

§ 7. Doctrine of Christ

Lecture 49

The Real Problem Raised By Religious Pluralism

Last time I argued that salvation is universally accessible through God's general revelation in nature and conscience even if it is rarely, if ever, actually accessed in that way. Therefore the problem posed by mankind's religious diversity cannot be simply reduced to the fact that many lost people are uninformed or misinformed about Jesus Christ. Rather, I think that the real problem is that if God is all-knowing then he knew even before he created the world who would receive the Gospel and be saved and who would not. But then certain very difficult questions arise. For example, number one, why didn't God bring the Gospel to people who he knew would accept it if they heard it but who reject the light of general revelation that they do have? To illustrate this problem, imagine a North American Indian living on the Great Plains during the Middle Ages prior to the arrival of Christian missionaries. Let's call him Walking Bear. Let's suppose that as Walking Bear looks up at the heavens at night and sees the beauty of nature around him that he thinks that all of this must surely have been made by the Great Spirit. Moreover as Walking Bear looks into his own heart he senses there the moral law written on his heart telling him that all men are brothers created by the Great Spirit and that therefore we ought to live in love and harmony with one another. But suppose that instead of worshipping the Great Spirit and living in love for his fellow man, Walking Bear ignores the Great Spirit and instead creates totems of other spirits. And rather than living in love with his fellow man, he lives in selfishness and cruelty toward others. In such a case Walking Bear would be justly condemned before God even when judged on the standards of God's revelation in nature and conscience. He hasn't responded properly to God's general revelation and therefore would be condemned before the bar of God's justice when judged by those standards. But now suppose that if only the missionaries had arrived that Walking Bear would have believed the Gospel and been saved. In that case his salvation or damnation seems to be the result of bad luck. Through no fault of his own he just had the bad luck to be born at a time and place in history when the Gospel was not yet available. His condemnation is just, alright, but would an all-loving God allow people's eternal destiny to hinge on historical and geographical accident?

Secondly, even more fundamentally, why did God even create the world when he knew that so many people would not believe the Gospel and so be lost? Since creation is a free act of God, why didn't God simply refrain from creating any free people at all?

Thirdly, and even more radically, why didn't God create a world in which everyone freely believes the Gospel and is saved? Such a world must be logically possible since people are free to believe or to not believe, and so there must be logically possible worlds in which everyone in that world freely believes in the Gospel and is saved. So why didn't

God create a world in which every person freely chooses to place his faith in Christ and be saved?

What is the Christian supposed to say in response to these difficult questions?¹ Does the Christian faith make God out to be cruel and unloving? In order to answer these questions, I think it will be helpful to examine more closely the logical structure of the problem before us. The problem seems to be very similar to the logical version of the problem of evil which we discussed so many moons ago in doing the doctrine of God. You remember according to the logical problem of evil the statement “God is all-powerful and all-loving” is logically inconsistent with the statement that “evil and suffering exist.” Similarly here, the pluralist seems to be claiming that it’s logically impossible for God to be all-powerful and all-loving and yet for some people never to hear the Gospel and be lost. That is to say, he seems to be saying that the following statements are logically incompatible with each other.

A. God is all-powerful and all-loving.

B. Some people never hear the Gospel and are lost.

This could be called, I think, a soteriological version of the problem of evil. Soteriology is the area of theology that deals with the doctrine of salvation. Similar to the logical version of the problem of evil, this seems to be a sort of soteriological version of the problem of evil, namely the statement that “God is all-powerful and all-loving” is logically incompatible with the statement that “some people never hear the Gospel and are lost.”

But now we need to ask why should we think that A and B are logically inconsistent? After all there’s no explicit contradiction between A and B. One is not the negation of the other so there’s no explicit contradiction here. If the religious pluralist is claiming that A and B are implicitly contradictory then he must be assuming some hidden premises, some hidden assumptions that would bring out the contradiction and make it explicit. So the question is: what are those hidden assumptions made by the pluralist?

