

THE SALVATION DEBATE AND EVANGELICAL RESPONSE

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No other doctrine is as sensitive as the doctrine of salvation. It usually provokes. Because of the hard facts with which it confronts people, it gets attacked from left, right and centre. Those outside the Church accuse Christians as being bigoted whenever they talk of 'being saved.' Within Christendom, many who are theologically liberal mock those who claim to be saved as being 'naive.' 'How can you be sure that you are saved?', they sarcastically ask. "Look at the millions of religious Hindus and Muslims. You mean they will be lost?" the critics ask. 'God is love, and since he doesn't want anybody to perish, all shall be saved eventually', they often argue. Endlessly the talking goes. The debate about salvation is very much alive. How should an Evangelical respond?

In this article we shall address ourselves to five areas of the salvation debate: Pluralism, Universalism, Second-chancism, Syncretism and Humanitarianism.

Pluralism

An Explanation

Pluralism is the doctrine that advocates many ways of salvation. As a belief or system of thought, it grows out of the socio-religious complexities of human society. It is argued that there are many faces to reality and since human perception of reality varies from people to people, and from place to place, and from generation to generation, room should be allowed for divergent forms and structures as long as the substance is the same. The Hindus know God and worship him; so the Muslims; and the Buddhists and so on and so forth. God is one, it is argued; and it doesn't matter whether you call him God or Allah or Brahma or Theos or Jehovah or Mungu. Appeal is also made to the sociological structure of the society. In the same house, among the same family you have Muslims and Christians and traditional religionists living together in harmony. Sometimes being saved is compared to going to a place like Mombasa from Nairobi. You can go by road, or by train or by aeroplane. It does not matter which way you take. As long as you get there, you are ok.

The highest form of pluralism is the religious cult called **Bahatism**. Originating in nineteenth century, Bahai's goal is to become a world religion to end all religions by accepting all religions. All of the founders of all religions are divine including Bahauallah (Mirza Husain Ali, died 1892)

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who founded the Bahai movement. The founder claimed progressive revelation with his idea as the latest. The goal of the movement is to establish a new world order.

In Africa, two of the strongest advocates of Pluralism are Dr. Kibicho, head of the religious department of the university of Nairobi and Dr. B. Akiiki of the religious department of Makerere university. In a paper presented at the yearly meeting of the Association of Theological Institutions in Eastern Africa held in April, 1982 at the Lutheran Theological College, Makumira, Tanzania, Dr. Kibicho states that the means of salvation include:

- 1) the created order;
- 2) man's unique nature;
- 3) persons of outstanding wisdom;
- 4) the activities of God in individuals and in nations; and
- 5) peoples' religious activities led by divine persons and others.

He further argues: There is revelation fully salvatory in any religion, as the 'cosmic Christ' is present. This revelation he concludes, 'must be understood in pluralistic terms.'¹ His colleague, Dr. Akiiki shares the same conviction. He claims that African worship is highly experienced compared to Christian worship of only 2,000 years. To him, survival (i.e. salvation) is at the heart of religion in Africa. And since African traditional religion offers that, in participation, initiative, love, care, and respect for others, it qualifies for a salvation religion. In principle he did not see much real contribution from the Church to the understanding of God in Africa. He admits that Christ is divine but only on the same level with African divines.

A Christian Defense

The first weakness of the Pluralists is that of their premise. More often than not, arguments begin from the point of anthropology and sociology rather than theology. Reality is boxed within human experience in a kind of closed system. Only the facts which agree with socio-religious experiences are taken into consideration at the expense of God's revelatory pronouncement. For example, how do the Pluralists reconcile their claim with Christ's assertion: 'I am the way, the truth and the life, no man comes unto the Father but by me'? Again, what will the Pluralists say to Peter's statement: 'There is no other name (besides Jesus Christ) under heaven given to men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12)?

We are talking here about authority. Both Jesus and Peter together with all the inspired New Testament writers advocate one way — Christ's way. Dr. Kibicho says that there are other ways including persons of outstanding wisdom. On what authority does he base his assertion? Is biblical revelation supreme and final as seems implied in Psalms 119:89 and

1. Norvald Yri, 'Theology in Africa — Que Vadis?', an unpublished critique paper; Lutheran Theological College, Makumira, Tanzania, April 1982.

Matthew 5:18? Is the witness of the Bible concerning itself valid and normative? Are the words of the Scriptures inspired of God and without error (2 Tim. 3:16)? Protestant Reformation thesis of **sola Scriptura** (the Bible alone) rests on a positive answer to these questions. God has spoken and what He has said is the truth since God cannot lie (Titus 1:3; Heb. 6:18). On the basis of their commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the trustworthiness of the Word of God, evangelicals throughout the centuries have always limited the ground of religious authority to the Bible.

