

ROMANS 2 AND THE SALVATION OF THE HEATHEN

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In the book *Salvation Outside the Church?* Peter Stravinskias, a Roman Catholic priest, defends the document *Dominus Iesus* ("The Lord Jesus"), issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on August 6, 2000. On the issue of salvation outside of the church he writes, "Men may be saved in any religion, if they are sincerely following the voice of conscience; when such people are saved, they are saved – whether they know it or not – by Jesus Christ and his Church."¹

The document *Dominus Iesus* itself states that "the salvific action of Jesus Christ, with and through his Spirit, extends beyond the visible boundaries of the Church to all humanity" and "with respect to the way in which the salvific grace of God . . . comes to the individual non-Christian, the Second Vatican Council limited itself to the statement that that God bestows it 'in ways known to himself.'"²

The argument that if people follow their conscience they will be saved is based on Paul's statement in Romans 2:12-16

"For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law (for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified; for when the Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing *them*) in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel." (NKJV)

But does Romans 2:14 really teach that Gentiles have by nature an inner law (their conscience) which, if they follow it, will save them without any knowledge of the gospel? Some may point to John 1:9 "the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world" to support the view that every person in this world receives sufficient light for salvation, but is this supported by the rest of Scripture?

¹ Peter M. J. Stravinskias *Salvation Outside the Church?* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2002), 129.

² *Ibid.*, 150, 159.

In this age of religious pluralism, in which the ecumenical movement reaches out to people beyond the borders of Christianity, the question is frequently raised whether upright adherents to the African traditional religions, as well as good Moslems, Hindus, or Buddhists are really outside a salvific relationship with God? How can Christians, in this day and age, maintain their claim that salvation is only found in Jesus Christ? Not a few Adventists, particularly younger ones, are also wrestling with this issue.

THE SCRIPTURAL EVIDENCE

That knowledge of the gospel is necessary for salvation is the general teaching of Scripture. Jesus not only declared that no man can come to the Father but by Him (John 14:6), but he also stated repeatedly that "he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:16; John 3:18). And faith without some knowledge is impossible. Paul in Romans 10 first states that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved (10:13), but then he argues, "How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? . . . So then faith *comes* by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (10:14-15, 17). The answer to each of Paul's questions is "they cannot," they cannot call on the Lord unless somebody is sent to tell them about the Lord. Somebody must go and preach the good news.

John Stott observes that "the essence of Paul's argument is seen if we put his six verbs in the opposite order: Christ sends heralds; heralds preach; people hear; hearers believe; believers call; and those who call are saved."³ The opposite, of course, is also true, if nobody is sent to preach, people cannot hear, they cannot believe, hence they cannot call, and therefore they are lost.

The apostle John writes, "He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 John 5:12), and Paul says, to be without Christ is to be without hope (Eph 2:12). According to Peter, salvation was only possible through Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12), and "Peter does not appear to be referring to Jesus merely as

³ John Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 286.

the ontological ground of salvation – that is, as the sole *source* of atonement. Rather, he is indicating what must be acknowledged about Jesus before one can be saved."⁴ The general teaching of Scripture seems to be that unless people hear the gospel of Jesus Christ they are lost, but what about Romans 2? Does it show another possibility?

Key Words in Romans 2

The passage in Romans 2 contains two important words *physis* (nature) and *syneidesis* (conscience) that deserve closer investigation before we seek to understand what Paul is saying in this passage.

The word *physis* which is used about a dozen times in the New Testament is found primarily in the book of Romans (7 times). It has the basic meaning of "nature," "natural characteristics or condition" or "natural order."⁵ In Romans 11:21 Paul says, God will not spare the wild olive branches (Gentile Christians), if he did not spare the branches which by nature (*kata physin*), i.e., according to the natural order, belonged to the olive tree. The same meaning is found in 1:26 where the God-created natural order determines the distinction between the sexes.

