

# A REJOINDER TO FERDINANDO'S REBUTTAL

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When I wrote "Toward Solving the Problem of the Unevangelized",<sup>1</sup> I had three specific goals in mind: 1) to demonstrate that general revelation was an insufficient means for the unevangelized to obtain salvation; 2) to show that special revelation was the manner in which God has chosen to redeem humanity throughout history; and 3) to delineate the existence and continual operation of the modalities of special revelation which God utilizes to reconcile people to Himself. In his critique of my presentation, Keith Ferdinando, while affirming the first two points, took strong exception to the last. For the sake of clarity, I therefore find it necessary to address his concerns. I will do so by following his outline so that the reader can easily compare our respective arguments.

In his introduction, Ferdinando asserts "I agree with the statement that the unevangelized are 'condemned through no fault of their own.'"<sup>2</sup> Yet nowhere in my article do I endorse such a view. Quite the contrary. I state that humankind is guilty as a result of rejecting the divine truth disclosed through general revelation,<sup>3</sup> there is no salvation apart from allegiance to the name of Jesus revealed through special revelation,<sup>4</sup> and by implication, those who do not fulfill the criteria for receiving special revelation from

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<sup>1</sup> This paper first appeared in 2002 in the *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 21(1):45-62.

<sup>2</sup> Keith Ferdinando, "'Toward solving the problem of the unevangelized': A Response to Christopher Little," in *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 21(1):64.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

God, are condemned.<sup>5</sup> My intent in quoting this phrase was nothing more than to employ a literary tool to attract the attention of those who have used it in the past.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Ferdinando disputes my interpretation concerning the witness of the Gentile conscience taking place at the final judgment and the significance of the names of Cain and Abel. Yet he provides no evidence to support these statements. In relation to the activity of the Gentile conscience, Paul explicitly says that it will occur “on the day when . . . God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus” (Rom. 2:16).<sup>7</sup> That is, “its ultimate significance will be revealed in the last judgment”.<sup>8</sup> And on the meaning of the names of Cain and Abel, M. G. Easton defines the former as “spear” and the latter as “vanity” which of course is a synonym for “futility”.<sup>9</sup>

Subsequently, Ferdinando makes four assertions, the first of which is “*the starting point of the discussion is seriously flawed.*” Initially Ferdinando maintains, “Little apparently goes along with the view that it would be unjust for men and women to be condemned without having the opportunity to hear and respond to the gospel” but then writes, “by definition, the very notion of a holy, just and infinitely wise God condemning people ‘through no fault of their own’ must be rejected, and Little of course does so as would any thoughtful Christian.”<sup>10</sup> To more accurately represent my position, I would agree with Ferdinando that “God’s righteous judgement falls on men and women not because they do not respond to the gospel, but because they are rebels and sinners, and because their sin merits his wrath and condemnation.” However, I would differ with him when he states: “‘the problem of the unevangelized’ is greatly diminished” or “non-existent” when one recognizes that “there is no

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 60-61.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. William Crockett & James Sigountos, eds., *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*, (Baker, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references are from the *New American Standard Bible* (1970).

<sup>8</sup> Douglas Moo in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Eerdmans, 1996) p. 153.

<sup>9</sup> *Easton’s Bible Dictionary from the Logos Library System Version 2.1g* on CD-ROM (Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995-1999).

<sup>10</sup> See p. 66 of his article.

longer any question of the arbitrary condemnation of the innocent.”<sup>11</sup> This is because the problem of the unevangelized is not simply related to their just condemnation in the sight of a holy God. Rather, their dilemma has to do with the availability of special revelation. That is, the question is not “How can a just God condemn those who are supposedly innocent for not having special revelation?” but “How can a just God condemn sinners who don’t have access to the necessary information to rectify their plight?” As such, I affirm both God’s justice in condemning sinners *and* His mercy in granting access to special revelation in order to furnish them an opportunity for redemption. Ferdinando wants us to hold to the former while denying the latter. For him, God is particular in distributing grace, for me “there is *no* partiality with Him” (Eph. 6:9) since He “has shut up *all* in disobedience in order to show mercy to *all*” (Rom. 11:32) not desiring “for *any* to perish but for *all* to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9, emphasis added).

