

Robert L. Millet, “The Soteriological Problem of Evil,” in *Religious Educator* 2, no. 2. (2001), 73-82.

23 October 2001 version—ready for Stephen Hales

The Soteriological Problem of Evil:

Robert L. Millet

Robert L. Millet was Professor of Ancient Scripture and former Dean of Religious Education at BYU when this was published.

One of the distinctive beliefs of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is associated with baptism for the dead, a practice derived from the concept that living individuals may perform vicarious saving labors in behalf of those who have never had the opportunity to receive them. The Prophet Joseph Smith initiated this most unusual rite during the Nauvoo period of Church history—a time when there were no temple facilities in which the Saints could perform the baptisms. As Latter-day Saints, perhaps we do not fully appreciate the manner in which this profound doctrine addresses one of the most perplexing issues in the religious world—particularly the Christian world.

More often than not, baptism for the dead is considered an unnecessary, ill-advised, or even contemptible practice by traditional Christians. This is a very current issue. In the 10 August 1998 issue of *Christianity Today*, a reader inquired: “I’ve heard Mormons criticized for getting ‘baptized for the dead,’ but in 1 Corinthians 15:29 [New International Version], Paul writes: Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them? Did Jews or early Christians practice this? Why do we believe it’s wrong to practice it today?”²

Professor D. A. Carson, a respected Evangelical biblical scholar, responded briefly with familiar arguments against the practice: (1) The doctrine is not taught in the Book of Mormon; (2) It is mentioned in only one place in the Bible; (3) Paul uses the word *they* (rather than *we*) in referring to the practice, thus implying that Paul was not associated with the practice; and (4) “There is no good evidence for vicarious baptism anywhere in the New Testament or among the earliest apostolic fathers. . . . If the practice existed at all, it may have been tied to a few people or special cases—for example, when a relative died after trusting the gospel but before being baptized. We really do not know.”³

In a Christian world where people are not persuaded that baptism *in the flesh* is necessary for entrance into the Lord’s Church and thus essential to salvation (or where baptism is viewed as an extraneous and inessential work that somehow undercuts or compromises the saving grace of the Lord), members of the Church of Jesus Christ should not be surprised about some of the reactions we receive.

Statement of the Problem

It is fascinating to allow those not of our faith to state the problem. One Evangelical theologian wrote:

What is the fate of those who die never hearing the gospel of Christ? Are all the “heathen” lost? Is there an opportunity for those who have never heard of Jesus to be saved?

These questions raise one of the most perplexing, provocative and perennial issues facing Christians. It has been considered by philosophers and farmers, Christians and non-Christians. In societies where Christianity has had strong influence, just about everyone has either asked or been asked about the final destiny of those dying without knowledge of the only Savior, Jesus Christ. Far and away, this is the most-asked apologetic question on U.S. college campuses.

During my freshman year at a large state university, several of my friends and I regularly practiced evangelism. On one of those occasions a thoughtful unbeliever asked me, "If Jesus is the only way of salvation, then what about all those who have never heard about him?" At the time I had only been a Christian for a short while and consequently did not have an informed answer to give. Nevertheless, I acknowledged the importance of the question and later asked my pastor about it. He pointed me to some basic texts of Scripture but did not, he said, have any firm opinion on the matter. In the years since that encounter, I have been asked the same question hundreds of times. . . .

A large proportion of the human race has died without ever hearing the good news of Jesus. It is estimated that in A.D. 100 there were 181 million people, of whom 1 million were Christians. It is also believed there were 60,000 unreached people groups at that time. By the year 1000 there were 270 million people, 50 million of whom were Christians, with 50,000 unreached people groups. In 1989 there were 5.2 billion people, with 1.7 billion Christians and 12,000 unreached people groups. In addition we could think of all those who lived prior to [the birth of Christ] who never heard of the Israelites and God's covenant with them. Although there is no way of knowing exactly how many people died without ever hearing about Israel or the church, it seems safe to conclude that the vast majority of human beings who have ever lived fall into this category.