In 2:14 the phrase "by nature" can be connected with what precedes it. The meaning would then be, "Gentiles, who do not have the [written] law by nature [that is by virtue of their birth], do the things in the law."⁶ Because they are not Jews, they do not have the written law which God gave to the Jews. "By nature," however, can also be connected with what follows. The text would then read, "Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature the things in the law." In that case Paul is arguing that even those who do not have the written law have an unwritten law in their hearts.⁷ In other words, part of the image of God in human beings is that they have an instinctive knowledge of right and wrong. "Syntax and balance of the sentence require that *physei* be taken with what follows."⁸ This is what most Bible translations have done (KJV, NKJV, RSV, NIV, NEB, etc.)

⁴ R. Douglas Geivett and W. Gary Phillips, "A Particularist View: An Evidential Approach" in Stanley N. Gundry, *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 231.

⁵ W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 870.

⁶ This is the position adopted by Paul Achtemeier (*Romans*, Interpretation [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985], 45) and C.E.B. Cranfield (*The Epistle to the Romans*, ICC, 2 vols. [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Ltd., 1975], 1:156-157).

⁷ This is the view adopted by Joseph A. Fitzmyer (*Romans AB* [New York: Doubleday, 1993], 310) and James D. G. Dunn (*Romans 1-8*, WBC [Dallas TX: Word Books, 1988], 98).

⁸ Dunn, 98.

Conscience -- The word conscience (*syneidesis*) from *syn* "together" and *eidenai* "to know" occurs some 30 times in the New Testament, 14 of those are found in Paul's writings. It describes "consciousness" "conscientiousness" or "moral consciousness."⁹ Conscience as a function of the mind is a universally human phenomenon (2 Cor 4:2). It is part of the image of God in humanity, and refers to an active and discerning awareness of what is morally right and wrong (Rom 2:15). It urges the individual to do what he knows to be right and restrains him from doing that which he knows to be wrong. "As through Christ every human being has life, so also through Him every soul receives some ray of divine light. Not only intellectual but spiritual power, a perception of right, a desire for goodness exists in every heart."¹⁰ This innate ability to distinguish between right and wrong functions like a court of appeal within individuals, as can be seen from Paul's dealing with the Corinthians' question of eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols (1 Cor 8:7 ff; 10:25 ff).

The Context of Romans 2

In the first three chapters of his letter to the Romans Paul establishes the theological truth that all human beings are sinners (3:23), and that therefore all deserve the wrath of God, and that all are saved the in the same way – "through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (3:24).

Paul begins his argument in the latter part of chapter one where he repeatedly states that because the Gentiles (heathen) have refused to acknowledge God, he has "given them up" to their own lusts and passions (1:24, 26, 28). They are sinners and therefore "deserving of death" (1:32). Next he turns to the Jews, who would agree with him on what he said about the Gentiles, and he tells them, "but you are no better" for "in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things" (2:1). The Jews, he says, are no better than the Gentiles when it comes to obeying God. Although they have a greater understanding of God's standard than the Gentiles they still do evil. In chapter three, therefore, he sums up his argument, "all [Jews and Gentiles] have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (3:23).

The Issue in Romans 2

The issue in Romans 2:11-16 is the accountability not the salvation of Jews and Gentiles. The fact that God is no respecter of persons (v. 11) is illustrated by what Paul

⁹ Arndt and Gingrich, 786.

¹⁰ Ellen G. White, *Education* [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1952].

says in verse 12. "As many as have sinned without law will also perish¹¹ without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law." Those "without law" are the Gentiles who do not have the written law,¹² given to the Israelites on Mount Sinai. However, they will not perish because they did not have the written law, they will perish because they are sinners. On what basis can they be said to be sinners? They are sinners because they have transgressed against the law "written in their hearts, their conscience" (2:15). What is written in their hearts is not the new covenant mentioned in Jeremiah 31:31-34, but the deeds or conduct required by the law. Jack Blanco's expanded paraphrase of verse 15 says, "They give evidence that the principles of the law are written in their hearts because their consciences are guided by God."¹³ Among the Gentiles conscience performed the same function as the law performed among the Jews.¹⁴

This passage, therefore, cannot be used to argue that the Gentiles who have never heard the gospel will be saved on the basis of their obedience to their conscience, because this would be salvation by works. Furthermore, it needs to be emphasized once more that this passage is not speaking about salvation but about judgment (2:16). Paul contrasts two groups of people, the privileged Jews who have the written law of God and the less privileged Gentiles who do not. How can God be fair to both and judge them impartially? Each, says Paul, will be judged by the method appropriate to their case. The Jews will be judged by the written law, and the Gentiles by the unwritten law of their conscience. Judged in this way, both groups will be found to be sinners. The Jews, it will be found, have sinned against the written law of God and the Gentiles against the unwritten law of their conscience. The outcome, therefore, is the same for both groups – they are sinners and they are all lost. Both can only be saved through the substitutionary death of Jesus on the cross.

