

ESSENTIALS

A liberal-evangelical dialogue

by
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with
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Contents

Preface	ix
Abbreviations	xi
1 The Power of the Gospel	1
<i>John Stott's Response</i>	32
2 The Authority of the Scriptures	41
<i>John Stott's Response</i>	83
3 The Cross of Christ	107
<i>John Stott's Response</i>	158
4 The Miraculous Christ	169
<i>John Stott's Response</i>	215
5 The Bible and Behaviour	234
<i>John Stott's Response</i>	259
6 The Gospel for the World	273
<i>John Stott's Response</i>	306
Epilogue by John Stott	332
Questions	339
Books referred to in the text	341
Index	349

'we who are still alive', 'we will not all sleep' and 'the time is short' (1 Thessalonians 4:15; 1 Corinthians 15:51; 1 Corinthians 7:29)? Well, of course, it is possible for you to press these (as others do) into being Paul's definite (and mistaken) teaching that the parousia would take place in his lifetime. But would you not then be guilty of the very literalism of which you keep accusing me? If I am right that Jesus did not teach it, it seems to me unlikely that the apostles did. If I am also right that Jesus' emphasis was on the unexpectedness of his return and on the consequent need for watchfulness, then it seems to me likely that this was the apostles' emphasis too. I believe God's purpose is for every generation of Christians to live in eager anticipation of the parousia; the promise 'I am coming soon' well expresses and secures this expectation. It is an aspect of the Christian 'hope' which has always been precious to Evangelicals.

Judgement and Hell

It is with great reluctance and with a heavy heart that I now approach this subject. You quote the Grand Rapids report which describes the unevangelised millions as human beings who, 'though created by God like God and for God . . . are now living without God'. This is a phrase which I have myself often used, because it seems to me to sum up the poignant tragedy of human lostness. And when it is extended to the possibility that some who live without God now may also spend eternity without him, the thought becomes almost unbearable.

I want to repudiate with all the vehemence of which I am capable the glibness, what almost appears to be the glee, the *Schadenfreude*, with which some Evangelicals speak about hell. It is a horrible sickness of mind or spirit. Instead, since on the day of judgement, when some will be condemned, there is going to be 'weeping and gnashing of

teeth' (Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28), should we not already begin to weep at the very prospect? I thank God for Jeremiah. Israelite patriot though he was, he was charged with the heartbreaking mission of prophesying the destruction of his nation. Its ruin would only be temporary; it would not be eternal. Nevertheless, he could not restrain his tears. 'Oh that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people' (Jeremiah 9:1; cf. 13:17; 14:17).

It is within this prophetic tradition of tragedy, of sorrow over people's rejection of God's word and over the resultant inevitability of judgement, that Jesus wept over the impenitent city of Jerusalem. He cried out: 'If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace . . . !' (Luke 19:41–42; cf. Matthew 23:37–38). In this too Paul had the mind of Christ. He wrote of the 'great sorrow and unceasing anguish' he felt in his heart for his own race, the people of Israel. His 'heart's desire and prayer to God' was for their salvation. He was willing even, like Moses before him, to be himself 'cursed and cut off from Christ' if only thereby his people might be saved (Romans 9:1–4; 10:1; cf. Exodus 32:32). He had the same deep feelings for the Gentiles. For three whole years in Ephesus, as he reminded the church elders of that city, 'I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears' (Acts 20:31; cf. 20:19; Philippians 3:18).

I long that we could in some small way stand in the tearful tradition of Jeremiah, Jesus and Paul. I want to see more tears among us. I think we need to repent of our nonchalance, our hard-heartedness.

(a) What is hell?

