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Circumcision of the Heart

“For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.” Romans 2:28-29

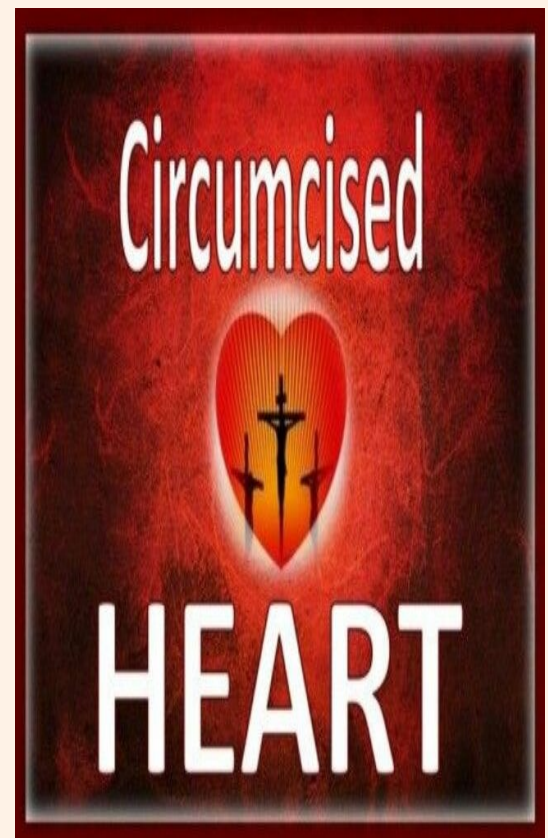
Years ago, my dad and I had a discussion with a group of young men who were from a different faith group than ours. During our discussions the question came up regarding people who have never had an opportunity to hear the gospel. There are, no doubt, still areas in the world that are isolated and off to themselves. And even in

areas that have ample communication with the outside world, there can still be closed societies that hinder the ideas and philosophies of outsiders to penetrate the barriers of tribal traditions. What if someone in such a situation lived their whole lives and never heard of Jesus Christ and his gospel of salvation? Will they be saved, or will they be lost?

These young men were very adamant in their belief that people in such closed societies would be lost. They quoted many familiar passages from both the gospels and the letters of the New Testament and firmly advocated that anyone who did not believe in Jesus would be condemned. My dad and I took the position that all these passages assumed, first, that such individuals had been given an opportunity to hear, but they had rejected the truth concerning Jesus and the gospel. It is one thing to hear the gospel and to spurn and scorn it; it is quite another thing to have never heard it. Paul posed these three questions in Romans 10:14, “How shall the 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?” This passage certainly emphasizes for us the need to preach the gospel in all the world. It further points to the difficulty for those who have never heard. We cannot believe in something of which we have never heard.

Paul goes on to point out in the remainder of Romans 10 that the Jews under consideration had heard (Rom. 10:18). Paul affirms that both Moses and Isaiah had spoken of the reaction of the Jews to the proclamation of the gospel, and he concludes, “All day long I have stretched out My hands to a disobedient and contrary people” (Rom. 10:21). Hearing and rejecting in unbelief are not the same thing as never hearing. The two are not the same.

So, we are still left with the question of whether someone who has never heard the gospel will be saved or lost? Is there any



Scriptural basis on which we can separate the two classes of hearers and non-hearers? Are there any principles taught in God's word that would indicate the non-hearers may still have some recourse to God? We believe there are some sound Scriptural principles that can help us unravel the confusion and misguided judgment that surround these issues.

Hearing and rejecting in unbelief are not the same thing as never hearing. The two are not the same.

One of the first Biblical principles that surely informs this discussion is that God looks on the hearts of men. As men, we can be deceived, but no one can hide the truth from God. God knows all and sees all. When Samuel was sent to the house of Jesse to anoint a new king over Israel, this tendency for men to misread situations is quite evident, even prophets of God can sometimes be misled. "So it was, when they came, that he looked at Eliab and said, 'Surely the Lord's anointed is before Him!' But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart'" (1Sam.16:6-7). If it had been left up to Samuel's initial judgment that day, the wrong person would have been anointed king. Samuel saw the stature and winsome appearance of Eliab. He may have looked regal, but his heart was not right. God saw his heart. And eventually Samuel would anoint David as king.

The Psalmist declares, "Would not God search this out? For He knows the secrets of the heart" (Psa. 44:21). God knows man from the inside out. John makes this statement concerning Jesus and his knowledge of the hearts of men, "Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did. But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men, and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man" (Jn. 2:23-25). We find this important truth that God looks on the heart and he knows man completely.

Let's turn our attention now to the basis of God's judgment. In the early chapters of Romans, Paul concludes that "all have sinned and fall short of

the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). In the context of Romans, we understand that the "all" in this verse refers to both Jews and Gentiles. However, it appears that the Gentile nations should have known certain things about God just from creation itself, while the Jews were given further revelations by God but failed to keep them.