Secondly, the Pluralists err by confusing means of revelation with means of salvation. Kibicho claims that the means of salvation include the five things listed above. This statement is grossly misleading. Beginning from the created order to man's unique nature, and including all God's activities in history as well as man's religious activities, all that man perceives is that there is a God. But such knowledge does not automatically save man. Surely it confronts man with the existence of God. It also reveals certain attributes of God like power, goodness, righteousness, justice and wisdom. If anything, such knowledge condemns man as a sinner. For instance, making laws in a state does not necessarily transform that state's citizens to be law-abiding. Rather, the laws reveal the sinfulness of the people and serve as a canon to condemn them. But it may be argued: 'aren't the law-abiding citizens rewarded or honoured by the same laws?' To this we respond that the law-abiding citizens are not necessarily rewarded unless they do acts of merit, though they are unpunished for what they have not done. Correspondingly, if a man responds positively to God's revelation either by keeping God's moral laws or pure religious devotion as some Muslims do, God will exonerate him from the penalty of sin acts. But as for merit which earns salvation no one is qualified since all by birth inherit a sin nature.

Herein lies God's love, He gave His only Son, who was not born in sin, neither knew nor committed sin acts and yet he died vicariously in the place of condemned sinners. The death of the innocent righteous Son of God is the only acceptable merit for salvation before God. It is the only means of salvation. And it is as repentant sinners place their faith in Christ and his finished work, either prospectively as in the Old Testament times or retrospectively as since after the cross, that God in His mercy imputes Christ's righteousness to their accounts. This is why the Bible concludes that salvation is a gift. The classical Dispensationalist thesis on this subject can not be surpassed. It states: 'The requirement for salvation in every age is faith; the object of faith in every age is God; the content of faith changes in the various dispensations but the basis of salvation in every age is the death of Christ'.²

2. Charles C. Ryrie. *Dispensationalism Today* (Moody Press)

A third area where the Pluralists err is their failure to see the radical nature of sin. Prophet Jeremiah locates its root in man's heart saying: 'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked' (Jer. 17:9). David, the Psalmist, identifies it with the very seed of life. He says: 'I was shaped in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me' (Ps. 51:5). Isaiah asserts that try as we could, 'all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags' (Isa.64:6). In another message, he uses the metaphor of sheep going astray, every one to his own way, to describe the lostness of man. Apostle Paul puts all these together in a beautiful piece: 'All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; and the wages of sin is death' (Rom. 3:23; 6:23). Death in this context is a spiritual separation or alienation from God. On anyone in such a state, the wrath of God hangs. God's justice demands a punishment of every sinner; God's love provides a substitute in the person of Christ who, knowing no sin, was made to be sin for all that every believer might be made the righteousness of God in Christ. This is what Christ means when he categorically states: "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man comes to the Father except by me' (Jn. 14:6).

Universalism

An Explanation

Universalism is the belief that ultimately all mankind shall be saved. Speaking in October 1981 after his election as one of the six presidents; of the World Council of Churches, Dr. A.M. Ramsey, former Archbishop of Canterbury declared: 'Heaven is not a place for Christians only. Those who have led a good life on earth but found themselves unable to believe in God will not be debarred from heaven. I expect to meet some present-day atheists there.'³ Recent studies in the World Council of Churches have raised the question of universalism explicitly and have also assumed the universalist position. One of their statements reads: 'By the raising up of the New Man, Christ Jesus, every man has been made a member of the New Mankind'.⁴ In his book, **New Testament Eschatology in an African Background**, Professor John S. Mbiti espouses universalism. His Chapter on 'corporate eschatology' is nothing but universalism through and through. In one instance he states:

For individuals it (i.e. Resurrection) is the union between creatures and their Creator. Thus, the Resurrection is a personal experience, flooding mankind and the cosmos with the dimension of the present, in the presence of God, clothing them with immortality, incorruptibility, unchangeableness of liveness. It is a resurrection into a consciousness of and participation in the very presence of God.⁵

3. Daily Mail, October 2, 1961, published in Britain.

4. Cited by Dr. Edmund P. Clowney in 'The Sovereignty of God ... and the Lostness of Men', **Horizons** November-December 1970, p. 4.