The statement that the Gentiles "do by nature the things in the law" refers to the fact that even pagans practice things stipulated by the law of God, "such as the pursuit of lawful vocations, the procreation of offspring, filial and natural affection, the care of the poor and sick, and numerous other natural virtues which are required by the law."¹⁵ In

¹¹ The word *apollumai* is used in John 3:16 and 1 Cor 1:18 to refer to the ultimate destiny of unbelievers.

¹² J. A. Fitzmyer has pointed out that Paul sometimes used *nomos* in a generic sense, "where there is no law, there is no transgression" (Rom 4:15), sometimes figuratively as a principle (7:21, 23), on occasion he means by "law" the OT or part of it (3:19; cf. Ps 107:42; Job 40:4-5; 42:6), but the in the large majority of occurrences *nomos* with or without the article refers to the Mosaic law (2:12-14, 15, 17-18, 20, 23, 25-27; 3:21 27-28, etc.)

¹³ Jack J. Blanco, *The Clear Word* (2000).

¹⁴ See M. Thrall, "The Pauline Use of Syneidesis," *New Testament Studies* 14 (1967-8): 124.

¹⁵ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: W. E. Eerdmans, 1965), 73.

that sense they “are a law to themselves” (2:14), i.e., they have a general knowledge of God's requirements for a virtuous life. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that even if a Gentile would live up to all the law his conscience reveals to him, this could not save him, otherwise it would be salvation by works, something Paul clearly denies. Throughout his writings he hammers home the truth that “a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law (Rom 3:28; Gal 2:16; Eph 2:8, 9; etc.).

One of the purposes of the written law as well as of the law of conscience is to provide a basis for God's judgment. While the Gentiles have no explicit knowledge of the written law, God can still judge them "in the day when God will judge the secrets of men" (v. 16) because they have transgressed against their conscience-law. On judgment day no one will have an excuse, no one will be able to say, “Lord, how can you judge me, I did not know anything about your law.” That day will reveal that all, Jews and Gentiles alike, have sinned because “there is none righteous, no, not one” (Rom 3:10).

Thus Romans 2 is in harmony with the general teaching of the rest of Scripture. There is only one way of salvation -- Jesus Christ (John 14:6). "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John 17:3). Paul therefore says, "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." (Phil 3:8, RSV).

Jesus commission, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations" (Matt 28:19) and the knowledge that there is only one way of salvation (Acts 12:4) has been the driving force behind Christian mission. The conviction that people will be lost unless they hear the gospel has sent thousands of missionaries into lands where the name of Christ was unknown. But does this mean that everyone who does not hear the gospel is therefore automatically lost?

The Inclusivist View

Inclusivists believe that because God is omnipresent, God's grace is also at work in some way among all people. They place great emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit in reaching people who never hear the gospel preached.

The world is the arena of God's presence, and the Spirit knocks on every human heart, preparing people for the coming of Christ; the Spirit is ever working to

realize the saving thrust of God's promise for the world. From the Spirit flows that universal gracing that seeks to lead all people into the fuller light and love.¹⁶

They see their biblical foundation in texts like John 1:9 "the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world," and John 12:32 " "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all *peoples* to Myself." Since God wants all people to be saved (1 Tim 2:4) he must give everyone the opportunity to be saved. Paul therefore says, "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men" (Titus 2:11). God, they say, never leaves Himself without witness among all people (Acts 14:17), and Jesus spoke of "other sheep I have which are not of this fold" (John 10:16).

