

Part A - Salvation, Part B - Judgment, Part C - The Ages to Come

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A-2: Who are God's People?

All through history God has been seeking for those whom He could call "His people". In ancient times, God showed His favor towards the descendants of Abraham who later became followers of the laws of Moses. These were the people of God in those days. Their laws, given to them by God, guided their behavior and government. As a result Israel served, in the midst of a pagan world, as the example of a nation that worshiped the God of Heaven. They were the "covenant people", the "chosen people".

And this feeling of exclusivity was very much a part of the Hebrews' religion. To them God said, *"If you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people."* (Exodus 19:5; also Deuteronomy 14:26, 26:18) To God they were a *"special treasure"*. And to the children of Israel, how proud they must have felt to hear that they were *"above all people"*.

No matter how humble we may think we are, there is hardly anyone who doesn't secretly like to think of him/herself as special, better than others, and unique. True, each of us is unique and special to God, and God likes to bestow merit and distinction upon His children... as long as it is tempered with humility and the understanding that everyone else is also unique and special to God. Without that perspective it is easy for a group, denomination, fellowship, or even an individual to slip into the misguided belief that they are the one and only people of God.

**God loves His image-bearing creatures, and He values us.
Because God values human beings, each has intrinsic, essential**

value. This should cause *us* to value each human being. All humans, no matter what their gender, race, skin tone, or creed, are created equal. Each person bears God's image and should be respected and treated as such. Neither one's place nor one's value in society diminishes a person's intrinsic value.

...Seeing others as God's image bearers should rid us of racial, religious, and all other prejudices. It should cause us, as individuals, to view and treat others with respect, regardless of our differences.

[\("What Does It Mean to Be Human?" - Anchor: Help for the Soul, 28 April 2015\)](#)

To some extent God goes along with human nature. That is, He confines Himself to work within our boundaries. Yet at the same time He invites us to stretch beyond them. In line with this we learn that, a few centuries after the Israeli nation had been established, the prophet Isaiah added some perspective, proclaiming that the Gentiles (non-Jews) would one day belong to the Family of God.

From chapter 42 on till the end of his Book, Isaiah several times mentions the inclusion of the Gentiles through the work of God's "Servant" - Jesus Christ who came *"in the likeness of men."* (**[Philippians 2:7](#)**) Perhaps the best example is the following passage in which God is speaking to His "Servant" (Christ): *"It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth."* (Isaiah 49:6)

To establish the Israeli nation in those days was a remarkable feat, a grand testimony of God's power as recounted in the Book of Exodus and in the rest of the Old Testament. But in God's way of looking at things, that was *"a small thing"* compared to His greater desire to reach out *"to the ends of the earth"* to bring His *"salvation... to the Gentiles"*.

So when the "Servant" (Christ) did enter our earthly realm, He shifted the emphasis - by teaching that the true *"children of Abraham"* were those who did *"the works of Abraham"*. (John 8:39) He warned His fellow Jews that the *"sons of the kingdom* (pointing to those who were not doing the works of Abraham) *will be cast out into outer darkness"* while others

(Gentiles) would *“come from east and west and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.”* (Matthew 8:11-12) He even went so far as to say to His Jewish enemies, *“How can you escape the condemnation of hell?”* (Matthew 23:33, KJV)

To understand this better, consider the following scenario. If one were to pick 50 people at random from a crowd and call them “God’s covenant people”, chances are that some or many of them will not be very “good” people. So one would have to apply strict rules of behavior to keep everyone in line. Essentially, this is what happened to the children of Israel with the laws of Moses. But the liberating *“law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus”* - the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit - served to re-establish what it meant to be a member of God’s family... and it served to open the gates for people all over the Earth to enter into His Kingdom. ([Romans 8:2](#))

Much of the apostle Paul’s writing was devoted to what was a controversial issue in those days: does one have to be Jewish or observe the Jewish laws in order to become one of God’s people? In many of his epistles, he spells it out, as in Romans 2:28-29, for example: *“for he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision [initiation into the Hebrew faith] 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.”* This exhortation for the Jewish people goes along with Christ’s teaching that *“the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him.”* (John 4:23)

Regarding the issue of whether the law was necessary, Paul’s answer to that: *“You also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another - to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God.”* (Romans 7:4) The implication here is that the old system of the laws of Moses could not bring forth enough *“fruit to God”*. The new broader-based, more flexible approach and greater intimacy that Jesus introduced would succeed in bearing more *“fruit”* - the benefits and blessings that God desires to bestow on His entire Creation.

Now, with hindsight, it is easy to see. It is almost a matter of common

sense: why, in His fairness and justice, would God want to limit His benefits to one race of people to the exclusion of others? Why should not His favor extend to all?

Jewish people in those days were pretty sure their special covenant relationship gave them an inside track into the Kingdom of God. (See [Appendix 1](#).) But the Laws of Moses couldn't truly measure people's motives and relationship with the Almighty, nor could they determine their fate in the Afterlife. *"For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham."* (Romans 9:6-7). What was true on a corporate level did not necessarily play out on the individual level.

But it would seem nowadays in the ranks of Christendom, there is a similar problem. As the Jewish people of old had to recognize that they were not exclusively the one and only people of God, so do Christians in this modern day probably need to stretch their boundaries of whom they consider should belong in the assembly of "God's people".

