God still justly punishes sinners

A week ago on February 13, Daniel Sinclair had published a blog article that confronted the question of whether or not it is just for God to punish those who had never heard the message of the gospel. If you believe that those who have never heard the gospel are going to face judgment for their sins, he asked, then how can you call God just? It seems unfair that some people have had a chance to hear the gospel and others have not. [1] Now, I do not for a moment think that Sinclair was asking that question for himself, that is, I do not believe he thinks the justice of God is a questionable matter. I believe he merely recognizes that such a question exists and tries to provide what he thinks is a sensible answer—see his “generational justice” toward the end—after first looking at some answers that others might offer.

I offered a response to his article that same evening from the perspective of Reformed theology, [2] since his anticipation of how Calvinists might respond seemed, well, a little off. He gestured at the issues of God’s sovereignty, predestination, and election, but I did not think these directly answered the question being asked. And it certainly did not seem to be how a Calvinist might perceive the question and answer it—at least not this one (yours truly). So as a Calvinist I offered what turned out to be the most succinct answer I have ever provided to any theological question. Yes God is just, and here is why: human beings are sinners. Bam, done.

Maybe that answer was a little too easy. Later on Sinclair admitted in conversation that perhaps he had sold Calvinism a little short. “Maybe I should fix that,” he said. I told him that I would make a note of it in my article if he did, letting our readers know that he had fixed it. A week later he republished his article with significant changes to it, but did he fix the Calvinism section? Let us have a look.

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NOTE: A week later (February 17) Daniel Sinclair substantially altered the text of his original article which I had responded to here; he did not leave the original text as it was and make an addition but instead rewrote it. My response below now may or may not make sense in light of his changes. See here for my new response.

Over at his blog Daniel Sinclair posed a question about the justice of God with respect to those who have never heard the gospel, that is, “the unreached.” If you believe that those who have never heard the gospel are going to face judgment for their sins, he asks, then how can you call God just? Isn’t it unfair that some people have had a chance to hear the gospel and others have not? [1]

He offers five unique “theodicies for defending the damnation of the unreached” and you can read them yourself over at his blog, but I am only interested in responding to one of them. And if you had gone to his blog and read his post first before continuing here, you will no
That's right, his proposed Calvinist response. He said that Calvinists “heavily emphasize God’s role in choosing the saved and the damned” and therefore “can merely remark that God chose who would be near the preaching of the gospel, and who would not,” and that something like Romans 9:18 might possibly get quoted.

Let me say, first, that he is right as far as that goes; namely, it is indeed up to God who would be near the preaching of the gospel. (In the *ordo salutis* of Reformed dogmatics to hear the gospel responsively is to be called; e.g., Romans 8:29-30, “those whom he foreknew he also predestined . . . And those he predestined, he also called; and those he called, he also justified; and those he justified, he also glorified.” This calling is one of the links in this golden chain of redemption.) But let me also add, second, that this is somewhat irrelevant to the question his blog post is raising and attempting to answer. Why is that? Because his question was, How can you call God just if you believe that those who have never heard the gospel are going to face judgment for their sins?

And the answer is right there in the very question itself. *It is because of their sins that they stand condemned.* That is how we can call God just, for he justly condemns all sinners—reached and unreached alike—for their manifold sin. Even if someone never has even “one good chance to hear the gospel,” God would still be considered just because they are rightly condemned sinners. And also importantly, God does not owe it to anyone to ensure they hear the gospel; if he did, *then it would not be grace.* Those upon whom his saving grace falls *will* hear the gospel responsively; e.g., John 6:37, “Everyone whom the Father gives me will come to me” (emphasis mine). And perhaps just as importantly, nobody will be judged for not hearing the gospel *because not hearing the gospel is not a sin*.

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**Implications of divine revelation**

I have been having a discussion today regarding the nature of Scripture and our relationship to it, a discussion sparked by a story about “a young Korean girl [who] claims that Jesus took her to hell, and told her to draw what she saw.” [1] I am sharing this because it strikes me as a rather important issue. (Names have been changed, except mine.)

