

# IS THERE SALVATION OUTSIDE THE CHRISTIAN FAITH?

Mark Shaw

## Introduction

It is a most puzzling climax. In **The Last Battle**, the final volume of C.S. Lewis' **Chronicles of Narnia**, Emeth, Seventh son of Harpha Tarkaan, life-long enemy of Aslan (The Christ-figure of Narnia), and worshipper of the false God Tash awaits his fate as he faces the victorious lion. Aslan's judgment is stunning:

"Child, all the service thou has done to Tash, I count as service done to me ... Not because he and I are one, but because we are opposites ... If any man swear by Tash and keep his oath for the oath's sake, it is by me that he has truly sworn, though he know it not, and it is I who reward him.

'But,' I said ... 'I have been seeking Tash all my days.'

'Beloved ... unless thy desire had been for me thou wouldst not have sought so long and so truly. For all find what they truly seek.'<sup>1</sup>

In this episode, C.S. Lewis, apologist, novelist, scholar and Christian humanist, boldly strikes a controversial chord that has stirred the church since the days of Justin Martyr (d. 165): the possibility of salvation outside the Christian faith. Students of church history will remember Justin's famous **Apology** and his answer to those who complained that Christianity was too recent to be considered universally true:

We are taught that Christ is the first-born of God, and we have shown above that he is the reason (Word) of whom the whole human race partake, and those who live according to reason are Christians, even though they are accounted atheists. Such were Socrates and Heraclitus among the Greeks, and those like them ...<sup>2</sup>

This sentiment that salvation is possible through sincere devotion and sound dialectic though rejected by the majority of the church fathers by no means disappeared.

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1. C.S. Lewis, **The Last Battle** (Penguin Books, 1956) p. 149.

2. Justin, **Apology** (c. 150) 1. xivi. 1-4. Quoted in Bettenson, **Documents of the Christian Church** (London: Oxford University Press, 1963) 2nd edition, p. 6.

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Zwingli, fresh from the heady discoveries of humanist scholarship and evangelical theology picked up the theme. In the summer of 1531 he sent to Francis I, King of France, his **Exposition of the Faith**, a document intended to clear the reformed faith of charges against it and attract the French king to embrace it as his own. Nearing the end of the document, Zwingli states his view on those who one day will enjoy the bliss of Heaven:

You will see the two Adams, the redeemed and the Redeemer, Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham ... Hercules too and Theseus, Socrates and Aristides, Antigonus ... Louis the Pious and your predecessors the Louis, Pepins, Phillips and all your ancestors who have departed this life in faith. In short there has not lived a single good man, there has not been a single pious heart or believing soul from the beginning of the world to the end, which you will not see there is the presence of God. Can we conceive of any spectacle more joyful or agreeable or indeed more sublime?<sup>3</sup>

Luther was neither joyful nor agreeable about such a spectacle and felt that the Reformation principles **sola fides** and **solus Christus** had been betrayed. For Luther, salvation was exclusively through a theology of the cross which declared that God is not truly known if he is not seen in the face of the suffering Messiah as both simultaneously the wrathful judge and the merciful Saviour. He meets us only at the cross and never outside the Christian faith.<sup>4</sup>

While Luther still speaks for the majority of Evangelicals, C.S. Lewis' tolerant Aslan is a sudden reminder that growing numbers of twentieth century Christians, faced with close encounters with devout men of other faiths and sometimes no faith at all are taking a fresh look at the suggestion of men like Zwingli and Justin.

Third world Christians, particularly here in Africa where the gospel has penetrated only in recent centuries agonize over the question of the destiny of their ancestors and their concerns become those of the global body of Christ.

With these theological and pastoral concerns in mind, it is the purpose of this paper to listen to the contemporary Christian's growing discomfort with Luther's **solus Christus** and **sola fides** and to attempt a biblical-theological evaluation of the arguments which support the possibility of salvation outside the Christian faith.

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3. **Zwingli and Bullinger** ed. G.W. Bromiley, **Library of Christian Classics** (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953) pp. 275-276.

4. For a discussion of the applicability of Luther's **notae exclusivae** [**Sola Scriptura**, **Sola Fides** and **Solus Christus**] to the modern debate over the salvific value of other religions. cf. Norvald Yri "Luther or Biblical Salvation" **East Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology**, vol 2, No. 1, 1983. pp 13 - 18.

## **The Case for a Broader View of Salvation: [I]: Voices of the Theological Left**

From both the theological left and right, flows a small but significant stream of articles, books and public pronouncements that attempt to build a case for a broader, more qualified view of salvation. Western theologians are no longer dominating the discussion of this issue. Africans, Asians and Latin Americans are expressing themselves forcefully and eloquently on the salvation question. Since we can only sample the contributions of a few theologians, mention will be made of a number of representative spokesmen positioned at various points along the left-right, north-south axis.

