

## *The Problem of Judgment*

**Stephen H. Travis**

*Dr Travis, who lectures at St John's College, Nottingham, has written extensively on New Testament apocalyptic, and has a major book published in 1986 entitled Christ and the Judgment of God (Marshalls/Nelsons).*

The notion of divine judgment has never been particularly popular, except perhaps among those who were convinced that they, at least, were exempt from its terrors. J. A. T. Robinson made the interesting comment: 'We live, in the twentieth century, in a world without judgment, a world where at the last frontier post you simply go out — and nothing happens. It is like coming to the customs and finding there are none after all. And the suspicion that this is in fact the case spreads fast: for it is what we should all like to believe.'<sup>1</sup> So judgment is a problem. We prefer to manage without the idea of someone to whom we must give account of our lives, someone standing over us to remind us that we are both finite and guilty.

However, 'judgment' in itself is a neutral word. Whilst it implies accountability, it does not presuppose any particular verdict. According to the New Testament the Last Judgment, like an earthly judgment, may issue for any particular individual in a verdict of acquittal or of condemnation. So the real problem is not so much the prospect of judgment as the prospect that some people will receive a verdict of eternal condemnation. How, we ask, can the idea of eternal punishment be reconciled with the love of God as it is revealed in Christ? How can people be happy in heaven if they know that others are imprisoned in hell? Why should God reject as worthless people who have lived good lives? Would it not be a defeat *for God* if some human beings fail ultimately to find a place in his kingdom? Would it not be terribly unfair of God to condemn people who have had inadequate opportunity, or no opportunity, to understand and respond to the Christian message? In particular, what about sincere adherents of non-Christian religions? Surely a just and loving God would not write people off merely because they happened to be born in a place and culture where Islam or Hinduism or one of the other religions is the norm?

So the questions keep coming. And they are deep and urgent questions, because they are questions not so much about a theological system or a verse of Scripture as about one's family and friends. But before we try to reflect on these questions, let us notice that there is also a problem if there is no judgment. Already in the Ancient Near East writers were questioning how the gods could be just when the righteous suffered at the hands of the wicked:

---

<sup>1</sup> *On Being the Church in the World* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 165.

They walk on a lucky path, those who do not seek [a god], Those who devoutly pray to [a goddess] become poor and weak.<sup>2</sup>

Job and Ecclesiastes wrestle with the same problem: why does God, if he is just, allow the wicked to prosper and inflict disaster on the innocent?

It is all one; therefore I say,  
he destroys both the blameless and the wicked.  
When disaster brings sudden death,  
he mocks at the calamity of the innocent.  
The earth is given into the hand of the wicked;  
he covers the face of its judges –  
if it is not he, who then is it? (Jb. 9:22-24; cf. Ec. 3:16-4:3; 9:1-3).

[p.53]

And the psalmists express their longing for vindication in the face of their suffering at the hands of evildoers (e.g. Pss. 43; 79; 94). If they did not maintain faith that somehow, some time God would demonstrate his justice by delivering them from suffering, then suffering would be compounded by utter despair. When people look for a God of judgment whilst they suffer at the hands of a Pharaoh, an Antiochus or a Hitler, it is not necessarily because they wish to gloat in vengeance over the fate of the wicked. It is because if God's just dealings with mankind are not ultimately to be demonstrated, they would think it necessary to give up faith in God's justice altogether.

Although the suggestion that we should drop the idea of divine judgment is superficially attractive, it leads in fact not to the liberation of man but to his belittling. To deny that all people are responsible for their actions and responsible to God is to deny an essential part of human personality and to reduce us to the level of machines. The prospect of judgment may even be welcomed, because it assures us that God treats all our actions as significant. If the idea of judgment is removed, then ultimately no actions are significant.