5. John S. Mbiti. **New Testament Eschatology in an African Background**. (London: SPCK, paperback 1978), pp. 168-9

In another instance he says: 'Man's participation in the Resurrection-event would be incomplete as long as the rest of creation remains groaning in travail.'⁶ To make his universalistic claim dear, Mbiti categorically declares:

There is not a single soul, however debased or even unrepentant, which can successfully 'flee' from the Spirit of God (Ps. 139:1-18). God's patient waiting for the soul's repentance must in the end be surely more potent than the soul's reluctance to repent and turn to Him (cf. 2 Pet. 3:9). The harmony of the heavenly worship would be impaired if, out of the one hundred in the sheepfold, there is one soul which continues to languish in Shoel or 'the lake of fire'.⁷

Universalism is not a new doctrine. It was espoused early in the history of Christianity by Clement of Alexandria (d.c. 215) and his pupil, Origen (d. 254). Down through the ages, it has succeeded in securing advocates and proponents. These include Gregory of Nazianus (d.c. 389), Gregory of Nyssa (d.c. 394), Didymus of Alexandria (d.c. 395), John Scotus Erigena (d. 877), Jonathan Mayhew, John Murray (founder of the Universalist church), Friedrich Schleiermacher, Karl Barth (d. 1968), Frederic W. Farrar, Charles H. Dodd (tutor of Professor John Mbiti), Herbert H. Farmer, and John A.T. Robinson. Universalism has never found acceptance in any of the major branches of the Church. In fact, after the Reformation, 'it was condemned in the Augsburg Confession (1530) and was at variance with the conclusions of the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Council of Trent (1563), and the Westminster confession (1646)'.⁸

Universalists' arguments can be broadly grouped in two categories: Speculative or philosophical and Biblical or theological. On speculative ground, the case is advanced that if the ultimate attribute of God is love, that radical love will pursue every man until he is redeemed. It is also postulated that God's irresistible grace cannot but overcome man's opposition. Further, Universalists usually romanticise the Biblical teaching concerning heaven and hell. Paul Tillich considered them as nonsense terms in reality. He claims that when one dies he simply comes into the New Being. Emil Brunner takes the mention of hell as a challenge to right action rather than as a description of an objective condition. To Mbiti, 'heaven for its own sake is not heavenly. It has neither attraction nor meaning, except perhaps to societies that might feel oppressed and deprived, and hence the need to escape psychologically to such a myth'⁹

6. *ibid* p. 169

7. *ibid*. p. 179

8. David J. Hesselgrave, 'Universalism', **Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics**; ed. Carl F.H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973), p. 689.

9. Mbiti, p. 89

On the Biblical or theological ground, Universalists begin with the death of Christ. It is claimed that since Christ died for the sins of the whole world, everyone shall be saved in the end. It is reasoned that since the fall of Adam has affected us all, and since God's grace in Jesus is for everyone on the basis of his universal atonement, it is only logical that everyone shall be saved. Karl Barth argues that through the will of the electing God, all men are in Christ and that the only difference between Christians and heathen is 'noetic' not 'ontic'. In support of this view, Universalists often cite Bible passages which declare the salvation of all men to be God's will (e.g. 1 Tim. 2:4); or that allegedly predict the salvation of all (e.g. 1 Cor. 15:22-28); or seemingly include all in a salvific relationship with God (e.g. 2 Cor. 5:19); or purportedly give grounds for hope after death to all (e.g. Mt. 18:18-22).

From the death of Christ, they proceed to His Lordship, using Philippians 2:9-11 as their proof-text. On this passage, Gregory of Nyssa based his doctrine of total annihilation of evil with a corollary of salvation of all. Identifying 'things in heaven' as obedient angelic beings; 'things on earth' as all human beings — dead or alive; and 'things under the earth' as disobedient fallen angels, Gregory asserts that the confession of Christ as Lord shall be incomplete without the redemption of all. He claims: '... when evil shall have been (some say) annihilated in the long revolutions of the ages, nothing shall be left outside the world of goodness, but even from those evil spirits shall rise in harmony the confession of Christ's Lordship'.¹⁰ Here Gregory shares his teacher, Origen's view that Satan himself shall be saved same day.