You raise two main questions in relation to hell. The first concerns what is meant by it, and the second who may be condemned to go there. We both agree that the imagery

which Jesus and his apostles used (the lake of fire, the outer darkness, the second death) is not meant to be interpreted literally. In any case it could not be, since fire and darkness exclude each other. You comment positively on the Lausanne Covenant's expression 'eternal separation from God'; it is a conscious echo both of Jesus' words 'depart from me' (Matthew 7:23; 25:41) and of Paul's 'shut out from the presence of the Lord' (2 Thessalonians 1:9). We surely have to say that this banishment from God will be real, terrible (so that 'it would be better for him if he had not been born', Mark 14:21) and eternal. The New Testament contains no hint of the possibility of a later reprieve or amnesty. The biblical phraseology includes, in contrast to 'eternal life' and 'eternal salvation', 'eternal judgement' (Hebrews 6:2 and possibly Mark 3:29), 'everlasting contempt' (Daniel 12:2), 'eternal punishment' (Matthew 25:46), 'everlasting destruction' (2 Thessalonians 1:9) and 'eternal fire' (Matthew 18:8; 25:41). And the imagery supporting this phraseology includes the pictures of the door being shut (Matthew 25:10–12) and the great chasm being fixed (Luke 16:26).

You press me, however, to go beyond this. You rightly say that I have never declared publicly whether I think hell, in addition to being real, terrible and eternal, will involve the experience of everlasting suffering. I am sorry that you use in reference to God the emotive expression 'the Eternal Torturer', because it implies a sadistic infliction of pain, and all Christian people would emphatically reject that. But will the final destiny of the impenitent be eternal conscious torment, 'for ever and ever', or will it be a total annihilation of their being? The former has to be described as traditional orthodoxy, for most of the church fathers, the medieval theologians and the Reformers held it. And probably most Evangelical leaders hold it today. Do I hold it, however? Well, emotionally, I find the concept intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterising their feelings or cracking under the strain. But our emotions are a fluctuating, unreliable guide to truth

and must not be exalted to the place of supreme authority in determining it. As a committed Evangelical, my question must be – and is – not what does my heart tell me, but what does God's word say? And in order to answer this question, we need to survey the biblical material afresh and to open our minds (not just our hearts) to the possibility that Scripture points in the direction of annihilation, and that 'eternal conscious torment' is a tradition which has to yield to the supreme authority of Scripture. There are four arguments; they relate to language, imagery, justice and universalism.

First, *language*. The vocabulary of 'destruction' is often used in relation to the final state of perdition. The commonest Greek words are the verb *apollumi* (to destroy) and the noun *apòleia* (destruction). When the verb is active and transitive, 'destroy' means 'kill', as when Herod wanted to murder the baby Jesus and the Jewish leaders later plotted to have him executed (Matthew 2:13; 12:14; 27:4). Then Jesus himself told us not to be afraid of those who kill the body and cannot kill the soul. 'Rather,' he continued, 'be afraid of the One [God] who can destroy both soul and body in hell' (Matthew 10:28; cf. James 4:12). If to kill is to deprive the body of life, hell would seem to be the deprivation of both physical and spiritual life, that is, an extinction of being. When the verb is in the middle, and intransitive, it means to be destroyed and so to 'perish', whether physically of hunger or snakebite (Luke 15:17; 1 Corinthians 10:9) or eternally in hell (e.g. John 3:16; 10:28; 17:12; Romans 2:12; 1 Corinthians 15:18; 2 Peter 3:9). If believers are *hoi sōzomenoi* (those who are being saved), unbelievers are *hoi apollumenoi* (those who are perishing). The phrase occurs in 1 Corinthians 1:18, 2 Corinthians 2:15; 4:3, and in 2 Thessalonians 2:10. Jesus is also recorded in the Sermon on the Mount as contrasting the 'narrow . . . road that leads to life' with the 'broad . . . road that leads to destruction' (Matthew 7:13; cf. also Romans 9:22; Philippians 1:28; 3:19; Hebrews 10:39; 2 Peter 3:7; Revelation 17:8,11; the word used in 1 Thessalonians 5:3 and 2 Thessalonians 1:9 is *olethros*, which also