Second, Ferdinando believes “*the whole notion of becoming a candidate for God’s special revelatory truth is problematic.*” This is because he concludes that I maintain “the necessity of some worthiness on the part of the ‘candidate’ [is essential] before God acts.”<sup>12</sup> As such, he accuses me of semi-Pelagianism. But in doing so, Ferdinando has overlooked several crucial issues. First, the candidates to which I refer are not those who consider themselves worthy—just the opposite. In footnote 22, I state the candidates for special revelation are those who have a broken and contrite heart (Ps. 51:17). That is, they are candidates precisely because they see themselves as unworthy! And God promises to not despise them (Ps. 51:17). In fact, He “saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Ps. 34:18). The point is not that the candidates are worthy but *needy*. And what is God’s response when such people acknowledge their need? Fortunately, Jesus gives us the answer. When the prodigal son was returning home, “his father saw him, and felt compassion *for him*, and ran and embraced him, and kissed him” (Lk. 15:20). Second, Ferdinando essentially denies any human involvement in salvation. But if this is the case, then why does God give special revelation at all to any one at any time? If God acts completely independent of the human condition and will, then, what is the purpose of Him revealing Himself to us? Why doesn’t He

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

just fulfill His own eternal decrees without going to the trouble of interacting with mere humans? And if in Ferdinando's mind humans are actually incapable of being "self-selecting," then, how can they be held responsible for their actions? What Ferdinando is apparently advocating is extreme Calvinism. However, according to Norman Geisler, extreme Calvinism is logically untenable because:

First of all, it involves a denial of human free choice (that is, the power of contrary choice), which is supported by both Scripture and good reason . . . . As even Augustine himself earlier stated, "he that is willing is free from compulsion . . . ." In the final analysis, a person who is coerced, either externally or internally, has no choice in his own salvation . . . .

Second, "irresistible grace" on the unwilling is a violation of free choice. For God is love (1 John 4:16), and true love is persuasive but never coercive. There can be no shotgun weddings in heaven. God is not a cosmic B. F. Skinner who behaviorally modifies men against their will . . . . Said Lewis, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell." . . .

Third, the extreme Calvinist's view leads logically to a denial of God's omnibenevolence (all-lovingness) . . . . If God is one indivisible being without any parts, as classical Calvinists believe, then His love extends to all of His essence, not just part of it. Hence, God cannot be partly loving. But if God is all-loving, then how can He love only some so as to give them and only them the desire to be saved? If He really loves all men, then why does He not give to all men the desire to be saved? It only follows then that, in the final analysis, the reason why some go to hell is that God does not love them and give them the desire to be saved. But if the real reason they go to hell is that God does not love them, irresistibly regenerate them, and give them the faith to believe, then their failure to believe truly would result from God's lack of love for them . . . .

Certainly this is not the picture of the God of the Bible who "so loved the world" (John 3:16) and sent His Son to be a sacrifice

not only for the sins of some "but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2); whose Son "died for the ungodly" (Rom. 5:6) and not just for the elect.<sup>13</sup>

And last, Ferdinando rejects my hypothesis that God chose Abraham as a result of his positive response to special revelatory truth contained in the Noachic covenant. This is no doubt due to the fact that he allows no room for Abraham's active role in his own destiny. In fact, according to him, "Abraham's call was the result of free and unmerited grace."<sup>14</sup> Yet in view of the textual clues in the narrative of Genesis regarding the information contained in the Noachic covenant transmitted through oral tradition, I see Abraham responding to what he knew to be true about God's will. Consequently, he was called by Him to be a candidate for further special revelation. Hence, it is not an either/or situation but a both/and one.