To strengthen this position, appeal is made to the sanctifying power of punishment. Gregory uses two analogies here to depict salvation which results from purgation. The first is that of gold refined by fire. 'For it is as when some worthless material has been mixed with gold, and the gold-refiners burn up the foreign and refuse part in the consuming fire, and so restore the more precious substance to its natural lustre'.¹¹ The second metaphor is that of a surgical operation. He writes:

For it is now as with those who for their cure are subjected to the knife and the cautery; they are angry with the doctors, and wince with the pain of the incision; but if recovery of health be the result of this treatment, and the pain of the cautery passes away, they will feel grateful to those who have wrought this cure upon them. In like manner, when, after long periods of time, the evil of our nature ... has been expelled, and when there has been a restoration of those who are now lying in Sin to their primal state, a harmony of thanksgiving will

10. Philip Schaff & Henry Wace, eds, 'Gregory of Nyssa' in **Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church** (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1976, reprinted; Vol. 5,) p. 444

11. *ibid.*, p. 495

arise from all creation, as well as from those who in the process of the purgation have suffered chastisement, as from those who needed not any purgation at all. These and the like benefits, the great mystery of the Divine incarnation bestows.¹²

In this quote, it becomes clear that Gregory and Origen are one in respect of salvation of all, including Satan. Gregory concludes his thesis stating that by the Christ-event, God frees man from evil and heals even the introducer of evil himself namely Satan.¹³ This is the highest form of universalism.

The last Biblical argument often used by the Universalists is 1 Corinthians 15:22-28, a passage that deals with the consummation of all things. From this passage emerge two arguments. A weaker one based on verse 22 envisions a universal salvation in Christ corresponding to a universal fall in Adam. This has already been alluded to above. The second and stronger argument is based on verse 28, and in particular, the little phrase: "that God may be all in all". Like Origen, Gregory insists on the impossibility of God being in 'everything', if evil still remains. Therefore, he argues for the restoration of all things to their original or primitive state at creation. He interprets the phrase to mean 'that God will be instead of all other things, and in all'. He concludes by saying: "He that becomes 'all' things will be 'in all' things too; and herein it appears to me that Scripture teaches the complete annihilation of evil. If, that is, God will be 'in all' existing things, evil, plainly, will not then be amongst them; for if any one was to assume that if it exist then, how will the belief that God will be 'in all' be kept intact? The expecting of that one thing, evil, mars the comprehensiveness of the term 'all'. But He that will be 'in all' will never be in that which does not exist."¹⁴ By this passage Gregory reinforced his doctrine of annihilation of evil, restoration of all things to their original state of goodness and, of course, salvation of all things so that God may be all in all.

A Christian Defense

If the problem of a Pluralist is sociological in nature, that of a universalist is intellectual. A careful study of universalists' literatures reveals the tendency to wed Biblical theology with secular philosophy. Wherever this happens, compromise is usually struck with biblical revelation on the shorter end. This is evident as much in Origen's attempt to systematise biblical doctrines on Plato's humanistic philosophical ideals as in Paul Tillich's theological construct heavily based on Hindu pantheistic assumptions. Forgotten is the fact that God, the eternal and unchanging One, has spoken and His words

12. *ibid.*, p. 496

13. *ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, p. 452

cannot be broken. As for human rationalization, this cannot only be challenged but changes from generation to generation and from culture to culture.

To the claim that God's radical love will pursue every man until he is redeemed, the universalists forget that God's perfection of righteousness and justice is equally ultimate. Likewise, God's irresistible grace has been overstressed at the expense of essential biblical conditions for salvation, namely, repentance and faith. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that God holds everyone responsible for his own choice. He does not force His will on people, rather He invites them to respond. In John 1:11-12, we read that He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed on his name, he gave the right to become children of God. In another passage we read of the verdict that whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son (John 3:18). In the light of this, the Universalist's claim that people are saved against their will is erroneous. God's offer of salvation is like an invitation to dinner extended to all. Adequate provision is made for all. But when the time comes, people, exercising their freedom, give different excuses thereby forfeiting their chance. Jesus ends that parable by saying: 'many are called, but few are chosen' (see Mt. 22:1-14). Those who are chosen are those who respond positively to the invitation.

Unlike the Universalists, Jesus and the New Testament writers take the issue of man's destiny seriously. They do not romanticise heaven and hell or exploit the doctrine merely to induce right action. Jesus emphasizes the separation at the end of time between 'sheep' and 'goats' - the former those inheriting God's Kingdom and the later those departing to destruction. Both heaven and hell are as real in the teaching of Jesus as palaces and prisons are in this world. It is also Jesus who told the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Unlike his parables, Jesus named one of the characters in this story giving an impression of his having a particular case in mind. Locatively placed with a great gulf fixed between them, Jesus vividly illustrates the two eternal destinies for mankind. This same message is conveyed by Apostle John in Revelation 20:11-15 which describes God's final judgment and the verdict of life to those who have believed and of death — a separation from God; a banishment from His presence into a lake of fire — to those who have rejected Him. If everyone is saved automatically as the universalists claim, then the Lord's commission to His Church to preach the gospel and make disciples is a mockery. Also, the call to practise holiness and self-denial makes no sense.