The doctrine of judgment is sometimes dismissed because it is wrongly assumed to involve the notion that life is a great obstacle race for which the booby prize is to be thrown on the bonfire by God, the cosmic sadist. The Oxford philosopher Richard Robinson wrote:

If it really were probable that we should burn eternally, or not burn eternally, according as we disobeyed or obeyed a certain set of moral laws, that would, indeed, be an excellent reason for obeying them. But it would be a poor reason for respecting them.... On the contrary, they and the God who imposed them on us in this unbelievably brutal way, could only be regarded as beneath contempt.<sup>3</sup>

But that is not how the New Testament writers understood divine judgment, as we shall see.

---

<sup>2</sup> 'A Dialogue about Human Misery', lines 70f, in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, ed. J. B. Pritchard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 439.

<sup>3</sup> *An Atheist's Values* (London: OUP, 1964), p. 132.

### **The New Testament message of judgment**

It will be useful to summarize New Testament teaching before attempting to handle specific problems. I shall not describe it in detail, since it has been done elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> I shall not distinguish sharply between different New Testament writers, since what follows is, I believe, uncontroversial and fairly central to the New Testament as a whole.

(a) Whilst judgment is characteristically an eschatological term and the New Testament's focus is frequently on the final judgment, there is a sense in which men judge themselves now.

This is the judgment [*i.e.* this is how the process of judgment works], that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed (Jn. 3:19f).

By the choices we make, by the way we respond when confronted by Christ and his gospel, we bring judgment on ourselves. Whilst prominent in John's Gospel, this theme is not peculiar to that writer. In Romans 1:18-32 Paul gives a vivid description of the process of judgment. 'The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men...', he begins, and he goes on to say three times, 'God gave them up...' (vv. 24, 26, 28). Men adopt a mode of life which leaves the living God out of account, and he allows them to experience the consequences of their own choice. The wrath of God does not mean some cataclysmic act of destruction; rather it is God's withdrawing of his presence and his blessings from men who have refused to receive them.

But there is one crucial feature in the New Testament's description of the judgment which men bring on themselves in the present. It is not final. This Godlessness is experienced only so long as people refuse to enter the kingdom of God.

(b) All people will be judged. The New Testament has a way of emphasizing this in its repeated insistence that God (or Christ) will judge 'the living and the dead' (Acts 10:42; 2 Tim. 4:1; 1 Pet. 4:5; *cf.* 2 Cor. 5:10). A few passages speak of a 'resurrection of the unjust' as well as of the just (Jn. 5:29; Acts 24:15), as if to make it plain that God will ensure that no-one escapes this judgment, whether they are dead or alive, Christian or not Christian, when Christ comes finally to pass judgment on men's lives. That this future judgment of all men is associated with Christ's final coming (*parousia*) is clear from passages such as Matthew 13:47-50; 25:31-46; Mark 8:38; 1 Corinthians 4:5; 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10; Revelation 22:12.

(c) Judgment is personal: there is a Judge. C. H. Dodd's famous description of wrath as an impersonal 'inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe'<sup>5</sup> is misleading in that it distances God from the consequences of sin which he himself has willed. Judgment is a process

---

<sup>4</sup> *E.g.* L. Morris, *The Biblical Doctrine of Judgment* (London: Tyndale, 1960); my *Christian Hope and the Future of Man* (Leicester: IVP 1980), ch. 7, and works cited there.

<sup>5</sup> *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Hodder, 1932), p. 23.

in which God is involved, though it is characteristic of the New Testament to refer to Christ as his agent in carrying out the judgment. The Father 'has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of man' (Jn. 5:27; cf. Mt. 25:31-46; Acts 10:42; 17:31; Rom. 2:16; 2 Cor. 5:10). J. E. Fison comments:

The importance of realizing that Jesus Christ is the judge cannot be overemphasized. At the end we shall not approach a distant doomsday, but we shall be confronted by an immediate presence. If only we realized it, it is the presence of a living and loving person, however mediated, with whom we have to deal here and now, and with whom we are bound to deal hereafter.<sup>6</sup>

The significance of this is brought home in that startling phrase in the Revelation to John: 'the wrath of the Lamb' (Rev. 6:16). Admittedly, the Lamb in Revelation is not the picture of vulnerable innocence which it has sometimes been taken to be, but is an apocalyptic symbol for the fierce and powerful leader of God's people.<sup>7</sup> He is, nevertheless, the Lamb who was slain for our redemption (Rev. 5:6-14). If there are those who reject him and thereby bring upon themselves his wrath, they reject not the cosmic sadist whose obstacle race they have failed to complete, but the one who in his love has offered himself to all mankind. And it is he who will confront us at the judgment.