John Hick has been at the very front of radical rethinking about the gospel. His call for a broadening of the Christian concept of salvation rises from the facts of our modern age. Over 75% of the world is non-Christian. 98% of the time, a person's place of birth determines his religion. Serious study of other religions has made it impossible to be provincial about the superiority of Christianity. Migration to the west of millions of Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs exposes us to the quality of their worship and lives. We are forced by the facts to reject the "older theology which held that God's saving activity is confined within a single narrow thread of human life, namely that recorded in our own Scriptures."<sup>5</sup> While he appreciates the attempt of liberal Christians to open the gates of Heaven to men of other faiths by saying that all men are saved by Christ working through the sacraments of their own particular religion he still detects the vestiges of the old religious imperialism. Such a view is based on the old dogma that "only Christians can be saved: so we have to say that devout and godly non-Christians are really, in some metaphysical sense, Christians or Christians-to-be without knowing it."<sup>6</sup> This is ptolemaic theology which falls into the myopic trap of making our particular religion the center of the spiritual universe. What is needed instead, according to Hick, is a Copernican revolution which puts the ineffable God in the center and relegates all religions to a fairly equidistant orbit around him. "He is the sun, the originative source of light and life, whom all the religions reflect in their own different ways."<sup>7</sup> To the modern Christian who asks a bit nervously about Jesus and his significance, taken this new view, Hick offers soothing assurances. Since higher criticism proves (albeit tentatively) that Jesus did not think of himself as God incarnate, we are thereby liberated from the necessity of defending the uniqueness and supremacy of Christ.

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5. John Hick, "Whatever Path Men Choose is Mine," in J. Hick and B. Hebble Twaite, Eds., **Christianity and Other Religions** (Collins, 1980) p 174. A valuable review of this book by R.R. Cook appears in **East Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology** Vol. 1, 1982, pp. 28—36.

6. **Ibid.** p. 180.

7. **Ibid.** p. 182

“We can revere Christ as the one through whom we have found salvation, without having to deny other points of reported saving contact between God and man.”<sup>8</sup> This opens up theology to a very bright future which most probably will lead not to a single world religion, but rather a pluriformity of faith where the various religions regard each other as of equal validity and quality and freely exchange elements of faith and worship.

Joining Hick on the theological left is Asian theologian, Raimundo Panikkar. Panikkar’s own religious pilgrimage from the faith of his Indian upbringing to Christian conversion in the west and finally a reconversion to Hinduism while still retaining his Christian identity is a fascinating study in the religious climate of our day. A Roman Catholic priest currently teaching in the department of religious studies at the University of California, Panikkar preaches that Christ saves the Hindu through the sacraments of Hinduism.<sup>9</sup> Enlarging on this view he asserts that

Christ is the only mediator, but he is not the monopoly of Christians and, in fact, he is present and effective in any authentic religion, whatever the form or the name, of the ever-transcending but equally ever-humanly immanent mystery ... The means of salvation are to be found in any authentic religion (old or new), since a man follows a particular religion because in it he believes he finds the ultimate fulfillment of his life.<sup>10</sup>

The Apostle Paul supports his view, Panikkar claims, for in Athens the Apostle came not to replace the Athenian’s religion but rather to disclose the Christ hidden at the center of their faith (Acts 17:23, “Whom ... ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.”) The arrogance of **solus Christus** must end or at least be radically reinterpreted.

A more moderate, but still decidedly liberal view has been propounded from an African perspective by Patrick Kalilombe, Roman Catholic bishop and Bible scholar from Malawi. He notes that Vatican II has moved beyond the tridentine **extra ecclesiam nulla salus** and has affirmed the salvific value of other religions.

Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or his church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do his will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.<sup>11</sup>

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8. **Ibid.** p. 186

9. cf. R. Panikkar, **The Unknown Christ of Hinduism** (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1965) p. 54.

10. R. Panikkar, “The Rules of The Game” in Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky, Eds., **Mission Trends No. 5: Faith Meets Faith** (Paulist Fathers-Eerdmans, 1981) p 122

11. **Lumen Gentium** n. 16. Quoted in Patrick Kalilombe, “The Salvific Value of African Religions” in Anderson and Stransky, p. 51.

Kalilombe applauds this new attitude as being both more humble and more biblical. Missions have traditionally approached men of other faiths with an arrogant crusader mentality which refused dialogue and sought only to pin the victim under the weight of the superiority of Christianity. The passing of this attitude is accompanied by new insights from the Scripture. The Old Testament is the story of the struggle between the cosmic covenant of Genesis one to eleven (in which God seeks to save all men) and the later ghetto mentality of the prophets (aided by heavy handed priestly editors of the text) which claimed special spiritual privileges for Israel. Christ and Paul team up in the New Testament to renew the cosmic covenant and bury once and for all the ghetto mentality. God loves all men. He is positive about Gentile culture and religion. The light of Christ is present to all men in different ways. This is the message of the New Testament being rediscovered today. Christ saves men through African Traditional Religion. God is not partial.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Case For a Broader View of Salvation [II]: Evangelical Opinions**

Many features of the theological left are abhorrent to evangelicals on the right. They are less willing to submit the Scripture to the canons of comparative religion and consequently less willing to give up the uniqueness of Christ, or reinterpret his distinctiveness in a way which reduces him to a vague mantra actually standing for any religious instinct man may experience. Yet in spite of these important differences, some evangelicals agree with more liberal opinion that a new quest is needed for a broader view of salvation.