Well, I must say that in my reading I have never seen any attempt by any religious pluralist to identify those hidden assumptions, but let’s try to help the religious pluralist out a little bit here to make his argument as powerful as we can. It seems to me that the hidden assumptions are the following premises (1) and (2):

1. If God is all-powerful then he can create a world in which everybody hears the Gospel and is saved.
2. If God is all-loving then he prefers a world in which everybody hears the Gospel and is freely saved.

¹ 5:01

Since, according to A God is all-powerful and all-loving, it follows that therefore God can both can create a world in which everybody hears the Gospel and is saved and that he prefers a world in which everybody hears the Gospel and is saved. Therefore it follows that everyone is freely saved, and that contradicts B which says that some people never hear the Gospel and are lost.

So according to this argument, God is all-powerful and all-loving, and if he's all-powerful he can create a world in which universal salvation takes place, and if he's all-loving he prefers a world in which universal salvation takes place and therefore there should be no one lost in contradiction to B, which says that some people fail to hear the Gospel and are lost.²

In order for this argument to be sound both of the hidden premises (1) and (2) need to be necessarily true if there is to be demonstrated a logical incompatibility between A and B. So the entire question is: are these two hidden assumptions necessarily true? Let's think about them. Consider the first assumption – (1) – that if God is all-powerful he can create a world in which everybody hears the Gospel and is freely saved. Is that necessarily true?

Well, I think it would be uncontroversial to say that God could certainly create a world in which everybody hears the Gospel. That part of the assumption isn't too difficult. That would be no big deal to create a world in which everybody hears the Gospel. But so long as people are free, there's no guarantee that everybody in such a world would be freely saved. In fact, when you think about it, there's no guarantee whatsoever that in a world in which everybody hears the Gospel that the balance between saved and lost would be any better than the balance between saved and lost in the actual world. So it's logically impossible for God to make someone freely do something. If he does it freely, he cannot be made to do it. If God makes him do it then he doesn't do it freely. It is as logically impossible to make somebody do something freely as it is to make a round square or a married bachelor. That's just logically impossible, and being all-powerful doesn't mean the ability to do the logically impossible. So there's no guarantee that a possible world in which everybody hears the Gospel and is freely saved is a world which is feasible for God to create. For all we know, any world of free people which God could create or might create would be a world in which some people would freely reject his saving grace and so be lost. Therefore, the first hidden assumption is not necessarily true, and therefore the religious pluralist's argument is fallacious.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I think, first of all, the Bible agrees in one sense, and it says because the Son of Perdition will not . . . but that's a type person. But I think to argue against it – if you have a little kid who loves ice cream, you can pretty well, without violating their free will,

² 9:45

bring circumstances where you know they'll choose to eat ice cream. God has a superior logic, he can not violate our free will, but we can be like water in his hands and manipulate what we do.

Dr. Craig: You are raising a very good point. We can persuade people to do something freely, especially by putting them in circumstances in which we know that they would freely do that, but again there's no guarantee so long as those circumstances are freedom-permitting, that they will, in fact, freely do that. The point that I'm making is that for all we know there are no worlds in which everybody who hears the Gospel is in circumstances in which they would, in fact, freely embrace the Gospel. It's possible that some of those people would freely not embrace the Gospel and so be lost. And remember, the circumstances that we're talking about here are freedom-permitting circumstances. We are not talking about circumstances in which God overwhelms their free will by an irresistible revelation of himself.³ He can certainly, through the Holy Spirit, attempt to draw them to himself, convict them of sin, bring the Gospel to them, just myriads of ways in which God can try to elicit a free response from people. But so long as those circumstances are freedom-permitting there's no guarantee that everyone in such a world would freely respond affirmatively to the Gospel and be saved.

Student: A microcosm to what you're saying is in Revelation 14:6 during the tribulation. He has an angel go and proclaim the Gospel in all dialects, in all languages, throughout the whole world. But then not everybody gets saved after that point until the millennium and so forth and judgment. So there's still unbelief even with that situation.