(d) Judgment will be 'according to works'. This is consistently taught in the New Testament (see Mt. 16:27; Rom. 2:6; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 22:12). It is not in conflict with Paul's doctrine of justification through faith. For to be justified means to be brought into a right relationship with God, within which one experiences God's power at work.<sup>8</sup> But, like any gift, it is only ours if we receive it and make use of it. So justification through faith, though it is a gift of God's free

[p.54]

grace, involves the obligation to work out our new status in practice. The only kind of faith of which Paul approves is the faith which shows its reality by the fruit it produces: 'faith working through love' (Gal. 5:6). And at the final judgment a man's works will be the evidence of the kind of man he is. It is not a question of earning salvation by good works: works are the evidence of the reality of the faith through which we are saved.

(e) The final judgment will be a moment of division between those who are revealed truly to belong to Christ and those who do not. The last judgment will underline and make known the self-judgment which men and women have chosen during the present life (Mt. 10:32f.; 25:31-46; Jn. 5:25-29; Rom. 2:6-11; 1 Thes. 5:1-11).

Some interpreters of the New Testament argue for two or more different judgments. For example, they may distinguish between a judgment of believers (2 Cor. 5:10), a judgment of the

---

<sup>6</sup> *The Christian Hope* (London: Longmans, 1954), pp. 48f.

<sup>7</sup> See G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (NCB; London: Oliphants, 1974), pp. 124f.

<sup>8</sup> See E. Kasemann's emphasis on this, "'The Righteousness of God' in Paul", *New Testament Questions of Today* (ET London: SCM, 1969), pp. 170f.

nations (Mt. 25:31-46) and a judgment of the unrighteous dead (Rev. 20:11-15). But it seems to me that these are variant ways of talking about the same judgment, whose purpose is to reveal the true character of men and allot their destinies accordingly. It is hard to see how passages such as Acts 17:31; Romans 2:5-11, 16, with their reference to 'the day' of judgment, could imply separate judgments for different categories of people.

(f) The New Testament views salvation and condemnation basically in terms of relationship or non-relationship to God. A failure to grasp this truth causes many of our distortions of the biblical doctrine of judgment.

We should note first that the criterion by which men's destinies will be determined is their attitude to Christ — their relationship to him. This is of course implied in the word 'faith': commitment to someone in relationship. And on the negative side, in 2 Thessalonians 1:8 Paul speaks of 'those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus'. They are not in relationship to him and so will come under his wrath. As we saw above, this emphasis is not in conflict with judgment according to works, since works are the outward evidence of the relationship (or lack of relationship). 2 Thessalonians 1:8 itself makes plain the parallelism between 'knowing God' (relationship) and 'obeying the gospel' (which has moral implications).

Secondly, just as the criterion of judgment is expressed in terms of relationship to God or to Christ, so also is the result of the judgment. Condemnation means 'exclusion from the presence of the Lord' (2 Thes. 1:9), whilst the destiny of God's people is to be 'always ... with the Lord' (1 Thes. 4:17; *cf.* 2 Cor. 5:8). In Jesus' teaching, too, the destiny of those who respond to him is pictured in terms of being in the presence of God or of Christ (Mt. 25:34; Lk. 23:43). Hell, on the other hand, means to be excluded from God's presence (Mt. 7:23; 8:12; 25:41). The same theme is differently expressed in Matthew 10:32f (= Lk. 12:8f):

Every one who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge [as my own] before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny [i.e. declare that I have no dealings with them] before my Father who is in heaven (*cf.* Mk. 8:38).

Thus we can understand the link between self-judgment in the present and judgment at the last day. The final judgment means God's underlining and ratification of the relationship towards him which we have chosen in this life. If we have fellowship with God now, we shall enter into a fuller experience of his presence then. If we do not know him now, we shall not know him then.

