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Should Peter Go To The Mission Field?

William Lane Craig

In an article in *Faith and Philosophy* 8 (1991), pp. 380-89, William Hasker related the cases of a veteran missionary, Paul, and a prospective missionary, Peter, who were each reflecting upon the implications of a middle knowledge perspective on the exclusivity of salvation through Christ for their missionary tasks. Peter, in some confusion, wrote to Paul for advice concerning whether he should leave his successful pastorate for the foreign field. Paul's response to Peter's letter has been obtained and is here published.

Source: "Should Peter Go To The Mission Field?", *Faith and Philosophy* 10:2 (April, 1993).

Dear Peter,

Thank you for your recent letter. Before directing myself to your questions, let me share with you some of my reflections on my own situation. I asked myself two

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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?

The answer to (A) seemed 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 suffer from transworld damnation

(and assuming that no one else carries the gospel to the unreached tribe in question), it follows that those to whom I failed to preach suffer from transworld damnation and so would probably not have been saved even if I had gone to them with the gospel. So I concluded that had I (or even Billy Graham, Mother Teresa, and the Pope!) gone to the tribe with the gospel, that "would have resulted in no conversions."

But then I saw that this conclusion was overly hasty. While I still think that a negative answer to (A) is plausible, it does not therefore follow that had I carried the gospel to the unreached tribe there would have been no conversions. For were I 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 my message. Hence, if I 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. That's why speculations about what would have happened in the tribe had God sent Billy Graham, Mother Teresa, and the Pope to them are misleading. Had such people gone to the tribe, then God in His providence would perhaps not have placed persons there who suffer from transworld damnation, but created persons who would freely embrace the gospel.

But that leads naturally to question (B). I figured that in all likelihood the answer to (B) is "Yes." At first I took this affirmation to mean that had I not gone to them, many of those saved through my ministry "would otherwise have been lost." But that does not follow. Rather perhaps God, knowing via His middle knowledge that I would not go to the tribes in question, would not have placed there the people which He in fact has, but would have created other people instead who He knew would not in any case respond to the gospel even if they heard it. Thus, if I had not preached to the tribes as I did, the people who were saved under my ministry would not have been saved, but neither would they have been lost.

Thus, I can rest comfortably in my reflections: I am sure that people were saved through my toil, but that no one who might have been saved was lost through my slackness.

Now let's consider your situation. You ask two questions:

(C) If I were 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?

But the difficulty is, Peter, that your formulation of (C) and (D) is problematic. In the first place, the questions are malformed, combining as they do the subjunctive and indicative moods. In a deliberative conditional, both the antecedent and the consequent should be in the subjunctive mood. Secondly, you falsely equate "not being saved" with "being lost." The real questions you ought to be asking yourself are:

(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?

(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?

Now in weighing a deliberative conditional, we generally assume that its antecedent is true. So doing, you may 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 you do not go to the mission field, then God via His middle knowledge knew this and so has not placed any potential converts on your unreached field. Thus, there *are* no persons who are such that if you were to go to the field and preach the gospel they would be saved. Nevertheless, it is still true that if you were to go to the field and preach the gospel, there *would be* persons awaiting you as prospective converts, since God via His middle knowledge would then have known that you would leave on your mission and so placed potential new believers in your path.

Similarly, assuming that the antecedent of (D') is true, you should answer (D') in the negative because the persons to whom you would fail to preach would suffer from transworld damnation. But 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 your soon to be reached field. Thus, there *are* persons who are such that if you were to fail to go to the field and preach the gospel, they would not be saved. Nevertheless, it is still true that if you 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 your failure to go and so placed only persons suffering from transworld damnation on the field.

Thus, you needn't be any more perplexed about your situation than than I am about mine. If the antecedent of (C') is true and of (D') is false, there are actually existing persons who will be saved as a result of your preaching who would otherwise not be saved. On the other hand, if the antecedent of (D') is true and of (C') is false, then there are no persons who, as a result of your failure, will be unsaved but would have been saved had you gone to the field.