means 'ruin' or 'destruction'). It would seem strange, therefore, if people who are said to suffer destruction are in fact not destroyed; and, as you put it, it is 'difficult to imagine a perpetually inconclusive process of perishing'. It cannot, I think, be replied that it is impossible to destroy human beings because they are immortal, for the immortality – and therefore indestructibility – of the soul is a Greek not a biblical concept. According to Scripture only God possesses immortality in himself (1 Timothy 1:17; 6:16); he reveals and gives it to us through the gospel (2 Timothy 1:10). And by the way, 'annihilation' is not quite the same as 'conditional immortality'. According to the latter, nobody survives death except those to whom God gives life (they are therefore immortal by grace, not by nature), whereas according to the former, everybody survives death and will even be resurrected, but the impenitent will finally be destroyed.

The second argument concerns the *imagery* used in Scripture to characterise hell, and in particular that of fire. Jesus spoke of 'the fire of hell' (Matthew 5:22; 18:9) and of 'eternal fire' (Matthew 18:8; 25:41), and in the Revelation we read about 'the lake of fire' (20:14–15). It is doubtless because we have all had experience of the acute pain of being burned, that fire is associated in our minds with 'conscious torment'. But the main function of fire is not to cause pain, but to secure destruction, as all the world's incinerators bear witness. Hence the biblical expression 'a consuming fire' and John the Baptist's picture of the Judge 'burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire' (Matthew 3:12, cf. Luke 3:17). The fire itself is termed 'eternal' and 'unquenchable', but it would be very odd if what is thrown into it proves indestructible. Our expectation would be the opposite: it would be consumed for ever, not tormented for ever. Hence it is the smoke (evidence that the fire has done its work) which 'rises for ever and ever' (Revelation 14:11; cf. 19:3).

Four objections are raised to this understanding of 'the lake of fire'.

(1) There is the vivid picture of hell as a place where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched' (Mark 9:48). It is a quotation from the last verse of Isaiah (66:24), where the dead bodies of God's enemies are consigned to the city's rubbish dump to be eaten by maggots and burned. It is not necessary to apply this as Judith did, however, namely that God would take vengeance on the hostile nations, 'to put fire and worms in their flesh' so that 'they shall weep and feel their pain for ever' (Judith 16:17). Jesus' use of Isaiah 66:24 does not mention everlasting pain. What he says is that the worm will not die and the fire will not be quenched. Nor will they – until presumably their work of destruction is done.

(2) At the end of the so-called parable of the sheep and goats, Jesus contrasted 'eternal life' with 'eternal punishment' (Matthew 25:46). Does that not indicate that in hell people endure eternal conscious punishment? No, that is to read into the text what is not necessarily there. What Jesus said is that both the life and the punishment would be eternal, but he did not in that passage define the nature of either. Because he elsewhere spoke of eternal life as a conscious enjoyment of God (John 17:3), it does not follow that eternal punishment must be a conscious experience of pain at the hand of God. On the contrary, although declaring both to be eternal, Jesus is *contrasting* the two destinies: the more unlike they are, the better.

(3) But did not Dives cry out because he was 'in agony in this fire' (Luke 16:23–24, 28)? Yes, he did. But we must be cautious in interpreting a parable (if it was that) which speaks of 'Abraham's bosom' as well as hell fire. Moreover, these two states were experienced immediately after Dives and Lazarus died (verses 22–23). The natural interpretation would be that Jesus was referring to the so-called 'intermediate (or interim) state' between death and resurrection. I myself believe that this will be the time (if indeed we shall be aware of the passage of time) when the lost will come to the unimaginably painful realisation of their fate. This is not incompatible, however, with their final annihilation.

ation. Similarly, the 'torment' of Revelation 14:10, because it will be experienced 'in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb', seems to refer to the moment of judgement, not to the eternal state. It is not the torment itself but its 'smoke' (symbol of the completed burning) which will be 'for ever and ever'.

