

Extent of the Gospel: Will All the Elect Hear the Gospel?

By Elder David Pyles

This post concerns the question of whether all of the elect will hear the gospel. I contend they will not, yet at the same time, I contend that we have no authority to offer the hope of eternal life to anyone who has not heard the gospel and believed it.

First, let me say that while Primitive Baptists may have differing concepts as to how many of the elect will hear the gospel, practically none take the extreme view that all of the elect will hear the gospel. This is not a matter of interpretation. Right or wrong, scriptural or unscriptural, it is verifiable fact that practically all Primitive Baptists allow the possibility that some elect will never be brought to a complete belief of the true gospel in this life. I hope that my position and defense will be a fair and respectable representation of common Primitive Baptist views.

Next, I wish to make it perfectly clear that I am not making a statement as to how many of the elect will be deprived of the gospel. I really don't care if it is one or one billion, and I certainly don't claim to know. I am objecting to the extreme view that absolutely all will hear it. There is a fundamental difference between saying this and saying that most of the elect will hear the gospel or saying that exceptions are very rare. Once we have committed ourselves to the absolute extreme, then we must necessarily assert that God has **predestined** all of the elect hear the gospel. How else could we be absolutely sure of it? In the opinion of nearly all Primitive Baptists, such an assertion is contradicted by scripture, reason, and observation. As we shall shortly show, even if one were to take the erroneous position that God has predestined all events, there still would not be reasonable grounds to conclude that He has predestined this event.

It is important that we begin with two clarifications:

1) The Meaning of "Gospel"

First, the definition of "gospel." We mean by this the true gospel as preached by man. We allow that God has every right and all ability to preach the gospel himself without the aid of man. According to Galatians 3:8, God preached to gospel to Abraham long before there ever was an apostle, elder, or missionary. It is presumptuous for us to take any position asserting that only man can preach the gospel. Now, there will be different opinions about how much information is conveyed by direct revelation from God, or as to how this revelation will manifest itself in the lives of those affected, and it is certain that God directly reveals more to some than to others. However, I believe I speak for all Primitive Baptists by saying that God will reveal Himself, in His own chosen way and degree, to all of His elect people here in time. In this sense it could be said that the gospel will reach all of the elect. Consider:

"And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven." Mt. 16:17

"No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me." John 6:44-45

Extent of the Gospel

"For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people: And they shall not teach every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for all shall know me, from the least to the greatest." Hebrews 8:10,11

"And ye have not his word abiding in you: for whom he hath sent, him ye believe not." John 5:38

These texts also show that without the "gospel" preached by God, one will never receive the gospel as preached by man. Observe that in the last verse, it is asserted that the Jews would not receive the outward word because they did not possess the inward word. Only God can implant this inward word, and He will do it to all of His chosen in time.

Consider also:

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live. For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself; And hath given him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of man. Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation." John 5:25-29

These texts speak of those in a state of spiritual death being raised by the power of Jesus' voice. They then tell us that by the power of this same voice, the dead will be raised at the end of time. Hence, there are two resurrections in these texts. As it will be Christ's personal voice which shall raise to bodily dead, even so it is Christ's personal voice that will raise the spiritually dead. As the latter resurrection will not be through the voice of man, neither will the former. The resurrection is to the body what regeneration is to the spirit. The resurrection could be called the regeneration of the body. And both forms of regeneration are performed in exactly the same way. This follows also from the terms of the text. The gospel minister can give one the *words* of Jesus, but only Jesus himself can give His *voice*. And we contend that all the elect will hear this voice in time. Again, we contend that this is the only sense in which all of the elect will hear the "gospel."