J.N.D. Anderson has called for a fairly moderate reappraisal of the traditional Reformation view held by most evangelicals. While affirming that there is only salvation through Christ, he asserts (noting Zwingli's precedent) that one can argue for salvation for those without explicit faith in Christ under the following conditions:

1. If one can assume that like Old Testament Jews the heathen turns to God not through his religious good works but rather through works of repentance and self-abandonment whereby he throws himself upon God's mercy. He cites the case of Cornelius as support concluding that whoever realizes his sin and abandons himself to God "would find that mercy – although without understanding it – at the cross on which Christ died for all."<sup>13</sup>

2. If one can assume that God is able to speak directly to the human heart and reveal himself to those outside the mainstream of prophetic and apostolic witness (presumably men like Melchizedek, Job, Jethro, Balaam, Nebuchadnezzar, etc.).

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12. *Ibid.* pp. 52-68.

13. J.N.D. Anderson, *Christianity and Comparative Religion* (London: IVP, 1970). p. 102.

3. If one can agree with George Goodman in **The Heathen: Their Present State and Future Destiny** that "it is possible that an omniscient God will judge those who have never heard of Christ on the basis of what he knows would have been their response if they had heard."

4. If one takes seriously the promise made in the Bible to sincere seekers such as Proverbs 8:17 "Those who seek me diligently find me." (though he admits with Paul in Romans 3:11 that none seeks without the initiative of God's grace).

To those who argue that such a position lessens missionary urgency, Anderson counters that weighty and sufficient incentives remain: God has commanded us to witness; the Cornelius category of heathen need explicit teaching to realize the fullness of joy that comes from a clear and conscious view of Christ; and finally, preaching is the common and proper means of salvation and presumably most would not find salvation without explicit teaching of the gospel. Thus Anderson calls for a modest re-evaluation of the Evangelical position.

More controversial are the fragmentary but highly suggestive statements of C.S. Lewis on the subject. In addition to the comments from **The Last Battle** already noted, Lewis in an essay in **God In The Dock** reacted to article XVIII of the Thirty Nine Articles of the church of England which curses anyone who claims to be saved by sincere devotion to another religion or by living up to the light of general revelation. Explains Lewis:

Of course it should be pointed out that though all salvation is through Jesus, we need not conclude that he cannot save those who have not explicitly accepted him in this life. And it should be made clear ... that we are not pronouncing all other religions to be totally false but rather saying that in Christ, whatever is true in all religions is consummated and perfected.<sup>14</sup>

While Lewis did not elaborate systematically on this position, scattered references in some of his writings suggest a few reasons for why he believed in salvation outside Christian faith. The first was an explicit reference in Scripture to forgiveness of those who reject Christ. Luke 12:10 is quoted in one of his essays with its promise that "Whosoever shall speak a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him." Lewis' gloss on this text concludes that "Honest rejection of Christ, however mistaken, will be forgiven and healed."<sup>15</sup> A second reason may lie in his view of religion. For Lewis, whenever religion (even Christianity) is an end in itself, it damns. But as long as it remains a means to know "the joy" (personal

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14. C.S. Lewis, **God In The Dock** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) p. 102.

15. **Ibid.** p. 111.

encounter, delight and union with the triune God) then it can be a way God uses to draw men to himself. Aslan's dialogue with Emeth in **The Last Battle**, as we have seen, illustrates this view as does a conversation that occurs in **The Great Divorce**:

There have been men before now how have gotten so interested in proving the existence of God that they came to care nothing for God himself ... as if the Good Lord had nothing to do but exist! There have been some who were so concerned about spreading Christianity that they never gave a thought to Christ ... Never fear. There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say "Thy will be done," and those whom God says in the end, "**Thy** will be done." All that are in hell choose to. Without that self choice there could be no hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened.<sup>16</sup>

For Lewis it seems that the desire for joy is the clue which reveals Christ's activity drawing a man towards himself although conscious faith in Christ may come only after death when the seeker stands face to face before the incarnate joy he had been groping for during his early pilgrimage. This leads to a third reason which may lie behind Lewis' broad view of salvation: his belief in purgatory. References to this are quite explicit in **The Great Divorce** but Lewis when questioned later denied that he held to the "Romish doctrine."<sup>17</sup> He seemed to conceive of it not as a place of torment but more as a time just after death when we are made ready to enter fully into the joy of God's presence. Could a non-Christian enter purgatory and there explicitly embrace the Christ he had failed to find in life? Lewis does not answer the question but leaves the door open. A character in **The Great Divorce** asks his heavenly guide the pointed question "is there a real choice after death?" The guide responds with a non-committal, "Ye cannot fully understand the relations of choice and time till you are beyond both."<sup>18</sup>

Charles Kraft of Fuller Seminary's School of World Mission agrees with both Lewis and Anderson that there is salvation outside the Christian faith. But while there is a certain tentativeness in both Anderson and Lewis, Kraft exudes confidence:

Can people who are chronologically A.D. but knowledgewise B.C. (i.e. have not heard of Christ), or those who are indoctrinated with a wrong understanding of Christ, be saved by committing themselves to

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16. C.S. Lewis, **The Great Divorce** in **The Best of C.S. Lewis** (New York: Iverson, 1969) pp. (56-)57.