Theologians sometimes distinguish between the "visible church" (the church as Christians on earth see it) and the "invisible church" (the church as God in heaven sees it). This distinction emphasizes two truths. First, only God, who reads hearts, knows the ultimate makeup of the "invisible church" - those whom he has called ("The Lord knows those who are his." 2 Tim 2:19) Second, there are some within the "visible church" who are not genuine believers, though they may look as if they are (cf. Matt 7:15-16; Act 20:29-30; 1 John 2:19). [from "The Church", pg. 2532, *ESV Study Bible*, Crossway Bibles, 2008]

Christ's coming into the world shattered the old framework of the Laws of Moses. That era had served its purpose, and the time had come for a re-alignment of humanity's relationship to God. On this point Scripture is very clear: *"the Father is seeking... the true worshipers" who "will worship the Father in spirit and truth."* (John 4:23) For *"flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God."* (1Corinthians 15:50)

God prefers for His people to love Him voluntarily. He is a personal God

who desires from us a personal relationship based on trust, rather than a rule-keeping, going-through-the-motions ritual. The loving relationship that God prefers to have with us has the additional benefit of causing His people to become stronger in faith and better connected to Him in spirit.

Even though we are God's created beings, the relationship with our Creator had become very distant as a result of what had transpired in the Garden of Eden. Originally, God created us because He wanted beings who would freely choose to love Him (which is why He did not interfere with Adam and Eve's choice in the Garden). In His grand foresight, God knew that the only way to bring us back to Him - without interfering with our freedom of choice - was to become one of us.

God loved you so greatly that even though He [in the person of His Son Jesus] had to make the supreme sacrifice and leave His Father and His home to suffer, to be condemned, to endure all the evils of sinful men, He did it because He loves you. And if you had been the only one ever born into this world, He still would have done it—for you! He did it because He saw that underneath all that filth and sin, there was a beautiful creation of His. (["Let All Your Things Be Done in Love"](#) - 15 August 2023, *Anchor - Help for the Soul*)

During His First Coming, Christ could have wiped out evil like some kind of superman (as the Devil was tempting him to do). But then we'd have ended up submitting to God because we had to; there'd be no other choice. That doesn't mean that God hasn't planned some day to wipe out evil, but it will be in God's time and God's way. (God's plan along these lines is outlined in the *Book of Revelation* and many other passages of Scripture.)

And by that time, there will have arisen a *"great multitude which no one could number"* of people who have chosen to love God voluntarily. (Revelation 7:9) And that great "army" of God will be needed during the End of the Age era - to stand up against the tide of iniquity that is about to sweep through the world. Afterwards, they will be needed again to serve as Christ's *"kings and priests,"* helping to lead and guide the World of Tomorrow. (Revelation 1:6, 5:10) *"And they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years."* (20:4)

So who exactly have been and will be the “followers of Christ” - the “people of God” from ages past and in the days to come? A delicate theological question perhaps. Basically, it should be anyone who loves Christ... but could also include many who are following the “*true Light*” but just haven’t connected the dots yet to see that Christ who is the “*Word made flesh and dwelt among us*” is the “*true Light*” which they have been following - “*the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world.*” (John 1:14,9)

Every person has a conscience, that ability to discern right from wrong. Conscience is, in fact, the guiding voice of God in us human beings - what distinguishes us from the animal kingdom. (See [Appendix 2 quotes](#) on that subject.) Many folks then, without realizing it, are following that “*true Light*”. And as one continues to follow it, he or she will eventually be led to receive the “*Word*” (Christ). This then would give them “*the right to become children of God.*” (John 1:12)

From this we may understand that many individuals will be following the “*true Light*” without tying it directly to faith in Christ. And if so, they too should be included as belonging to the family of God. Who they are would be difficult for us to determine, but God certainly “*knows those who are His.*” (2Timothy 2:19)

It was recognition of this that may have prompted C.S. Lewis to write the following:

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 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. For example, a Buddhist of good will may be led to concentrate more and more on the Buddhist teaching about mercy and to leave in the background (though he might still say he believed) the Buddhist

teaching on certain other points. Many of the good Pagans long before Christ's birth may have been in this position. ("Nice People or New Men" in *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis)

No doubt, the strongest members of God's family are those who have come to Christ and know Him intimately. But that doesn't mean there won't be other voices or deeds from people who may not consider themselves officially to be Christians but who, whether they realize it or not, are following *"the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world."* (John 1:9)

Christ said He was the *"Light of the world"*, and in this aspect of His nature, He resembles the Holy Spirit. (John 8:12, 9:5) And this bears some relationship to Christ's statement in Matthew 12:32, *"Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven."*

When God came to Earth in the person of Jesus Christ, He appeared in human form (according to the purpose of God then), and not as some kind of super-hero. And people had no idea who He really was. For example, we read in [Mark 6:2-3](#) that no one in the neighborhood of His youth could accept Him as anything more than *"the carpenter, the Son of Mary... And they were offended at Him."*

And so, it is not surprising that, because of cultural misunderstanding and indoctrination, and because Jesus came in human form, not in a glorified form, people could be forgiven for misunderstanding who He was or for speaking *"against the Son of Man"*; but the Holy Spirit cannot be mistaken in this way. The Spirit of Truth cuts through those barriers of fleshly misunderstanding, speaking directly to people's minds and consciences. And those who follow that Spirit of Truth, those who *"come to the Light"*, will be forgiven and accepted, while those who resist the Spirit will be rejected.