Third, Ferdinando states "*Little affirms God's ability to reveal himself apart from human messengers.*" Even though he essentially agrees with my point of view by confessing "God can act as he wills . . . [and] is indeed free in all that he does, totally unrestrained by his creation,"<sup>15</sup> he takes issue with my supposedly reductionistic interpretation of Paul's statement in Romans 10:15. According to him, "In answer to his question, 'how can they hear without someone preaching to them?' Paul certainly seems to expect the response, 'in such a case they cannot hear.'"<sup>16</sup> But by making such an inference, Ferdinando overlooks the context of Jewish evangelism in this passage. In relation to Romans 10:14-15, C. E. B. Cranfield writes,

We have here four questions which are parallel in structure and together form a logical chain . . . The third person plural verbs of the first three questions are sometimes understood as indefinite ('How then shall men call . . .'); but in view of the argument of the section 9.30-10.21 as a whole, it is more natural to assume that the subject of these verbs is the same as that of the third person plural verbs in 9.32; 10.2, 3—namely, the Jews. At this point Paul is

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<sup>13</sup> Norman Geisler, *Chosen But Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election* (Bethany House, 1999), pp. 47-50.

<sup>14</sup> See his article, p. 68.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

concerned to show that the Jews have really had full opportunity to call upon the name of the Lord in the sense of vv. 12 and 13, and are therefore without excuse. That all along the law which was constantly on their lips was pointing to Christ, that all along He had been its innermost meaning, did not by itself constitute this full opportunity. The fullness of opportunity was not present for them until the message that the promises have indeed now been fulfilled had actually been declared to them by messengers truly commissioned for the purpose by God Himself. Paul makes his point by asking the question whether this fullness of opportunity has really been present for the Jews by means of this chain of related questions, and then answering in the affirmative in v. 15b.<sup>17</sup>

Hence, Paul's comments here have specific reference to the Jews and their interaction with special revelation either by way of the law (v. 5) or human messengers (v. 18). As such, it cannot rightly be used to reach a conclusion about God's salvific activity among those who do not have a similar history. The truth is, no where in this passage does Paul explicitly state that people cannot hear from God apart from human messengers. If he did, then there would be a contradiction to what I am affirming with regard to the use of the other modalities of special revelation available to God. But since he didn't, there is no contradiction even though Ferdinando attempts to invent one. In the end, Ferdinando tries to force the passage to teach what it doesn't—that God calls and uses human messengers and only human messengers in communicating special revelation to people. Therefore, his interpretation is ultimately reductionistic because he is unwilling to accept God's prerogative to employ the other modalities to fulfill His redemptive agenda.

Furthermore, Ferdinando assumes that what I am advancing will lead to "a reduced sense of the urgency about the task of bringing the gospel to the lost."<sup>18</sup> This is only true of course if one links the Great Commission to human need rather than God's command. I choose to view mission in relation to the latter and therefore, as I said in my article,<sup>19</sup> "no Christian

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<sup>17</sup> *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans*, Volume II, (T. & T. Clark Limited, 1979), p. 533.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>19</sup> See p. 60.

has the right to repudiate his or her duty to take the gospel to the unevangelized regardless of what God decides to do through the other modalities." Thus, we are not sent on a fool's errand but divinely commissioned in concert with the other modalities. This brings up another important point. Ferdinando evidently wants Christians to feel the entire weight of the world on their shoulders. He is content in assuming that if redeemed individuals don't share the gospel with the unredeemed then they will be lost. But I must confess that I find it very difficult to imagine that God would place the complete fulfillment of His redemptive program in the world upon human beings or the Church as a whole. To do so would mean that He is dependent upon us and that we are in fact indispensable. Of course, Ferdinando is free to take this anthropocentric posture, but I believe it is more sound to interpret salvation history from a more theocentric perspective.

And last, Ferdinando addresses "*the fundamental stage of [my] argument.*" He rightly articulates my thesis in the words: "God uses 'the modalities of special revelation' to bring saving truth to those to whom the gospel has not been preached and who do not have access to the Bible."<sup>20</sup> Thereafter however, he rejects the evidence. For example, in relation to my discussion of Job, he concludes that it is doubtful whether his life "has any clear-cut soteriological implications for the unevangelized at all."<sup>21</sup> But Ferdinando has ignored several key facts. First, most scholars agree that Job and his friends, lived during the patriarchal period—a period of time before the Old Testament was written. Hence, they had no Bible to consult. Second, we encounter Job as a faithful worshipper of the true God. But how did he arrive at such a place? Was he born that way or did he hear of special revelation and embrace it? If the latter, then at some point he was just like the unevangelized person today who may have no knowledge of special revelation. Furthermore, how did he know that a Redeemer lives and that there will be a resurrection from the dead? Ferdinando offers no explanation. After considering other possibilities, I maintain that he learned of these things through the modalities referred to by Elihu in Job 33:13-33. Third, Ferdinando wants to limit Elihu's words to Job and his friends alone and thereby denies their salvific application among the unevangelized. On

