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RESPONDING AGAIN TO CHRISTOPHER LITTLE

Keith Ferdinando

I am grateful to AJET for the opportunity to respond to Christopher Little's *A Rejoinder to Ferdinando's Rebuttal* (AJET 22.2 (2003)). Some background to this exchange may be helpful. It began back in 2000-2001 when Little sent his first article to AJET. In view of its content the editors were willing to print it only on condition that a response should be published at the same time, and they asked me to provide that. At that point AJET readers had the opportunity to study Little's views, read a response, reflect on the merits and demerits of each perspective, and make up their minds. Little, however, was not happy with the outcome and AJET agreed to publish a further article from him—which appeared in 2003—offering me also the opportunity to reply again, which belatedly I now take up. However, I do not propose to try the patience of readers by engaging in another lengthy response and rehearsing in detail arguments made earlier: for those interested in the issue the best approach would certainly be to read the original articles which appeared in AJET 21.1 back in 2002. The focus here will be on a few critical and representative issues only.

First, in his 2003 'Rejoinder' Little reiterates the semi-Pelagian approach which was present in his first article. Early adherents of this position have been described in the following terms: 'They believed that God's help is necessary in order to live the Christian life, but they also believed that we can make the first move on our own. When it comes to righteousness, the sinner is sick, not dead, and the sick man can take the initiative in asking the doctor for help.'¹ In much the same vein Little refers to those 'who do not fulfil the criteria for receiving special revelation from God.'² In his view, the operation of God's grace is contingent on the fulfilment of conditions by human beings. Little identifies disagreement with this approach as a manifestation of 'extreme Calvinism', but

Dr. Keith Ferdinando is currently the AIM's Coordinator for Theological Education in Africa. As from October 2006, he will be teaching at the Rwanda Faculty of Evangelical Theology in Kigali, Rwanda. He earned his MA from Oxford University and his BA and PhD in Theology from London Bible College, where he has recently been teaching.

¹ Tony Lane, *The Lion Concise Book of Christian Thought*, Tring, UK: Lion Publishing, 1984, 76.

² Christopher Little, 'A Rejoinder to Ferdinando's Rebuttal', *AJET* 22.1 (2003), 45.

it was Paul's view before ever it was Calvin's, that men and women are by nature hostile to God (Rom 8:5-8), dead in their sins and unable to respond to him unless and until he makes them alive with Christ (Eph 2:1-7). Paul insists on the exclusive efficacy of grace in bringing about human salvation: 'For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no-one can boast' (Eph 2:8-9). This is a fundamental issue, and it is not only Calvinists—let alone extreme ones—who recognise the necessity of God's prevenient grace before any human move towards God becomes possible. 'Grace does not find a man willing, but makes him willing.'³ Little's argument would seem to restore to Christians the grounds of boasting which Paul denies them: they fulfil the criteria and so become candidates for salvation. In the light of this it is curious that he should then claim to be theocentric in his approach.⁴

Second, while protesting that I misinterpreted his argument, Little still maintains that justice requires that the unevangelised be given access to salvation. 'How can a just God condemn sinners who don't have access to the necessary information to rectify their plight?'⁵ The biblical answer to his question is that God justly condemns sinners on the basis of their sin and consequent guilt. Justice does not demand that he make his grace available to anybody at all – nor to everybody. Grace is not about justice, but about totally undeserved favour freely given according to the will of the giver; in other words, the whole point about grace is precisely that it is not justice. If the issue is that of understanding the *basis* on which God accords grace, Paul's doxology at the end of his long discourse in Romans 9-11—in which, among other things, he deals with the issue of free will and election—gives the response: 'Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?"' The tendency of Little's argument is to move salvation away from grace and towards justice and merit: those who fulfil the criteria may thus receive special revelation. However, if Little insists on justice, we are all lost.

Third, and more generally, Little strains biblical texts to find meanings beyond their obvious sense. Two examples will suffice, the first of which is his reference to Abram. Contrary to Little there is at no point in the biblical narrative any suggestion that Abram's call was a result of his 'responding to

³ Augustine, *Letters* 186.

⁴ Little, 'Rejoinder', 51.

⁵ Little, 'Rejoinder', 47.

what he knew to be true about God's will.⁶ There is no indication in the text – no 'textual clues' anywhere – that Abram had any special knowledge of God or relationship with him before he was called. 'The history of redemption, like that of creation, begins with God speaking'⁷ – and not with Abram fulfilling any sort of criteria.

More significantly, in his discussion of Romans 10 Little limits the application of Paul's series of questions to the Jews: 'How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Rom 10:14-15). However, while Paul is indeed addressing the situation of the Jewish people in this chapter, he has just explicitly stated, 'For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved"' (Rom 10:12-13). Paul then goes on to demonstrate the necessity of the proclamation of the gospel if *anybody* – Jew or Greek – is to call on Christ. 'When one combines 1:18-32 with 10:14-17, it seems fair to conclude that people are not saved apart from the preaching of the gospel. It is this conviction that has driven the missionary impulse throughout history.'⁸

Fourth, Little's continued use of the 'conversion' of Constantine to prove his argument remains bewildering. There are two main questions which he simply does not address. The first is the extent to which Constantine's conversion was anything other than a cynical political manoeuvre, the answer to which will no doubt remain inaccessible as far as the historical record is concerned. The other is whether Constantine could seriously be regarded as unevangelised at the time of his supposed response to the vision, ruling as he was over millions of Christians whose beliefs were scarcely unknown.

