Discussions with My Friend: An Introduction to the Gospel of Jesus Christ By David Stewart

Chapter 39: What of the Pagan? Mercy, Justice and Judgment

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We have previously agreed that God's truth must be for all people. Yet throughout history and in much of the world even today, most people have had relatively little freedom to choose their faith because of the monopoly or near-monopoly status of state religions and because of limitations of knowledge and opportunity. Even the most prolific missionary faiths have come to the knowledge of only a small fraction of humankind.

The eternal state of the pagan, who was kept from the knowledge of the truth only from ignorance and want of opportunity, is therefore a central matter that impacts not only the pagan himself, but also impacts our own ability to believe in a God who is just and fair. We can understand the just condemnation of the unbeliever who had the opportunity to accept Christ, but rejected Him because of the cares of the world and the lusts of the flesh. Yet to believe that God would eternally punish good people who merely lacked the opportunity to accept him challenges the very concept of a perfect, loving, and just God upon which our faith is predicated.

Christianity therefore faces a seeming contradiction. Christ declared the necessity of baptism for salvation: "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). He expounded no exemptions to the eternal law. Baptism is necessary but not sufficient; those baptized who are not faithful still cannot be saved. Yet God also is just and "in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him" (Acts 10:35). What hope is there for good people who never had the opportunity to hear of Christ, learn his full gospel, and accept the baptismal covenant?

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Sectarian Christianity answers that there is no hope; that those who did not hear of Christ and were not baptized are condemned to eternal damnation from which there is no escape. They claim that God through his foreknowledge appointed the righteous to nations and generations where Christ's word has been preached, yet thoughtful people can find good among all nations that defies the unscriptural and irrational dogmas of the sectarians.

Through the gospel of Jesus Christ as restored through the prophet Joseph Smith, we know that those who did not have the opportunity to hear the full gospel of Christ will have the opportunity after this life in the world of spirits. The Prophet Joseph Smith recorded a heavenly vision of his brother Alvin who had died:

I saw Father Adam and Abraham; and ... my brother Alvin, that has long since slept;
And marveled how it was that he had obtained an inheritance in that kingdom, seeing that he had departed this life before the Lord had set his hand to gather Israel the second time, and had not been baptized for the remission of sins.
Thus came the voice of the Lord unto me, saying: All who have died without a knowledge of this gospel, who would have received it if they had been permitted to tarry, shall be heirs of the celestial kingdom of God;
Also all that shall die henceforth without a knowledge of it, who would have received it with all their hearts, shall be heirs of that kingdom;
For I, the Lord, will judge all men according to their works, according to the desire of their hearts.
And I also beheld that all children who die before they arrive at the years of accountability are saved in the celestial kingdom of heaven. (D&C 137:6-10)

After His crucifixion, Christ went to organize his forces in the spirit world to preach to those who did not know of him. This doctrine is taught in the Bible, yet is only understood because of modern revelation, and is not taught by any Christian churches except for the LDS faith. LDS prophet Joseph F. Smith described the vision he received when pondering upon Biblical verses:

I opened the Bible and read the third and fourth chapters of the first epistle of Peter, and as I read I was greatly impressed, more than I had ever been before, with the following passages:
"For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit:
"By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison;