17. R. Green and W. Hooper, **C.S. Lewis: A Biography** (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Javanovich, Inc. 1974) p. 234.

18. **Divorce** p. 154

faith in God as Abraham and the rest of those who were chronologically B.C. did (Hebrews 11)? Could such persons be saved by 'giving as much of themselves as they can give to as much of God as they can understand?' I personally believe they can and many have.<sup>19</sup>

Citing the opinions of both Anderson and Lewis, Kraft's own distinctive argument is to deny that there is any essential need for special revelation (i.e. knowledge of God's saving work in Christ) on the part of the pagan. Paganism through General revelation provides sufficient information to know God. "People," Kraft insists, "in non-western cultures, are not lost for lack of information but for lack of willingness to respond properly to what they may already know."<sup>20</sup> He builds his position on Henry Maurier's study, **The Other Covenant: A Theology of Paganism** (Newman Press, 1968) which stresses the continuity between Paganism and the Christian gospel. Kraft chides missionaries who preach and teach the New Testament information about Christ when what is really needed is simply stimulation of the pagan will to respond wholeheartedly to the light of general revelation. Presumably the missionary will encounter numbers of saved pagans whom he may disciple by teaching the Bible but his "evangelism" consists of motivating the pagan to be a more religious one. Melchizedek (Hebrews 7, Genesis 14), Abimelech (Genesis 20), Jethro (Exodus 3), Balaam (Numbers 22—24), Job and Naaman (II Kings 5) are cited as examples of those who were accepted by God while still within paganism.

The voices of left and right, north and south thus conclude to greater or lesser degrees that the contemporary Christian must answer "Yes" to the question "Is there salvation outside the Christian faith?" The leading arguments can be summarized as follows:

1. The pluralism of twentieth century global culture argues against any form of religious imperialism that would arrogantly restrict harmony with God to itself.
2. The most relevant view of salvation, consequently, is one which views all religions as having rough equality before God.
3. In Acts 17, Paul affirmed that Christ is hidden in pagan religion and supports therefore, the idea that the cosmic Christ saves men through their religion.
4. Authoritative councils of the Christian church such as the second Vatican Council (and we might add, the World Council of Churches) affirm salvation outside of Christian faith.

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19. Charles Kraft, **Christianity in Culture** (Mary Knoll: Orbis, 1979) p. 254.

20 **Ibid.** pp. 254-255.



5. Salvation in the Old Testament was largely repentance and throwing oneself on God's mercy. God will therefore accept the Gentile who approaches him in this way.

6. In the case of those who never hear the gospel preached the possibility of direct revelation cannot be ruled out.

7. God in his omniscient foreknowledge can detect those who would have complied with the gospel had they heard. With this knowledge he may well redeem, after death, all in this category.

8. The sincere seeker is promised in Scripture that he will be rewarded. Though his quest may not lead to explicit faith in this life it may in the next.

Such is the case for salvation outside of Christian faith. How strong is it? Can it hold up to an evaluation from a biblical-theological perspective?

### **Evaluating the Case For a Broader View of Salvation**

Geoffrey Bromiley, echoing an insight of Karl Barth's reminds us that "for the church to rush into action without considering what it is doing theologically is the height of folly"<sup>21</sup> We might add that in certain cases it would not only be folly, but suicide.

If the church is going to witness to, dialogue with and serve in a pluralistic world she must make sure about "what we are doing theologically" in order to be faithful to Christ. For purposes of clarity we will respond in turn to the eight arguments as summarized.

1. We are told that the facts of a pluralistic world makes the Christian insistence upon faith in Christ alone an act of inexcusable arrogance. This is certainly a serious charge and it must be admitted that there have been representatives of the gospel who have looked down with disgust at other faiths. This was a charge against the early church as it advanced in a pluralistic Roman empire. The true Christian position is that we approach other faiths from a position of weakness. The nobility of thought, the sensitivity to the spiritual dimension, the lofty ethics, and intensity of zeal and devotion in other religions may surpass that of the Christian. The Christian looks up at other religions around him and rejects them not out of arrogance but out of humility. Christ reveals to him that religion however noble, however lofty is not the place where God has chosen to meet man. Leslie Newbigin pictures the world's religions as a staircase reaching toward God, adorned with spiritual achievements of all kinds. But "the central paradox of the human situation is that God comes to meet us at the bottom of our stairways, not at the top, that our ascent towards God ...

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21. G.W. Bromiley, *Introduction to The Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) p. 52.

takes us further away from the place where he actually meets us ...”<sup>22</sup> The theology of the cross, Luther declared, not the theology of glory leads us to the place of cleansing and mercy. Justification by faith is the great scandal of religion. Man’s work will not be accepted. God will not be pleased except by his own work. When medieval Catholicism attempted to climb the staircase to turn Christianity into a religion of achievement the Reformers cried out at such arrogance and clung to the theology of the cross.