Dr. Craig: Yes, I think you're right. I'm speaking here purely philosophically, just examining these assumptions philosophically. But I would agree with what you say – that what I'm saying is certainly biblical, as well. It's in line with the teaching of the Bible that some people, even though they're in very favorable circumstances, nevertheless resist God's grace and separate themselves from him.

Student: Does the pluralist have an answer for what to do with the people that wouldn't freely accept God? In other words, should they not be born?

Dr. Craig: The pluralist is, as we saw, not even on the same page as we are in thinking that if people don't believe in the Gospel they will be lost. The pluralist thinks that there are many paths to God and no matter which path you elect to take . . . well, I shouldn't say no matter which – they would agree that there are some religions that are certainly debased and corrupted. One thinks of voodoo or certain other pagan religions that practice human sacrifice and other atrocities. But, in general, of the world's great religions they would say whichever one you pick you will be saved, and therefore it doesn't matter if you wouldn't believe the Gospel if you heard it. But we're talking here

about whether or not the Christian particularist is facing some sort of a logical problem that the pluralist alleges. The pluralist is raising up an objection to Christian particularism by saying, *You're committed, Mr. Christian particularist, to both A and B. Your religion says that God is all-powerful and all-loving, and yet your religion says some people never hear the Gospel and are lost. Therefore, Mr. Christian particularist, your religion has a logical contradiction in it.* That's the objection, and that's what we're trying to examine. I'm suggesting that his argument that A and B are logically inconsistent is fallacious because it assumes that God's being all-powerful implies that he can create a world in which everybody hears the Gospel and is freely saved. And my response is that while God could certainly create a world in which everybody hears the Gospel, he cannot guarantee that in such a world everyone will freely respond to the Gospel and be saved. That's outside God's control.

Student: I was raised more Arminian. I've been listening to some of your stuff about Molinism. Calvinism would seem to say what you're explaining why assumption (1) is wrong is right.

Dr. Craig: I think you are quite correct. The Calvinist would be very uncomfortable with what I'm saying because the Calvinist does believe in irresistible grace. I am talking about God's grace as being something that is resistible, that he doesn't overpower the human will. I think, in a sense as I'm using the word "freely" (libertarian freedom), the Calvinist doesn't believe in libertarian freedom. He thinks that we don't really have that kind of freedom. God picks who will be saved (those are the elect). He passes over the rest (those are the reprobate).⁴ Then he irresistibly calls and regenerates the elect. So it is a very different view than the view that I'm defending. I think that the problem of religious pluralism would press very hard on the Calvinist because the Calvinist would agree with (1) – God can create a world in which everybody hears the Gospel and is saved. You have to say therefore that God preferred not to create such a world, if you're a Calvinist. That he actually prefers a world in which people are damned and go to hell even though he could have saved them. I think that is very difficult to reconcile with God's being all-loving.

Student: So the can-of-worms was opened, so I wanted to ask this question. Hopefully it isn't too broad or off track but we're clearly examining here a middle knowledge account of why there are unevangelized. Why are there lost? This is very simplistic but a typical Calvinist answer to that would be, *Well, there's unevangelized – there's lost – because God is glorified through that.* I'm wondering if there is any Molinist position or literature or account that would still want to emphasize God's glory in the midst of there being so much . . .

Dr. Craig: Let me just give you a little background here. You have used some terms here that I've tried to avoid because they're technical terms – middle knowledge, Molinist account. What you need to do is think back to our discussion of divine omniscience – of God's being all-knowing – and there I suggested that God has a kind of knowledge that's called middle knowledge. This is not knowledge of the future which is simple foreknowledge. Middle knowledge is God's knowledge of what every possible person would freely do in any set of circumstances God might place him in. This was an account developed by the Jesuit theologian Luis Molina, and so it's called a Molinist account, after Molina. You want to ask: *Does the Molinist account that you're offering emphasize God's glory in the way that the Calvinist theologian wants to?* I would answer, yes, definitely, because Molina has a very, very strong emphasis upon divine sovereignty and how God is free to create any world that is feasible for him, and that God is glorified through this. What I don't understand is how the Calvinist can think that God is glorified by sending people to eternal hell that he could have saved had he wanted to. I don't think that glorifies God. I think that impugns the character of God. It does seem to make God cruel and unloving that he would actually prefer to send people to hell that he could have just as easily saved. So I'm not saying that the Calvinist cannot offer a solution to the problem of religious pluralism, but I'm defending a different solution, as you say a Molinist solution, which assumes that we do have free will. And this is a Christian option, as someone earlier said. I think this is a biblical option and therefore unobjectionable on theological grounds. And I think philosophically it makes good sense of why we find ourselves in a world in which some people never hear the Gospel and are lost. I'm not attacking the Calvinist view (though I've said some very critical things here in response to questions); I'm just offering a different solution.