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<sup>20</sup> See his article, p. 70.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

this, he writes: “The dreams, visions, angels and mediators of which the passage speaks are . . . to be understood in the context of belief.”<sup>22</sup> But no such delimitation is given by Elihu. Rather, he says these things happen to “men” in general (Job 33:15ff). Thus, since some “men” are unevangelized, these things apply to them. And last, Ferdinando challenges my contention that Job was not surprised by the medium of God’s message but by the content of it when he states: “the text certainly does suggest that Job found the subsequent divine theophany unusual: ‘My ears had heard of you but now mine eyes have seen you’ (Job 42:5).”<sup>23</sup> To comprehend what is happening to Job here it is necessary to take a closer look at this verse. When Job says his “eyes have seen” God, he uses the Hebrew verb *r’h* (“to see”). In this phrase it occurs in the Qal form. According to William White: “The extended and metaphorical senses in the Qal include to regard, perceive, feel, understand, learn, enjoy.”<sup>24</sup> It is this sense that Isaiah proclaims “all flesh shall see that God hath spoken” (40:5) and Elihu pleads, “Teach Thou me what I do not see” (34:32). Taking this into account, the Amplified Bible translates Job 42:5b as: “now my [spiritual] eye sees You.” Moreover, Jackie Naudé points out: “The [verb] is also used in the sense of becoming psychologically visionary conscious, seeing in a vision, receiving a revelation.”<sup>25</sup> As such, Charles Ryrie is on the mark when he notes: “No form of God appeared in the whirlwind, but what God revealed about Himself enabled Job to see Him.”<sup>26</sup> Or in the words of Roy Zuck:

Job had only heard of God’s doings. The complainer was not an eyewitness of the act of Creation, a fact God called to his attention near the beginning of His first speech (38:4-11). Nor could Job even view firsthand many aspects of natural Creation (38:16-24; 39:1-4). His perspective of God’s total workings was therefore limited and secondhand.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>24</sup> R. Laird Harris, Gleason Archer, Jr., & Bruce Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, (Moody Press, 1980), p. 823.

<sup>25</sup> Willem Van Gemeren, gen. ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Volume 5, (Zondervan, 1997), p. 1007.

<sup>26</sup> *Ryrie Study Bible Expanded Edition* (Moody Press, 1995), p. 828.

But now that Job was addressed directly by God, this experience exceeded his previous knowledge, like seeing (**now my eyes have seen You**) compared with hearing. This thrilling view of God, probably spiritual insight, not physical vision, deepened his perspective and appreciation of God. What Job now knew of God was incomparable to his former ideas, which were really ignorant. This personal confrontation with God silenced his arguing and deepened his awe.<sup>27</sup>

Hence, there is no reason to contemplate a theophany here. Instead, what happened was that God rebuffed Job's attempt at finding fault with Him due to his suffering (40:2). That is, He added to Job's knowledge of Himself through this supernatural encounter. As such, I find no justification for rejecting my interpretation that what is accented in Job's case is not the medium but the content delivered through the medium.

But Ferdinando's rejection of the evidence does not stop with Job. In relation to the manner in which Rahab received special revelation, he asserts: "It is questionable whether [my] first category, 'oral tradition' is in fact a 'modality of special revelation' at all . . . . She did not benefit from a 'modality of special revelation' but simply from the oral transmission of special revelation itself, the news of what God had done in Egypt and at the Red Sea."<sup>28</sup> In stating this, Ferdinando shows he has not grasped the meaning of the term modality. In my book, I demonstrate by citing the definitions of others that a modality is any vehicle through which specific information about God is conveyed.<sup>29</sup> Oral tradition thus qualifies as a modality because it is a channel through which revelation passes from one generation to another. And of course this does not prove my thesis, as Ferdinando observes, but then my thesis doesn't rise or fall on the operation of oral tradition alone.