In his indictment against the Gentiles Paul writes, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things" (Rom. 1:18-23).

...even though a man may know nothing about Jesus, he is still capable of suppressing certain truths about God.

From this passage we learn that even though a man may know nothing about Jesus, he is still capable of suppressing certain truths about God. Paul says that the Gentiles suppressed the truth in unrighteousness. Paul affirms that God revealed to the Gentiles his eternal power and Godhead through creation itself. The Psalmist declares, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard. Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world" (Psa. 19:1-4). Based on the created world, God held the Gentile nations accountable for certain truths. They had not been given everything that the Jews received, but they were still responsible for what they had received.

In Romans 2 Paul begins his indictment of the Jews. He begins by saying that they are

inexcusable. Not only had the Jew been given the creation as a demonstration of God's eternal power and Godhead, they had been given the Law through Moses. They had the words of the Prophets, and yet they were often guilty of practicing the same things the Gentiles did. On top of that, they would condemn and criticize the Gentiles for doing things of which they themselves were guilty. The goodness of God should have led them to repentance, but they had despised his goodness, forbearance and longsuffering.

Men will be judged based on the truth which has been revealed to them.

We must take note of God's impartiality. God does not play favorites. Men will be judged based on the truth which has been revealed to them. Paul writes, "For there is no partiality with God. 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 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" (Rom. 2:11-16).

Paul says it is possible that some of the Gentiles who were not given the law were nonetheless doing the things written in the law. He says they show the work of the law written in their hearts. Not all Gentiles had rejected the truth of God and become vain in their imaginations. Some of them were practicing the principles of the law more successfully than were the Jews. How could this be? It is because God looks on the heart; he knows what is in the hearts of men.

Even the ritual practice of circumcision is more a matter of the heart than of any outward sign in the flesh. Notice what Paul states, "For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the law, will not his

uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? And will not the physically uncircumcised, if he fulfills the law, judge you who, even with your written code and circumcision, are a transgressor of the law? For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God" (Rom. 2:25-29).

This contrast between Jew and Gentile is helpful to us in understanding some basic principles about God's dealings with men. First, we have noted that God looks on the hearts of men; he doesn't judge on outward appearances. And second, we see that God is impartial. He judges each man based on the truth revealed to him, and not based on what has not been revealed.

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On questions like we are discussing here it is so tempting for us to fall into the trap of trying to please men. When we seek the approval of men, we may often find ourselves opposed to God. Jesus had an encounter with religious leaders of his day wherein he warned them about the dangers of seeking to please men. "I do not receive honor from men. But I know you, that you do not have the love of God in you. I have come in My Father's name, and you do not receive Me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive. How can you believe, who receive honor from one another, and do not seek the honor that comes from the only God? Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; there is one who accuses you—Moses, in whom you trust. For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?" (Jn. 5:41-47).

We must be sure that we seek to honor God and his Word and not one another. We cannot afford to abandon principles of God's word in order to please men. Jesus pointed out to his enemies that the very one they claimed to believe, Moses, had

written about him. Why could these men not see this? Was it due to their desire to honor one another? Had they forsaken plain truths in God's word because they wanted the praise of men?

Surely these principles from God's word can help us in understanding how God looks upon someone who has never had an opportunity to hear the gospel and to know Jesus Christ. The context of Romans is, of course, set in the Christian Age. The gospel is being preached and obeyed by both Jews and Gentiles. Paul made it very plain that all come to God through Jesus on the same footing. Paul declares, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith" (Rom. 1:16-17). Paul affirms the both the Jew and the Gentile obtain salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. The uncircumcised Gentile and the circumcised Jew both obtained salvation through obedience to the gospel.

Once again, we note that hearing the gospel proclaimed and rejecting it is not the same as never hearing the gospel proclaimed. We have observed two general principles found in the Bible: God looks on the heart and God is impartial. Are these two principles operable in understanding how God looks on individuals who have never heard of Jesus and the gospel? Does God judge one who has never heard the gospel on the same basis as those who have heard the gospel?

Let's see if we can discern another principle from God's Word that may be helpful in answering this question. In Matthew 25 we find the Parable of the Talents sandwiched between the Parable of the Ten Virgins and the Great Judgment Scene. All three of these teach us various truths about God's dealings with men and how he will judge the world. The Ten Virgins teach us about being prepared and ready for the Lord's return. The Great Judgment Scene gives us some insight based on God's judgement. What can we learn from the Parable of the Talents?

The parable begins, "For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. And to one he gave five talents, to another two,

and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey" (Matt. 25:14-15). One of the first things we note is that these three men had varying abilities, and the talents given to each was based on their abilities. We can rightly conclude that the one-talent man was not expected to perform at the same level as the five-talent man; another words, the master would not expect the one-talent man to have gained five talents like the five-talent man, or even two talents, like the two-talent man. They were all expected to perform within the realm of their given abilities.