(4) But does the Book of Revelation not say that in the lake of fire 'they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever'? Yes, that sentence occurs, but only once (20:10), where it refers not only to the devil, but to 'the beast and the false prophet', just as the noun for 'torment' had been used of 'the harlot Babylon' (Revelation 18:7,10,15), though without the addition of the words 'for ever and ever'. The beast, the false prophet and the harlot, however, are not individual people but symbols of the world in its varied hostility to God. In the nature of the case they cannot experience pain. Nor can 'Death and Hades', which follow them into the lake of fire (20:13). In the vivid imagery of his vision John evidently saw the dragon, the monsters, the harlot, death and hades being thrown into the lake of fire. But the most natural way to understand the reality behind the imagery is that ultimately all enmity and resistance to God will be destroyed. So both the language of destruction and the imagery of fire seem to point to annihilation.

The third argument in favour of the concept of annihilation concerns the biblical vision of *justice*. Fundamental to it is the belief that God will judge people 'according to what they [have] done' (e.g. Revelation 20:12), which implies that the penalty inflicted will be commensurate with the evil done. This principle had been applied in the Jewish law courts, in which penalties were limited to an exact retribution, 'life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot' (e.g. Exodus 21:23-25). Would there not, then, be a serious disproportion between sins consciously committed in time and torment consciously experienced throughout eternity? I do not minimise the gravity of sin as rebellion against God our Creator, and shall return to

it shortly, but I question whether 'eternal conscious torment' is compatible with the biblical revelation of divine justice, unless perhaps (as has been argued) the impenitence of the lost also continues throughout eternity.

The fourth and last argument relates to those texts which have been used as the basis for *universalism*. I am not a universalist, and you tell me that you are not either. So there is no need for me to say more than that the hope of final salvation for everybody is a false hope, since it contradicts the recorded warnings of Jesus that the judgement will involve a separation into two opposite but equally eternal destinies. My point here, however, is that the eternal existence of the impenitent in hell would be hard to reconcile with the promises of God's final victory over evil, or with the apparently universalistic texts which speak of Christ drawing all men to himself (John 12:32), and of God uniting all things under Christ's headship (Ephesians 1:10), reconciling all things to himself through Christ (Colossians 1:20), and bringing every knee to bow to Christ and every tongue to confess his lordship (Philippians 2:10-11), so that in the end God will be 'all in all' or 'everything to everybody' (1 Corinthians 15:28).

These texts do not lead me to universalism, because of the many others which speak of the terrible and eternal reality of hell. But they do lead me to ask how God can in any meaningful sense be called 'everything to everybody' while an unspecified number of people still continue in rebellion against him and under his judgement. It would be easier to hold together the awful reality of hell and the universal reign of God if hell means destruction and the impenitent are no more.

I am hesitant to have written these things, partly because I have a great respect for longstanding tradition which claims to be a true interpretation of Scripture, and do not lightly set it aside, and partly because the unity of the world-wide Evangelical constituency has always meant much to me. But the issue is too important to suppress, and I am grateful to you for challenging me to declare my

present mind. I do not dogmatise about the position to which I have come. I hold it tentatively. But I do plead for frank dialogue among Evangelicals on the basis of Scripture. I also believe that the ultimate annihilation of the wicked should at least be accepted as a legitimate, biblically founded alternative to their eternal conscious torment.

(b) Who will go to hell?

You now ask me a second equally difficult and delicate question. Whatever the nature of hell may be, who will go there? Do Evangelicals believe that hell will be the fate of 'the bulk of humanity', in which case the gospel does not appear to be 'good news for the mass of humanity'?

Again, you are right to put this searching question to Evangelicals. You then quote paragraph three of the Lausanne Covenant which is entitled 'The Uniqueness and Universality of Christ'. It contains the stark statement that 'those who reject Christ repudiate the joy of salvation and condemn themselves to eternal separation from God'. I stand by this, as I believe would the whole Evangelical community. It reminds me of a similar clause in the Congress Statement of Keele 1967: 'A persistent and deliberate rejection of Jesus Christ condemns men to hell' (I.11). Both assertions are clear and definite because they refer only to people who have heard of Christ but have rejected him, consciously, deliberately, persistently. Such people are not just condemned; they condemn themselves.

