

Does the Balance Between Saved and Lost Depend on Our Obedience to Christ's Great Commission?

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SUMMARY

As a follow-up to my middle knowledge solution to the problem of Christian exclusivism, I ask whether the problem does not recur in another form under that solution: is it not the case that the balance between saved and lost depends upon the degree to which we Christians obey our Lord's Great Commission to bring the gospel to every nation? If so, then is not that conclusion as morally objectionable as the claim that people's eternal destiny hinges upon the historical accidents of the time and place of their birth? I argue that such a conclusion does not follow because, given divine middle knowledge and providence, it may not lie within our power to bring about a better balance between saved and lost.

DOES THE BALANCE BETWEEN SAVED AND LOST DEPEND ON OUR OBEDIENCE TO CHRIST'S GREAT COMMISSION?

In the interface of evangelical Christianity and other religions, the principal stumbling block for many is Christianity's claim that salvation is available exclusively through Jesus Christ. But what exactly is the problem here supposed to be? The central difficulty posed by the doctrine of Christian exclusivism, it seems to me, is counterfactual in nature: even granted that God has, through general or special revelation, accorded sufficient grace to all persons for their salvation, should they desire to accept it, still some persons who in fact freely reject God's general revelation might complain that they would have responded affirmatively to His initiatives if only they had been accorded the benefit of His special revelation in the Gospel. If God is omnibenevolent, He must surely, it seems, supply all persons with grace, not merely sufficient, but efficacious for their salvation. But then Christian exclusivism is incompatible with the existence of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God.

In previously published work [1], I have argued that to this challenge the Molinist may respond that it is possible that there is no world feasible for God in which all persons freely respond to His gracious initiatives and so are saved. Given the truth of certain counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, it is possible that God did not have it within His power to realize a world in which all persons freely respond affirmatively to His offer of salvation. But in His omnibenevolence, He has actualized a world containing an optimal balance between saved and unsaved. God in His providence has so arranged the world that as the Christian gospel went out from first century Palestine, all who would respond freely to it if they heard it did hear it, and all who do not hear it are persons who would not have accepted it if they had

heard it. In this way, Christian exclusivism may be seen to be compatible with the existence of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God.

In a very engaging response to this proposed middle knowledge solution [2], William Hasker imagines a veteran missionary, Paul, and a prospective missionary, Peter, who are engaged in some reflective thinking. Paul asks himself the two questions:

- (A) Are there persons to whom I failed to preach who are going to be lost and who would have been saved had I gone to them with the gospel?
- (B) Are there persons who have been saved as a result of my preaching, who would not have been saved had they never heard the gospel?

Being apprised of my proposed middle knowledge solution, Paul will conclude, says Hasker, that the answer to (A) is in all probability, "No." For given:

1. God has actualized a world containing an optimal balance between saved and unsaved in which not all are saved, and those who are unsaved would not have believed the Gospel if they had heard it.

(and assuming for the sake of argument that no one else carries the gospel to the unreached tribe in question), it follows that those to whom Paul failed to preach would probably not have been saved even if Paul had gone to them with the gospel. Hasker concludes that had Paul therefore gone to the tribe with the gospel, that "would have resulted in no conversions." [3]

In my response to Hasker I pointed out that this conclusion is overly hasty. [4] While I should agree that a negative answer to (A) is plausible, it does not therefore follow that had Paul carried the gospel to the unreached tribe there would have been no conversions. For were Paul to have gone to them with the gospel, God, via His middle knowledge, would have known this logically prior to His decree to create a world and so might well have decreed to create *different* persons in the tribe who He knew would respond affirmatively to Paul's message. Hence, if Paul had gone to the tribe, there might well have been conversions. It must not be forgotten that from the Molinist perspective such affairs are a matter of God's providential planning, not mere happenstance. Hence, had Paul gone to the tribe there might well have been conversions, but his failure to go did not bring it about that anyone was lost who would have been saved otherwise.