But what of religions which reduplicate the emphasis on grace, which call for passivity and not activity in order to experience union with God? Some point to Mahayana Buddhism and the mediatorial work of Bodhisattvas. Others note the Bhakti doctrine of Hinduism. These are said to be expressions of **Sola Gratia** as fully as any Luther described. But in reality the similarities are only superficial. In mysticism, both of ancient and modern kinds the quest is for direct union with God whether by God’s action or man’s. As Emil Brunner shrewdly observes:

However different all these types of modern religions may be from the one another, on one point they are all agreed: guilt, the negative human situation caused by disobedience, and forgiveness of guilt, the new situation caused by God’s act of removing the obstacle and healing the breach, play no part in them ... Religion of immediacy ... ignores the central fact of human existence, that sins separate us from the holy God.<sup>23</sup>

For the Christian, then, there is no question of playing “my religion is greater than yours.” The Christian’s objection to other faiths is that they project the very arrogance of which they accuse Christianity. A communication has been received through a line of Hebrew prophets that the wrath of God lay upon man but that reconciliation would be brought by his only son. The very mixing of cultures in our society, pointed out with such statistical accuracy by John Hick, means that the same communication has come to the attention of the world’s faiths. But they still climb their staircase, pile up their achievements or wait passively for the union with God they so presumptively expect and ignore the message. One of the most religious men of the first century gave his own inspired testimony to the arrogance of religion and the humility of the cross when after surveying his stunning spiritual achievements and qualifications he concluded:

I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him not having a righteousness of my own ... But that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. (Phil 3:8-9)

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22. L. Newbigin, “The Gospel Among The Religions” Anderson and Stransky, p. 18.

23. Emil Brunner, **The Scandal of Christianity** (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1965) p. 20,21.

Christianity rejects other faiths because they are not weak enough to hold out empty hands to receive the work of Christ.

2. We are further told that the most appropriate theological stance for the Christian in the later twentieth century is one modelled after the Copernican perspective, one that is God-centred and sees all religions as orbiting around the divine center in rough equivalence. This certainly has an attractive ring to it. What religiously sensitive person does not want to be God-centered? It certainly appeals to the modern man today. In a casual conversation on a bus one would expect that if the subject of religion came up it would be met with the protocol of tolerance. "I like to think that though we come from different faiths," our genial busmate might exclaim, "It is the same God whom we all worship." John Hick's Copernican revolution in theology seems to be taking place. But how God-centered is such a view? Notice what has been thrown out of court before discussion even begins:

a) Truth rests on "what I like to think": Modern pluralism makes me want to think God is like this or that. Statistics make me want to think that religion is to be this certain way. Man determines by his wishful thinking, self-composed philosophies, interest in global unity, etc. that he wants a comfortable, tolerant religion. That God has spoken distinctly and propositionally beyond the vague impressions gleaned from general revelation and has commanded religion to be a certain way or be condemned is dismissed as offensive to modern ears.

b) No God such as the Bible teaches can exist: How embarrassing the God of the Bible becomes when brought into modern religious debate. His intolerance of other faiths is infamous. His first two commandments required his people to be forever suspicious of other religions. He unblinkingly participated in the slaughter of the priests of Baal at Mt. Carmel. His perpetual harangues through the prophets against religious tolerance in Israel is still shocking to read. Christ's unfortunate tirades against Judaism and Paul's description of Gentile religions as superstitious (Acts 17) and idolatrous (1 Thess 1) add up to damning evidence against the biblical God who insists that one of his central attributes is jealousy. This will not do. The Hindu God, the mystic God, the god of the history-of-religions school of thought, the god of the philosophers: all of these will do. The God of the Bible, however, is quietly shuffled off the stage and some more palatable replacement is presented to the waiting crowd. His incarnation in Christ is consequently rejected.

We can only conclude that modern theologian-philosophers who call for a God-centered view of religion actually mean a God that agrees with their ideas and instincts about what God should be. The real center of such a

**Acts 17:16-31**

1. Paul was infuriated by the idolatry of Athens (v. 16) (parozunato — greatly distressed)

2. In response he carefully chooses a proper point of contact. Refusing to build up their worship on understanding of Zeus or Apollo he makes ignorance the point of contact: "What you admit you don't know, I have come to tell you about." (v.23)

3. This ignorance is a guilty self-inflicted one because the general revelation of nature is clear, but the Greeks chose to respond idolatrously to what even their poets professed to receive (v 24-29)

4. God has previously despised and disdained (huperidein — huperorao, to disregard out of contempt), your guilty ignorance but now offers you a chance to repent (v. 3) before judgement, through the risen Christ (v. 30,31)

**Romans 1:18-32**

1. Paul affirms that God's wrath is on human religion because they are attempts at God-suppression (1:18)

2. Gentile man does not truly know God. He is ignorant because he has exchanged the truth of God for a lie (v.25) and is without understanding (31)

