

Acts 4:1-12, No. 10**“The Only Name”****October 25, 2015****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

We read these verses last time and, indeed, to the end of the paragraph at v. 22. This morning we read the first twelve verses again in order to pay attention to Peter’s monumentally important statement in v. 12. As I commented on the text last Lord’s Day morning, I’ll read these verses without comment this morning.

Before I say anything else let me draw your attention to the context of Peter’s remark in v. 12. He was explaining to the religious leadership that it was by the name of Jesus of Nazareth that the lame man was healed of his congenital deformity. Jesus whom they had crucified but whom God raised from the dead was alive and well and at work in the world by his Holy Spirit. The one they had rejected, - most of those men to whom Peter had been speaking had been involved in the crime of the Lord’s murder – the Author of life (Peter’s description of Jesus in the sermon in chapter 3, the sermon that had got him arrested), is nothing less than the hope of salvation for every human being on the face of the earth. The galactic blunder of these men was that they rejected, indeed had murdered the only one who could get them to heaven!

That is clear enough. But Peter surely did not realize that with this remark made to the Sanhedrin he had begun a theological discussion *among Christians and Christian theologians* that continues to our day. I’m sure he thought his conclusion obvious and unavoidable. To be sure, Peter is hardly the only one to have said such a thing. In fact, taking the Bible as a whole, it is neither an unusual nor a controversial statement.

Jesus himself said what would seem to be virtually the same thing. In John 14:6 we read his famous remark: “I am the way, the truth, and the life...” So far so good. But he went on to say, “no one comes to the Father *but by me*.” There is Peter’s “salvation in no one else,” but on the lips of the Savior himself.

Paul makes the same point in his own way.

“There is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus.” [I Tim. 2:5]

And in Acts 20:21 he summarized his message:

“I have declared to both Jews and Gentiles that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Indeed, Paul says that God’s instructions to him, at his conversion were precisely these: “I am sending you to [the Gentiles] to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, *so that* they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.”

This fact, that salvation can only be found in Jesus and by faith in him only, is made the basis of the church's evangelistic witness and missionary obligation. The reason we must get the gospel to the world is precisely because *unless people believe in Jesus they cannot be saved*. Is this not what Paul said with what would seem to be unmistakable emphasis?

“For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?” [Rom. 10:13-15]

Paul's logic is irresistible. If men and women must believe in Jesus then they must hear about Jesus so that they can believe in him. Untold multitudes of Christian men and women have left their homes and families and undertaken dangerous journeys to distant parts of the world precisely because they understood in their minds and felt in their hearts the inescapable obligation to make sure that people hear of Jesus so that they might be saved. Countless numbers of them have given their lives to get the good news to those who had not yet heard. And everywhere they went, people believed and were saved, until the Christian church is everywhere in the world!

Search the Scriptures high and low and you will not find, no one has ever found a reason to believe that people have been or can be saved apart from the saving work of Jesus Christ and apart from faith in him. This is why evangelism at home and abroad is the great calling of the church.

But it remains a hard thing to believe, does it not, that no one can be saved apart from faith in Jesus Christ? And doesn't it become harder the more we travel, the more people we meet whom we like but who do not know the Lord Jesus Christ and have not believed in his name? What of all those human beings who lived and died in the world without once ever hearing the name of Jesus Christ? Can we believe that they must all be lost? Well, it is easier for a Calvinist to answer that question, because we understand the Bible to teach that in any and every case the salvation of a human being is the gift of God's grace and the work of his power. That is, no one ever failed to find salvation because he or she didn't have a chance to believe! Unless that person was an object of God's saving love, unless Christ had gone to cross for that person's sins, and unless the Holy Spirit had been sent into his or her heart to open it to the truth, that person would never be saved, no matter how often or how clearly he or she heard the gospel and no matter how many times someone urged him or her to believe in Jesus. We know that not only from the emphatic teaching of the Bible but from our own experience.

It is not the hearing of the gospel by itself that makes a man or a woman a Christian. Millions upon millions of people have heard the gospel to no effect. They have been urged to believe in Jesus and refused. They have received the news of Christ and his cross with indifference in some cases, positive repugnance in others. They have known Christian people, even attended Christian churches, they may even have a Bible of their own, but they might as well have lived on the moon, utterly cut off from human civilization for all the good hearing the gospel did them.

No human being has a claim on God's grace. There are no human beings who want to submit their lives to God, who would love to believe in Jesus Christ *apart from the Spirit and the grace of God working in their hearts*. What does the Bible say? There is no one, left to himself, not a one, not a single human being who seeks after God; no one who does what is good. The heathen man or woman in some distant land who seeks after God, who does everything he possibly can to find God with the light that he has, does everything that he can to please God to the extent that he knows God, I say that person doesn't exist.