In terms of sheer numbers, then, an inquiry into the salvation of the unevangelized is of immense interest. What may be said about the destiny of countless billions who have lived and died apart from any understanding of the divine grace manifested in Jesus?⁴

This issue has been labeled by some as "the soteriological problem of evil." "The problem of evil" in philosophy and religion may be stated as follows: If God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving, how can He allow so much pain and suffering in the world? The effort to address the problem of evil and suffering is known as theodicy. Soteriology is the study of salvation; and thus the soteriological problem of evil might be stated simply as follows: If in fact Christ is the only name by which salvation comes (Acts 4:12; Mosiah 3:17) and if, as we have seen, the majority of the human race will go to their graves without ever having heard of Christ in this life, how can God be considered just or merciful?

This is an ancient issue. As early as the fourth century, St. Augustine was confronted by Porphyry, a philosopher who opposed Christianity. Porphyry asked: "If Christ declares himself to be the Way of salvation, the Grace and the Truth, and affirms that in Him alone, and only to souls believing in Him, is the way of return to God, what has become of men who lived in the

many centuries before Christ came? . . . What, then, has become of such an innumerable multitude of souls, who were in no wise blameworthy, seeing that He in whom alone saving faith can be exercised had not yet favoured men with His advent?"⁵

Varied Responses

Efforts to respond to what is indeed a significant challenge to the Christian faith have been numerous. Some people readily adopt an agnostic position—we simply do not know what God intends to do with the unevangelized. Others tend to believe that those who remain true to the light they have here will somehow be rewarded with greater light, including the gospel itself, in the life to come. In Christendom, these efforts to address the problem tend to fall into four main categories: (1) exclusivism or restrictivism, (2) pluralism or universalism, (3) inclusivism, and (4) divine perseverance or postmortem evangelization.

Exclusivism—Exclusivism or restrictivism might be stated as follows: People are saved only if they accept the Lord Jesus Christ in this life. This acceptance includes a worship and practice of the only true God, a union with Christ through full acceptance of His saving grace and atonement, and a Christian walk that reflects one's membership in the body of Christ. All others will be damned. There is no chance for salvation or receipt of the gospel hereafter. Those who are Calvinistic, who believe in the election and predestination of souls, would have to conclude that those who do not receive Christ here were not elected, in God's infinite wisdom and mercy, to do so. Besides, they might add, no one deserves to be saved; we ought to feel intense gratitude for those whom God foreknew and thus foreappointed to salvation. In short, in this view, "our destinies are sealed at death and no opportunity for salvation exists after that."⁶

Universalism—Pluralism or universalism's response to the soteriological problem of evil is quite simple: There is goodness and morality in religions and religious practices throughout the world. Christians do not have a monopoly on morality and decency. The philosopher John Hick wrote: "Coming to know both ordinary families, and some extraordinary individuals, whose spirituality has been formed by these different traditions and whose lives are lived within them, I have not found that the people of the other world religions are, in general, on a different moral and spiritual level from Christians. They seem on average to be neither better nor worse than are Christians."⁷ Hick further observed:

If we define salvation as being forgiven and accepted by God because of Jesus' death on the cross, then it becomes a tautology that Christianity alone knows and is able to preach the source of salvation. But if we define salvation as an actual human change, a gradual transformation from natural self-centeredness (with all the human evils that flow from this) to a radically new orientation centered in God and manifested in the "fruit of the Spirit," then it seems clear that salvation is taking place within all of the world religions—and taking place, so far as we can tell, to more or less the same extent.⁸

Hick thus argues "on Christian grounds" for a doctrine of universal salvation.⁹

Inclusivism—The third approach to this difficult question is what some have called inclusivism. Justin Martyr, the early Christian apologist (ca. A.D. 100–165), explained that Christ "is the Word of whom every race of men were partakers; and those who lived reasonably are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists; as, among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus, and men like them."¹⁰ Justin believed that all are partakers of a general revelation through the universal

logos, though in Jesus Christ the logos was revealed in its fulness. Likewise, Irenaeus contended that God has never been completely unknown to any race of people, as the universal Spirit of Christ is inherent in the minds of men and women of all times and places.