But that leads naturally to Paul's question (B). Hasker affirms that in all likelihood the answer to (B) is "Yes." "There is no reason to doubt that, in the vast majority of instances, those who respond to the Gospel in faith are saved specifically because they have been evangelized and would not have been saved otherwise." [5] This affirmation contains, however, a noteworthy ambiguity. Hasker interprets this affirmation to mean that had Paul not gone to them, many of those saved through his ministry "would

otherwise have been lost.” [6] But that does not follow. Assuming once more for the sake of argument that had Paul not preached the gospel to these persons no one else would have, we may agree that most of them would then not have been saved. But that does not imply that most of them would have been damned. Rather God, knowing via His middle knowledge that Paul would not go to the tribes in question, would not perhaps have placed there the people which He in fact has, but would have created other people instead who He knew would not respond to the gospel even if they heard it. Thus, if Paul had not preached to the tribes as he did, the people who were saved under his ministry would not have been saved, but neither would they have been lost. On the other hand, perhaps it is true that the people saved under Paul’s ministry would have been lost if he had not gone to them; but no matter: since God knew via His middle knowledge that Paul would under the foreseen circumstances go to them, God placed in the villages persons who He knew would have been lost had Paul not gone, being absolutely certain that Paul would go to them and they would be saved.

Thus, Paul, can, indeed, rest in his reflections: he can take assurance in the belief that as a result of his missionary outreach people will be in heaven who, had he not gone to them, would not have been there, since God would then have foreknown Paul’s not going to the field and so in His providence would not have placed the persons there whom He did. On the other hand, he need not be burdened by guilt and worry that had he only gone to yet another tribe which he failed to reach, persons would have been saved who instead were lost. He can be sure that people were saved through his toil, but that no one was lost through his slackness.

Turn now to Peter, who is considering leaving the pastorate to become a foreign missionary. He also asks himself two questions:

- (C) If I was to go to the mission field and preach to those who otherwise would never hear the gospel, are there persons who would be saved as a result of my preaching, who would otherwise be lost?
- (D) If I were to fail to go to the mission field, are there persons to whom I would in consequence not preach who would then be lost, and who would have been saved had I gone to them with the gospel?

In response to (C), Hasker answers affirmatively, since, according to the middle knowledge perspective, God has providentially ordered the world such that the good news will be brought to persons who God knew would respond if they heard it. Peter can justifiably assume that the answer to (C) is “Yes” because in most cases God will have providentially arranged for responsive persons to be among Peter’s prospective audiences.

But Hasker’s formulation of (C) is problematic. In the first place, the question is malformed, combining as it does the subjunctive and indicative moods. As a deliberative conditional, both the antecedent and the consequent should be in the subjunctive mood. Secondly, the question falsely equates “not being

saved" with "being lost." But we have seen that under certain circumstances, persons whom God has created would not have been created, in which case they would not have been saved, but neither would they have been lost. The real question Peter should ask is:

(C') If I were to go to the mission field and preach to those who otherwise would never hear the gospel, would there be persons who would be saved as a result of my preaching, who would otherwise not be saved?

Now in weighing a deliberative conditional, we generally assume that its antecedent is true. So doing, Peter may, on the basis of God's middle knowledge and providence, justifiably assume that the answer to (C') is "Yes." But what if the antecedent is false? In that case, though the answer to (C') remains affirmative, the answer to (C) is negative. For if the antecedent of the counterfactual expressed interrogatively in (C') is false, that is, if Peter does not go to the mission field, then God via His middle knowledge knew this and so has not placed any potential converts on Peter's unreached field. Thus, there *are* no persons who are such that if Peter were to go to the field and preach the gospel they would be saved. Nevertheless, it is still true that if Peter were to go to the field and preach the gospel, there *would be* persons awaiting him as prospective converts, since God via His middle knowledge would then have known that Peter would leave on his mission and so have placed potential new believers in his path.

Now consider (D). Hasker answers (D) negatively because "in all likelihood there is *no one* who would be saved as a result of his preaching who would not be save otherwise," for all who are lost would not have believed the Gospel even if they had heard it. But (D) is as malformed as (C). What Peter wants to know is not the answer to (D) but to:

(D') If I were to fail to go to the mission field, would there be persons to whom I would in consequence not preach who would then not be saved, but who would have been saved had I gone to them with the gospel?