**DAVID:** Because it is given a religious gloss, the girl will probably not receive the psychological evaluation she possibly needs. Those were some disturbing notions and pictures.

**STEVEN:** Wait, she’s crazy because she believes the Bible?

**DAVID:** Well, let us perhaps first qualify that term. Since she claimed that the one and holy Son of God himself revealed to her these visions of hell, it follows that she must believe in an open canon—to which her vision must now be added, as it is also divine revelation. Ergo, just exactly what is “the Bible” that she ostensibly believes?

**STEVEN:** So Jesus doesn’t talk to us today? Or the Holy Spirit’s illumination doesn’t include dreams and visions? You must be a dispensationalist.

**DAVID:** Of course Jesus talks to us today, Steven, through the enscripturated testimony of his apostles in the canonical texts. Or would you be so bold as to suggest that he does not speak to us through the sacred scriptures of God’s word? And yes, the Holy Spirit can illumine our understanding through dreams and visions, but it is in *reference* to the scriptures, not in *addition* to them. The Holy Spirit is sent of the Father in the Son’s name, to instruct and bring to remembrance the things revealed by the Son (John 14:26), guiding into all truth; yet never speaking on his own authority, but that which he hears and to tell what is to come (John 16:13). Just as the Son never spoke anything than what the Father gave him to speak (John 12:49; 14:10), surely we may expect the Trinity to be self-consistent.
And no, I am definitely not a dispensationalist.

STEVEN: I’m not being contentious, but I come from a tradition where one expects to have a conversational relationship with God, where one can hear God speak in real words within our spirit. You can hold that position without thinking that you are hearing so clearly as to be canonical or speak ex cathedra. And such hearing is improved through knowledge of, and exposure to, the word (viz. faith comes by hearing, and hearing comes by the word of God).

Note that this does not say faith comes by hearing the word of God; it says that hearing comes by the word of God, and faith comes as a result of this hearing. I interpret this to mean that the ability to hear God speak comes from the word, that is, the renewing of your mind.

(By the way, I realize this does cause some issues when people say, “God told me such and so,” but I don’t think that statement alone makes them less than credible.)

DAVID: Indeed “faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the preached word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). And what is that word? “The word you hear is not mine,” Jesus said, “but the Father’s who sent me” (John 14:24).

Correlate this with John 8:43-47, “Why don’t you understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot accept my teaching. . . . The one who belongs to God listens and responds to God’s words. You don’t listen and respond, because you don’t belong to God.” (cf. 10:25-27). See also the parable of The Sower (cf. Luke 8:11 and 1 Peter 1:23 with 1 Corinthians 3:6 and Acts 16:14).

PETER: Is there a difference in interpretation between “faith comes from hearing” and “faith comes from what is heard”? This also seems to be relevant in cultures where almost everyone would hear the scriptures orally and not read them. I’m asking because I don’t know.

DAVID: There should not be a difference in interpretation between “faith comes from hearing” (NIV) and “faith comes from what is heard” (NET), for this is more than the mere act of hearing with our auditory senses. In everyday conversation we might distinguish between listening to someone and hearing them; so it is one thing to listen to the word being preached but another thing to genuinely hear it (e.g., “The one who belongs to God listens and responds to God’s words”), which is by the grace of God and only for those who belong to him. In the ordo salutis this is effectual calling.

STEVEN: So David, are you disagreeing with my claim that a conversational relationship with God is normative, or with my using that passage to support it, or with just my exegesis of that passage?

DAVID: First, I am not really sure what a “conversational” relationship with God even means. It sounds like one of those hipster churchy buzzwords, like misional and intentional. It might be too trendy for my paygrade. Being uncertain as I am about what it even means, I can neither agree or disagree as to whether or not it is normative for Christians. (If a “conversational” relationship is supposed to mean a genuine and active relationship with God in prayer, then I would agree that it is normative. I would also wonder why you didn’t just say prayer, which is why I think you probably don’t mean prayer.)