2) Belief in Jesus is the Only *Sufficient* Evidence of Eternal Life

While we allow that God may, in His own sovereign pleasure, quicken whom He will, where He will, and when He will, and while we allow that God may do all of these even among those who are, and shall remain, deprived of the true gospel as preached by man, the scriptures deny that uninspired man can identify the presence of a regenerate heart in the absence of belief in the Lord Jesus. Accordingly, we have no authority to offer the promises of the gospel to anyone who has not accepted it. Consider:

"But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe." Gal 3:22

Extent of the Gospel

I cannot find a place in the Bible where we are to offer the promises unto anyone other than a believer. Good works are indeed fruit of the Spirit, but good works can also be produced by other motivations. The Lord Jesus credited even the Pharisees with good works on certain points (Mt 23:23), but in the same context He implied they would not escape the damnation of hell (verse 33). I fear that had we lived among the Pharisees, many would have made the mistake of boldly declaring them to be children of God, because the Lord said the Pharisees were as "*whited sepulchres which indeed appear beautiful outward*" (Mt 23:27). That is, they appeared to be fine religious people. But their reaction to Jesus and to the gospel revealed that they were in fact "*full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness.*" Accordingly, we believe that God may, in an act of mercy to His own people, move the most wicked of kings, rulers, and other men to good deeds (see I Tim 2:1,2). Do these good deeds signal the presence of eternal life? They do not. However, this we know God will never do: He will never move an eternally condemned man to belief in the gospel. Consider:

"Wherefore I give you to understand, that no man speaking by the Spirit of God calleth Jesus accursed: and that no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost." 1 Cor. 12:3

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life." John 5:24

These texts teach that true belief in Jesus Christ is a *sufficient* evidence of eternal life within. Of course, *true* belief will be confirmed by works (James 2:18). On the other hand, while good works are indeed evidence of the Spirit (Gal 5:22,23), they are not by themselves a *sufficient* evidence.

Accordingly, when the scriptures declare that the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit (1 Cor 2:14, Rom 8:7), these "things of the Spirit" do not include the fact of God's existence, or the fact of His creative powers, or the fact of His law. The wicked men who crucified the Lord believed all of these things. By "things of the Spirit" are meant those things pertaining to Jesus Christ. Christ is the focal point of all that the Spirit teaches. These are things the natural man will invariably reject. Only the called will appreciate the message of Christ crucified. To all others, this message is a stumblingblock and foolishness (1 Cor 1:23,24).

Christ is therefore the only decisive criteria by which uninspired minds can ascertain the presence of eternal life within themselves or others. It is scripturally improper to point to the unbelieving heathen masses of this world and proclaim them to be laden with children of God. Even if this were true, we simply cannot know this. To assert that we can is equivalent to claiming ourselves to be under inspirational powers. It is true that certain texts in the Bible describe the redeemed family of God to be very large, but one cannot decisively infer from this that the present heathen world contains multitudes of elect. To draw such a conclusion would require knowing how long the world will exist a piece of information that none of us have. Will this world have many generations with an elect minority in each, or will it have few generations with a multitude of elect in each? I suppose we cannot help but have opinions, but we must distinguish these from what we can actually prove.

Extent of the Gospel

FIVE POINTS AGAINST UNIVERSAL GOSPEL

Now allow me to present the case that God has not predestined all the elect to hear the gospel as preached by man. I will present five arguments. Bear in mind that I am not directly addressing the question of gospel regeneration. More than five arguments could be advanced against this. Certainly, if universality of the gospel is false, then gospel regeneration must also be false, but the converse does not necessarily hold.

1) The fact of regenerate infants and the possibility of such dying in infancy destroys the principle that all of the elect will hear the gospel. The common claim that these are exceptional cases is totally without scriptural foundation. The scriptures never indicate that God has made any exceptions in His providential dealings with infants. The fact that there are regenerate infants is clearly implied by Mt 11:25, Mt 21:16, and Lk 1:15. The fact that such can die in infancy is revealed in 2 Sam 12:23.

A similar problem exists in the case of Old Testament saints. Many heard truth, but few today would classify what they heard as "gospel." Certainly, few would say that one today had heard the gospel if the information at their disposal was limited to what Old Testament saints generally understood.