So it is a serious matter to reject the voice of the Holy Spirit. Anyone who *"hates the Light and does not come to the Light,"* those who love *"darkness rather than the Light"* will face *"judgment"*. (John 3:19-20, ESV)

[By the way, most modern translations use the word *"judgment"*

rather than *“condemnation”* (which is common in older translations). Judgment means that a person is being separated - as in the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds ([Matthew 13:24-30](#)) - and it has a more comprehensive application than the word *“condemnation”*.]

That passage about coming to the Light ([John 3:19-21](#)) identifies the *“light”* with the *“Word”* (Christ). And that term *“light”* resembles what we would think is supposed to be a function of the Holy Spirit. This sounds like a deep theological question. But to put it very simply, if we understand that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all part of the same Godhead, it should be no surprise if at times they seem to share the same attributes and functions.

In a sense, the Holy Spirit was sent as Jesus' successor, to be His constant presence with the disciples... Once Jesus ascended into heaven and was glorified, the disciples were given His continuing presence in their lives through the Holy Spirit... We can see that much of what is said about the Spirit was also said about Jesus, and thus the presence of the Spirit in our lives reflects the presence of Jesus within us... ([Jesus, His Life and Message, “Discipleship 6”](#), 24 October 2017)

After Christ's Resurrection and final departure, the disciples continued to experience His presence through the Holy Spirit. The Gospels portray the Holy Spirit and Jesus in much the same way: 1) both came from and were given by the Father 2) both not received by the world 3) both teach 4) both convict the world 5) both speak only what they have heard 6) both glorify their Sender. (For more information on this point, see [Jesus - His Life and Message: “Discipleship, Part 6”](#), 24 October 2017)

Since they are part of the same Godhead, we can see why it counts a great deal in God's eyes to yield to the Holy Spirit of Truth - maybe even more than it does to yield to the Name of Jesus Christ - at least in those cases where there is apt to be a good deal of cultural misunderstanding. Of course, the Holy Spirit guides people towards Christ, and once that knowledge becomes planted in a person's mind, then he or she is responsible to come to Christ because of the direction given them by the Holy Spirit.

And once a person comes to Christ, at more or less the same time he or she also receives a more complete and powerful infilling of the Holy Spirit. The two go hand in hand.

At this point it might help to interject something that Christ said about Himself: *"I am the way, the truth, and the life."* (John 14:6) Who Christ is and what He represents covers a wide panorama of godly endeavor. Under the umbrella of His Name, there is an amazing amount of variety, breadth and flexibility in the kinds of trajectories that people may take as they journey towards the Light.

And here we should call to mind what is written in the *Book of John*: *"But as many as received Him, to them gave He the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His NAME."* Only a few people actually met Christ when he walked on Earth, but millions have met Christ by believing in His *"name"*.

In ancient times a person's *"name"* wasn't just a label to identify and distinguish one individual from another. It meant a lot more; it was a way of describing a person's character and reputation.

By a usage, chiefly Hebraistic, the name is used for everything which the name covers... one's rank, authority, interests, pleasure, command, excellence, deeds, etc. (from *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, pg. 47)

People may not always understand who Jesus really was, but if they are following in His Way, His Truth, and His Life, can this not be counted as believing in His Name? Jesus said once to a disciple who doubted the testimony of His Resurrection, *"Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."* (John 20:29)

Jesus was referring to those who will not have the benefit of experiencing His physical presence or witnessing His Resurrection appearances, yet they will have believed. Perhaps we could re-phrase the above quote to say, *"Blessed are they who follow in the Way, the Truth, and the Life of Christ, even though they may have never heard the Gospel."*

Jesus taught something to this effect in the Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes outline who will, and what it means to, be *“blessed”*: *“the poor in spirit... those who mourn... the meek... those who hunger and thirst after righteousness... the merciful... the pure in heart... the peacemakers... those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.”* ([Matthew 5:3-12](#)) These are the ones whom God shall call His people. We might add to this what Paul said about those who hadn’t heard the Gospel or known the Law, *“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.”* (Romans 2:14-15)

The Spirit of God is not bound by cultural or religious boundaries. So if, for example, someone were led of the Spirit to proclaim a truth or truths that were needed in a certain era or culture; or if a peacemaker found a way to bring peace to a land scarred by warfare; or a person of means distributed wealth to enrich the lives of the poor, would not such deeds be *“accounted to him [them] for righteousness”*?(James 2:23, Romans 4:3)

They may not have realized they were following the way, truth, or life of Christ, but several Scriptures state clearly that would actually be the case. *“For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.”* (Romans 8:14) *“If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him.”* (1 John 2:29) *“Love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.”* (1 John 4:7-8) And then in the Parable of Final Judgment we learn the astounding fact that the people who are invited into the Heavenly Kingdom did not even know that they were serving Christ. All they knew was that they were serving those in need. (Matthew 25:31-46)

In the Christian community great importance is attached to having the right belief system as the all-important doorway to blessing and acceptance with God (and escape from Hell). But when we look at how Christ interacted with those He met during His earthly ministry, it seems He was more concerned about their conduct than their belief system. For Him it seemed that entrance into the Kingdom was not nearly as important as being ready - prepared in mind, heart, and spirit - to make that entrance into the Kingdom.