Student: What's the difference between particularism and exclusivity?

Dr. Craig: OK, you want to know the difference between Christian particularism and Christian exclusivism. There isn't any difference. They're the same view under different labels. I initially called this view Christian exclusivism, but I think that that label is emotionally loaded and pejorative. Exclusivism sounds like some elite group that is excluding these less desirable, undeserving people, and that's not at all the Christian view.⁵ The Christian view is that God wants everyone to be saved. He loves all persons, and therefore gives his grace to everybody. This is an open-ended offer. It's not excluding people. That is why I switched. I adopted the language of particularism under the influence of my former pastor, Phil Roberts, who uses the word "particularism" as the opposite of "universalism." I think that's right. Universalism is the view that everyone will be saved. Particularism is the view that some people will be saved but not

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everybody. So particularism is the better label for the view opposite to universalism than exclusivism is. Good question.

Student: I understand your position on people freely rejecting the Gospel, but could you go into more detail about those who never have an opportunity to hear it in the first place apart from general revelation.

Dr. Craig: We'll get into that in a minute, but right now we're showing that the first assumption is wrong and that therefore the argument fails. The argument is fallacious whatever you want to say about those who have never heard. The point is that even if God were to create a world in which there are no unevangelized, a world in which everyone hears the Gospel, you cannot assume that that would be a world of universal salvation because despite those advantages some people might freely resist God's grace and be lost.

STOP DISCUSSION

Let's move on to the second assumption. Is it necessarily true? This is the assumption that if God is all-loving he prefers a world in which everybody hears the Gospel and is freely saved. Is that assumption necessarily true? Well, let's think about it. Let's suppose, for the sake of argument, that there are possible worlds that are feasible for God in which everybody hears the Gospel and freely accepts it. So let's suppose that there are feasible worlds of universal salvation that are available to God. Would God's being all-loving compel him to prefer one of these worlds of universal salvation over a world in which some people are lost? Not necessarily, because the worlds in which there is universal salvation might have other overriding deficiencies which make them less preferable. For example, suppose that the only worlds in which everybody hears the Gospel and is freely saved are worlds that have only a handful of people in them (say three or four). But if God were to create any more people then at least one of them would have freely rejected the Gospel and been lost. Must God prefer one of these sparsely populated worlds over a world in which multitudes of people freely believe in the Gospel and are saved even though that implies that some persons freely reject his grace and so are lost? I think that's far from obvious. So long as God gives sufficient grace for salvation to every human person that he creates, God, I think, is no less loving for preferring one of these more populous worlds even if that means that he knew that some people would freely reject his every effort to save them and would be damned. So the pluralist's second assumption, I think, is also not necessarily true, and so the argument is doubly fallacious. Not only is the first hidden assumption false, but the second hidden assumption also seems to be false.

START DISCUSSION

Student: God is not willing any should perish; he prefers that world. But a little reversion back to the Calvinist thing, I think these things exist in tension.⁶ Anytime you put time and space into the situation this is problematic. I see the Calvinist-Arminian thing as existing in tension. But, at any rate, if God created such a world that means . . . if he only created people he knew we're going to believe then he would not give life to those that didn't believe. So the question is: is it not loving to give life even to those that would not believe and be separated and not to annihilate them after they were put into hell because that would give them non-existence over a whole spectrum? Is that more loving to give them non-existence than to give them an existence even if it's separated from God?