The argument of all being saved in Christ as all fell in Adam seems logical. In fact, Apostle Paul employs the thesis in Romans chapter five where he compares and contrasts justification with condemnation. Using the expression 'much more' the apostle demonstrates the higher, greater and

deeper effect of God's grace through Christ's death that brings salvation. 'Where sin increased', he reasons, 'grace increased much more'. If he had stopped there, we would have had no case against universalism. But he didn't. He goes on to ask: Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? And the answer is: God forbid. From this account and similar passages we arrive at this conclusion: By his death — an expression of God's love and grace — Christ makes everyone saveable since everyone is the object of God's love. Whether a man is saved or condemned in the end depends not on the provision made by God but rather on his response of faith or rejection in revolt. This naturally raises questions about the fate of dead infants, the mentally sick and the unevangelized peoples of the world. In keeping with our conclusion that the blood of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God slain before the foundation of the earth, speaks better things than the fall in Adam, and consistent with God's loving kindness, that does not want any to perish, we are forced to conclude that God will deal favourably with infants and the mentally sick.¹⁵ As for the unevangelized, God is a righteous and impartial judge. He will judge everyone of them according to how they respond to the measure of revelatory light He gives them.¹⁶

Concerning confessing Jesus Christ as Lord, we need not force the Scripture into human rationalism which asserts that comprehensive confession is only meaningful with the annihilation of evil. In the contrary, just as the demons believe that there is one God but yet won't submit to Him so will it be with the lordship of Christ. In defeat the condemned intelligencies — human and angelic — will acknowledge the lordship of Jesus Christ even when that is against their stubborn will. Likewise, it is superfluous to stress the sanctifying power of eternal punishment by fire at the expense of eternal satisfaction of God's justice and righteousness. No where does the Scripture speak of annihilation. Even at the dawn of new creation — of heaven and earth — we still read of two separate destinies. Of new heaven and the descending new Jerusalem Apostle John says: 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God'. Then he goes on to describe the destiny of those condemned: 'But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and fornicators, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death' (Rev. 21:3,8)

15. Robert P. Lightner has carefully pulled together Biblical teachings in support of this conclusion. His book, **Heaven for those who can't Believe** which primarily deals with the case of dead infants covers in some measure the case of those who cannot believe, the mentally retarded. Published by Regular Baptist Press, Schaumburg, Illinois, 1977.

16. In his epistle to the Romans chapter 2, Paul identifies four canons of judgment — truth; deeds; law (on tablet and on conscience); and the gospel — and in his preaching on Mars' Hill, he adds a fifth, judgment by 'this man' meaning Jesus (Ac. 17:31).

Can the belief that God will be 'in all' be kept intact with the existence of evil? The Bible answers in the affirmative. It is consistent with the sovereignty of God to exercise His will in goodness and in severity — to those who believe, goodness; but to those who believe not, severity (see Rom. 11:22). In a similar judgment: context during the captivity of Israel, Jehovah speaks of his sovereign authority in words that are not comforting to a rebellious heart. He says: 'I am the Lord, and there is none else, there is no God beside me ... I form the light, and create darkness; I make peace, and create darkness; I make peace, and create evil; I, the Lord, do all these things' (Isaiah 45:5,7). Though God does not desire any to perish, when men rebelliously turn away from Him and reject His merciful provision, He cannot but satisfy His justice and righteousness. This does not in any way diminish His goodness or limit the comprehensiveness of His being 'all in all'. Rather, it confirms His dual perfections of love and justice, of Goodness and severity. After all, He is Lord of all.

Second-chancism

An Explanation

This doctrine takes three forms. One form states that the unevangelized, the mentally sick and infants who died before they could make a decision will be given a chance in the resurrection of all peoples. The second form teaches that after death and while awaiting the resurrection, an offer concerning Christ is made to the unbelieving dead regardless of whether they heard the gospel before they died or not. Passages often cited in support of this position are Ephesian 4:9-10; 1 Peter 3:19-20 and 4:6. The third position is that held officially by the Roman Catholic Church. It maintains that 'the soul which has temporal punishment still due goes to purgatory ... The faithful can help the holy souls by prayer and good works (i.e. indulgence)'.¹⁷ Passages used in support of an intermediate state between death and judgment and for the possibility of forgiveness either through intercession or purgatorial fire include 2 Maccabees 12:39-45 (from apocryphal books unrecognised by the Protestant Church), Matthew 5:26; 12:32 and 1 Cor. 3:11-15.