Which brings us to a fifth and related point. The way in which Little clarifies his position raises some puzzlement as to whether he is really saying anything very significant at all. When he states that God saves the unevangelised by means of the 'modalities' of special revelation, he includes the normal regular means by which the gospel is communicated, including preaching or the passing on of the message through other vehicles such as tradition. This was a

⁶ Little, 'Rejoinder', 49.

⁷ Derek Kidner, *Genesis: an Introduction and Commentary*, Leicester: IVP, 1967, 113.

⁸ Thomas Schreiner, *Romans*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998, 568.

baffling point in the first article, where it seemed that he wanted to say that God acts in special ways to reach those beyond such ordinary means of access to the gospel. Of course, God saves by the use of regular human means: Carey pointed this out long ago, and Paul in Romans 10 long before him as we have already noted. What seemed distinctive about Little's argument was the assertion, 'There is great hope for the unevangelized because they have never existed, exist or will exist, without the possibility of finding and knowing God.'⁹ This suggests the interposition of supernatural intervention quite independent of human agency on a very large scale indeed. However, it seems that such is not after all Little's case, and in reality he is not as optimistic as his claim seemed to imply. After all, human beings have to fulfil criteria in order to experience 'modalities of special revelation', and we have no idea how many may do so. Moreover, while initially expressing 'great hope' on the basis of his theory, now Little does not want to play 'the numbers game' (his terminology), pointing out that he is only describing a 'possibility'.¹⁰ Accordingly, apart from the worrying semi-Pelagianism embedded in his theology, Christopher Little may not in fact be saying very much at all – which is a good reason to bring this response to a speedy conclusion.

Finally, therefore, Little erroneously implies that he can read the mind of his critic, and that with marked sarcasm. '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' (emphasis added). I am happy to set the record straight regarding what I 'want' and what I am 'content in assuming'. I want Christians to feel the force of the great commission and to respond to it. I want churches to recognise the missionary nature of God and the implications of that for his people, in terms of sacrifice and obedience. I want them to understand that 'if the Holy Spirit is given, a missionary Spirit is given.'¹¹

I am worried by approaches such as Little's, whose tendency (which is not to say that this is what Little *wants*) is to undermine the sense of urgency that captivated those like Hudson Taylor, William Carey and Peter Cameron Scott in the past, who left their homes and countries to bring the gospel to unreached masses of humanity. That sense of urgency is already being lost in many of the churches of the West; it would be a tragedy if Western theological speculation should now undermine the growing missionary vision and energy of African

⁹ Christopher Little, 'Towards Solving the Problem of the Unevangelised', *AJET* 21.1 (2002), 57.

¹⁰ Little, 'Rejoinder', 61.

¹¹ Roland Allen, *Missionary Principles*, London: Lutterworth Press, 1968, 43.

churches and believers just as the centres of gravity of world Christianity move to the South. We are summoned not to engage in unsupported conjecture about ways in which God may or may not reach the unevangelised in addition to the means he has clearly and explicitly identified, but to ensure that they do not remain unevangelised precisely by taking the gospel to them. We can be sure of this: while there may perhaps be striking exceptions to the norm of regular mission, a possibility that Calvin himself admits,¹² they would nevertheless be just that – striking exceptions, for the biblical testimony is that God has ordained human messengers as the means by which the gospel should be communicated to men and women. Mission responds to the ‘problem of the unevangelised’. I conclude with Packer’s response to approaches not so very dissimilar to that of Christopher Little:

We may safely say (i) if any good pagan reached the point of throwing himself on his Maker’s mercy for pardon, it was grace that brought him there; (ii) God will surely save anyone he brings thus far (cf Acts 10:34f; Rom. 10:12f); (iii) anyone thus saved would learn in the end that he was saved through Christ. But what we cannot safely say is that God ever does save anyone this way. We simply do not know.¹³

¹² John Calvin (trans. Ross Mackenzie; ed. D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance), *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and Thessalonians*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960, 231.

¹³ James Packer quoted by Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: the Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission*, Downers Grove and Leicester: Apollon and IVP, 2001, 322.

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Theology: Since *AJET* publishes theological reflection based on the authority of Scripture articles submitted for publication should reflect an evangelical perspective.

Relevance: Articles should be relevant to the African Christian church today. Topics may deal with a range of issues, including theology, African church history, practical theology, theological reflection on problems in the church due to traditional African culture or contemporary society, theological and Christian education in the African context and other similar topics.

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

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

Biographic Information Requested: Authors should include a brief biographic sketch of their present vocational work, together with the last degree obtained and name of the institution from which the degree was obtained.