3. This ignorance is guilty because general revelation eloquently speaks of God's glory but men respond idolatrously to this (v. 19-23)

4. God has previously given Gentiles over to their folly (v. 24,26,28) but now offers the gospel to the Jew first but also Greeks (v.16)

**Acts 14:14-17**

1. Paul's response to worship of Zeus (of whom he was regarded an incarnation) was outrage and distress (v.14)

2. You Gentiles by worshipping Zeus and Hermes are worshipping vain and empty things not the true God (v.15)

3. This ignorance is guilty because he has not left himself without a witness in nature (v.17)

4. God let the Gentiles continue in their idolatrous and empty religions until now when he led us to preach the gospel to you (v.15,16)

Paul adopted a consistent approach to Gentile faiths which was not flattering. Seen in context, Paul's statement in Acts 17:23 does not affirm the truth of pagan religions. Rather this statement confirms their guilt.

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Paul adopted a consistent approach to Gentile faiths which was not flattering. Seen in context, Paul's statement in Acts 17:23 does not affirm the truth of pagan religions. Rather this statement confirms their guilt.

Their religion represents a rebellious response to God whose glory is arrayed before them in nature, history and conscience. Carl F.H. Henry is correct when he declares that "Panikkar superimposes a special meaning on the Acts passages that they do not have, for they in no way refer to a normative witness in the non-biblical religions."<sup>25</sup>

4. What of the fact that the Roman Catholic Second Vatican Council and the Protestant World Council of Churches (Bangkok '73) have given their approval to the idea that salvation can be obtained outside of the Christian faith? For someone who stands in the stream of historical Protestant faith, the decrees of councils, though never lightly taken, must submit to testing by the Word of God. It would be a simple matter then to dismiss this argument on the grounds of **Sola Scriptura**. But there is a deeper issue than needs to be discussed. Roman Catholicism and modern liberalism (and certain strands of evangelicalism) while vehemently disagreeing on a number of crucial issues have been accused of buying into very similar presuppositions regarding man. This is often identified as the nature-grace issue which posits an enlarged ability of the natural man (even in the fallen state) to know God and do his will. God's role of providing assisting grace was made compatible to this humanistic interpretation of God's nature and abilities. Medieval Catholicism in particular held that since man has a natural desire for God and capacity for union with God only the slightest help was needed from above to trigger a co-operative process of "salvation by slow ascent in which 'works' – the personal response to inward sanctifying grace – played a part in the person's acceptance before God."<sup>26</sup> By man "doing what was in him" God would meet him half way and reward him for devotion and zeal. It is only a small step to the twentieth century position that those who live up to the light they have are in the stream of salvation although they may pass through this life as anonymous Christians.

This humanistic premise was attacked by Luther in his famous response to Erasmus entitled **Bondage of the Will** and by Melancthon in **Loci Communes**. Luther denied the proposition that after the fall man's nature is able and willing to know God or co-operate with his grace. Luther insisted that on the part of man nothing precedes grace except a will in rebellion against grace.<sup>27</sup> This is a radical rejection of the humanist view of the freedom of the will. Man in his fallen state has sold his capacities into slavery and whatever pangs he may feel for God are overwhelmed by a greater sense of repulsion and loathing (Eph 2:1-3, Romans 1:18-32, Romans 3:9-20). Melancthon spoke for the movement when he described fallen man in the following way:

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25. C.F.H. Henry, **God, Revelation and Authority** Vol VI (Waco: Word, 1983). p 365. See also Byang Kato's useful discussion of Acts 14 and 17 in **Theological Pitfalls in Africa** (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 1975) pp. 115-121.

26. David Wells, **The Search for Salvation** (IVP, 1978) p. 155.

27. Quoted, *ibid.* p. 156.

The miserable human heart stands like a desolate, deserted, old and decaying house, God no longer dwelling within and winds blowing through. That is, all sorts of conflicting tendencies and lusts drive the heart to the manifold sins of uncontrolled love, hate, envy and pride ... When we speak about this great ruin of human powers, we are not talking about free will, for man's will and heart are wretchedly imprisoned, impaired and ruined, so that inwardly man's heart and will are therefore offensive and hostile to (God's law) and man cannot by his own inward natural powers be obedient.<sup>28</sup>

A radical transforming grace which ushers into the heart of the kingdom of light is therefore needed. A gentle push in the right direction would not do. Dead men do not walk. Blind men cannot see. Without this radical view of sin the Reformer's distinction between general and special revelation and law and gospel cannot stand. Man's knowledge of God through nature teaches only law (i.e. what you must do to earn God's favour). But special revelation equals the gospel of salvation by faith alone. The law of works (religious, social, moral etc.) since the fall, cannot lead men to God by simply activating their natural abilities. Rather it only reveals "that his capacity to sin is humanly unbreakable and that his rebellion is incorrigible." In contrast to the dead end of general revelation and law-keeping, the gospel through the Spirit's regenerative work in the soul fully redeems man and reconciles him to God.