A Christian Defense

The teaching about a second chance stems from an improper exegesis of the passages cited, a universalistic tendency, and a failure to take the Scripture at its face-value where it speaks forthrightly. The Bible clearly says: 'It is appointed to every man once to die, and after death judgment' (Hebr. 9:27). In support of this thesis, the writer of Hebrews refers to Christ's death which makes atonement for sins once and for all (verse 28).

17. Josef Neuner, S.J. and Hunrich Ross, S.J. edited by Karl Rahner, S.J. **The Teaching of the Catholic Church** (New York: Alba House, 1967), p. 414

The emphasis of the New Testament suggests that the choice of one's eternal destiny is made during one's life time. The story of the rich man and Lazarus already mentioned disallows a second chance. The statement of Jesus to one of the malefactors crucified with him offers no second chance to the other (see Luke 23:39-43). In John 3:18, we read that whoever does not believe stands condemned **already**. Later in verse 36, John argues that as one enters into eternal life upon believing on Christ so the other enters into eternal condemnation upon rejecting God's offer. The drama of destiny is lived out here and now.

Syncretism

An Explanation

Originally a political term, syncretism was later used as an expression of harmony between philosophy and religion. Much later, in the context of religious plurality and cultural diversity, syncretism has assumed the meaning of 'mixture'. Thus John Stott describes it as 'a fruit cocktail of religions'. Webster, Random and Oxford dictionaries define it as 'the reconciliation or union of divergent beliefs'. At the Congress on the Church's Worldwide Mission held in the United States in 1966, three kinds of syncretism were described:

1. Syncretism by assimilation which incorporates elements of non-Christian religions, assuming there is no qualitative difference between the Christian faith and other faiths.
2. Syncretism by accommodation which reduces or replaces the Gospel message.
3. Syncretism by accretion or by growth in which secondary beliefs and practices overlay and obscure the basic message.¹⁸

Our concern in this paper centres on the second type, syncretism by accommodation. It is what Professor Beyerhaus describes as 'an unconscious tendency or conscious attempt to undermine the uniqueness of a religion by equating its elements with those of other belief systems. Syncretism equates heterogeneous religious elements and thereby changes their original meaning without admitting such a change'.¹⁹

Syncretistic soteriology claims: 1) that there are many ways to reach the divine reality: 2) that Christ's atoning sacrifice needs to be supplemented. Both positions are found among liberal Protestant thinkers, within the ecumenical ranks and the Roman Catholic theologians. Writing in **Attitudes Toward other Religions**, Hans Kung remarks: 'Every human being is under God's grace and can be saved; and we may hope that everyone is.

18. Harold Lindsell, ed. **The Church's Worldwide Mission** (Waco: Word Books, 1966), p. 96.

19. Professor Peter Beyerhaus, 'Syncretism', in **Christianity Today** (July 5, 1974), p. 1175.

Every world religion is under God's grace and can be a way of salvation' 20 The distinguished Roman Catholic divine Karl Rahner says: 'The exclusive claims of Christianity operate only where Christianity is known; non-Christian faiths, which are the combined products of grace and sin, function as legitimate and saving religions where Christianity is absent; their adherents should be classed as anonymous Christians'.²¹ The whole gamut of pluralists' argument as seen above is rooted in this belief that there are many ways of salvation. From the workbook of the 5th General Assembly of the World Council of Churches held in Nairobi in 1976 we read: 'We cannot exclude possibilities of God speaking to Christians from outside the Church ... We may find ourselves encountered by an African Christ, a Latin American Christ, and Asian Christ or a European Christ.'²²

The second form of syncretistic soteriology is contained in all kinds of legalism, gnosticism, asceticism and false mysticism. Any doctrine or practise that postulates grace plus anything (including penance; hidden superior knowledge; esoteric experience; observance of certain food and days; keeping the Law; and performing rituals and sacrifices) is syncretistic soteriology.