Second, since I could not be sure what you even meant, I also could not be sure how you were using that particular uncited passage. So I cited it and contributed what the scriptures seem to be saying about it (i.e., what the word is, what that means, and what is meant by hearing, and who hears and why, etc.).


Evolution vs. evolutionism: One of these precludes a Savior.

Back in September of 2012 it was reported that Paul C. Broun, U.S. representative for the 10th congressional district in Georgia, had made a very curious claim during a campaign speech at the 2012 Sportsman’s Banquet in Hartwell, Georgia, a claim which garnered him a great deal
“All that stuff I was taught about evolution and embryology and the Big Bang theory,” Broun proclaimed, “all that is lies straight from the pit of hell.”

And it’s lies to try to keep me, and all the folks who were taught that, from understanding that they need a Savior. You see, there are a lot of scientific data that I’ve found out as a scientist that actually show that this is really a young Earth. I don’t believe that the Earth’s but about 9,000 years old. I believe it was created in six days as we know them. That’s what the Bible says. [1]  

I am going to try and ignore as best I can the fact that a physician with a medical degree actually regarded embryology as not only a lie but one straight from the pit of hell, as well as the fact that he serves on the House Committee on Science and Technology even though he believes that our planet did not exist until more than four thousand years after the Clovis people had already begun inhabiting the Americas. The reason for why I am going to ignore that low hanging fruit is because I want to just briefly address his remark that these things keep people from understanding that they need a Savior, which is a comment I hear quite frequently when it comes to the creation versus evolution debates.

In that campaign speech Broun never identified exactly how it is that believing the universe to be expanding from an initial big bang or that life evolved from common ancestry is supposed to keep people from understanding that they need a Savior, but presumably he has in mind an idea similar to that of Richard Peachey, vice-president of the Creation Science Association of British Columbia, who said that “in evolution there is no fall from perfection, no sin and no necessity for a Savior,” and therefore evolution “strikes at the very heart of our Christian faith.” [2]  

So is that true? Well, yes and no. You see, it depends very much on what is meant by the term evolution—as is nearly always the case—for it is not as if it is somehow this one monolithic and univocal idea. When it comes to the evolutionary view that people are taught in Western public education systems, I would agree that they are probably not hearing about Adam and Eve as real people in history, about their covenant relationship with God, their fall from grace, and the reality of mankind’s now sinful condition in Adam and need for a Savior, the promise of whom was first heard by Adam and Eve. I would almost be willing to guarantee that they are not hearing about these things, and I suspect that in rare cases they may be hearing that these are simply religious myths or fictions. This is because what is being taught presupposes a methodological naturalism that results in an evolutionary view that is at once godless and dysteleological. [3] As John Haldane (1882-1964) is reported to have said, “Teleology is like a mistress to a biologist: he cannot live without her but he’s unwilling to be seen with her in public.” [4]  

But this implicates the point I wish to make, namely, that there are evolutionary views out there which are not embarrassed to be seen with her in public; in fact they are proud to be seen with her and wish for people to understand that teleology is not a mistress but a lawfully wedded wife. Maybe that analogy is being pushed too far. What I mean to say is that there are evolutionary views out there which are self-consciously God-centered and teleological. Such evolutionary views reject and repudiate notions of dysteleological natural selection in favor of teleological divine selection, whereby creation accomplishes what God intends it to accomplish in Christ. [5] The relationship between Christian faith and scientific understanding is approached by viewing it through a theology of the cross, wherein all of life is seen in the context of redemptive history predicated on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, [6] taking seriously the historical reality of Adam and Eve and the dawn of redemptive history in the garden of Eden, their fall into sin and mankind’s desperate need of a Savior—all quite contrary to the remarks of Broun and Peachey.