On the other hand, reading the Bible we are given to understand that if there were a person anywhere in the world, in any period of human history, whom God intended to save, whom Christ had redeemed, and whose heart the Spirit was going to change, God would make sure that the gospel got to that man or woman so that he or she might believe in Jesus and be saved. Indeed, if it took moving entire civilizations out of the way to get one evangelist or one missionary to that man or woman, God would have seen to it. Such is the history of Christian missions!

Acts, after all, is the opening chapter of that glorious history. First Peter, then Paul would travel hither and yon taking the good news of Jesus and salvation to people who had never heard of Jesus or of the salvation that could be obtained only by trusting in his name. Why did they undertake such an arduous life? Why did they risk their health and safety at every turn? To bring men and women the news of salvation in Jesus Christ so that they might be saved. Or, as Paul once put it, "that by all means I might save some." [1 Cor. 9:22]

Having said all that, clearly as the gospel imperative is taught in Holy Scripture, clearly as its logic is worked out in the church's evangelistic and missionary enterprise, it may surprise you to learn that there has always been among some Christians the hope that people who never heard of Jesus Christ and certainly never believed in him might somehow be saved.

In our relativist day, of course, it is widely assumed that such an exclusive message as Peter preached and Paul, and even Jesus would, of course, be rejected by intelligent people as hopelessly out-of-date and repugnant to modern sensibilities. Who were these people to suppose that *they alone* knew the way to God and that everyone else was wrong? How arrogant! How condescending! Don't they understand that all religions are equally valid manifestations of man's search for God? Do they not realize that truth is a highly individual matter and that what is true for one may not be true for another? Those men lived so long ago that they never appreciated the fact/value distinction which is now a cornerstone of our modern Western worldview. They never realized that facts are what science alone can teach us but that religious beliefs are mere opinions, a way of our coping with the unknown, opinions to which all men have an equal right and concerning which no one can judge.

Well, that is right. Neither Jesus nor Peter accepted that religious knowledge is not true knowledge. They both believed that in religion as in science it is possible to be right and equally possible to be wrong. What is more it was obvious to them that being wrong in religion was far more dangerous than being wrong in other areas of human knowledge.

What is more they would tell us, as many wiser people do in our own day, that the fact/value distinction, the notion that concerning God, salvation, and the eternal future we can have only personal opinions, only preferences, not true knowledge is absurd. Either Jesus came out of the tomb alive, or he didn't. There is either a final judgment of human life or there isn't. Jesus is either the savior of the world or he isn't. And if he did rise did from the dead – as he did –, if there is a last judgment, and if Jesus is the only one who can rescue us from condemnation at that judgment, then obviously there is sure and certain knowledge about salvation and how to obtain it, as certain as any other knowledge that we possess and terribly more important!

The fact/value distinction is a fantasy. The distinction between scientific knowledge and religious knowledge is a modern dream. The fact is, we are as frequently wrong about so called scientific knowledge as we are about religious knowledge. If God made all things; if he made us, if he sent his Son into the world for our salvation; if he calls on all men to repent and believe in Jesus Christ; if the issue of human life is to be settled at the last judgment; *that is knowledge, pure and simple, as hard as rock and as clear as glass.* The fact/value distinction is nothing more than comforting nonsense for a culture that wishes to do what it pleases without worrying about the consequences.

This world is God's world. We are his creatures. We have rebelled against him and are guilty of persistent and willing violations of his law. In his great love God sent his Son, Jesus Christ into the world to save sinners, which he did by suffering the penalty of their sins on the cross and rising from the dead. He calls upon all men everywhere to repent and believe in his Son. *That is the message of the Bible.* And that is the truth in the same way that it is true water is two **atoms** molecules of hydrogen and one of oxygen or that the earth revolves around the sun.

Obviously if this is true, if God himself entered the world he had made, took upon himself a human nature, and suffered and died for his rebellious creatures, *there is not some other way for people to be reconciled to God!* God's way – a way of such titanic achievement and that cost him so dearly – must, in the nature of the case, be not only the *right* way, it must be the *only* way of salvation, the only way to obtain eternal life.

About that believers in the Word of God have almost always been in agreement. *There is and can be no salvation apart from the work of Jesus Christ.* Nevertheless, there has always been debate about the possibility of people being saved by Christ who never heard of Jesus Christ and never put their faith in his name.