In analyzing the logical aspects of the supposed problem, you go on to formulate a pair of difficult counterfactuals. But again your formulation is problematic. Using the third person for the sake of logical clarity, we ought to agree that:

2.(a) There exist persons who are such that either Peter will preach to them or Peter will not preach to them.

(b) On the assumption that Peter will preach to them, it is true that "If Peter were to preach to them, they would accept salvation."

(c) On the assumption that Peter will not preach to them, it is true that "If Peter were to preach to them, they would reject salvation."

Now what is the problem with (2)? Your first objection is that the transworld damnation of these persons depends on your actions. Not at all; your preaching to these people is merely the *evidence* that they do not have transworld damnation and your not preaching to them to them is *evidence* that they do. What *does* depend, at least in part, on your decision--and is different from the above--is whether the people to whom you go are persons who suffer from transworld damnation or persons who do not. How can this be? Your own answer seems to me exactly correct, in the following sense: if God knew that you would not go to the tribe, He would have placed in the tribe only persons afflicted with transworld damnation; but if He knew that you would go to the tribe, He would have placed *other* persons in the tribe who would have accepted the gospel. You object to this possibility that counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are not under God's control. Correct; but as I understand this possibility, no such control is envisioned. Your error lies in thinking that the *same* persons are involved whether you go or not. The reason you failed to see this point, I believe, may be because your vision has been obscured at this juncture by theological fatalism; you didn't see that the existence of certain persons in the world can be a soft fact dependent upon your decision to go to the mission field. But given God's middle knowledge and providence, their existence is, indeed, a soft fact.

You next try to show formally that your version of (2) involves a contradiction. But your schematization illicitly substitutes counterfactual implication for material implication. The correct schematization should be

- i. $P \supset (P \square \rightarrow A)$ P
- ii. $\neg P \supset (P \square \rightarrow \neg A)$ P

You then introduce the assumption

iii. $\neg P$ ACP

but forget to treat (iii) as the assumption for a merely conditional proof. We can now derive

iii. $\neg P$ ACP

But (i) is not equivalent to $P \square \rightarrow A$ but to

iii. $\neg P$ ACP

No contradiction, however, obtains between (iv) and (v) since (iv) is true only under the conditional assumption of (iii).

Finally, it is evident that we need not reject

- 3. Most of those who accept the gospel and are saved would not have been saved had the gospel not been preached to them.

You take (1) to imply that ". . . these persons, who are in fact saved, would have suffered from transworld damnation if no one had preached the gospel to them" (p. 386). But this is implied neither by (1) nor by the conjunction of (1) and (3). Suppose, for example, that if the gospel had not been preached to them, then God would have foreknown this via His middle knowledge and so not created them in the first place; hence, they would not have been saved. But they are obviously not damned in such a world. Nor is there any reason to think that in such a world it would be true that were they to exist and the gospel were to be preached to them, they would not accept it.

In conclusion, then, the proposed Molinist solution to the soteriological problem of evil seems to be a consistent defense. Moreover, it is a solution that is *worthy of God*, something that He both could and would do. By contrast, the Augustinian-Calvinist solution makes the damnation of the lost the result of God's choice, which seems abhorrent; and the Pelagian-Arminian solution seems to make their damnation the result of historical and geographical accident, which seems unconscionable. So what alternative is there? A risk-taking God, who lacks both middle and foreknowledge, seems either indifferent to or helpless with respect to the fate of the unreached, since He is doing so relatively little to bring the gospel to them. Of course, one could simply deny that there is any soteriological problem of evil, as religious pluralists and universalists do; but such positions unfortunately do violence to the biblical data and make preaching the gospel superfluous.

So, Peter, if you feel God's call upon you to go to the foreign mission field, my advice is, by all means, go, "knowing," in the words of the first Christian missionary, "that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (I Cor. 15: 58).

Your fellow-servant,

Paul

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