For it was not merely for those who believed on Him in the time of Tiberius Caesar that Christ came, nor did the Father exercise His providence for the men only who are now alive, but for all men altogether, who from the beginning, according to their capacity, in their generation have both feared and loved God, and practised justice and piety towards their neighbours, and have earnestly desired to see Christ, and to hear His voice. Wherefore He shall, at His second coming . . . give them a place in His kingdom.¹¹

C. S. Lewis wrestled with this question when he explained: “Those who put themselves in [God’s] hands will become perfect, as He is perfect—perfect in love, wisdom, joy, beauty, and immortality. The change will not be completed in this life, for death is an important part of the treatment.”¹² On another occasion, he remarked: “Here is another thing that used to puzzle me. Is it not frightfully unfair that this new life [in Christ] should be confined to people who have heard of Christ and been able to believe in Him? But the truth is God has not told us what His arrangements about the other people are. We do know that no man can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him.”¹³ Further, Lewis taught that “Christ saves many who do not think they know Him. For He is (dimly) present in the *good* side of the inferior teachers they follow. In the parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31 and following), those who are saved do not seem to know that they have served Christ.”¹⁴ Lewis also said:

There are people (a great many of them) who are slowly ceasing to be Christians but who still call themselves by that name: some of them are clergymen. There are other people who are slowly becoming Christians though they do not yet call themselves so. There are people who do not accept the full Christian doctrine about Christ but who are so strongly attracted by Him that they are His in a much deeper sense than they themselves understand. There are people in other religions who are being led by God’s secret influence to concentrate on those parts of their religion which are in agreement with Christianity, and who thus belong to Christ without knowing it. . . . Many of the good Pagans long before Christ’s birth may have been in this position.¹⁵

Lewis repeatedly taught that Jesus is the only way to salvation. But although “all salvation is through Christ, we need not conclude that He cannot save those who have not explicitly accepted Him in this life. And it should (at least in my judgment) be made clear that we are not pronouncing all other religions to be totally false, but rather saying that in Christ whatever is true in all religions is consummated and perfected.”¹⁶

In the closing pages of his book, *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis concludes with a fascinating conversation between himself and George Macdonald, a Scottish Congregational minister whose writings deeply influenced Lewis. Macdonald teaches Lewis concerning Christ’s descent into hell by saying, “There is no spirit in prison to Whom He did not preach.” Lewis then asks, “And some hear him?” “Aye.” Lewis follows up with, “In your own books, . . . you were a Universalist. You talked as if all men would be saved. And St. Paul too.” Macdonald then delivers a rather complex and difficult response in which he seems to be saying that everyone

who desires to be saved will be saved. He observes that although Christians speak rather categorically of heaven and hell and formulate straightforward criteria from an eternal perspective for attaining each, far more will be saved than we realize. Lewis did not attempt to correct Macdonald's doctrine for the reader.¹⁷

In short, while inclusivists acknowledge that salvation is in Christ alone, they also note that God is working through His Spirit to bring people to that higher light we know as the gospel of Jesus Christ. Favorite passages of scripture for this group are Titus 2:11 ("For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men") and 1 Timothy 2:3–4 ("For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth"). Scriptural illustrations of those who obviously exercised faith but were outside the purview of a traditional Christian reception of the gospel include people mentioned in Hebrews 11 such as Abel, Enoch, Noah, Job, Melchizedek, and Jethro (those called "holy pagans" by Clark Pinnock); premessianic Jews like Abraham; and faithful Gentiles like Cornelius.¹⁸