But neither the Lausanne Covenant, nor the Keele Statement which preceded it, said anything about the final destiny of those who had never heard of Christ, never received a 'worthy presentation of him' and so never had a reasonable opportunity to respond to him. What will be their fate? What does the New Testament authorise us to say about them? My answer includes four parts, of which

the first three are (for Evangelicals at least) non-controversial, while the fourth leads us into the precarious area of wondering and speculating.

First, *all human beings*, apart from the intervention and mercy of God, *are perishing*. Yes, I deliberately used and use the present continuous tense, as Paul did when he referred to the *apollumeno*i. The word describes their present, not their future, state. They are, in Jesus' phrase, on the broad road that leads to destruction, but they have not reached that destination, and they need not. The door of opportunity is still open. They may yet hear and believe. Nevertheless, at the moment they are not saved and therefore must be described as 'perishing'. Is this too harsh? Those who think so I would want to direct to pages 89–110 of *The Cross of Christ*, in which I have written about both the gravity of sin and the majesty of God. All divine judgement seems and sounds unjust until we see God as he is and ourselves as we are, according to Scripture. As for God, Scripture uses the pictures of light and fire to set forth his perfect holiness.

He dwells in unapproachable light, dazzling, even blinding in its splendour, and is a consuming fire. Human beings who have only glimpsed his glory have been unable to bear the sight, and have turned away or run away or swooned. As for ourselves, I often want to say to my contemporaries what Anselm said to his, 'You have not yet considered the seriousness of sin'. True, Scripture recognises both our ignorance ('they do not know what they are doing') and our weakness ('he remembers that we are dust'), but it dignifies us by holding us accountable for our thoughts and actions. Think of God's endlessly repeated refrain in the Old Testament: 'I spoke to you, but you refused to listen'. Jeremiah kept calling it 'the stubbornness of your evil heart'. Think too of the words of Jesus: 'You refuse to come to me to have life' (John 5:40), and 'how often I have longed to gather your children together . . . but you were not willing' (Matthew 23:37). It was the wilful blindness and wilful disobedience of people that he condemned. And is not this the essence of

Paul's argument in Romans 1-3? I accept your rebuke that to apply the end of Romans 1 (where God gives people up to idolatry and immorality) to earnest adherents of other faiths, when Paul applied it to the moral decadence of his own day, is 'an insulting travesty of much sincere seeking, devotion and holiness'. But I cannot surrender Paul's conclusion, which is that Jews and Gentiles, the religious and the irreligious, the morally educated and uneducated, because they have all failed (yes, wilfully) to live up to what they have known to be true and good, are all guilty before God and without excuse.

How then do we explain the phenomenon of religious and righteous people who belong to other faiths and ideologies? It is part, I think, of the paradoxical nature of our humanness, that is, that we are both breath of God and dust of earth, godlike and bestial, created and fallen, noble and ignoble. That seems to be why we both seek God (Acts 17:27) and run away from him, both practise righteousness and suppress the truth in our unrighteousness (Acts 10:22; Romans 1:18), both recognise the claims of the moral law upon us and refuse to submit to it (Romans 8:7), both erect altars in God's honour and need to repent of our ignorance and sin (Acts 17:23, 30).

You are too inclined, I think, to praise the good you see in others, and I may be too inclined to blame the evil. But the reason in my case is that I believe I know myself. To be sure, I welcome and affirm all those noble gifts of God which are part of his image in me (rationality and curiosity, moral aspirations, the primacy of love, artistic creativity, the urge to worship), but it is this very glory which highlights the shame - the vanity, obstinacy, selfishness, envy, impatience, malice, and lack of self-control. My perceptions of God and of myself, however distorted, convince me that in myself I am completely unfit to spend eternity in his presence. I need to be 'made fit' (NIV, 'qualified') to share in the saints' inheritance in light (Colossians 1:12). Without those white robes made clean in the blood of the Lamb, I could never stand before God's throne (Revelation 7:9-10).