Inclusivists point to biblical examples such as Melchizedek (Gen 14:17-24) and Cornelius (Acts 10:1-48) to show that God was at work in pagan cultures, saving people who responded to the activities of the Holy Spirit. Clark Pinnock goes so far as to say, "I welcome the Saiva Siddhanta literature of Hinduism, which celebrates a personal God of love . . . I also respect the Buddha as a righteous man (Matt 10:41) and Mohammed as a prophetic figure in the style of the Old Testament."¹⁷ At the same time he is careful not to attribute salvific power to other religions. He recognizes that the Holy Spirit is the power unto salvation not other religions. "God saves through faith, through a heart response not confined to a religious framework."¹⁸

It is certainly true that the Holy Spirit's activities cannot be confined to the boundaries of Christian churches. At the same time, however, we must be careful not to see God at work in all religions just because they have some nuggets of truth. In the great controversy between Christ and Satan, the latter may use many nuggets of truth to deceive people into thinking a particular religion or teaching is of God. In the past "Satan and his confederacy of human agents have endeavored to mix the chaff of error with the wheat of truth"¹⁹ wrote Ellen White, and most likely he is still doing it, "The

¹⁶ Clark H. Pinnock, "An Inclusivist View," in Stanley N. Gundry, *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 104.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁹ Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville, TN: Southern Pub. Assoc., 1923), 307.

enemy is determined to mix error with truth."²⁰ Thus while inclusivism has some merit, it goes beyond what the biblical evidence permits.²¹

Ellen White and the Salvation of the Heathen

Ellen White throughout her writings urges the church to fulfill her God-given responsibility to bring the gospel to those who do not know Christ. She clearly understood that many people will be lost because the gospel was not brought to them. "The world is in need of the saving truth that God has entrusted to His people. The world will perish unless it be given a knowledge of God through His chosen agencies."²² Although the world is receptive to the gospel, she said:

Multitudes perish for want of Christian teaching. Beside our own doors and in foreign lands the heathen are untaught and unsaved. While God has laden the earth with His bounties and filled its storehouses with the comforts of life, while He has so freely given to us a saving knowledge of His truth, what excuse can we offer for permitting the cries of the widow and the fatherless, the sick and the suffering, the untaught and the unsaved, to ascend to heaven?²³

Millions upon millions have never so much as heard of God or of His love revealed in Christ. It is their right to receive this knowledge. They have an equal claim with us in the Saviour's mercy. And it rests with us who have received the knowledge, with our children to whom we may impart it, to answer their cry.²⁴

While Ellen White speaks of millions upon millions of people going into Christless graves because the gospel is not brought to them, she also teaches that there are occasions where God apart from human messengers reaches out to individuals in heathen lands and brings the gospel to them.

Those whom Christ commends in the judgment may have known little of theology, but they have cherished His principles. Through the influence of the divine Spirit they have been a blessing to those about them. Even among the heathen are those who have cherished the spirit of kindness; before the words of life had fallen upon their ears, they have befriended the missionaries, even ministering to them at the peril of their own lives. Among the heathen are those

²⁰ Idem, *Testimonies For the Church, 8 vols.* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 8:184.

²¹ For example, the words "all" and "every" (Gr. *pas*) in Scripture is often used with implied restrictions. Thus when Jesus says, "I will draw all men unto Myself" he was not teaching universalism but referring to the fact that through the cross those who believe will be drawn to him. Since the word "men" is not in the Greek text it may refer to all believing beings in the universe.

²² Ellen G. White, *Testimonies To Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1962), 459.

²³ Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1942), 288.

²⁴ Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1952), 263

who worship God ignorantly, those to whom the light is never brought by human instrumentality, yet they will not perish. Though ignorant of the written law of God, they have heard His voice speaking to them in nature, and have done the things that the law required. Their works are evidence that the Holy Spirit has touched their hearts, and they are recognized as the children of God.²⁵

In the depths of heathenism, men who have had no knowledge of the written law of God, who have never even heard the name of Christ, have been kind to His servants, protecting them at the risk of their own lives. Their acts show the working of a divine power. The Holy Spirit has implanted the grace of Christ in the heart of the savage, quickening his sympathies contrary to his nature, contrary to his education.²⁶