If this is so, we can see that both heaven and hell are best spoken of not as reward and punishment for the kind of life we have lived, but as the logical outcome of our relationship to God in this life. Heaven is not a reward for being a Christian any more than marriage is a reward for being engaged. And hell, we may say, is not a punishment for turning one's back on Christ and choosing the road that leads to destruction. It is where the road leads.

### **The nature of 'eternal punishment'**

The biblical doctrine of judgment offers confidence to those who humbly seek to respond to the love of Christ. But it presents a stark picture for those who do not. One way of 'softening the blow' has been sought in the idea of 'conditional immortality'. On this view those who are condemned at the final judgment will not endure endless conscious torment (which traditionally has been the common view of Christians) but will be 'annihilated'. Since in the biblical view men are not naturally immortal, and the gift of immortality or eternal life is conditional upon faith in Christ, those who do not have such faith will not receive immortality. They will simply cease to be.

The traditional view of eternal punishment has normally been defended on the grounds that the soul is immortal, that strict justice requires it, and that it is the plain teaching of Scripture.<sup>9</sup> Murray Harris has recently argued for it, pointing to references to retributive punishment in Matthew 25:46; Romans 2:8; 2 Thessalonians 1:8f.; Hebrews 10:29; and to the significance of the word 'eternal' (*aiōnios*) in passages such as Matthew 25:41, 46; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Hebrews 6:2. Thus in Matthew 25:46, where *aiōnios* is applied to both 'life' and 'punishment', 'if the life that is described as *aiōnios* is without end, so too will be the punishment that is described in the same way'. 'That the concept of "destruction" (*apoleia*) ... or "perishing" (*apollusthai*) ... does not imply annihilation is clear from the use of the verb "perish" (*apollusthai*) in John 11:50; Acts 5:37; 1 Corinthians 10:9-10; Jude 11.' 'There are ... sufficient warnings of the dire, eternal consequences of rejecting Christ to leave us in no doubt that the Early Church rejected both universalism and annihilationism.'<sup>10</sup>

Arguments for annihilationism or conditional immortality include the following:

(a) Since the Bible teaches that immortality is not natural to man but is a gift given by God to believers, that logically implies that unbelievers do not exist indefinitely after death.

(b) Biblical images such as 'fire' and 'destruction' suggest annihilation more readily than they suggest continuing conscious existence. Harris's appeal to the use of *apollusthai* in John 11:50; etc., does not appear to make out a case for the opposite view.

[p.55]

(c) 'Eternal' in places such as Matthew 25:46; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Hebrews 6:2 may signify the permanence of the result of judgment rather than the continuous operation of the act of punishment itself. So 'eternal punishment' means an act of judgment whose results are irreversible.

(d) Eternal torment involves an eternal cosmic dualism which is impossible to reconcile with the conviction that ultimately God will be 'all in all'. It leaves us with no solution to the problem of how God's people could be happy in heaven while others continue to suffer in hell.

---

<sup>9</sup> See my *Christian Hope and the Future of Man*, pp. 133-136.

<sup>10</sup> *Raised Immortal: Resurrection and Immortality in the New Testament* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1983), pp. 180-185 (quotations from pp. 183, 184).

In attempting to weigh up such arguments J. W. Wenham suggests, first, that the traditional case for eternal torment should not be lightly surrendered; but, secondly, that the case for conditional immortality deserves to be considered much more seriously than has been the case hitherto.<sup>11</sup>

But it is important not to get the differences between the two views out of proportion. The very ambiguity of the biblical evidence should remind us that this issue was of secondary importance to the biblical writers. As we say, they understood judgment in terms of relationship to God. Thus the most significant thing about the destiny of unbelievers is that they will be separated from God. Compared with that tragic fact, there is — from the perspective of the New Testament writers — little point in asking for a more precise definition of their destiny, whether it involves continued conscious existence or not.