Many people in our world have only ever heard hell talked about as the place reserved for those who are “out”, who don’t believe, who haven’t “joined the church”. Christians talking about people who aren’t Christians going to hell when they die because they aren’t... Christians. People who don’t believe the right things.

But in reading all of the passages in which Jesus uses the word “hell”, what is so striking is that people believing the right or wrong things isn’t His point. He’s often not talking about “beliefs” as we think of them - He’s talking about anger and lust and indifference. He’s talking about the state of His listeners’ hearts, about how they conduct themselves, how they interact with their neighbors, about the kind of effect they have on the world.

Jesus did not use hell to try and compel “heathens” and “pagans” to believe in God, so they wouldn’t burn when they die. He talked about hell to very religious people to warn them about the consequences of straying from their God-given calling and identity to show the world God’s love.

This is not to say that hell is not a pointed, urgent warning or that it isn’t intimately connected with what we actually do believe, but simply to point out that Jesus talked about hell to the people who considered themselves “in”, warning them that their hard hearts were putting their “in-ness” at risk, reminding them that whatever “chosen-ness” or “election” meant, whatever special standing they believed they had with God was always, only, ever about their being the kind of transformed, generous, loving people *through whom* God could show the world what God’s love looks like in flesh and blood.

(Love Wins, page 82, by Robert H. Bell, 2011)

Now it is also true from the same passage (in John 14:6) that “*no one comes to the Father except through Me.*” (John 14:6) Christ is the “door”, by which “*if anyone enters... he will be saved.*” ([John 10:9](#)) It is a “narrow gate” and “*there are few who find it*” - in this life at least. ([Matthew 7:13-14](#)) But this “door” opens readily in the Afterlife also. Jesus is not limited to welcoming new believers in this life only - although that is certainly preferable. For He taught, “*Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live.*” (John 5:25) (More on this subject later.)

To conclude, we can understand that the boundaries of God's "new nation" of the Kingdom of Heaven probably extend much further than we may think. This we can gather from Scriptures like Matthew 12:32 (explaining the difference between blasphemy against Christ and against the Holy Spirit), John 1:9 (about the Light which lights every person), and others. Thus, it behooves Christian people to adopt an inclusive mindset when considering who they feel "God's people" should be. *"The Lord knows those who are His."* (2Timothy 2:19) And *"those who are His"* may well include people who are not part of a congregation, or even among those called Christian.

Recent developments among religious groups in modern times bear testimony to this, which we see in the rise of ecumenism and inter-denominational and inter-faith dialogue. In spite of their non-Christian orientation, many groups, who aspire to the same ideals as their Christian counterparts, are willing to accept Christian leadership in various religious gatherings and worship services. (See [Appendix 3: news article](#) for an interesting example of this.) In an increasingly secular world, it is not surprising that the forces of Light, as they oppose the growing forces of Darkness, are burying their differences and starting to cooperate more with one another.

Some will question this rise of religious pluralism, seeing it as a threat to traditional Christianity. There may be some justification for this concern, but a better question to ask might be, why has pluralism become popular in our modern world? And this will be addressed further ahead in this post.

Christ did not come to grant His favor to a select group of people. Even though His work focused mainly on the Israeli people of His time and location, He stated plainly, *"Other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice."* (John 10:16) And true to this statement, Jesus bestowed His favor upon all He met who were worthy - including Samaritans and Gentiles. ([Matthew 8:5-13](#), [15:21-28](#), [Luke 23:34](#), [John 4:5-26](#))

Both the apostles Peter and Paul expressed the same sentiment that God *"desires all men to be saved"* and is *"not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance."* (1Timothy 2:4, 2Peter 3:9)

Likely, these passages were directed to certain false teachers who were limiting the growth of the Early Church through their insistence that new believers should keep the laws of the Old Testament.

Exclusivism was a problem in the days of the Early Church, and the Jewish disciples then had to come to grips with the fact that God's favor was being extended to the Gentiles. And so, in spite of themselves, Jewish Christians expanded their boundaries and began to accept Gentiles into the family of God, and that without synagogue attendance or law-keeping rituals.

And it is an ongoing process. Like the Jewish people of old, we in modern times may also need to expand our boundaries. We need to recognize - in spite of whatever we may think constitutes salvation - that many people outside of Christian congregations will wind up in the family of God.

The Reverend Billy Graham ushered thousands of souls into the Kingdom through his inspired preaching. But even he acknowledged the reality that souls would enter the Kingdom, people who had not the opportunity to become Christians officially.

GRAHAM: *"I think there's the Body of Christ. This comes from all the Christian groups around the world, or outside the Christian groups. I think everybody that loves Christ, or knows Christ, whether they're conscious of it or not, they're members of the Body of Christ ...*

"The Apostle James in the first council in Jerusalem... said that God's purpose for this age is to call out a people for His name. And that's what God is doing today, He's calling people out of the world for His name, whether they come from the Muslim world, or the Buddhist world, or the Christian world, or the non-believing world, they are members of the Body of Christ, because they've been called by God.