2) Scriptures indicate that if we do not care and if we do not pray, the gospel will not reach all those for whom it is intended. Consider:

"Then saith he unto his disciples, The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few; Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest." Mt. 9:37,38

"Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified, even as it is with you." 2 Thess. 3:1

"Now I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me; That I may be delivered from them that do not believe in Judaea; and that my service which I have for Jerusalem may be accepted of the saints." Rom. 15:30,31

Do these texts indicate that God has predestined the gospel to reach all the elect? They certainly do not suggest this at all. Some have said that the prayers commanded by these texts are God's instrumental means of ensuring that the gospel will reach the elect. This reasoning only compounds the error, because it logically reduces the implied human responsibility in these texts to nonsense. Besides this, compare this allegedly predestined event with events which are known to be predestined: Does the Bible command us to pray that none will fall from the eternal covenant, or that more will be added to it? Of course not, because the contents of this covenant are predestined. Does the Bible command us to make graves easy to unearth so as to facilitate the resurrection? Again, this is ridiculous. The resurrection is a predestined event, and all the powers of man and hell can neither aid it nor hinder it. Does the Bible call upon us to affect the date of Jesus' return? Of course not. We are to prepare for it, but the date itself is fixed by God.

3) Our own consciences teach us that not all the elect will hear the true gospel, because we know within ourselves that our speech and actions can prove as stumbling blocks and deterrents to the truth. We are under constant convictions about our behavior before children and unconverted individuals

Extent of the Gospel

because we know that they may be caused to reject the truth if we represent it with guile and hypocrisy. The scriptures teach the same (1 Thes 2:16, 1 Tim 6:1). Yet we feel no such convictions about affecting the contents of the eternal covenant, affecting the resurrection, affecting the return of Jesus, or affecting any event which God is known to have predestined. A principle purpose of predestination is to eliminate all vulnerabilities and uncertainties that would otherwise be created by the vagaries of man.

4) The world we observe is not consistent with the doctrine asserting that God has ordained all the elect to hear the gospel. Why are so many of God's people hearing a false gospel? If the providence of God brings the gospel to all the elect, then why is it a perverted gospel in more cases than not? Shall we say that it is the providence of God that has exposed modern multitudes to the corruptions of Arminianism? I suppose that of all heresies considered in the scriptures, the heresy of the Galatians was as near to modern Arminianism as any. But Paul unequivocally declared, *"This persuasion cometh not of him that calleth you"* (Gal 5:8).

5) The scriptures teach that God did, as a judgment against the nation Israel, blind the eyes of some of His own people so that they did not see the gospel. Consider:

"For God hath concluded them all in unbelief, that he might have mercy upon all." Rom 11 32

This case may be exceptional, but it single-handedly destroys the principle that God has predestined all the elect to hear and obey the gospel.

ANY POSITION OTHER THAN THE PRIMITIVE POSITION IS *EXTREME*

The Primitive Baptist position is often accused of being extreme. However, upon close examination it will be seen that the Primitive Baptist position falls between the extremes. The extremes are Arminianism on the left and classic Calvinism on the right. Arminianism places more responsibility on the minister than he can possibly bear, because this doctrine necessarily implies that others will surely go to hell because of the minister's failures. Calvinism maintains that the gospel is predestined to reach all the elect. There is a logical sense in which this doctrine has removed the responsibility of man. This is not to say that Calvinists fail to teach responsibility. They generally do. But they themselves concede an apparent contradiction between such teachings and their views of predestination. They generally dismiss this apparent contradiction to mystery.

It is certain that the providence of God is a strong and necessary force in the spread of the gospel. In the absence of God's providential intervention, the gates of hell would surely prevail against the church. But this force is not necessarily exerted to such degree that it completely corrects or offsets the failures of man to spread the truth in this world. There is no doubt that Almighty God has the ability to direct gospel preachers to all of his elect, but the evidence does not support the claim that He has purposed to do so in time.