But how did the Reformers find such a profound doctrine of sin and grace? Only by accepting the supremacy of Scripture in the area of truth. When Luther looked at his life **Coram Deo** (i.e. from God's perspective, not man's, as recommended only in the Scriptures) he was forced to abandon an optimistic humanism with its shallow sin and shallow grace. Once again we suspect that the nature-grace error is still the fundamental root behind growing humanistic views of salvation in the post Vatican II Catholicism and in much of contemporary Protestantism.

5. But can't we say that salvation in the Old Testament, such as in the case of Abraham, consisted largely of repentance and throwing oneself upon God's mercy? Won't God surely accept the modern Gentile who is informationally B.C. though chronologically A.D.? Isn't paganism informationally sufficient to save? Isn't it really a question of repentance and self-abandonment? Both Anderson and Kraft have appealed to this argument. The great strength of the argument lies in its attempt to stay within the bounds of Scripture. Most adherents of this view reject salvation by works, and affirm that Christ alone saves. They feel that the analogy between Old Testament salvation and modern Gentile self-abandonment is a strong one which stays within the limits of **sola gratia** and **solus Christus** (through not **sola fides**). Yet questions remain:

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28. *Ibid.* p. 157.

a) Is Abraham really a proper paradigm for salvation outside explicit faith? I think not. God's dealing with Abraham establishes the necessity of justification by faith in the explicit promise of God. Genesis 15:6 represents Abraham's experience of salvation (i.e. acceptance by God). Two important phrases should be noted: 1) **He believed God.** Ten years had passed since God had promised Abraham an offspring through whom God would bless the whole earth (Genesis 12). He was beginning to waver in his faith. Now God was renewing the promise (v. 4-5). Abraham's response was to say "Amen" (Hamen); in effect meaning "I believe this promise will be established." Abraham sensed the reality of God's promise to such a vivid degree that he regarded it as good as done. Abraham was abandoning himself not to a vague hope of mercy but to the clear promise of God given through special revelation. 2) **He was reckoned righteous:** "Reckoned" (Kashev), whenever it is used in the Old Testament, means to be regarded as someone that one is not. For example in Genesis 31:15 Laban threatens to 'reckon' (Kashev) his daughters as strangers if they go against him. Previously Abraham had not been regarded by God as righteous for his piety (leaving Ur, loyalty to Lot) partly because there were always off-setting sins on his part (e.g. lying). He is finally justified for trusting an explicit promise of God in the coming son of blessing. Paul in Romans 4 and Galatians 3 regards this justification as the key point in Old Testament salvation history. Abraham was chosen by God's grace and was given a promise of a future redeemer (note, that in light of Genesis 5:29, Abraham would have understood the son of blessing to be one who was going to remove the curse). To enjoy Abraham's salvation, then, one must hear the promises of God, of a redeemer and believe it is so. Anderson's and Kraft's vague repentance and throwing oneself on God's mercy do not find support in the case of Abraham. We should rather assume that this is the normal and accepted pattern of salvation through the Old Testament. This was true both for Israel and for those on the fringes (Job, Jethro, Abimelech, Ninevah, etc.).

b) No theology of salvation outside of Christian faith can be built on the case of Melchizedek. We do know that he was a king-priest of Salem who was a representative of Yaweh. Elaborate theories of his priestly connections with pagan Canaanite religion are not only impossible to establish but also biblically improper. Why? Does not the writer of Hebrews see the genius of Melchizedek as a type of Christ in the very fact that we are ignorant of his history (Hebrews 7:3 "Without father, or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life.")? We do not know what his connections were with paganism except that he was a priest of "God most high" (Heb 7:1). Biblical commentary on Melchizedek seems to shut the door on the kind of speculation engaged in by proponents of the broader view.

c) Old Testament salvation does not, therefore, prove that paganism is informationally adequate, the distortions and idolatry of paganism are



held up as notorious in the Old Testament. While redemptive analogies (a la Don Richardson's **Peace Child**) may be present and therefore ultimately useful in understanding the gospel, such elements are in their original settings misunderstandings and therefore deceptive. The fallen nature renders him unable to respond properly to God. He suppresses the truth and erects rebellious religious systems (often of noble insights and high morality) that are perfectly designed to act out the lie that God is on his side and can be reached by man's best efforts. Kraft suggests that we stimulate this process. Produce more religion. Help man to bow down to his idols. Christ will save him by accepting the best response the pagan can offer. This can only be regarded as a biblically irresponsible position in light of Romans 1:18 ff.

d) This argument is without clear support in the New Testament and is consequently weakened by its hypothetical and speculative character. "What if" questions are important but we can never treat answers as though they carried the weight of Scripture.

6. What of the possibility of direct revelation imparting a saving enlightenment to those who have never heard? Is it not possible that God saves infants and imbeciles that way? If so, why not the uninformed pagan?