### **Will not all be saved?**

A more radical solution to the problem posed by the prospect of God's condemnation of many of the people he has created lies in the doctrine of universalism, which has become increasingly popular over the last fifty years.<sup>12</sup> John Hick's exposition of this view that all will ultimately be saved will be considered as an example.

In *Evil and the God of Love* he argues that 'God will eventually succeed in his purpose of winning all men to himself in faith and love'.<sup>13</sup> Whilst it is logically contradictory to say that creatures endowed with free will are predetermined ultimately to love God, it is factually the case that God will lovingly persist, like a divine psychotherapist, in helping his patients to find their true selves. We must take seriously Jesus' warnings that selfish deeds lead to real sufferings after death, but we must believe that because God is love those sufferings will be temporary and redemptive. In *Death and Eternal Life* Hick agrees that in Matthew 25:31-46, and probably in Matthew 25:30 and Mark 3:29, eternal torment appears to be taught. But since a larger number of passages do not specify that condemnation is eternal we should not allow the small cluster of passages on eternal torment to determine our view.<sup>14</sup>

Hick further argues that a doctrinal system which offers only two outcomes — death or life — is ethically intolerable. And alongside these judgment' passages we must set the 'universalist' passages which are present particularly in Paul (Rom. 5:18; 11:32; 1 Cor. 15:22; Eph. 1:10; 1 Tim. 2:4). The two sets of statements are not incompatible because they are different types of statement. Paul's are 'detached' theological statements about the purpose of God. The warnings of judgment in Jesus' teaching are 'existential' statements, designed not to propound a theological theory but to goad his hearers to repentance.

---

<sup>11</sup> *The Goodness of God* (London: IVP, 1974), pp. 27-41. For a detailed defence of conditional immortality see E. W. Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes* (Fallbrook, California: Verdict Publications, 1982).

<sup>12</sup> The issue was thoroughly handled in *Themelios* 4.2 (January 1979), so I will not discuss it at length here. See also *Christian Hope and the Future of Man*, pp. 124-133.

<sup>13</sup> *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Macmillan, 2nd edn 1977), p. 342.

<sup>14</sup> *Death and Eternal Life* (London: Collins, 1976), pp. 242-261, is the central part of Hick's argument for universalism.

Hick adds that since God has made us for himself, with a 'bias' towards him, we do not need to think of God working against human freedom in bringing men to the response of love towards himself. We should think of him like a psychiatrist helping the patient — both before death and beyond — to remove the blockages which prevent our free response to his love.

Hick, like other universalists, has a fine emphasis on God's love, and of the sorrow it must bring to God — and ought to bring to us — if all men were not in the end to respond to that love. Nevertheless serious criticisms must be made.

(a) Whilst the universalist is right to assert that God's will is to draw all men to himself, he underplays man's freedom — which is itself a gift of God's love — to resist him. Love does not force itself on its object, even though resistance causes the utmost anguish. Hick invites us to picture God as a divine psychiatrist guiding men to their true goal, gradually winning their free response of love. But what of the man who refuses to go to the psychiatrist? Hick underplays man's 'bias' against God.

(b) A scheme which presupposes a period of purgation after death, during which a person moves from rebellion or imperfect response towards a complete openness to God, suffers from total lack of New Testament evidence. The idea of remedial punishment or of the steady transformation of persons after death is a guess which contradicts the general thrust of Scripture.<sup>15</sup> There is something suspect about the argument (which is often put forward) that 'the general thrust of Scripture', with its revelation of God's love, requires us to postulate a period of purgation, or a 'second chance', after death. For if it is Jesus himself in whom God's love is supremely displayed, must we not regard with utter seriousness the fact that his teaching about God's love (as recorded in the gospels) apparently included nothing about opportunities for repentance and transformation after death?

(c) Hick's argument that warnings of eternal condemnation are a different type of statement from the statements about God's universal plan of salvation fails to cope with the case of a man who refuses to heed the warnings. What is the use, or the morality, of an existential threat which turns out to have no corresponding reality?