"They may not even know the name of Jesus, but they know in their hearts that they need something that they don't have, and they turn to the only light that they have, and I think they are saved, and that they're going to be with us in heaven."

SCHULLER: *"What I hear you saying is that it's possible for Jesus Christ to come into a human heart and soul and life, even if they have*

been born in darkness and have never had exposure to the Bible. Is that a correct interpretation of what you're saying?"

GRAHAM: *"Yes it is, because I believe that.*

"I've met people in various parts of the world, in tribal situations that they had never seen a Bible or heard about a Bible, never heard about Jesus. But they believed in their heart that there was a God, and they tried to live a life that was quite apart from the surrounding community in which they lived."

SCHULLER: *"That's fantastic! I'm so thrilled to hear you say this! There is a wideness in God's mercy."*

GRAHAM: *"There is, there definitely is."*

(from ['Hour of Power' interview](#) between Robert Schuller and Billy Graham, 1997)

And because of this statement, a storm of criticism arose from the usual herd of conservative evangelicals who, like the Jews in Paul's day, felt threatened by and/or jealous of such a possibility -of a level playing field, on which God didn't belong only to them, and some of God's people could come to the fore beyond the bounds of their denominations and scope of influence.

Of course, there is a limit as to how far the boundaries of welcome can be stretched. And for those evil-doers who hope to find a shortcut into God's favor, John the Baptist provided a sober warning. These self-righteous, religious rivals had to realize that they could not trust in their false security of bloodline descent from Abraham: *"Brood of vipers!.... do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones... Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance."* (Matthew 3:7-10) The only "shortcut" into God's favor is a humble and receptive heart... which enables one to *"bear fruits worthy of repentance"*.

Now we might wonder, is there some definite procedure by which one can become a member of the family of God? In his controversial book *Love Wins*, Rob Bell (*) explores this mystery. Before detailing a number of different examples of people who came to Jesus and trying to figure out what it was they did that brought them salvation, Bell expressed it thus:

"One way to respond to these questions is with the clear, helpful

answer: all that matters is how you respond to Jesus.” (Love Wins, pg. 7)

How you respond to Jesus. This goes along with what Jesus said about His “other sheep”. They “hear My voice”; they respond; they obey and follow. And that makes the door to salvation both easy, and not easy, to walk through. Easy if one responds to God’s call in whatever form it may take; not easy if one is hardened to God’s call. The Lord is reaching out to us, His creations, and He is gladdened when we turn to Him - “joy in heaven over one sinner who repents.” (Luke 15:7). And it is an on-going process throughout life of continuing to hear or reject God’s voice.

(* Although Bell probably went to an inadvisable extreme in 2013 with his endorsement of same-sex marriage, there is still much that we can learn from his writings. Regarding the issue of gay marriage, there was a time when showing tolerance and compassion for those who have this weakness was needed in the Church. But that can make it difficult to draw the line against over-permissiveness. And this is the problem that modern society is facing now - the ridiculous extremes of the LGBTQ+ movement and how it is negatively influencing the younger generation.

But God is disappointed when we don’t respond, or even worse, turn away. “When you hear what I say, you will not understand. When you see what I do, you will not comprehend. For the hearts of these people are hardened; and their ears cannot hear, and they have closed their eyes - so their eyes cannot see, and their ears cannot hear, and their hearts cannot understand, and they cannot turn to me and let me heal them.” (Matthew 13:14-15, NLT; and repeated in Isaiah 6:9-10, Jeremiah 5:21, Ezekiel 12:2, John 12:40, Acts 28:26-27)

By such lack of response, we tie God’s hands. If we “cannot turn to” Him, then He cannot turn to us. And this is how it is in any relationship; there has to be interaction, a mutual give-and-take process. Christ’s invitation to restore the Laodicean church expresses this well. “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.” (Revelation 3:20) God desires very much this interaction with us, His creations.

And for those who respond and *“open the door”*, He says, *“Blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear (they respond).”* (Matthew 13:16) *“The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear [respond] will live.”* (John 5:25) As for those who don't *“hear”*, who don't respond or respond negatively, the reason why they won't *“come to the light”* is probably *“because their deeds were evil,”* and they're afraid that their *“deeds should be exposed.”* (John 3:20)

How you respond to Jesus. It's difficult, as Bell points out, to establish a one-size-fits-all procedure by which a person gets *“saved”*. The salvation experience is unique to each individual. Denominational credentials, religious observances, water baptism, genealogical descent from Abraham, and any other forms of outward show don't get to the heart of the matter (although they can serve as a sign or testimony of inner transformation).

Coming to Christ is a spiritual journey, one that is unique to each individual. Jesus compared the process of being *“born of the Spirit”* to the wind which *“blows where it wishes”*. (John 3:8) So there is no standard formula.