I'm not talking about wishful thinking here. There have been, to be sure, those who cherished the hope that at the last *everyone* would be saved. They did not doubt that they would be saved by the work of Christ but that in some way all would finally be found in heaven. Some good men have held this view, the church father Origen chief among them, though the Christian church has always repudiated it as unbiblical, as it certainly is. The Bible teaches not only that there is a last judgment but that many will be condemned in that judgment, not only that there is such a place and condition as hell, but that many will be found there at the end. This is said many times in the Bible in many ways, indeed the Bible doesn't hesitate to say that there are many *already* in hell.

Nor am I speaking of Christian thinkers through the ages, men who should have known better, who have imagined that Plato or Cicero or Seneca were Christians because they had such high-minded ethics, or who, like Karl Rahner, the 20th century Roman Catholic theologian, who imagined classes of so-called “anonymous Christians” who were supposed to be followers of Jesus although they themselves believed that they were devoted Buddhists or Muslims. These views are utterly lacking biblical support and threaten to undermine any sense of obligation to evangelize the world. If you can be a Christian as a Muslim, as a Buddhist, as a Hindu, why, pray tell, do you need to be a Christian at all? The Bible would not read as it does if such a thing were possible.

We must certainly reject the notion that there are some unbelieving men or women who are saved even without the knowledge of Christ *because of their virtue* or because they do the best with the light they have. That idea has often surfaced, as in Dante’s *Paradiso* (xix, 66ff.) when the poet puts this question to the eagle:

A man
Is born on Indus’ banks, and none is there
Who speaks of Christ, nor who doth read or write;
And all his inclinations and his acts,
As far as human reason sees, are good;
And he offendeth not in word or deed;
But unbaptized he dies, and void of faith.
Where is the justice that condemns him?

But the Bible emphatically denies that any such person exists or ever has existed. Man is not virtuous – even as his life is viewed only from the outside by other human beings; he is not virtuous – he is sinful and selfish. What is more he doesn’t do the best he can with the light he has. He has knowledge of God in his soul but he suppresses that knowledge and does not live according to it. He knows the good and doesn’t do it. He knows that there is a true and living God but does not revere him. As Bernard of Clairvaux tartly put it: “Many laboring to make Plato a Christian do prove themselves to be heathens.” [Cited in John Owen, *Works*, X, 111]

But that there may be others who are saved who have never expressed or been able to express faith in and love for Jesus has been acknowledged by even the best and most faithful of Christian theologians. They would say that while what Peter says here is undoubtedly true, that there can be no salvation apart from Jesus Christ, Christ’s salvation may sometimes be granted without conscious faith in Christ’s name.

The obvious example of such a class of people or such a situation is the children of Christian parents who die in infancy, who never reached the point where they could understand the gospel or articulate their own faith in Jesus. That the infant children of true believers in Jesus who die in infancy are saved our church has never doubted. It is the inevitable implication of the Lord’s promise to his people, repeated so many times in Holy Scripture, “I will be your God and the God of your children after you.” There can be no doubt that such infants are saved by the grace of God and the work of Christ, but they certainly died without a visible faith in Christ. That conviction is so settled in the Reformed tradition that it is found expressed in the great

confessions of the Reformed Church: in the canons of the Synod of Dort and in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*.

But if they, what of others? What of the infant children of unbelievers who die in infancy. After all, through the ages that has been an enormous number of such human beings, probably larger than the total number of human beings who ever reached adulthood in those past times. Reformed theologians have, by and large, spoken cautiously but have not denied the possibility. The great Dutch Reformed theologian Voetius, the John Owen of the Dutch Puritans in the 17th century, expressed his opinion this way: “As to whether they are lost or some among them are elect and were regenerated before they died, I would not wish to deny nor am I able to affirm.” Many have followed him in saying something similar. They are cautious because the Bible does not give us an answer to that question, but they cherish the hope of the salvation of some, if not many such little children.

But if we may have hope for such infants, may we also cherish the same hope for others, for those who are mentally ill or otherwise incapable of understanding the gospel, and perhaps even for some among the unbelieving masses of humanity in general? Again, there has been a willingness to believe that it is at least possible that some are saved by Christ who have never known of his saving work and who were never summoned to believe in his name. The *Second Helvetic Confession*, a very important early Reformed Creed, reads:

“At the same time we recognize that God can illuminate whom and when he will, even without the external ministry, for that is in his power.” [Art. I]

Indeed, you would be hard pressed to find a Reformed theologian of note who is unwilling to say that, at the very least, *it is possible* that some are saved apart from their knowledge of the gospel and their active faith in Jesus Christ. One of the strictest of all Reformed theologians, Jerome Zanchius was willing to say:

“...it is not indeed improbable that some individuals in...unenlightened countries may belong to the secret election of grace and the habit of faith may be wrought in them.”