(d) New Testament texts which speak in universalist terms ought to be taken more seriously than traditional Christianity has usually taken them, and Hick is right to remind us of them. But they cannot justifiably be used as an argument for universal salvation. Nearly all of them occur alongside statements about the need for faith in order to experience salvation. In Colossians 1:19-23, for example (a passage not in Hick's list), God's purpose of 'reconciling to himself all things' is said to include the Gentiles at Colossae, 'provided that you continue in the faith...'. It seems better, therefore, to interpret these 'universalist' texts not as assertions of what will happen but as declarations that God's saving purpose has universal scope, even though some people may refuse to enter into that purpose.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Cf. W. Strawson, *Jesus and the Future Life* (London: Epworth, 2nd edn 1970), p. 149.

<sup>16</sup> See further N. T. Wright, 'Towards a Biblical View of Universalism', *Themelios* 4.2 (January 1979), pp. 54-58.



It may be objected to my argument, with its emphasis on human free will as the corollary of divine love, that it fails to take seriously enough the sovereign grace of God. Or it may

[p.56]

be argued that we ought to express the gospel's warnings of hell and its promise of universal salvation without attempting to resolve the paradox. E. Schweizer, for example, writes:

It is just as impossible to state that some will be punished in hell someday as it is to state the opposite — that eventually all will be saved. Both anticipate something which is God's prerogative.<sup>17</sup>

These are important perspectives, and it needs to be emphasized — over against the modern climate — that the sovereign grace of God, rather than human choice and decision, is at the heart of the gospel. Nevertheless, when the theological tide is flowing strongly towards a universalism which underplays the New Testament's stress on the eternal consequences of what men do with the gospel, it is important to put up barriers against the tide.

### **Divine judgment and non-Christian faiths**

The questioning of the traditional doctrine of judgment and the shift towards universalism have increased significantly as Christians have tried to take seriously the status of those whose cultures and beliefs are shaped by one or other of the religions of the world. Will not a 'good Muslim' meet with God's favour at the judgment? Would it not be unfair of God to condemn people just because they happen to have grown up in a non-Christian culture? I shall deal only briefly with this question, which featured prominently in *Themelios* 9.2 (January 1984).<sup>18</sup>

It seems to me that certain common ways of handling this problem must be rejected because they are lacking in evidence or faulty in method. It is unsatisfactory to solve it by adopting universalism, for reasons summarized above. It is unsatisfactory to argue from specific texts such as John 1:9 ('the true light that enlightens every man') or Acts 10:34-35 ('... in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him') that sincere pagans can be in a right relationship to God apart from knowledge of Christ. For that is not what those passages are saying, as Wright, for example, shows.<sup>19</sup> It is unconvincing to deflect the force of 'exclusivist' passages such as Acts 4:12 ('there is salvation in no one else') and John 14:6 ('no one comes to the Father, but by me') by arguing that the New Testament writers knew nothing of our multi-religious world and were making a confession of gratitude born out of personal experience, not

---

<sup>17</sup> *The Good News according to Mark* (ET London: SPCK, 1971), p. 199. See the whole paragraph.

<sup>18</sup> See especially C. J. H. Wright, 'The Christian and other religions: the biblical evidence', *Themelios* 9.2, pp.4-15. See also now C. J. H. Wright, 'Inter Faith Dialogue', *Anvil* 1 (1984), pp. 231-258: this is a critique of *Towards a Theology of Inter-Faith Dialogue*, a report by the Church of England's Board of Mission and Unity (London: CIO, 1984). I wrote earlier on this topic in 'The Life of the World and Future Judgement', *Churchman* 97 (1983), pp. 31-40.

<sup>19</sup> *Themelios* 9.2, pp. 12-14.

an absolute claim intended in an absolute sense.<sup>20</sup> For such statements in the New Testament are not merely statements about experience. And the early church did arise in a multifaith context, in which rival claims had to be carefully considered.