Perhaps the best we can say is that if a person is coming *“to the light”*, then, by whatever means they make that journey, they will accept Christ eventually. (John 3:20-21) And those who are known as Christians can play a useful role to expedite this entering-the-Kingdom journey through the positive impact of their words and deeds. Unfortunately too, they can sometimes hinder that process when they neglect to stay inside the charmed circle of God's presence and so wind up becoming a bad example to seekers and non-Christians. But *“he who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit.”* (John 15:5)

Regarding the poor example of some of His followers, Jesus had to tell them, *“I will vomit you out of My mouth.”* The reason for such an extreme rebuke? *“Because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot.”* (Revelation 3:16) Being in limbo between cold and hot is detrimental to the work of God. Cold water refreshes. Hot water relieves congestion. But lukewarm water? Unless one is terribly thirsty, it is not appealing. And lukewarm Christianity does not appeal to people very much. It only makes

them confused and wonder, is that what Christianity is all about? So it is not surprising that, nowadays, many, who are truly following the Light of God, avoid associating themselves with “Christianity”.

Whoever comes to Christ, regardless of the route they take that gets them there, they become the spiritual descendants of Abraham - the followers of God in Christ. And for all we know, that may include many who do not claim to be Christian but are, nonetheless, following in Christ's footsteps.

We might consider, for example, these individuals belonging to the Hindu culture: Mahatma Gandhi who tried to follow Christian principles, espousing non-violence, as he led the people of India in peaceful protest against British rule; Swami Vivekananda, a preacher of tolerance and concern for the poor, who always carried with himself a copy of the *Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis along with his *Bhagavad Gita*; Rabindranath Tagore - eminent poet, songwriter, artist, and Nobel Peace Prize winner - who was much attracted to Christianity. None of these men claimed to be Christian and were thought by their followers to be devotees of Hinduism. But they were tolerant towards and attracted to the Christian way, and their influence upon their people was generally positive and uplifting. (See [Appendix 4](#) for some of their messages.)

Although some might think that in a sinister way these men were somehow undermining the cause of Christ, it is doubtful that such suspicions would hold up in God's eyes who “*looks at the heart*” and not “*the outward appearance*”. (1Samuel 16:7) From John chapter 3 we learn that “*judgment*” results because “*God's light came into the world, but people loved darkness more than the light.*” (3:19, NLT)

So the question to ask is, “Were these men lovers of Darkness or lovers of Light?” God knows the answer to that one. But it shouldn't surprise us, in some future day and age, to see them in the Kingdom of Heaven and well rewarded for the positive influence of their earthly lives.

(Incidentally, there is remarkable evidence to show that the Gospel account exists in ancient Hindu Scriptures. Here is a fascinating study about this from “[I Love My India](#)” in the website of [johanpeters.in](#))

Jesus once said, *“Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me.”* (John 6:45) That seems to leave plenty of room for those who may not have known about Christ but had a general love for God the Father; *“everyone”* of them, Jesus says, will *“come to Me”*... even if that must happen in the Afterlife.

To illustrate what this means, consider the following scenario: imagine a radical Christian group, whose truth and freedom-loving quest has led them to break out of the mold of formalized religion. Another more traditional Christian group has taken it upon themselves to persecute the upstart movement. Then suppose that some Muslim or Hindu folks take on the role of *“good Samaritan”* by accepting and sheltering the radical Christian group because of their mutual faith in God or their common desire to bring peace to the world. It seems obvious that the Muslim or Hindu people in this scenario have *“heard and learned from the Father”* (even if they have not known Christ); whereas the traditional Christian, who claims to know Christ, does not really know Him nor the Father, for he does not follow. *“Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me.”* (John 16:2-3,ESV)

A Christian who persecutes one who is trying to bring needed change is not keeping Christ’s sayings. *“He who does not love Me does not keep My words”*. (John 14:24) So what might Christ have to say to that person in the end? *“I never knew you: depart from Me, ye that work iniquity.”* (Matthew 7:23, KJV) The Muslim or Hindu who accepts the dedicated Christian will be found more righteous, even though they may not have the *“correct”* theological understanding.

The Pharisees and Sadducees were the traditionalists of their day, who appeared so right and righteous with what they thought was their right belief system. Yet they were not at all ready for entrance into the Kingdom. John the Baptist told them to *“bear fruits worthy of repentance.”* (Matthew 3:8) In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talks about false prophets who appear to be so righteous with their *“sheep’s clothing”* of belief systems but bear *“bad fruit”*. He counseled His followers not to look at the outward appearance of belief systems but to look rather at the fruits. *“Therefore by their fruits you will know them.”* (Matthew 7:20)

To conclude, it is not up to us to decide who belongs in the Family of God and who doesn't. God knows who His people are, and about the best we can do, from our limited earthly perspective, is to judge by the fruits of what a person does or says: *"By their fruits you will know them"*. (Matthew 7:20)

Nowadays religious pluralism poses a significant challenge to the traditional beliefs of Christianity. A major reason for this lies in the fact that "Christianity", as it is practiced nowadays, has gone astray, and seekers find it hard to believe in a religion that seems to them irrelevant, even toxic.

The *Book of Revelation* portrays the modern world as a *Harlot* - badly corrupted. ([Revelation 17-18](#)) In the Old Testament the *Harlot* symbolism was applied to ancient Israel when she went astray and became a bad example to the nations around her. And we may say the same for the nations of the West (America and Europe), which are supposed to be the strongholds of Christianity. In strangling the world economically, devastating it militarily, and corrupting it morally, Western nations are fulfilling this prophetic picture in the *Book of Revelation* about the future world system. The *Harlot* symbolism applies accurately to the degenerated state of modern Western society. (See [posts on Revelation 17-18](#) for more information.) Seekers after God can't help but notice this *"bad fruit"*, so it is no wonder that that they find it difficult to accept Christianity.