Assuming that the antecedent of (D') is true, Peter will answer (D') in the negative because the persons to whom he would fail to preach would be persons who would not have believed the Gospel had they heard it. But from that Hasker's inference does not follow that there *is* no one who would be saved as a result of his preaching who would not be saved otherwise. For if the antecedent of the counterfactual expressed interrogatively in (D') is false, the answer to (D') will remain negative, but the answer to (D) will be "Yes." For if the antecedent is false, then God via His middle knowledge knew this and so has placed potential converts on Peter's soon to be reached field. Thus, there *are* persons who are such that if Peter were to fail to go to the field and preach the gospel, they would not be saved. Nevertheless, it is still true that if Peter were to fail to go to the field and preach the gospel, there *would be* no persons

out there who would be potential converts, since God via His middle knowledge would then have foreknown Peter's failure to go and so placed on the field only such persons as would not have believed the Gospel even if they had heard it.

Thus, Peter is no more perplexed about his situation than Paul. For the antecedents of (C') and (D') are (roughly) contradictories. Hence, if the antecedent of (C') is true, there are actually existing persons who will be saved as a result of Peter's preaching who would otherwise not be saved, and if the antecedent of (D') is false, there are persons who will be saved through Peter's preaching and who are such that they would not be saved if Peter were to fail to go to the field. On the other hand, if the antecedent of (D') is true, then there are no persons who, as a result of Peter's failure, will be unsaved but would have been saved had he gone to the field, and if the antecedent of (C') is false, then there are no persons who are such that they would be saved if Peter were to go to the field. There is no inconsistency here.

Now all this is by way of review. In a conversation with one of my former students Glenn Runnals the question arose as to whether the scenario I have envisioned does not make the balance between saved and lost dependent upon our obedience to the Lord's Great Commission to go into all the world and preach the Gospel. If so, this seems as objectionable as the view that people's salvation depends on the historical and geographical accidents of their birth.

As a way of gaining insight into this question, I reproduce here the following transcript of a telephone conversation between Peter, who, one will recall, is contemplating going to the mission field, and Paul, the veteran missionary, who had previously responded to Peter's questions via the post:

Paul: Hello, this is Paul speaking.

Peter: Hi, Paul, this is Peter. I'm calling because, after reflecting on your letter,

I've got a further question that I'd like to ask you.

Paul: Sure, go ahead.

Peter: Well, in your letter you said that all things being equal God, being omnibenevolent, would necessarily not create any more of the lost than is required to create a certain number of the saved, so that the world contains an optimal balance of saved and unsaved. But, given human freedom, it's possible that such an optimal balance may involve a considerable number of persons who are lost, since worlds with a better balance between saved and lost are not feasible for God.

Well, one of the factors determining the balance between saved and unsaved would seem to be our obedience to the Lord's Great Commission to evangelize the world. You said in response to my question (D) that if I were not to go to the mission field, God would not place there persons who would

receive the gospel if they heard it. And in response to (C ϕ) you said that if I were to go, then God would probably have placed people there who would be receptive to the gospel. So it seems that I, by my obedience or disobedience, have the power to bring it about that more people will be saved and fewer people lost or fewer people saved and more people lost. But then the number of the lost seems to depend upon the accident of my obedience or disobedience, which seems almost as objectionable as making people's salvation or damnation hinge on historical and geographical accidents.

Paul: Hmm. It seems to me that if there is such a thing as an optimal balance between saved and lost, then I doubt that we do have the power to act in such a way that if we were to act in that way, the balance between saved and unsaved would have been better as a consequence. Of course, if there is no such thing as an optimal balance, then God can't be blamed for not creating a world in which such an optimal balance exists, since that would be logically impossible. But, assuming that there is such a thing, God would, all things being equal, prefer a world having such a balance. Thus, even if we were more obedient to the Great Commission, the balance between saved and lost would not be improved.