A Christian Defense

We have given an answer to the pluralistic form of syncretism above. It is unnecessary to it repeat here. To the second form, there is no stronger statement than the Reformation thesis **sola gratia** and salvation is by faith alone, **sola fide**. The just shall live by faith alone! '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). In another passage we read: 'But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy' (Tit. 3:4-5). Every repentant sinner approaches God with an empty hand. For salvation in Christ is a free gift. The sacrifice of Christ by his atoning substitutionary death is both efficient and sufficient. There is nothing more that a sinner can do or is required to do except to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Often the error of syncretistic salvation arises from a false concept of the fall of man. Fallenness is regarded as weakness through deprivation rather than badness through depravity. There is no radical directional antithesis between sin and grace, only a difference between want and supply. The

20. Owen C. Thomas, ed. 'The Freedom of Religions', **Attitudes Towards other Religions**, p. 216.

21. Karl Rahner, 'Christianity and the non-Christian Religions' **Theological Investigations**, translated by Karl H. Krueger vol. 5, pp. 115-35.

22. 5th General Assembly of the WCC, Nairobi, 1976, pp. 19-20.

Scripture says: all were dead in trespasses and sins. What can a dead man do to procure his salvation? The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ, our Lord. And having been saved by grace, the believing sinners are kept by the same power. 'Holy Father, keep them through your own name those whom you have given me', prays Jesus for his followers. The Old Testament prophets as well as New Testament writers mince no words in their denunciation of all forms of syncretistic soteriology. Anything added to salvation by grace through faith makes it unbiblical.

HUMANISATION

An Explanation

Is salvation liberation? Men like Gustavo Gutierrez, James Cone and Canon Burgess Carr will readily answer in the affirmative. Liberation from what? From racial inequality, political oppression, economic injustice, exploitation and any other thing or system that prevents man from being 'truly human'. From Uppsala (1968) to Bangkok (1973) to Nairobi (1975) and to Melbourne (1980), the socio-economic and political interpretation of salvation has dominated the World Council of Churches and the consiliar movement. Philip Potter, the General Secretary of WCC dismissed the proclamation of the gospel to the unreached two billion, or to other lands, or to the world as 'totally futile'.²³ 'Salvation Today' was at Bangkok described by M.M. Thomas, chairman of the WCC Control Committee as:

1. bodily health and beauty of bodily form for the youth.
2. development of material abundance
3. security from aggression and peace of the frontier between peoples
4. social justice among the people.²⁴

Stemming from this concept of salvation has been the Council's Program to Combat Racism which gives millions of dollars to Liberation fighters. The former General Secretary of All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), Canon Burgess Carr, stated at his organization's 3rd General Assembly at Lusaka that God endorses violence by the death of His Son on the cross.²⁵ He therefore conceives liberation struggles as part of salvation process. One of Geneva reports of the WCC sums up this position aptly:

We have lifted up humanization as the goal of mission because we believe that more than other (positions) it communicates in our period of history the meaning of the messianic goal. In another time the goal of God's redemptive work might best have been described in terms of man turning towards God ... The fundamental question was

23. 'International Review of Missions' (April 1973), p. 145

24. *ibid.*, pp. 159-160

25. Byang H. Kato "Evangelical Evaluation of Lusaka Conference", *Perception*, Volume 1, No. 2, July 1974, p. 8.

that of the true God, and the Church responded to that question by pointing to Him. It was assuming that the purpose of mission was Christianization, bringing man to God through Christ and His Church. Today the fundamental question is much more that of true man, and the dominant concern of the missionary congregation must therefore be to point to the humanity in Christ as the goal of mission.²⁶

The position as described above has been given theological expressions in works of such men as Harvey Cox, **The Secular City** (1965); L. Shier, **The Secularization of History** (1966); James Cone, **A Black Theology of Liberation** (1973).

An Evangelical Appraisal

When carefully examined one discovers that humanisation as advocated by some leading Black and Liberation theologians and within the senior ranks of the WCC is a radical departure from the Biblical emphasis on the religious relation between God and man to the social relation between man and society — a shift from the vertical dimension to the horizontal. In his evaluation of 'theologies of liberation' in Latin America, Samuel Escobar identifies three areas of weakness in the system. The first is the primacy of praxis: 'you first perceive God moving in history and consequently throw your lot with Him; only then you go to Scripture or to Christian truth in order to read'²⁷ The second is a false historical assumption which claims that the Church has always been classist, that is, an institution at the service of one social class: the exploiters. Such an assumption endorses the inevitability of class struggle. The third deals with the hermeneutical method which employs Marxist economic analysis of the society as a science for understanding Scriptures. Beginning with such presuppositions and using such a method one can understand the reason for the radical shift.