It is sad, of course, that Christianity is getting this toxic reputation in the world. What it means then is that in this End of the Age era, the Gospel message has to be presented with a broader (more pluralistic) scope than what most Christians are used to. But if we look at some of the passages about conditions for believers in this final era of human history, we find a rather surprising wideness as to the identity of those who will suffer the brunt of persecution.

The man of sin... the son of perdition... opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped... showing himself that he is God. (2Thessalonians 2:3-4)

The king [Antichrist] shall do according to his own will: he shall

exalt and magnify himself above every god, shall speak blasphemies against the God of gods... He shall regard neither the God of his fathers nor the desire of women, nor regard any god; for he shall exalt himself above them all. (Daniel 11:36-37)

The “*man of sin*”, also known as the Antichrist, will be opposed to any form of religion (“*all that is called God or that is worshiped*”). He will rail against those belief systems that oppose his “*blasphemies against God*”. Many of the world’s religions will oppose him because he is a man of war. (“*Who is able to make war with him?*” - Revelation 13:4). And they share the Christian ideal of making peace rather than war. “*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.*” (Matthew 5:9) And of course, they will be opposed to having to worship a man and/or system instead of worshipping God.

From these Scriptures about conditions in the End of the Age, it is clear that believers in God are not restricted to believers in Christ. They could be Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, among many others. What this means - in this secular, scientific, atheistic era - is that the Gospel message has to lean more towards promoting what might be called a general revelation of God.

That is, people’s understanding will be so darkened that, just to believe that God exists and is concerned about them, will be a major step of faith. And as far as God is concerned, in those very End Time days and even now, if they can get that far, that would be “*accounted*” to them “*for righteousness*”. (James 2:23)

Now we Christians know that this doesn’t get at the full truth. We know that God came into the world in the form of His Son, Jesus Christ. But to get a better handle on this, we could look at Jesus’ example with the Samaritan woman at the well. He told her, “*Ye know not what ye worship.*” (John 4:22, KJV) This was not a condemning statement, just a matter-of-fact observation. Her theology was a bit mixed up, that’s all.

But that was not the main issue. For Jesus goes on to say, “*The true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him.*” (John 4:23) Forget the old forms of place-worship, He was saying - whether a mountain, a temple, a city - none of

these would be needed for worship anymore. But *“when He, the Spirit of Truth, has come”* the true worshipers will be those who hearken to the voice of God. (John 16:13)

The Spirit and the Truth are not bound by religious barriers, doctrinal beliefs, cultural customs, or any man-made belief systems or traditions. Sincere seekers after God are those whom God is seeking because they are worshiping in spirit and truth, even though they may belong to a religious persuasion other than Christianity. And in the spiritual journey of most people, this seeking-after-God step comes first before one comes to faith in Christ. The Spirit will, of course, lead persons to Christ eventually, that we certainly understand.

But because of the secular orientation of our modern day and age, and because of the bad example of the *Harlot* society culture, many sincere seekers will never get that far. Just to acknowledge and believe in a Higher Power, and then to reject worship of the Antichrist demagogue, will be a great step of faith for many. And for this “faith” people will be honored and in the mind of God will be counted as what we might call “pre-Christians”. For *“the Lord looks at the heart”*, not the *“outward appearance”*. (1Samuel 16:7)

Further ahead in this series, we will learn more about how the New Testament places less emphasis on a person’s belief system and more on their conduct as the “yardstick” to measure how God will accept and reward them:

[God] will render to each one according to his deeds: eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness - indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God. (Romans 2:5-11)

Certainly it is not our business to decide who is or is not part of the family of God. That is God’s business. And as far as we Christians are concerned, it would be wise to keep in mind that God’s people may include

a wide variety of folks whom we may think are not supposed to be our compatriots. For *“God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.”* (Matthew 3:9)

And sober warnings also are there in the Scriptures that many, even though saved, will have to endure *“shame and everlasting disgrace”*. This was a point that the angel Gabriel, in his dialogue with the prophet Daniel, mentioned would be a feature of the future Resurrection of believers. (Daniel 12:2, NLT) (More on this later.)

To illustrate this reality, we could look to a couple of examples from the Old Testament. As the children of Israel were entering their Promised Land, spies were sent to Jericho. While there, they were befriended and protected by the harlot Rahab *“when she had received the spies with peace”*. ([Joshua 2](#), Hebrews 11:31) Despite being a harlot and a non-Jew, she was granted special favor and recognition among the children of Israel and, centuries later, had the honor of being named as an ancestor to the Messiah and one of the heroes and heroines of faith. (Matthew 1:5, Hebrews 11:31)

Then later, not long after their victory at Jericho, the children of Israel were to attack the city of Ai. Strangely, they began to experience defeat. God revealed to Joshua that He had lifted His hand of protection from the children of Israel because one of their own people (Achan) had kept some of the spoils of battle for himself. This sin of covetousness had to be rooted out before the children of Israel could continue with their conquest of the Promised Land.