From this perspective, "God saves people only because of the work of Christ, but people may be saved even if they do not know about Christ. God grants them salvation if they exercise faith in God as revealed to them through creation and provident." Further, "According to the inclusivist view, the Father reaches out to the unevangelized through both the Son and the Spirit via general revelation, conscience and human culture. God does not leave himself without witness to any people. Salvation for the unevangelized is made possible only by the redemptive work of Jesus, but God applies that work even to those who are ignorant of the atonement. God does this if people respond in trusting faith to the revelation they have."¹⁹

Postmortem Evangelism—A fourth position taken by Christians in regard to the soteriological problem of evil is what has been called future probation, second probation, eschatological evangelism, divine perseverance, and postmortem evangelism. According to this view, those who die without a knowledge of the gospel are not damned; they have an opportunity to receive the truth in the world to come. "God is resolute," one advocate of this position has pointed out, "never giving up on getting the Word out. In this world God will give us power to spread the gospel far and wide. But the Word will also be declared to those we can't reach, even if it takes an eternity." Moreover, "God's love is *patient* and *persistent*. It outlasts us. . . . For the final victory of this powerful patience, however, we must await the end of the story. Only then will the kingdom come—the resurrection of the dead, the return of Christ, final judgment and everlasting life. In the end, God will settle accounts, vindicate the sufferer and validate the divine purposes."²⁰

Donald Bloesch, a respected Evangelical, explained:

We do not wish to build fences around God's grace, . . . and we do not preclude the possibility that some in hell might finally be translated into heaven. The gates of the holy city are depicted as being open day and night (Isaiah 60:11; Revelation 21:25), and this means that access to the throne of grace is possible continuously. The gates of hell are locked, but they are locked only from within. C. S. Lewis has suggested in *The Great Divorce* that where there is a supposed transition from hell to heaven the person was never really in hell but only in purgatory. This, of course, is interesting speculation and may be close to the truth. Yet we must maintain a reverent agnosticism concerning the workings of God's grace which

are not revealed in Holy Scripture. We can affirm salvation on the other side of the grave, since this has scriptural warrant.²¹

Favorite passages of scripture for this group are 1 Peter 3:18–20 and 1 Peter 4:6, which refer to Christ teaching the gospel in the postmortal world; John 5:25, in which Jesus states that the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and Ephesians 4:8–9, which speaks of Christ descending to the “lower parts of the earth.” One critic of the doctrine of postmortem evangelism declared that a “reading of 1 Peter 4:6 is neither the only nor even the most plausible interpretation. Wise Christians do not base any important doctrine—especially one that is controversial and that might also contain heretical implications—on one single, highly debatable passage of Scripture. If this approach were applied by PME [postmortem evangelism] advocates to 1 Corinthians 15:29, it would lead Christians to follow a policy of baptizing living people as proxies for the unbaptized dead.”²²

Indeed, it just might!

After having quoted 1 Corinthians 15:28, Richard John Neuhaus, a noted Roman Catholic thinker, observed: “The Corinthians passage just quoted is immediately followed by St. Paul’s mysterious remark about baptism for the dead. ‘Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?’ [New Revised Standard Version, 1 Corinthians 15:29] Why indeed. Mormons baptize for the dead today, but the Orthodox Christian tradition has quite lost track of what St. Paul was talking about, although he obviously assumed the Corinthians were familiar with the practice. What is clear is that it was thought that something could be done spiritually for those who had died.”²³

The Revealed Response

J. I. Packer, a prominent Evangelical scholar, recently reminded the readers of *Christianity Today* that any notion of salvation beyond the grave “is nonscriptural speculation, and reflects an inadequate grasp of what turning to Christ involves.” Further, he added, any idea of a person’s not receiving the gospel in this life and then choosing to receive it hereafter is unscriptural. He pointed out that “the unbeliever’s lack of desire for Christ and the Father and heaven remains unchanged [after death]. So for God to extend the offer of salvation beyond the moment of death, even for thirty seconds, would be pointless. Nothing would come if it.”²⁴