By *habit of faith*, Zanchius meant the Latin *habitus*, a technical theological term for the inward disposition of the heart to believe in Christ, a disposition which the Holy Spirit creates by regeneration or the new birth, a disposition that may exist before there is any knowledge of Christ, as it often does in the case of the infant children of believers.” Zanchius was saying that people might have that God-given disposition of faith without the actual exercise of faith.

It is a question one must approach very carefully, because we all find ourselves wishing that it might be true that many more people are saved than we fear may be the case. We too feel the burden of the judgment of the unbelieving world. Christians, more than others, *precisely because they believe in the existence of hell*, want as few as possible finally to be there. What is more, it is perfectly obvious that Holy Scripture does not address this question. Theologians are cautious because they know they are speculating! The questions we ask ourselves and one another: how about these people? What of those people? The Bible does not answer. It never speaks directly

of the possibility of people being saved without the knowledge of Christ. If God has chosen to be silent, we must be careful not to speak as if somehow *we* knew what *God alone* can know.

What is more, the urgency of the gospel proclamation in the New Testament very clearly rests on the absolute necessity of people coming to put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ. Any thought that people are being saved in large numbers around the world apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ must be rejected precisely because such a belief must in the nature of the case undermine what the Bible plainly teaches: that we must tell people of Christ because they must believe in him to be saved. Paul and the other New Testament writers obviously did not think that the peoples of the world were being saved without the knowledge of Jesus Christ and his cross and resurrection. It was precisely that conviction – *that people must hear the good news* – a conviction based on the clearest teaching of the Bible that propelled them and the generations who followed them to the far corners of the earth.

On the other hand, it is certainly a striking thing that even our most conservative theologians have not denied the possibility that some people may have been saved without any personal knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ. If so they would have been saved by Christ, to be sure – Peter is absolutely clear that no one can be saved by any other name, that there is but one savior of sinners – but saved *without knowledge* of his name.

I tell you frankly that I am not persuaded that we should believe it possible for someone to be saved – particularly for some adult to be saved – apart from the knowledge of Jesus Christ, his cross, and his resurrection. However, the fact that so many great Christian minds have at least remained open to that possibility gives me pause. Not just the church fathers, but the Reformers, the American Presbyterians, and the great preachers of our Christian faith. Here, for example, is John Donne.

“To me, to whom God hath revealed his Son, in a Gospel, by a Church, there can be no way of salvation, but by applying that Son of God, by that Gospel, in that Church. Nor is there any other foundation for any, nor any other name by which any can be saved, but the name of Jesus. But how this foundation is presented, and how this name of Jesus is [made known] to them, amongst whom there is no Gospel preached, no Church established, I am not curious in inquiring. I know God can be as merciful as those tender [Church] Fathers present him to be; and I would be as charitable as they are. And therefore...I leave God to his unsearchable ways of working upon others, without further [inquiry].” [Cited from his *Sermons*, vol. IV, 77-78, by D. Kelly, *Systematic Theology*, I, 222]

God is mighty love; he is also perfect justice. We leave the matter in his all capable hands. What we take from Peter is what we know his words mean *and must mean*. There is no other way for sinners, guilty before God, to be reconciled to God than through the sacrificial death of the Son of God and there is no one who can reconcile them to God except the risen and glorified Son, Jesus Christ.

In that sense, this is and must remain in all ages and in our age the scandal of our faith as Christians. We do believe, we must believe that there is no salvation in anyone else, by any other

means. To believe otherwise would be to deny Christ, his cross, his resurrection from the dead, and his coming again to judge the living and the dead.

In this sense, the Bible is intolerant, as all truth must be intolerant of error. What we are taught in the Word of God and what the Gospel of Jesus Christ demands that we believe is that the truth lies behind us in one name, one person, and one complex historical event: the incarnation, life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ the Son of God. The inexorable logic of Peter's statement, as the Anglican Archbishop William Temple once expressed it is that the gospel is *true for all or it is not true at all*. Jesus Christ is the savior of sinners because only the God/man suffering and dying for sin could deliver us from our guilt and satisfy the justice of God on our behalf.

People so desperately need to know *that* that Peter was willing to tell it to the Sanhedrin even though he knew very well they would hate him for saying it. Some truth is simply too important to keep to oneself!