From these examples we learn that God brings in the worthy *“outsider”* who has the fruits and removes the unworthy *“insider”* who has strayed from the path of righteousness. *“For there is no partiality with God.”* (Romans 2:11)

We may be quite surprised to see who makes it into the Heavenly Realm or who receives places of honor there. God’s idea of righteousness often baffles our human understanding. However, being aware of the fairness and justice of God, it would not be surprising to see destinies pan out in the way Jesus said: *“many who are first will be last, and the last first”*. (Matthew 19:30)

Conclusion: We have the security of knowing we have entered the Kingdom of Heaven by coming to Christ, but it is important to beware of any false sense of security and self-righteousness. That can only hurt and limit us from the full expression of God's plan for our lives.

Nor does it serve God's great endeavor and desire to draw the world to His Light and Love. A smug, holier-than-thou attitude on the part of those who are known as Christians will only repel and disillusion seekers who might otherwise be drawn to Jesus Christ, the Light of God.

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Appendix 1

On the corporate level the nation of Jewish people had importance because it was connected to God's "*holy name*". But on a personal level, Paul observes, regarding some of his less obedient brethren, "*Do you presume on the riches of His kindness?*" In a note on this verse, the *ESV Study Bible* states,

"[Romans 2:4] is probably directed against Jews who thought that their covenant relationship with God would shield them from final judgment. After all, they had often experienced *his kindness and forbearance and patience*. They thought such blessings showed that they were right with God and had no need to trust in Christ, but Paul says the opposite is true: God's blessings should have led them to repent of their sins." [page 2160]

Going back even further, we find similar thoughts expressed in the Old Testament, where we learn that at certain times "*the house of Israel profaned*" God's name "*among the nations*". Nevertheless, God promised to restore Israel, not for their sakes, not because of their righteousness of which they had almost none, but "*for the sake of My holy name*". "*And the nations will know that I am the LORD... when through you I vindicate my*

holiness before their eyes.” (Ezekiel 36:21-23, ESV; see also Ezekiel 43:7-8.)

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Appendix 2: Quotes on the subject of conscience

It’s an amazing thing that the world over, in nearly every kind of culture, even in the most remote places, everyone seems to know the difference between right and wrong. They understand and know that certain things are sins, and have laws against them. God’s basic moral standards are pretty universal.

God created man as a free moral agent. He gives each of us the majesty of personal choice to choose between good and evil. The Holy Spirit is faithful and speaks to the hearts of all, telling them when they’re doing wrong. They know the difference between good and evil.

They may not know... the good news... but they know the difference between right and wrong...

God gives everybody some light, and God is going to judge each one according to how they follow the light He’s given.

(from [Anchor - Hope for the Soul: “The Habit of a Good Conscience”](#))

*

Labour to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire, called conscience. (George Washington)

*

The only impulse we really cannot deny and that we have no control over is aligned with morality and takes the form of conscience within our minds.

The desire to commit a crime is not due to an external force or a pre-destined biological nature but rather due to a disconnect from one’s own conscience!

We are all born with a conscience. It is the compass to our humanity. We only become inhuman, when we reject the good that we were born with. But it is always there within us, this voice for good, and for those who push it furthest away, such a voice can become a terrible haunting.

We can never fully sever ourselves from our conscience, it is with us to the end, whether we choose to live in harmony or disharmony with it.

[from [“The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters”](#) - 30 October 2021 by Cynthia Chung for the [Saker Blog](#)]

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[Appendix 3:](#)

Regardless of what one may think of the Catholic Church or the Pope, or what one may think of liberalism going overboard in some established Churches, it is interesting to note how various faiths are banding together in response to the rising tide of anti-religious sentiment in today’s world, as evidenced in the following news article.

[Pope and World Religious Leaders Vow to Oppose Terror in God’s Name](#)

By Philip Pullella, Reuters, Sept. 20, 2016

ASSISI, Italy—Pope Francis and leaders of other world religions said “No to War!” on Tuesday...

The head of the Roman Catholic Church closed a three-day meeting where about 500 representatives of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism and other faiths discussed how their members could better promote peace and reconciliation.

...

Francis, leader of the world’s 1.2 billion Roman Catholics, prayed in the basilica with Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, spiritual leader of the world’s 80 million Anglicans, and Patriarch Bartholomew, spiritual leader of up to 300 million Orthodox Christians around the globe.

In a final appeal that key representatives signed... they vowed “to oppose every form of violence and abuse of religion which seeks to justify war and terrorism.”

“No to war! May the anguished cry of the many innocents not go unheeded. Let us urge leaders of nations to defuse the causes of war: the lust for power and money, the greed of arms’ dealers, personal interests and vendettas for past wrongs,” the appeal said.

The narrow, cobblestone paths of Assisi echoed with the sound of different languages when Shinto priests in red-and-white robes crossed paths with rabbis in black and Muslims in white as each group converged

outside St. Francis Basilica to join the Christians.

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Appendix 4: Quotations from Indian sages:

Swami Vivekananda: “Seek Jesus, Jesus is superior than any of your imaginable gods.” (Gnana Deepam: Sudar 7, page 270)

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan: “As far as my knowledge there is only one person deserving to be called “GURU”. He is none other than “JESUS OF NAZARETH”

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi: “A sinless man, who sacrificed himself not only for others but also for the welfare of his enemies. He became the Tool for the redemption of the world, He alone is JESUS.”

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