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<sup>27</sup> John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary Old Testament*, (Victor Books, 1985), p. 774.

<sup>28</sup> See his article, p. 71.

<sup>29</sup> Christopher Little, *The Revelation of God Among the Unevangelized: An Evangelical Appraisal and Missiological Contribution to the Debate* (William Carey Library, 2000), pp. 50-52.

In relation to the conversion of Paul, Ferdinando admits it “does indeed prove that ‘God is not limited to human agency’” but then in an interesting twist of logic maintains that “the whole incident offers scant support for Little’s thesis.”<sup>30</sup> For the sake of clarity, it is imperative to listen to Paul’s own testimony of what happened to him on the Damascus road: “For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but *I received it* through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:11-12; cf., Acts 26:14-18). This is hardly “scant support” as Ferdinando suggests. Yet he seeks to undermine it by setting forth three objections. First, since Ananias comes to Paul immediately after his miraculous event, this supposedly detracts from my thesis. But Ananias’ visit cannot be used to disprove my thesis since he didn’t deliver the gospel to Paul; he simply was used by God to fill Paul with the Holy Spirit and heal him (Acts 9:17-18). Second, Ferdinando assumes that having a visible encounter with Christ is unique to an apostle. But Mary Magdalene saw the risen Christ and she is never referred to as one (Jo. 20:11-18). Also, Christ appeared to more than five hundred brethren and they were not considered apostles (1 Cor. 15:6). Additionally, listen to the following true story of Sadhu Sundar Singh, which is amazingly similar to the conversion of Paul:

At 4:30 A.M. I saw something of which I had no idea at all previously. In the room where I was praying I saw a great light. I thought the place was on fire. I looked round, but could find nothing. Then the thought came to me that this might be an answer that God had sent me. Then as I prayed and looked into the light, I saw the form of the Lord Jesus Christ. It had such an appearance of glory and love. If it had been some Hindu incarnation I would have prostrated myself before it. But it was the Lord Jesus Christ whom I had been insulting a few days before. I felt that a vision like this could not come out of my own imagination. I heard a voice saying in Hindustani, ‘How long will you persecute me? I have come to **save you; you were praying to know the right way. Why do you not take it ?**’ The thought then came to me, ‘Jesus Christ is not dead but living and it must be He Himself.’ So I fell at His feet and got this wonderful Peace which I could not get anywhere else. This is the joy I was wishing to get. This was heaven itself. When I got up, the vision had all disappeared; but although the vision dis-

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<sup>30</sup> See his article, pp. 71-72.

appeared the Peace and Joy have remained with me ever since. I went off and told my father that I had become a Christian. He told me, 'Go and lie down and sleep; why, only the day before yesterday you burnt the Bible; and you say you are a Christian now.' I said, 'Well, I have discovered now that Jesus Christ is alive and have determined to be His follower. To-day I am His disciple and I am going to serve Him.'<sup>31</sup>

And third, even though Paul was familiar with Old Testament revelation, he still did not have a redemptive relationship with God up to the time of his Damascus road experience, which thereby places him on the same footing with the unevangelized. Hence, there is in reality nothing here which discredits my thesis.

Ferdinando also doubts the conversion of the Emperor Constantine through a miraculous event. But Richard Todd argues that there is really no excuse for doing so:

Constantine's account of his conversion, told by the Emperor himself to the church historian Eusebius of Caesarea, towards the end of his life, is well known. Constantine, alarmed by reports of Maxentius' mastery of magical arts, prayed to the 'Supreme God' for help. The response was a sign, a cross in the noonday sky 'above the sun', and with it the words, 'Conquer by this.' That night Christ appeared to him in a dream and commanded him to use the sign—apparently Chi-Rho, the initial letters of the name of Christ—as a safe guard in all engagements with his enemies'. According to the historian Lactantius, Constantine placed the sign on the shields of his soldiers. He then marched on Rome, confronted Maxentius, who was miraculously induced to fight outside the city fortifications, and conquered.