"Which sometime were disobedient, when once the long-suffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water." (1 Peter 3:18-20)
"For for this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit" (1 Peter 4:6)
As I pondered over these things which are written, the eyes of my understanding were opened, and the Spirit of the Lord rested upon me, and I saw the hosts of the dead, both small and great.
And there were gathered together in one place an innumerable company of the spirits of the just, who had been faithful in the testimony of Jesus while they lived in mortality;
And who had offered sacrifice in the similitude of the great sacrifice of the Son of God, and had suffered tribulation in their Redeemer's name.
I marveled, for I understood that the Savior spent about three years in his ministry among the Jews and those of the house of Israel, endeavoring to teach them the everlasting gospel and call them unto repentance;
And yet, notwithstanding his mighty works, and miracles, and proclamation of the truth, in great power and authority, there were but few who hearkened to his voice, and rejoiced in his presence, and received salvation at his hands.
But his ministry among those who were dead was limited to the brief time intervening between the crucifixion and his resurrection;
And I wondered at the words of Peter -- wherein he said that the Son of God preached unto the spirits in prison, who sometime were disobedient, when once the long-suffering of God waited in the days of Noah -- and how it was possible for him to preach to those spirits and perform the necessary labor among them in so short a time.
And as I wondered, my eyes were opened, and my understanding quickened, and I perceived that the Lord went not in person among the wicked and the disobedient who had rejected the truth, to teach them;
But behold, from among the righteous, he organized his forces and appointed messengers, clothed with power and authority, and commissioned them to go forth and carry the light of the gospel to them that were in darkness, even to all the spirits of men; and thus was the gospel preached to the dead.
And the chosen messengers went forth to declare the acceptable day of the Lord and proclaim liberty to the captives who were bound, even unto all who would repent of their sins and receive the gospel.
Thus was the gospel preached to those who had died in their sins, without a knowledge of the truth, or in transgression, having rejected the prophets.
These were taught faith in God, repentance from sin, vicarious baptism for the remission of sins, the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands,
And all other principles of the gospel that were necessary for them to know in order to qualify themselves that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.
And so it was made known among the dead, both small and great, the unrighteous as well as the faithful, that redemption had been wrought through the sacrifice of the Son of God upon the cross.
Thus was it made known that our Redeemer spent his time during his sojourn in the world of spirits, instructing and preparing the faithful spirits of the prophets who had testified of him in the flesh;
That they might carry the message of redemption unto all the dead, unto whom he could not go personally, because of their rebellion and transgression, that they through the ministration of his servants might also hear his words.
The dead who repent will be redeemed, through obedience to the ordinances of the house of God,
And after they have paid the penalty of their transgressions, and are washed clean, shall receive a reward according to their works, for they are heirs of salvation. (D&C 138:6-13, 25-37, 58-59)

Even if individuals accept Christ through preaching in the spirit world, this does not obviate the firm requirement for baptism taught by Christ Himself. Without a body, spirits cannot be baptized. Therefore, living people are baptized on their behalf through vicarious work individuals conduct for their ancestors in holy temples. This doctrine is taught by the Apostle Paul: "Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? why are they then baptized for the dead?" (1 Corinthians 15:29). Critics speculate that Paul was referring to a non-Christian practice, yet dismissing the practice out of hand leaves us no closer to understanding God's justice or how those without the opportunity to accept Christ during their mortal lives can have the requisite opportunity to accept baptism.

The ordinance of baptism is known from the earliest of times. The Apostle Paul wrote: "All our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; And did all eat the same spiritual meat; And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ." (1 Corinthians 10:1-4). A form of baptism was practiced among the Jews before the time of John the Baptist.

Solomon's temple had such a font. Although our knowledge is sketchy and its purpose in scripture is noted only as being for the "washing of the priests," it may also have served as a baptismal font:

And he made a molten sea, ten cubits from the one brim to the other: it was round all about, and his height was five cubits: and a line of thirty cubits did compass it round about.
And under the brim of it round about there were knops compassing it, ten in a cubit, compassing the sea round about: the knops were cast in two rows, when it was cast.
It stood upon twelve oxen, three looking toward the north, and three looking toward the west, and three looking toward the south, and three looking toward the east: and the sea was set above upon them, and all their hinder parts were inward.
And it was an hand breadth thick, and the brim thereof was wrought like the brim of a cup, with flowers of lilies: it contained two thousand baths.
And he made ten bases of brass; four cubits was the length of one base, and four cubits the breadth thereof, and three cubits the height of it.
And the work of the bases was on this manner: they had borders, and the borders were between the ledges:
And on the borders that were between the ledges were lions, oxen, and cherubims: and upon the ledges there was a base above: and beneath the lions and oxen were certain additions made of thin work. (1 Kings 7:23-29)

The Apostle Paul wrote of God's justice in the day of judgment:

For there is no respect of persons with God.
For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law: and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law;
(For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified.
For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves:
Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another;)
In the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel. (Romans 2:11-16)

Those who have God's word and law will be judged according to His word and law; those who did not have His word will be judged according to their conscience and whether they lived up to the light and understanding that they had. We can see God's mercy, justice, and equity with the ignorant pagan as with the faithful believer. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints offers a theology on these matters that is comprehensive, just, and scripturally consistent, in contrast to sectarian teachings of an unjust God who will eternally condemn individuals because of factors beyond their control.

Yet as the gospel light shines into all the world, the days of ignorance are past: "And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained" (Acts 17:30-31), Jesus Christ, the Savior of the World.