Which brings me to my final point. There is a tendency and fear that acceptance of scientific ideas of evolution must lead inexorably to the philosophical ideas of evolutionism. Tim Keller described the fear this way: “If you believe human life was formed through evolutionary biological processes . . . you must therefore believe in the Grand Theory of Evolution” or the philosophical world view of evolutionism, a plausibility structure which entails that “all features of human life have a natural, scientifically explicable cause.” [7] Keller believes that Christian pastors, theologians, and scientists who want to argue for evolution as a suite of scientific biological theories must therefore at the same time put a great deal of emphasis on repudiating and arguing against evolutionism as a controlling philosophical world view. The scientific ideas of evolution do not entail philosophical ideas of evolutionism which, as a world view plausibility structure, keeps people from understanding that they need a Savior, denying there was a fall into sin and a necessity for a Savior, thereby striking at the very heart of our Christian faith. Scientific biological theories of evolution have nothing to say about these things and are consistent with a Christian faith.

Endnotes:

[2] See the “About Us” section of the Creation Science Association of British Columbia web site (accessed February 7, 2013). I am assuming here that Richard Peachey is the author since his name appears on practically every single article on that site.

[3] To refer to something as dysteleological is to say that it has no telos or final cause from purposeful design; it is the negation of teleological (purposeful).


[7] Tim Keller, “Creation, Evolution, and Christian Laypeople,” BioLogos Foundation (2011), 6. Keller writes that evolutionism as a philosophical world view “is fast becoming what Peter Berger calls a ‘plausibility structure’. It is a set of beliefs considered so basic, and with so much support from authoritative figures and institutions, that it is becoming impossible for individuals to publicly question them. A plausibility structure is a ‘given’ supported by enormous social pressure. The writings of the new atheists here are important to observe because their attitudes are more powerful than their arguments. The disdain and refusal to show any respect to opponents is not actually an effort to refute them logically, but to ostracize them socially and turn their own views into a plausibility structure. They are well on their way.”
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My missions trip to Mexico
Witnessing Bible lesson about God judging justly when he condemns sinners. Points out some contradictory statements in the Westminster Confession. Firstly, there's the belief clearly taught in scripture, that God is a just and righteous Judge who will punish sinners. Secondly, there's the belief taught in certain creeds, that sinners are what they are by God's decree, and cannot change themselves. The creeds seem to contradict the scriptures. How can God be a just and righteous judge, yet condemn and punish people for being as he unchangeably made them? 1 God Judges Justly. The scriptures clearly represent God as a righteous judge who is always just and fair. "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of thy throne" Jesus Christ will be our judge and if you read the Bible at all then you will know that Hell is for eternity. And there is no once saved always saved. you can fall from grace as many have. I disagree with BOTH of the current posts. First of all, the Elect are "once saved, always saved". They would not be truly saved if they fell from grace. Second, I am entirely unable to tolerate to any degree those who claim that all will be saved - the ones who answer "No" to this question. Citing the ultimate and I just am asking if you think God does still punish nations to some extent. Edited to add a third answer for any end-time tribulation kind of thinking. Last edited: Mar 3, 2015. This is considered dualistic and modalistic view of God. It's essentially tribal paganism. While it is still 'normal' in 'Orthodox' Judaism, do NOT fall into that way of thinking or buy any of those books. Man does not control the deity. This is Paganism. Thus God is just to punish sinners with eternal punishment. As far as I know, Edwards did not follow up that sermon with another on Romans 3:25-26 on, “The Justice of God in the Salvation of Sinners.” But that is the question that Paul answers in our text: How can a holy God be just and yet justify sinners? How can He forgive our sins and still be a God of justice? Thus if I trust in Him, God can justly forgive my sin. But, as with last week’s text, there are some difficult theological terms here that have generated thousands of pages of commentary and debate among scholars—propitiation; blood; righteousness; justify; and faith. In the Old Testament sacrificial system, God provided a