As we consider these men further, we conclude that they were judged based on what they were given and not based on what they were not given. The one-talent man was not reprimanded because he didn't gain five or even two talents. He was condemned for not using and applying what had been given to him. In this sense, all three men were actually evaluated on the same basis. They were judged on the talents they were given, and not on the talents they were not given.

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Perhaps I am wrong but is this principle applicable in answering our question about individuals who have never heard of Jesus and the gospel. Will God judge and condemn men based on something never given to them? Or will God judge each servant based on the light that has been given to him?

I have heard this accusation leveled against God by different people over the years. When some Christian proclaims that those who have never heard the gospel and don't know Jesus will be condemned, there are those who protest that God is not fair, and his judgment is flawed. In answer to their protests I propose that God is impartial, and that God looks on the hearts of men. He does not judge men based on what they do not have but based on what they do have.

I am also aware of this truth taught in God's word, "But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against

God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, 'Why have you made me like this?' Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?" (Rom. 9:20-21). God is sovereign and he can do what he pleases. However, I am more inclined to believe that he is

an impartial God who looks on the hearts of men and judges them according to what they have been given and not according to what they have not been given.

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Uplifting, Or Just Lifting?

"Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need." Ephesians 4:28

This story appeared in an AP wire out of Atlanta, GA:

ATLANTA (AP) — Two gospel singers are facing multiple charges after authorities say they played uplifting music for several Georgia churches, then stole some \$100,000 worth of speakers, microphones and other musical equipment.

Washington County Sheriff Thomas H. Smith said Tuesday that 28-year-old Deshawn Rico Thomas, of Augusta, and 28-year-old Rico Pionegro Blackshear, from Dublin, have each been charged with nine counts of theft by taking and nine counts of burglary.

Smith says authorities had been investigating nine break-ins at churches in central Georgia over the past several months. He says a tipster told authorities the pair might be linked to the break-ins and authorities executing a search warrant found musical equipment in the men's homes and cars.

Neither man had a listed phone number. Thomas said he did not know if they had attorneys. (AP 5/11/10)

It would be disheartening to know that a gospel singing group was casing out your church with plans to come back after everyone had gone home for the night. What should have been an "uplift" would turn into nothing more than a deceptive "lifting." This story is surely an extreme case and

not the typical gospel singing experience that we usually encounter.

Paul points out to the Ephesians that good, honest work allows us not only to provide for our own needs, but it also enables us to have something to give to those who are in need. I am happy to say that I have never known any gospel singers like the two in the AP story out of Georgia. I have known a lot of men and women who have used their singing talents and have spent their time and resources trying to encourage people and to glorify the Lord. Most of the gospel singers I have known are not professionals and their work is a labor of love. They often spend from their own resources to promote the gospel. They are in the business of "uplifting" folks and not looking for an opportunity to "lift" a church's sound equipment.

...good, honest work allows us not only to provide for our own needs, but it also enables us to have something to give to those who are in need.

"...that you also lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you, that you may walk properly toward those who are outside...." 1Thessalonians 4:11-12

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05/13/2010

Oldest Church Found?

“Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.” Ephesians 2:19-22

On June 10, 2008, the news traveled almost instantly around the world. Not only the Associated Press and the BBC carried the story, but even *Chinese View*: The oldest church in the world had been found in northern Jordan, according to Jordanian archaeologist Abdul Qader Hussan, who declared the find “amazing.” Actually, the claimed archaeological find packed a double whammy. According to *The Jordan Times*, the Jordanian archaeologists not only found the oldest church in the world, which they dated to 230 A.D., but beneath the church they found a cave-church “dating from 33 A.D. to 70 A.D.” that served as a chapel for Jesus’ original disciples who fled Jerusalem after the crucifixion. The earlier date (33 A.D.) is the assumed date of the crucifixion, and the latter date (70 A.D.) is the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

Biblical Archaeology Review’s Web coverage of this story includes not only Hershel Shanks’s interview on Fox News (slightly over 3 minutes) but also a careful and detailed analysis of the church in Jordan and the cave beneath it, written by two scholars from the University of Toronto, Lincoln Blumell and Jenn Cianca. To date, this is the only serious archaeological analysis of this alleged discovery. The two scholars conclude that a date of 230 for the church “is an impossibility.” Instead, they date the church to the sixth century. As for the cave beneath the church, the Toronto scholars write, “There is no evidence that the cave was used for worship in the first century.”

That story is not so amazing to people who read and understand the Bible because the church is not

a physical building. The church is the people of God. What is really amazing is that God has chosen to dwell in our hearts by faith. The Apostle Peter proclaimed: “But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy” (1 Peter 2:9-10). Now that is truly amazing!

“...And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.” Acts 2:47

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02/11/2010

C. S. Lewis Quotes on the Church

I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.

Life with God is not immunity from difficulties, but peace in difficulties.



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