Peter: But then we may as well all just go to the Bahamas instead of the mission field, trusting that God will create all the persons who would have been saved on the mission field, had we gone there, in the Bahamas instead, where they will still be saved!

Paul: No, for while it may not be the case that we have the power to act in such a way that if we were to act in that way, the salvific balance would be improved, we may nonetheless have the power to act in such a way that, if we were to act in that way, the salvific balance would be worse. It may well be the case that if we were all to go to the Bahamas, fewer people would be saved and more people lost than in fact will be saved and will be lost.

Peter: But then doesn't the salvific balance depend on our obedience?

Paul: Not in any objectionable sense. For under the envisioned scenario, God knew that if He were to use any other means of reaching the lost with the gospel, including those not involving us as intermediaries, no better balance would be achieved than will be achieved. Nor is there anything we humans might do, such that if we were to do it, the balance would be improved. So the salvific balance doesn't crucially depend on our obedience to the Great Commission.

Peter: But if we were all to go to the Bahamas, wouldn't it then be the case that if we were to obey the Great commission, as we do in the actual world, then the balance between saved and lost would be better, just as it is in the actual world?

Paul: Oddly enough, no. For on the envisioned scenario whichever world is actual, that world has an optimal balance which cannot be improved by greater obedience on the part of the saved.

Peter: So if we were all to go to the Bahamas, it would be the case that no better balance could be achieved than would be achieved, even though the balance would be worse than it is in the actual world?

Paul: Yes. For in the actual world, this world a is among those feasible worlds having an optimal balance between saved and unsaved. But in the Bahamanian world b, a would not be among the optimally balanced feasible worlds; instead b would be. In b, a would be infeasible.

Peter: But it still seems that the salvific balance does depend on our obedience. For in b, the reason a is infeasible for God is because of our disobedience. If we were to be obedient, a would be actual instead of b.

Paul: No, for in b different counterfactuals of freedom are true than are true in a. In b it is true that "If we were to obey the Great Commission rather than go to the Bahamas, no better balance would be achieved." But in a it is true that "If we were to obey the Great Commission rather than go to the Bahamas, a better balance would be achieved."

Peter: But still there is a correlation between our obedience and a more optimal balance. In the world in which we are obedient, the balance is better than in the world in which we are disobedient.

Paul: Only when we compare a and b! There is any number of possible worlds in which we fully obey the great Commission and the balance is worse. In any case, a mere correlation is insufficient to show a relation of counterfactual dependency between our obedience and an optimal balance. Our obedience to the Great commission could serve as evidence of what optimal balance obtains, but that balance does not *depend* on our obedience. It is neither within God's power nor within our—that is, the saved's—power to bring it about that a more optimal balance exist than does exist.

Peter: But then who does have the power to bring it about that a better balance's existence?

Paul: Very simply, it lies only within the power of the lost themselves.

Peter: Of course! Improving the balance between the saved and the lost naturally depends on the lost's obedience or disobedience to God's salvific revelation.

Paul: Correct. It lies entirely within the power of the lost themselves to bring it about that more persons should be saved and fewer damned than are.

Peter: So I guess that the balance between the saved and lost does not depend in any crucial sense on our obedience to the Lord's Great Commission.

Paul: That seems to be correct. We do have the power to act in such a way that were we to act in that way the salvific balance would be worse. But we do not have the power to act in such a way that were we to act in that way, the balance would be better. The only persons who have the power to bring it about that the salvific balance is better are the lost themselves.

Peter: That answers my question. Thanks, Paul!

Paul: Godspeed!

Footnotes

[1]

“No Other Name”: A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation through Christ,” *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (1989): 172-188.

[2]

William Hasker, “Middle Knowledge and the Damnation of the Heathen: A Response to William Craig,” *Faith and Philosophy* 8 (1991): 380-89.

[3]

Ibid., p. 382.

[4]

“Should Peter Go to the Mission Field?” *Faith and Philosophy* 10 (1993): 261-265.

[5]

Hasker, “Middle Knowledge and the Damnation of the Heathen,” p. 382.

[6]

Ibid., p. 383.