

Is God unfair?

'If you are born in the West you are much more likely to become a Christian than if you are born in a Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist country. That doesn't seem very fair.'

Is God unfair? In particular, is he unfair in that he has apparently so arranged things that a person is far more likely to come to know Christ in the UK or in America than in, say, Saudi Arabia or Mongolia?

I shall try to respond with seven brief reflections.

First, 'fairness' and 'unfairness' are scarcely categories to apply to God, when we remember some of the things the Bible says about sin, human responsibility and lostness, and God's grace. The Bible insists that God does not owe salvation to anyone. Suppose out of sheer grace he had decided to save one person. Wouldn't that have been marvelous? He was under no obligation to save anyone, but he chose to save one. That would have demonstrated his grace; it would not have indicted him for unfairness with respect to the rest of the race, since he does not owe them anything but his condemnation. In fact, he has told us that he is busy calling a vast number to himself, from every tongue and tribe and people and nation.

Second, the question presupposes that what God owes people, in particular, is the 'chance' or 'opportunity' to hear the gospel and become Christians. That is perilously close to presupposing that the primary or even the exclusive reason why God should condemn people is because they have self-consciously rejected his son. Clearly, if they do so they stand condemned, according to the New Testament. That

is a particularly heinous sin, in that it is a sin against light that is potentially redeeming and transforming. But in fact, it is of a piece with all sin, and it is sin that condemns (1 Cor 6:9-10), not simply the sin of self-consciously rejecting Jesus. If God condemns men and women, it is because they are sinners, not because they have committed one particular sin.

Third, the old truism that God is a God of means is particularly appropriate in this case. He is Lord of history, including British history, Iranian history, Chinese history and Pakistani history. As the Lord of history and the God of means, He so orders things that the overwhelming majority of those who become believers do so through 'ordinary' means. In the West, such means have usually included Christian homes, Christian churches, Christian heritage, Christian literature, Christian pastors. Totalitarian Marxism flavoured with Sino-culture is part of the Chinese heritage; fundamentalist Islam is part of the (more recent) Iranian heritage; and in both of these contexts, the Gospel has made (proportionately) astonishing advances. The growth of Christianity in all three of these areas has been decisively shaped by the means that God has sovereignly deployed in each case.

Reported statistics on the growth of the church in Iran since the Ayatollah are wonderfully encouraging. Doubtless that is why four pastors have been executed or have 'disappeared' recently. Would the church in China have grown to its present astonishing size and

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vitality if turn-of-the-century China had simply drifted into pro-Western democracy, loaded with its own heritage and our corruptions? Who can say for sure? But I doubt it.

In other words, the only way that God could prove his 'fairness' under the demands of the opening question is by so ordering events that every nation had exactly the same history, heritage, and response to the gospel at every stage, since those are the realities that affect the next stage, and the stage after that, and the stage after that. What kind of rigid determinism would that be? The appeal to such fairness turns out to be a muted call to uniformity.

Fourth, the presenting question is phrased as if the Bible says nothing about election. Doubtless election has sometimes been abused in the past to foster a debilitating fatalism. But in the Bible, election is tied not only to God's choice of the old covenant people, but to his selective love (Mal 1:1-2). It serves as an incentive to evangelism (Acts 18:9-10) and as an anchor for grace (Rom 9). Above all, as absolute and mysterious as election may be, it never functions in Scripture as a disincentive to human responsibility and personal choices. In exactly the same way, God's continuing and sovereign work in the Christian's life, at the level of both the Christian's will and the Christian's action, becomes an *incentive* to us to 'work out' our salvation (Phil 2:12-13), not a disincentive.

Acknowledging these truths leads us to think about the initial question from a fresh vantage point. The *ultimate* reason why anyone believes is mysteriously bound up with God's grace in election. The more difficult question is not 'Why should he leave some with relatively less opportunity to hear the gospel?' but 'Why should he have saved anyone, and me in particular?' Rightly placed in biblical theology, that question leads to humility and worship.

Fifth, election is not only a mark of immeasurable privilege, it is a mark of obligation; being a Christian is not only the fruit of God's grace, it immediately faces the standards of God's requirements. To those to whom much is given, from them also shall much be required. Both Israel in the Old Testament and the Church in the New are repeatedly told not to boast in their privilege, but to recognize their profound indebtedness - as Paul does (Rom 1:14).

Many of these first five points are well supported by Matt 11:20-24. There Jesus argues that Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum,

Galilean towns where Jesus had preached and performed miracles, will be treated more harshly on the last day than Tyre and Sidon, pagan cities just up the coast, or even than Sodom and Gomorrah, proverbial for wickedness. This demonstrates that more light brings greater responsibility, and with it the risk of greater condemnation (after all, in Luke Jesus reminds us that some will be beaten with more strokes, and others with fewer strokes). *But it does not alter the fact that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed, and stand condemned because of their sin.* Jesus does not treat this as unfair or incongruous. He does not so much as hint that because the gospel was not preached in Tyre and Sidon they are thereby excused. He certainly does not call his father's fairness into question. Rather, he lays additional responsibility, and even threat of more severe judgment, on those who are privileged to receive more light.

Sixth, some believers are perhaps troubled by the initial question because they have not recognized the different ways in which the Bible speaks of the love of God. To mention but three: the Bible can speak of God's love for the entire lost and evil world (John 3:16), of his peculiar love for his covenant people (Mal 1:1-2), and of his love as that in which believers are obligated to keep themselves by their obedience (Jude 21), just as Jesus kept himself in his father's love by his obedience (John 15:9-10). If we think that every reference to the love of God falls into the first category, we shall run into all kinds of interpretative difficulties. The immediate context of a passage is more important for determining its finely textured meaning than a reductionistic theme supported elsewhere and imperially foisted on the text.

Seventh, world evangelism is not over yet. Perhaps before the onset of the new heaven and the new earth, there will be more Chinese believers, relatively speaking, than Caucasian Christians, and more Arab believers than Chinese believers. I simply do not know. I do know that on the last day, there will be a great throng around the throne, drawn from every tongue and tribe and people and nation. Individually and collectively, they attest the triumph of the Lamb. ■

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