Dr. Craig: That's a good question. When you think about it, there's an infinite number of people that God has refrained from creating. Right? Because he could have created any sort of possible world with different people in it. Therefore there are just infinite myriads of possible persons that God could have created but he refrained from doing so. I don't think we'd want to say that he's unloving for not creating those people. So I'm not inclined to go in that direction because then it would tend to imply that God is all-loving because he's refrained from creating some people he could have created.

Student: It seems to me that the Bible deals with this question in the book of Jeremiah and his potter's wheel very interestingly (I know of no other word for it). When asked about it, Jeremiah said, *Does the clay have the right to tell the potter how to make it?* But he doesn't answer the question. He just raises the question for you to face, for us to face. In other words, do we really have the right to tell God you can't be a loving God and do that? It seems to me that Jeremiah's point is well-taken; we need to look at ourselves and say, *Who do we think we are?* I mean, we can't tell God how to create the universe. We can only look at what he's done and send men to the moon because we can decipher his physics formulas. But we can't get along with each other. I mean, we're going to blow this whole world to pieces in a short period of time if we're not careful.

Dr. Craig: All right. Let me respond to that. This is a very same issue that I encountered in the study of the atonement; namely when people say it would be unjust of God to punish an innocent person like Christ. The question is raised that you raised – who are we to say what is just and unjust? It is God himself who determines what is just and unjust through his commands. Moral duties arise from divine commandments, and God doesn't command himself to do anything. So God doesn't have any moral duties to fulfill. In that case it's very difficult to accuse God of acting unjustly because he himself is the standard of justice. However, in dealing with this issue in the atonement, what I pointed out is that the critic here can simply say, *But wait a minute. God can't do anything inconsistent with his own nature. And so if you affirm that God is by nature just, then it's perfectly*

⁶ 30:03

legitimate to say he cannot do something that is unjust, that is say, inconsistent with his own nature. Similarly here, we have affirmed in assumption A that God is all-powerful and all-loving. These are essential properties of God. So God cannot do something that is inconsistent with his own nature – with being all-loving. If a person says, *God defines what is all-loving and what is not all-loving*, the difficulty there is that then to affirm that God is loving becomes something different than what we mean by the word “loving.” In that case it’s not true that God is loving.⁷ He’s not all-loving in the way in which we use that word. God has a nature that is quite different from what we mean when we say that someone is all-loving. I think that kind of equivocation on terms like “just” and “loving” is something that we ought not to embrace. I think we want to say that when we mean that God is just we mean he is just in the way in which we understand that term – just. And when we say he’s loving we mean he’s loving in the way in which we understand that term. Otherwise God could be a moral monster and yet you would say he’s loving and just by his definition but it’s totally different than what we mean. So I don’t want to go down that route in responding to the religious pluralist. I want to agree that God is all-loving in the way in which we understand that term, but that doesn’t mean that he prefers a world in which there is universal salvation over a world in which some people are lost because those worlds of universal salvation might have other overriding decisions. All things being equal, God would prefer a world in which everybody is saved. Right. But if there are overriding deficiencies in these feasible worlds of universal salvation then that could make them less preferable. I gave one example of what such an overriding deficiency might be – under-population. But there could be others, as well. For that reason I don’t think this second assumption is necessarily true, which is what it has to be for the pluralist’s argument to go through.

END DISCUSSION

In summary, neither of the pluralist’s hidden assumptions seems to be necessarily true. So unless the pluralist can come up with some other hidden assumptions – some other premises – I don’t think we have any reason to think that A and B are, in fact, logically incompatible with each other.

Now, we can actually push this argument a step further. I want to argue that we can show that A and B are consistent with each other. Not only has the pluralist failed to show they’re inconsistent, I think we can show that they are consistent, and that’s what we’ll try to do next week.⁸

⁷ 35:02

⁸ Total Running Time: 38:24 (Copyright © 2018 William Lane Craig)