

## **Can Non-Christians—Even Atheists—Be Saved?**

**By Jim Penrice**

A fundamental difference between Catholic and Evangelical Christian theology is this: Evangelicals tend to limit what they believe Jesus is capable of doing, especially without the help of human beings. The Catholic Church has a broader view of how Jesus works in the hearts of men, with or without human assistance.

This likely stems from the Evangelical doctrine that limits the Word of God to what's printed in the Bible, while the Catholic Church proclaims what the Gospel of John teaches, that Jesus himself is the eternal Word of God, that while he is present in Scripture he is not confined to it, nor even to the Church He established upon Peter and the Apostles. (These issues are dealt with in some detail in the article "Why We Need More Than the Bible" also found in this section of the web site.)

A particular circumstance where these different views come into play is the possible eternal fate of a non-believer. Let's present a hypothetical person to illustrate.

Consider someone who calls himself an atheist. We'll name him John Q. Atheist. Let's say John Q. Atheist is a loving person. In fact, that's why he calls himself an atheist. He loves people so much that he he hurts when he sees suffering, and he can't intellectually fathom the idea that a loving God would allow people to suffer. His "unbelief" is based not on selfishness or greed, or a desire to make himself his own god (that kind of "atheist" can be saved for another discussion.) We're talking here about a person who has a profound love for all people, but simply can't get his mind around the idea of a world with so much chaos still being ruled by an all-powerful and all-loving God.

So he says: "Because there must not be a "God" to care for these suffering people [because of his intellectual limitations to grasp such an idea], I'll do what I can to take care of them." So he feeds the hungry, gives drink to the thirsty, clothes the naked, welcomes strangers, etc.

John Q. Atheist spends his life giving himself in loving service to others. He is also aware that he is not perfect, and when he hurts someone he expresses true

sorrow and asks forgiveness. He also forgives others who hurt him. Though he can't assimilate the idea of "sin" because of his intellectual inability to recognize the concept of "God," John Q. Atheist knows when he misses the mark, acknowledges his transgressions, forgives the transgressions of others, and seeks to improve.

Then John Q. Atheist dies. What happens to him? The answer of many Evangelicals is that he is going to hell. Because John Q. Atheist could not intellectually accept the idea of God he is going to hell, despite all the good he did on earth. It is as if since John was bound by limitations that prevented him from finding God, God is likewise bound by limitations that prevent him from finding John.

The problem with this position is that it re-writes the Gospel, contradicting Jesus' own teaching. In Matthew 25:34ff we read:

"Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to me.'

"They will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?'

[It's interesting to note that the righteous did not intellectually recognize Jesus when they served Him on earth. They simply did what they knew in their heart was the right thing to do. Intellectually recognizing Jesus was not a consideration.]

"And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'"

Evangelicals, however, like to add this ending, which is not part of the story but their theology nevertheless clearly proclaims:

“However—because you did not intellectually recognize me when served me and my people, despite all that you have done for me, BECAUSE YOU DIDN’T KNOW IT WAS ME—depart from me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

That simply isn’t what the Gospel says. What it does say is this:

Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one goes to the Father except through Jesus. (John 14:6) Some people recognize Jesus consciously, and consciously express faith in Him. There are others who recognize the Way, the Truth and the Life in their hearts, but cannot intellectually name Jesus. Jesus clearly lives through their actions, because their actions are from him, even though they cannot intellectually assent to God becoming man as a savior.

Does John Q. Atheist know Jesus in his heart, even if cannot make the connection in his head, and is thus joined to Jesus? The evidence would strongly suggest so. Let’s put this in the context of Scripture.

In 1 John 4:15 we read: “Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.”

Obviously this is not speaking of a mere verbal confession, for anyone can say with their lips that Jesus is the Son of God while their actions do not show true belief.

Let’s continue with the next verse: “And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.”

John Q. Atheist abides in love. He is a caring neighbor who helps those in need, willing to sacrifice his time and resources for the sake of others. So although John cannot explicitly confess Jesus as the Son of God, he does abide in love, and as 1 John 4:15 says, “he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.” In fact, the Scripture also teaches that one cannot perform any act of love apart from some kind of union with God. In John 15:4-5 Jesus says (emphasis added):

“Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.”

John Q. Atheist is bearing good fruit, which cannot be done apart from Jesus, so he must have some connection to Jesus, whether he realizes it or not.

On that same note, as Jesus says in Matthew 7:17-20 (emphasis added): “A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them.”

By their fruits, not by their words.

John Q. Atheist must be a good tree, since he bears good fruit. No bad tree can bear good fruit, and should be thrown into the fire. John must be a good tree that shouldn't go into the fire.

His good works must be the fruit of faith—faith in what a Christian would call the Way, the Truth and the Life, though he cannot verbalize it as such.

We also read in 1 John 4:20: “He who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?” Conversely, he who does love his brother whom he can see, can love God whom he has not. Because John Q. Atheist can love his brother whom he can see, he can love God consciously if he can get his mind around that concept. In the meantime, he seems to abide in God and God in him through the love that transcends human understanding.

Now we read in Luke 23:34 these words of Jesus from the cross, referring to those who crucified him: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.” Inferred here is the idea that if these people consciously knew the evil they were committing, they would repent and ask for God's forgiveness. Jesus is already praying for them in their extreme ignorance that led them to torture and to kill him. John Q. Atheist, whose ignorance isn't nearly as severe (since his fruits demonstrate he is much closer to explicit faith than Jesus' executioners) must also have Jesus praying for forgiveness for his transgressions.

In Matthew 6:14-15 Jesus says: "If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

John Q. Atheist abides in love, seeks forgiveness, and forgives others. Since the heavenly Father forgives those who forgive, John Q. Atheist must be forgiven. And he must abide in God since he abides in love.

In fact, if explicit faith was a requirement, some of the Apostles would never have been sent forth. In two Gospel accounts of their commissioning we read of Jesus sending them though some doubted what they were being sent to do:

"Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them. When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:16-20)

"Later He appeared to the eleven as they sat at the table; and He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen. And He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.'" (Mark 16:14-15)

How could they be sent out if they did not believe? Or did they truly believe, in ways that Jesus understood and we don't?

The Catholic Church teaches that the fullest way to experience life in Christ while on this earth is through participation in the life of the Church He established upon Peter and the Apostles; this is how Jesus desires all people to live. This does not mean that only those fully joined to the Church can be saved. All can be saved who seek the Way, the Truth and the Life in their hearts, regardless of their intellectual framework, because they are really seeking Jesus, and Jesus knows that. And Jesus can do much without our help or our knowledge. (Thank God for that!)