'Hell-deserving sinner' sounds an absurdly antiquated phrase, but I believe it is the sober truth. Without Christ I am 'perishing', and deserve to perish.

Secondly, *human beings cannot save themselves* by any religious or righteous acts. Christians cannot. Nor can non-Christians. Self-salvation is out. In this connection we need to think about Cornelius, because he is the person often chosen to exemplify the upright seeker whom God 'accepts' on account of his sincerity and decency. Certainly Luke describes him before his conversion as righteous, generous, pious, and widely respected in the local community. He prayed, attended synagogue and gave alms. Not yet, however, had he received salvation. The overriding lesson Peter learned from the story was that God has no racial favourites (10:34). He 'accepts' people from every nation 'who fear him and do what is right' (10:35), in the sense that, irrespective of Cornelius' Gentile status, God heard his prayer and made provision for him to hear the gospel (10:30-33). But only later did God 'accept' him in a saving sense when he gave him the Holy Spirit (15:8). It was then that he was 'saved' (11:14; 15:11), that he was granted 'repentance unto life' (11:18), and that God 'purified his heart by faith' (15:9). God honoured his reverent spirit, his prayers and his uprightness, and led a messenger of the gospel to him. But his salvation came through his penitent, believing response to the gospel, not through his previous religion and righteousness. I don't think this conclusion can be avoided. Principled exegesis requires it. We have to say that Cornelius did not win salvation by good works or religious observances; and if Cornelius could not, nor can anybody else.

Thirdly, *Jesus Christ is the only Saviour*. The uniqueness to which Christians bear witness does not refer to Christianity in any of its numerous empirical manifestations, but only to Christ. He has no peers, no rivals, no successors. And his uniqueness is most evident in relation to the incarnation, the atonement and the resurrection. He is the one and only God-man, who died for our sins and was then raised from

the dead to authenticate his person and work. And it is this threefold, historical uniqueness which qualifies him to be the Saviour of the world, the only mediator between God and humankind (1 Timothy 2:5). No one else has these qualifications. I confess to being sad that in your chapter you tried to wriggle out of the plain, natural and obvious meaning of John 14:6 and Acts 4:12. As the way, the truth and the life, no one can come to the Father except through Jesus Christ's mediation. And 'salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven . . . by which we must be saved'. If there is only one Saviour, there can be only one way of salvation.

That brings me to the fourth point. Here we need to ask questions rather than make statements. If we grant that human beings left to themselves are perishing, and that they cannot save themselves, and that Jesus is the only qualified Saviour – which are the three truths which Evangelicals are at all costs determined to safeguard – what condition has to be fulfilled in order that they may be saved? How much knowledge of Jesus do people have to have before they can believe in him? And how much faith do they have to exercise? Those who genuinely hear the gospel must repent and believe, of course. But what about those who have not heard it? They cannot save themselves, as we have seen, and Christ is the only Saviour. Is there then any way in which God will have mercy on them, through Christ alone, and not through their own merit? A variety of answers have been given to these questions.

(1) There is the quotation you give from Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium*, on which I also have reflected. It seems to promise salvation to those who 'seek God', and who give evidence of the sincerity of their search by 'striving' to do his will and live a good life. At the same time, it includes a number of caveats, which seem to be designed to avoid the impression of salvation by good works. It emphasises that their ignorance of the gospel must be 'through no fault of their own' and 'without blame on their part'. It contains two

references to God's grace and one to his providence. And it not only attributes people's goodness and truth to the *Logos*, but calls these things 'a preparation for the gospel'. Does that mean that like Cornelius they will be given the privilege of hearing it? And why does the Statement begin that such people only 'can [not do] attain to everlasting salvation who . . . sincerely seek God . . .'? In other words the statement has many ambiguities. A statement of John Paul II at the beginning of his papal ministry is quite unambiguous, however. In his encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* (1979) he wrote: 'Man – every man without any exception whatever – has been redeemed by Christ, and . . . with man – with each man without any exception whatever – Christ is in a way united, even when man is unaware of it' (para. 14).