The Lord has, in fact, offered a more excellent hope in our day. The good news, or glad tidings of salvation in Christ, is intended to lift our sights and bring hope to our souls and to “bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound” (Isaiah 61:1). That hope in Christ is in the infinite capacity of an infinite Being to save men and women from ignorance as well as from sin and death. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is indeed the God of the living (Matthew 22:32), and His influence and redemptive mercies span the veil of death. The Apostle Paul wrote: “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable” (1 Corinthians 15:19).

And so what of those who never have the opportunity in this life to know of Christ and His gospel, who never have the opportunity to be baptized for a remission of sins and for entrance into the kingdom of God, and who never have the privilege of being bound in marriage and sealed in the family unit? In a world gripped by cynicism and strangled by hopelessness, the scriptures and revelations of the Restoration bear witness of a God of mercy and vision and of an

Omnipotent One whose reach to His children is neither blocked by distance nor dimmed by death.

And so it was that after the doctrinal foundation had been laid, God made known through the Prophet of the Restoration those ennobling truths that pertain to life and salvation, both here and hereafter. Truly, as Joseph Smith explained, “It is no more incredible that God should *save* the dead, than that he should *raise* the dead.”²⁵

The doctrine of baptism for the dead, Joseph Smith once declared, “presents in a clear light the wisdom and mercy of God in preparing an ordinance for the salvation of the dead, being baptized by proxy, their names recorded in heaven and they judged according to the deeds done in the body. This doctrine was the burden of the scriptures. Those Saints who neglect it in behalf of their deceased relatives, do it at the peril of their own salvation.”²⁶

We, the children, thus participate in the realization of the “promises made to the fathers” and thereby help to preserve the earth from destruction (D&C 2:2–3). Surely no work could represent a more noble cause or a more valiant enterprise. And no labor in time could have more eternal implications.

Notes

1. This essay is adapted from an address delivered to the Brigham Young University Religious Education faculty, fall 1998.
2. D. A. Carson, “Did Paul Baptize for the Dead?” *Christianity Today* 42, no. 9 (10 August 1998): 63.
3. Ibid.
4. John Sanders, ed., *What about Those Who Have Never Heard?* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 7–9; see also Clark Pinnock and Delwin Brown, *Theological Crossfire: An Evangelical/Liberal Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1990), 227.
5. Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1979), 1:416.
6. Sanders, *What about Those Who Have Never Heard?* 13.
7. John Hick, in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, ed. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1996), 39.
8. Ibid., 43.
9. Ibid., 45.
10. In *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1979), 1:178.
11. Ibid., 494.
12. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 177.
13. Ibid., 65.
14. C. S. Lewis, in *Letters of C. S. Lewis*, Letter to a Mrs. Ashton, 8 November 1952, ed. W. H. Lewis, rev. ed. by Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 428.
15. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 178.
16. C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1970), 102.
17. C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 121–22.
18. Cited in Sanders, *What about Those Who Have Never Heard?* 36–42; John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids,

Michigan: Eerdmans, 1992), 259–60; see also Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1996), 185–214.

19. Sanders, *What about Those Who Have Never Heard?* 13, 36.

20. Gabriel Fackre, in *What about Those Who Have Never Heard?* 73, 78.

21. Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper, 1978), 2:226–27.

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22. Ronald H. Nash, in Sanders, *What about Those Who Have Never Heard?* 130.

23. Richard John Neuhaus, *Death on a Friday Afternoon* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 52.

24. J. I. Packer, “Can the Dead Be Converted?” *Christianity Today* 43, no. 1, (11 January 1999): 82.

25. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 191.

26. *Ibid.*, 193, from a sermon delivered on 3 October 1841.