Does it therefore mean that salvation in the Bible not include the horizontal dimension? How broad is salvation in Scripture? In his article presented at Grand Rapids on the Consultation on the relationship between Evangelism and Social Responsibility, Ronald Sider comes to several conclusions. Since we are in basic agreement with him, we have quoted him extensively here. 'In the Old Testament salvation is clearly social and corporate and includes every aspect of life. God's salvation pertains to material prosperity, justice for the poor and needy in the judicial system, and the continued historical existence of the people of Israel. The very centre of God's saving activity in the Old Testament was the

26. Drafts for Sections, The Uppsala Report 1968, p. 34.

27. Samuel Escobar, 'A Critical Appraisal of Current Theological Trends in Latin America, unpublished paper presented at Seoul Korea during the Third World Theologians Consultation, Sept. 1982.

calling forth of a redeemed community, the people of Israel. At the same time the vertical dimension is everywhere present. God himself is the author of salvation. He took the initiative to effect salvation at the exodus. Both persons and the people of Israel continue to enjoy salvation only as they trust in Yahweh'. Turning to the Gospels, one finds that the idea of salvation is inseparably linked with the Kingdom of God in the teaching and ministry of Jesus. Being saved is entering into (Mk.9:47) or receiving (Lk. 8:17) or inheriting (Mt. 25:34) the kingdom. 'Just as a new redeemed community was central to God's salvation in the Old Testament, so too Jesus called out a new community of disciples who received the salvation of the dawning kingdom and began to live out the kingdom values of the New age. Experiencing the salvation of the kingdom Jesus announced meant a total transformation of values, actions and relationships.²⁸ That salvation begins with a religious vertical relationship of man with God and then reaches out in horizontal dimension to neighbours in the society. In Pauline thought, salvation focuses on the redeeming act of Christ on the cross. Through it as a past event, believers are justified, redeemed and reconciled with God; and as a present reality, they are empowered by the Holy Spirit to live out victorious reconciled lives where there is neither Jew nor Gentiles (Eph. 2:11ff). Forgiveness, sanctification, reconciliation, corporate transformation are all aspects of salvation in the New Testament. We truncate the gospel wherever the horizontal dimension is overlooked. On the other hand, any gospel that blurs or ignores or stresses the horizontal at the expense of the vertical is as good as secular humanism. Sider's final conclusion is appropriate to end this section. 'If biblical usage is decisive, then we should use salvation language to refer only to what happens when persons confess Christ, experience the salvation he offers, and begin to live out the radical demands of his new kingdom. Certainly that salvation is vertical and horizontal, personal and social. But it is all within the context of conscious confession of Christ. Salvation language should probably not be used to refer to the imperfect emergence of justice and peace in the society at large before the return of Christ'.²⁹

28. Ronald J. Sider and James Parker, III, 'How Broad is Salvation in Scripture?' Unpublished paper presented at Grand Rapids during the Consultation on the Relationship between Evangelism and Social Responsibility, June 1982, p. 5

29. *ibid.*, p. 15

Conclusion

From the above it has been demonstrated that it is not any empty assertion to say that of all doctrines of the Church that of salvation is prince. It suffers attack more from within the Church than from outside. Our study reveals that attacks from within the Church on this doctrine arise primarily from three sources: 1) an erosion of confident trust in the inspired authoritative Word of God; 2) an accommodation of God's Word to human philosophy and rationalism; and 3) a reversal of hermeneutical process, from the world to the Word instead of from the Word to the world. As evangelicals we must guard against these pitfalls. We must tenaciously hold to the primacy of God's Word. God's eternal unchanging Word must remain supreme in matters of faith and practise. It is not a product of the literary activity of the Church. Rather, the Church bows before the authority of the Word. **Sola Scriptura** must ring out loud and clear in our day.

To understand the word and communicate it with relevance, evangelicals, particularly of the Third World, must evolve meaningful and effective hermeneutics. I cannot agree any less with Rene' Padilla in his suggestion of a four-dimensional hermeneutics: 1) communal, deriving from community of believers; 2) pneumatic, illumined by the Holy Spirit; 3) contextual, taking seriously the cultural context; and 4) missiological, responding to God's mission of calling people from all nations to faith and obedience in Christ.³⁰ It is also imperative that we exegete our socio-economic-politico and cultural contexts seriously. We need to know our people, our history and present day struggles so as to be able to relate the gospel sensibly. Needless to say that words and deeds, faith and obedience, evangelism and social justice must go hand-in-hand. If the Church fails in this harmony her credibility disappears and she becomes irrelevant or unnecessary. Finally, the Church as a pneumatic community cannot afford to sacrifice purity, prayer and loving outreach for programs, propaganda and popularity. All nations must be discipled for Christ.

30. Rene' Padilla, 'Toward a Biblical Foundation', Unpublished paper delivered at Seoul, Korea, Sept. 1982