That kind of unconditional universalism must, however, be firmly rejected by those who look to Scripture for authoritative guidance.

(2) Others turn to the sheep and goats passage in Matthew 25, as you do. They point out that Jesus refers to 'the nations' being judged and to the surprise of both groups when they find out that they are accepted or rejected, and why. We certainly must not interpret it as teaching salvation by works, or we would be turning the whole New Testament on its head. There is also a continuing debate over the identity of Jesus' 'brothers'. If it can be shown to mean human beings in general, with whom Jesus identifies himself, then we would have to insist that the nations are not accepted or rejected according to their works, but according to their attitude to Jesus which is revealed in their works. But in Matthew's gospel Jesus' 'brothers' are his disciples who do his Father's will (12:48–50). As he sends them out into the world to preach, people will either welcome or reject them, and in their attitude to Jesus' brothers their attitude to him will be made known (10:5–15).

(3) A third approach is to say that God knows how people would have responded if they had heard the gospel, and

will save or judge them accordingly. For Jesus said to the cities of Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum: 'If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes' (Matthew 11:21). What is true of cities, could also be true of individuals.

(4) Others have speculated that God gives everybody a vision of Jesus, and therefore an opportunity to repent and believe, at the moment of their dying. But no evidence is available to support this, either from Scripture or from death-bed experiences.

(5) A more common suggestion is that God will give everybody an opportunity in the next life to respond to Jesus. I think this possibility appeals to you. You refer to it as the 'Hades Gospel'. Some have tried to base it on Peter's statement that Jesus 'went and preached to the spirits in prison' (1 Peter 3:19). But 'the spirits' were almost certainly (see E. G. Selwyn's famous commentary) demonic, not human, and Jesus' preaching was an 'announcement' of his victory, not a proclamation of the gospel with an invitation to respond. You, however, seem to suggest that the Corinthian practice of being 'baptised for the dead' (1 Corinthians 15:29) supplies some hope that after death people will be able to share in Christ's salvation. But was Paul not using an *argumentum ad hominem* here? One cannot say with any confidence that he approved of the practice. Besides, as I'm sure you know, Robertson and Plummer in their old ICC commentary on 1 Corinthians (1911) mention that thirty-six explanations of the practice have been collected! Although the guess that people will be given in the next world an opportunity to believe is an attractive one, it remains a guess and lacks biblical warrant.

(6) Sir Norman Anderson, in speech and writing, has often suggested that some people who have never heard of Christ may be brought, by a sense of their sin, guilt and inability to save themselves, to cry for mercy to the God they but dimly perceive; that God does have mercy on them; and that he saves them on the basis of Christ's

atonement work, through faith, even though they have not heard of him. This proposal has two particular merits. First, it preserves the three safeguards outlined above, especially that we cannot save ourselves and that Christ is the only Saviour. Secondly, it can claim some biblical warrant, since Old Testament believers were saved by God's grace through faith, even though they knew little if anything about the coming Christ. Norman Anderson writes: 'The believing Jew was accepted and blessed not because of the prescribed animal sacrifices he offered, nor even his repentance and abandonment of himself to God's mercy, but because of what God himself was going to do in his only Son at the cross of Calvary' (*Christianity and World Religions: The Challenge of Pluralism*, 1984, p. 153).