The story has been doubted. But Constantine's attitude towards the Christian church after he became emperor, and his new laws, show that his allegiance to Christianity was genuine, though his understanding of the Christian faith was at first no doubt imperfect. Constantine did, indeed, retain the pagan high priest's title of *Pontifex Maximus*, and for a decade his coins continued to

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<sup>31</sup> B. H. Streeter and A. J. Appasamy, *The Sadhu A Study in Mysticism and Practical Religion*, (MacMillan and Co., 1922), pp. 6-7.

feature some of the pagan gods, notably his own favourite deity, the Unconquered Sun. He also delays Christian baptism until the end of his life. But delayed baptism was the custom of the age, a device for avoiding mortal sin, and retaining the pagan symbols was a necessary compromise with his pagan subjects, still very much in the majority.

Constantine treated Christianity as the favoured, though not yet the official, religion of the Empire. He granted immunities to the clergy and lavished gifts on the church; in his letters and edicts he spoke as if the Christian God were his own.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, I understand God's response to Constantine's plea for deliverance to be the pivotal point from which he traced his conversion.

With regard to dreams, Ferdinando writes: "There is no evidence of the two biblical dreams that Little refers to (Abimelech, Gen 20:3; the magi, Matt 2:12) was instrumental in the conversion of the recipients."<sup>33</sup> In this, he is of course correct. However, I cited those examples as proof of the existence of this modality<sup>34</sup> not to substantiate my thesis. To demonstrate from the Bible that God uses dreams to initiate a redemptive relationship with Himself, all one has to do is read the account of Jacob's dream at Bethel on his way to Haran (Gen. 28:10-22). And in relation the story of Adiri of Dutch Guiana, Ferdinando presumes: "The incident may indeed be significant, not so much because it supports Little's case, but because . . . Adiri was told 'to go to the missionaries for instruction'."<sup>35</sup> But the reference specifically states: "He was convicted of sin and apparently converted through dreams." Hence, his experience confirms my thesis. That Adiri was told to go to those more mature in the faith to be discipled

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<sup>32</sup> Tim Dowley, org. ed., *A Lion Handbook The History of Christianity*, (Lion Publishing, 1990), pp.139-140.

<sup>33</sup> On p. 72 of his article.

<sup>34</sup> As was done with the modalities of human messengers and the Bible which Ferdinando refers to on pp. 74-75.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

simply shows, as I point out in my book,<sup>36</sup> that God is not interested in promoting isolationist Christianity.<sup>37</sup>

Next, Ferdinando postulates that the information communicated through the various modalities, in this case, visions, are not self-explanatory and therefore human messengers are necessary. Yet if Abraham's vision was not self-explanatory, then how did he know to believe in the Lord and make sacrifice to Him? (Gen. 15:6-10); if Cornelius' vision was not self-explanatory, then how did he know that his prayers had been heard and he must send for Peter? (Acts 10:5); and if Adiri's visions were not self-explanatory, how was it that he was converted through them? I don't think that Ferdinando would have stumbled here if he had read my book which provides other instances of how God has used visions to convert people.<sup>38</sup> To add to that list, the respected Missiologist, Lesslie Newbigin, in his autobiography says,

As I lay awake a vision came to my mind . . . It was a vision of the cross, but it was the cross spanning the space between heaven and earth, between ideals and present realities, and with arms that embraced the whole world. I saw it as something which reached down to the most hopeless and sordid of human misery and yet promised life and victory. I was sure that night, in a way I had never been before, that this was the clue that I must follow if I were to make any kind of sense of the world. From that moment I would always know how to take bearings when I was lost.<sup>39</sup>

Then Ferdinando addresses the modality of angels. He rightly contends that the "shepherds of the birth of Christ were bringing special revelation itself at the central moment of redemption history."<sup>40</sup> However, this is not in question. Rather, the evidence being sought to establish my thesis is

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<sup>36</sup> *The Revelation of God*, p. 141.

<sup>37</sup> This is the same answer I would offer to Ferdinando regarding his comments on p. 75 about church history not being full of reports of communities which were Christian before missionaries encountered them.

<sup>38</sup> *The Revelation of God*, pp. 126-127.