Heaven's plan of salvation is broad enough to embrace the whole world. God longs to breathe into prostrate humanity the breath of life. And He will not permit any soul to be disappointed who is sincere in his longing for something higher and nobler than anything the world can offer. Constantly He is sending His angels to those who, while surrounded by circumstances the most discouraging, pray in faith for some power higher than themselves to take possession of them and bring deliverance and peace. In various ways God will reveal Himself to them and will place them in touch with providences that will establish their confidence in the One who has given Himself a ransom for all, "that they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments." Psalm 78:7.²⁷

In each case, it is the Holy Spirit or the angels of God reaching out to these individuals and implanting the grace of God in their hearts. These heathens are not saved because they have done the works their conscience told them to do (as we have said, this would be salvation by works), they are saved because the Holy Spirit has touched their hearts and revealed God's love to them. However, such cases are the exceptions and not the rule.

Ellen White's comments regarding the salvation of the heathen fall into three categories: (1) The majority of her statements make it clear that God's general way of saving the heathens is through the church.²⁸ (2) In some quotations she indicates that

²⁵ Idem, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1940), 638.

²⁶ Idem, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1941)

²⁷ Idem, *Prophets and Kings*, (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1943), 377-378.

²⁸ "The church is God's appointed agency for the salvation of men." (Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1911], 9. See also SC 81; YRP 47; RH, July 16, 1895; RH, August 22, 1899; etc.

God brings honest people among the heathen in contact with the gospel.²⁹ (3) In some cases God, through the Holy Spirit, speaks to individuals in heathen lands and brings them the gospel without any human messengers.³⁰

In summary, God's usual way of saving the heathen is through the preaching of the gospel, but occasionally for reasons known only to Him, God reaches out to people who have never heard and never will hear the gospel and brings salvation to them. Such occasions, however, are not the rule but the exception.

God's Justice

Some will object to this teaching and argue that God's justice requires that every person receives an opportunity for salvation. While this seems perfectly logical, it is nevertheless unscriptural. Ezekiel 3:18 and 33:8 teach that the watchman is to warn the wicked so he can mend his ways. If he is not warned, God says, he will die in his sins but the watchman is held responsible. Similarly, Romans 10 teaches that it is the responsibility of those who know the gospel to pass it on. If this is not done, people will be lost.

It is sad but not unjust that sinners will perish. If they are lost they are lost because they are sinners not because they have not had the opportunity to be saved. What will happen to those who have never had an opportunity to hear the gospel? Genesis 18:25 says, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" He certainly will. Ellen White wrote about some of the slaves in colonial America.

I saw that the slave master will have to answer for the soul of his slave whom he has kept in ignorance; and the sins of the slave will be visited upon the master. God cannot take to heaven the slave who has been kept in ignorance and degradation, knowing nothing of God or the Bible, fearing nothing but his master's lash, and holding a lower position than the brutes. But He does the best thing for him that a compassionate God can do. He permits him to be as if he had not been, while the master must endure the seven last plagues and then come up in the second resurrection and suffer the second, most awful death. Then the justice of God will be satisfied.³¹

²⁹ In Scripture we have Rahab and Cornelius. Modern examples would be the Davis Indians in Guyana and Sekuba, the bushman, in the Kalahari desert.

³⁰ Only heaven will reveal how many there have been over the millennia.

³¹ Ellen G. White, *Early Writings* (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1945), 276.

What happens to those slaves may well happen to "millions of human beings bound down under false religions, in the bondage of slavish fear, of stolid indifference, toiling like beasts of burden, bereft of hope or joy or aspiration here, and with only a dull fear of the hereafter"³² who have never had an opportunity to accept salvation.

Conclusion

Scripture and the Spirit of Prophecy teach that there is only one name under heaven whereby man can be saved (Acts 4:12).³³ While in general God saves the heathen through the preaching of the gospel, sometimes bringing them in contact with such people, there are occasions when he intervenes directly and through the Holy Spirit touches the hearts of people to bring salvation to them without any human agent. Why he does so in some cases and not in others, only he knows. However, knowing that billions of people have never even heard the name of Jesus should motivate every Christian to do all he/she can to spread the good news worldwide.

³² *Idem, The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1940), 478.

³³ "He made an infinite sacrifice, because it was the only way whereby man could be saved." (RH, February 10, 1891).