Speaking now for myself, although I am attracted by Sir Norman Anderson's concept, and although there may be truth in it and even in some of the other suggestions, I believe the most Christian stance is to remain agnostic on this question. When somebody asked Jesus, 'Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?', he refused to answer and instead urged them 'to enter through the narrow door' (Luke 13:23–24). The fact is that God, alongside the most solemn warnings about our responsibility to respond to the gospel, has not revealed how he will deal with those who have never heard it. We have to leave them in the hands of the God of infinite mercy and justice, who manifested these qualities most fully in the cross. Abraham's question, 'will not the Judge of all the earth do right?' (Genesis 18:25) is our confidence too.

Like yourself, however, I am imbued with hope. I have never been able to conjure up (as some great Evangelical missionaries have) the appalling vision of the millions who are not only perishing but will inevitably perish. On the other hand, as I have said, I am not and cannot be a universalist. Between these extremes I cherish the hope that the majority of the human race will be saved. And I have a solid biblical basis for this belief. True, Jesus said that

those who find the narrow road that leads to life were 'few' (was he referring to the little remnant of his own day within the nation of Israel?). But we need to remember that God is the Creator of all humankind, and remains infinitely loving, patient and compassionate towards all whom he has made. Yes, and he is also everybody's 'Father', both in the sense that they 'live and move and have their being' in him, deriving the richness of their human life from his generosity (Acts 17:25-28), and in the sense that he continues to yearn for his lost children, as in the parable of the prodigal son. (It is the intimacy of a father-child relationship which according to the New Testament is given only to those whom God has reconciled to himself through Jesus Christ.) We have to remember too that God does not *want* anybody to perish but *wants* everybody to be saved (2 Peter 3:9; 1 Timothy 2:4); that Jesus expressed his compassion for society's outcasts (the 'publicans and sinners' and the prostitutes), refused to reject them, but deliberately made friends with them; that his own forecast was that 'many' would come from the four points of the compass and the four corners of the earth to join the Jewish patriarchs in God's kingdom (Luke 13:29); and that the final vision of the redeemed in the Book of Revelation is of 'a great multitude that no-one could count' (7:9), a huge international throng, in whom God's promise to Abraham will at last be fulfilled that his seed (his spiritual posterity) would be as innumerable as the stars in the sky, the dust of the earth and the grains of sand on all the seashores of the world.

That is the hope I cherish, and that is the vision that inspires me, even while I remain agnostic about how God will bring it to pass. Meanwhile, there is an urgency to make the gospel known. This is 'our obligation', as you rightly say near the beginning of your chapter. We are charged to share the good news with 'all the nations'. This must include the Jews, for the gospel is 'the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile' (Romans 1:16). And our supreme motivation in world evangelisation will not primarily be

obedience to the great commission, nor even loving concern for those who do not yet know Jesus, important as these two incentives are, but first and foremost a burning zeal (even 'jealousy') for the glory of Jesus Christ. For God has exalted him to the highest place, and desires everybody to honour him too.

The Gospel for Today

Once more I have gone on too long. But you have raised so many issues and asked so many questions! I must now be brief in responding to the main topic of your final chapter: What is the gospel for the world? What is the gospel for today?

I feel confident that you and I would want to begin our reply in relation to Jesus Christ. It would be impossible to share the good news without talking about Jesus. So we focus on God's love in the gift of his Son to live, die and rise again, and on his further gift to those who trust in him of a new life of forgiveness and freedom in the Spirit, of a new community of brothers and sisters to which he joins us, and one day of a new world of perfect righteousness and peace. But how shall we formulate this good news, especially in our increasingly pluralistic society, in a way that communicates and resonates with people? There seem to me two extremes to avoid.

The first is *total fixity*. Some Christians (including some of us Evangelicals) are in bondage to words and formulae, the prisoners of a gospel stereotype. They wrap up their message in a neat little package, almost labelled and price-tagged as if destined for the supermarket. Then, unless their precise *schema* and their favourite phraseology are used, they declare that the gospel has not been preached. For many Evangelicals it used to be 'the precious blood of Jesus'. Now for some it is being born again or justified by faith, and for others the kingdom of God (which you yourself call 'the heart of the gospel' and 'absolutely basic',