<sup>39</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda An Autobiography*, (Eerdmans, 1985), pp. 11-12.

<sup>40</sup> See his article, p. 73.

whether an angel communicated the gospel apart from human messengers. And the angel's words demonstrate that this is precisely what occurred: "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Lk. 2:10-11). Thereafter, Ferdinando attempts to repudiate my discussion concerning the angel preaching the "eternal gospel" (Rev. 14:6), on three grounds: "First, in view of the apocalyptic genre of the whole book, it is legitimate to enquire whether in this and the following verses John is referring to the intervention of a literal, visible angel . . . Second, the emphasis in these verses is on judgement. Third, the announcements contained in the verses apparently refer to unique events of world-wide significance that are to take place at the end of history, and not to the way in which the gospel advances normally. Again, Little seeks to generalise from what appears to be an exceptional and unique situation." However, there are those who would disagree with Ferdinando. For example, Alan Johnson comments:

The first angel announces that there is still hope, for even at this crucial moment in history God is seeking to reclaim the beast followers by issuing a message appealing to the people of the world to "fear God ... and worship him." That this appeal is called a "gospel" (*euangelion*) has raised a question. How can it be good news? Yet is not the intent of the gospel message that men should fear God and worship him? Is it not the "eternal" gospel because it announces eternal life (John 3:16)? Could this be John's way of showing the final fulfillment of Mark 13:10? Let us not fail to see how in the NT the announcement of divine judgment is never separated from the proclamation of God's mercy.<sup>41</sup>

Therefore, since God will utilize an angel to preach the gospel at the end of the age, is one at liberty to infer that He has decided to refrain from doing so until that time? Evidently not, since the writer of Hebrews teaches that angels are "sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation" (Heb. 1:14).

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<sup>41</sup> *Expositor's Bible Commentary Volume 12*, Frank Gaebelin, gen. ed. (Zondervan, 1981), p. 541. Along the same lines, Ryrie maintains that this is "God's last call of grace to the world before the return of Christ" (*Ryrie Study Bible*), p. 2032.

Furthermore, one wonders how many biblical examples are "exceptional and unique" which as such cannot properly be used as evidence to support my thesis? Apparently, in Ferdinando's eyes, all of them. Not only this, but he goes on to surmise that where the Bible is present the other modalities are unnecessary.<sup>42</sup> But what if a person doesn't know how to read or doesn't know anyone who knows how to read? Or what if a person has been nurtured in a setting which is intrinsically antagonistic toward Christianity so that even if the Bible were in one's mother tongue, he or she would be severely ostracized or perhaps punished for reading it? Or what if a person derives from a culture with a worldview that values knowledge gained more through supernatural phenomena than literary sources? As I discuss in my book,<sup>43</sup> I see no reason for why God would not use all the modalities at His disposal in order to reach those who fulfill the necessary criteria.

By way of summary, Ferdinando concludes: "none of the examples Little quotes substantiates his thesis. In every case what the text refers to is either the use of a 'modality of special revelation' precisely to communicate special revelation, or the intervention of a dream or vision to direct the recipient to those human messengers called by God to communicate his unique Word."<sup>44</sup> The truth of the matter is that the evidence indicates otherwise. Rahab was converted through oral tradition; Paul, Constantine and Sadhu Sundar Singh through miraculous events; Jacob, Adiri, and Lesslie Newbigin through dreams and visions; and the shepherds through an angel and an untold amount through an angel at the end of the age. Moreover, God didn't send Jacob, Paul<sup>45</sup> or Constantine to a human messenger to explain what happened to them. He didn't need to because they grasped exactly what He was conveying to them. And in relation to his comments concerning God using dreams and visions in the process of leading Muslims to faith in Christ, there is no argument. My thesis

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<sup>42</sup> On p. 74 of his article.

<sup>43</sup> *The Revelation of God*, p. 126.

<sup>44</sup> See his article, p. 74.