If we are to handle our question on the basis of the biblical revelation we must accept that there may be no tidy solution, no final answer before the final judgment itself. But we may make some progress if we take as our starting point Paul's rather paradoxical use of the motif of divine impartiality in Romans.<sup>21</sup> Paul invokes God's impartiality in connection with the final judgment (Rom. 2:11). For Jews and Gentiles alike the outcome will be tribulation for those who do evil, glory for those who do good (Rom. 2:7-10). God shows no favouritism to those who possess the law. Performance of the law's demands, not mere possession of it, is what matters. And if a Gentile who does not 'possess' the law sometimes does what the law requires, this shows that Gentiles as Gentiles can stand as equals beside Jews at the final judgment (Rom. 2:12-16).<sup>22</sup> If a Jew can stand before God at the judgment and be accepted, so can a Gentile, despite his lack of Jewish privileges.

But Paul goes on to apply the principle of impartiality in a different way. Whereas Romans 2:7-16 seem to offer the possibility that Gentiles, like Jews, may do God's will and find salvation, Romans 3:9 declares that 'all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin' (*cf.* vv. 19f.). Yet just as there is 'no distinction' between Jew and Gentile with regard to sin, so justification is available 'for all who believe' (vv. 22-24). This familiar Pauline emphasis, that all men, both Jew and Gentile, are under judgment and all may be justified through faith, is fundamental to our understanding of the gospel. The right reaction to 'the problem of judgment' is to be eager to preach the gospel of justification.

Yet that is not the whole story, since Paul's use of the impartiality motif in Romans 3 should not obscure his use of it in Romans 2. Admittedly, in Romans 2:12-16 he does not say (as he is sometimes imagined to say) that those who have not heard the gospel will be saved if they live a good life according to their own lights. But he does insist that Jews, who have received special revelation from God, have no special advantage over Gentiles, who do not have that special revelation, when the day of judgment comes. God's impartiality will ensure that. Now of course Paul believed that Jews could be saved on the basis of the work of Christ, but without necessarily having heard the Christian gospel. Abraham for him is the supreme example of one who was justified through faith (Rom. 4), and like the rest of the New Testament (*cf.* Mt. 8:11; Heb. 11) Paul's letters reflect the assumption that Israel's men and women of faith will share in God's final kingdom.

---

<sup>20</sup> See *e.g.* K. Stendahl, 'Notes for Three Bible Studies', in G. H. Anderson & T. F. Stransky (eds.), *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981), pp. 11-15; P. Starkey, 'Biblical Faith and the Challenge of Religious Pluralism', *International Review of Mission* 71 (1982), pp. 66-77; and my criticism of her in *Churchman* 97, pp. 35f.

<sup>21</sup> On this theme see J. M. Bassler, *Divine Impartiality: Paul and a Theological Axiom* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), esp. pp. 137-170.

<sup>22</sup> I accept Bassler's arguments against the view that Rom. 2:14 refers explicitly to Christian Gentiles (*Divine Impartiality*, pp. 141-145).

It seems to follow from the principle of God's impartiality that there is a door open similarly — if only slightly and tentatively — for people whose lives are lived outside the range of Christian influence and gospel preaching. If some find acceptance at the judgment, it will not be because they have been 'good Hindus' or 'good Muslims' any more than Christians are saved by being 'good Christians'. It will be because, like Abraham, they have been people of faith, looking (as Heb. 11 has it) for that which is not yet seen. They are not satisfied with what they have but hunger to know the God whose character and will is not entirely unknown to them (Rom. 1:19f.; 2:14f.). They have been open to the grace of God and to the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, even though they have not necessarily named the name of Christ.<sup>23</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Is divine judgment a problem? Certainly it is no comfortable doctrine. But I have argued that to underplay it is to diminish human significance and to dismantle the gospel. Universalism, for all its attractiveness, is painfully short of biblical foundation. And it is possible to take seriously the problem of those who have not properly heard the gospel without surrendering either the fairness of God or the urgency of worldwide evangelization. And when we reach questions we cannot answer, we may trust 'the Judge of all the earth' to 'do right' (Gn. 18:25).

---

© 1986 Stephen H. Travis. Reproduced by kind permission of the author.

Prepared for the Web in May 2006 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/>

---

---

<sup>23</sup> Cf. L. Newbigin, 'Christ and the World of Religions', *Churchman* 97 (1983), pp. 27-29.