<sup>45</sup> The phrase "it shall be told you what you must do" (Acts 9:6; cf., 22:10), refers to Christ's subsequent communicate to Paul as indicted in the context by what was related to Ananias: "I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake" (Acts 9:16).

stipulates this but also goes beyond it to include God employing them to actually convert Muslims. As proof of the fact that He is doing this in our day, I offer the recent testimony of Ravi Zacharias:

I pray for God to open the eyes and the hearts of people in all cultures. Among former Muslims who are now Christians, more than 90 percent of those with whom I have talked have come to know Christ through a dream or a vision. God used their own worldview through which to reveal Christ. We must be men and women of prayer, to pray for the salvation of people all over the world.<sup>46</sup>

Hence, it certainly does *not* appear, at least in the case of Muslims, “that in God’s economy human messengers are an essential element in bringing the gospel to the unevangelized.”<sup>47</sup> Besides that, what happens if human messengers are not available to the unevangelized for having not heeded the missionary call as has been the case throughout church history? Ferdinando does not address that issue, but I would say that in such circumstances God’s redemptive purposes are not thwarted since they are not ultimately dependent upon human obedience.

In the end, Ferdinando rejects my thesis because he finds no evidence for it in the missionary record. According to him, if my thesis were true, “would it not be reasonable to suppose that as missionaries have gradually penetrated the unreached areas of the globe, they would have come across individuals . . . who had indeed found God in this way . . .? Do the annals of mission history suggest that this has happened and, if so, why does Little not refer to such cases to reinforce his position?”<sup>48</sup> Thus, he postulates that the idea “that some, even significant numbers, of the unevangelized, have found Christ through these ‘special modalities’”<sup>49</sup> is unfounded. But several things need to be clarified at this point. First, my thesis only argues for the “possibility” of this happening without attempting to comment on the frequency. I will leave the numbers game up to God. All I am claiming is

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<sup>46</sup> “A Conversation with Ravi Zacharias”, from the Internet address: [www.gospelcom.net/rzim/publications/jttran.php?jtcode=JT02SRZ](http://www.gospelcom.net/rzim/publications/jttran.php?jtcode=JT02SRZ)

<sup>47</sup> As Ferdinando asserts on p. 74.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

that the unevangelized who may be caught off from access to evangelists and/or the Bible are not without hope since God is able to use the other modalities to communicate special revelation, including saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Second, there *are* cases of people knowing Christ before being contacted by missionaries. For instance, there is the amazing account of Gyalsang Tamang, a Nepalese boy who along with his family knew of the name Yesu and worshipped Him as the Son of God before being contacted by missionaries.<sup>50</sup> And last, there is a crucial issue that Ferdinando does not address. If in heaven people are present from every tribe who have been purchased by the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 5:9), then what are we to say about those tribes which vanished before they had an opportunity to interact with human ambassadors of Christ? If they are to be included in those who will be "priests to our God" (Rev. 5:10), then there must have been other ways in which God approached and redeemed them even though we may have no earthly evidence of it. This must also hold true for unreached people groups in our day which may go out of existence before the gospel is proclaimed among them by those committed to the Great Commission.

In light of the foregoing discussion, it is no doubt obvious to the reader by now that while Ferdinando and I examine the same evidence, both biblical and extra-biblical, we interpret it differently. Since I espouse a different viewpoint, Ferdinando implies my "Theology [does not correspond] to reality" and judges my "theory [to be] a dangerous one."<sup>51</sup> However, I would simply respond, when the evidence is interpreted properly, then my theory is both a biblical and theologically sound one, even if it may not be a prevalent or popular one. Accordingly, I commend it to the Church in the hope that it will enable Christians everywhere to gain a greater appreciation of the mysterious workings of God to procure "a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and *all* tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb . . . saying, "Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb" (Rev. 7:9). Amen!

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<sup>50</sup> This story "The Name Above All" was first published by Gospel Recordings. It now appears on the Internet site:  
<http://members.aol.com/tailenders/npnmaa.htm>

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

## CONTRIBUTORS INVITED FOR AJET

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**Scholarship:** Articles should reflect serious scholarship based on library or field research. Bibliographical references should preferably be no less than ten. The English composition should be accurate and readable, without the need of extensive editing.

**Format:** Articles should be typewritten, double-spaced with bibliographic information (of every book used) at the end of the paper. Footnotes, or End Notes should be properly given, following guidelines of scholarly publications.

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