This is an improvement over the previous argument particularly in that it denies the adequacy of general revelation and-or pagan religions as a basis for the need of repentance and throwing oneself on God's mercy that supposedly characterizes salvation outside the Christian faith. Many conservative Evangelicals would find it possible to agree with Bruce Demarest's point that "given the fact that God is the sovereign God of Heaven and earth and that he is free to act in ways that please himself, it would appear difficult to rule out the possibility that in exceptional circumstances God might choose to reveal himself in some extraordinary way independently of gospel proclamation."<sup>29</sup>

Demarest maintains that no compromise would be made with human ability and no denial is implied that it is still a Messianic revelation that the selected pagan would receive.

Strong precedent exists for this argument within the historic Protestant tradition. Calvin cautiously held that "God can act in other modes towards men if he so wills ... without using the medium of biblical testimony."<sup>30</sup> He did insist, however that extraordinary revelation to the heathen does involve communicating Christ to him. Thus he clung to the necessity of faith in Christ though produced in an unusual way through the Spirit's direct work.

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29. Demarest, p. 260.

30. Cf. Wilhelm Niesel, **The Theology of Calvin** (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) pp 51,52.

The Westminster Confession of Faith has two statements that apply to salvation by extraordinary revelation. First, in chapter X (“of effectual calling”) section III we read that “elect infants dying in infancy are regenerated, and saved by Christ, through the Spirit, who worketh when, and where and how he pleaseth; so also are all other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word.”

Robert Shaw in his commentary on the Confession explains that “the Holy Spirit usually works by means; and the word read or preached in the ordinary means which he renders effectual to the salvation of sinners. But he has immediate access to the hearts of men, and can produce a saving change in them without the use of ordinary means.”<sup>31</sup> The position here is essentially an outworking of Calvin’s views. Two critical points need highlighting. The first is the freedom of the Spirit. The Protestant pattern of authority as Bernard Ramm has ably demonstrated has always been Christ speaking in the Scriptures through the Spirit. A corollary of this pattern of authority has been biblical preaching. The Confession here is not straying from the established authority pattern. It is simply denying in this instance the corollary of preaching. It insists that the Spirit can implant directly without external means the biblical Christ to elect persons. And this is the second point. God’s unconditional election grounds these extraordinary works of the Spirit firmly in God’s grace. Human merit and self-righteousness is firmly excluded. I’m not sure that this is the case with Anderson’s understanding. No mention of election is made.

The second statement can be read as a response to those who insist that such direct revelation outside of preaching is impossible. In chapter XIV, Section I the Confession states that “the grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts, and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word ...” Is Shaw correct when he sees in the word “ordinary” an attempt by the Westminster divines to protect the possibility of extraordinary revelation? He appeals to I Thess 1:5 “Our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit.” Doesn’t this verse imply a distinction between the work of preaching and the work of the Spirit? Although the work of the Spirit of God is normally linked to the word (Romans 10:17 “faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God”) Shaw warns us of the dangers of a religious rationalism that forgets that the more ultimate cause of faith is the power behind the word – the Holy Spirit. In this way then, the Confession points to the salvation of elect infants and adults (both the infirm and uninformed) who are given saving faith in Jesus Christ by direct operation of the Spirit and without external preaching of the Word. Biblical evidence of spiritual life in John the Baptist and Jesus Christ while still in the womb may partially validate this confessional position.

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31. Robert Shaw, **The Reformed Faith** (Inverness: Christian Focus Publications, 1974 – Orig. 1845) pp. 122, 123.

But having said all this, can we really be comfortable with this position? I must admit four hesitations remain:

a) The position is without clear and unambiguous Scriptural support and therefore highly tentative.

b) Does not Hebrews 1:1-2 with its insistence that former ways of revelation have ceased since the full and final revelation of the Son, raise serious questions about the validity of direct revelation in our time?

c) Aren't we still forced to admit that preaching is the norm and only certain means of saving knowledge? Isn't that what Paul was affirming in 1 Corinthians 1:21 when he stated that "God was pleased through the foolishness of preaching to save those who believe"?

d) Isn't the test of such extraordinary revelation to an elect adult to measure his response to the gospel? No one who consciously rejects Christ or (as Kraft believes) has seriously distorted views of Christ has any right to be regarded as saved. Wasn't this the vindication of Cornelius' Abrahamic faith in the promise?

With these hesitations in mind, I must admit an appreciation for this line of thinking and recommend that evangelicals seek to explore the question of the salvation of the pagan within this stream of thought.

7. I find the suggestion that the omniscient God will judge those who never hear the gospel on the basis of how they would have responded had they heard to be totally unacceptable for the following reasons.

a) The biblical doctrine of sin tells us in advance how everyone would respond – total rejection.

b) It smacks of the Catholic nature-grace error with its misconception that basically good people with a little push of God's grace would ascend to embrace him.

c) This is surely salvation by works. The whole scheme assumes that salvation ultimately depends on man's choice and not God's. It sacrifices God's freedom on the altar of human autonomy.

8. What of the promises to the sincere seeker? Is not the case of Cornelius instructive on the question of salvation outside of explicit faith in Christ?

It must be admitted that the Bible does have quite a bit to say about the sincere seeker. But it also has a great deal to say about the plan of salvation. The true seeker is one who is simply in early stages of the Spirit's

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32. Lewis in Aslan's controversial speech in **The Last Battle** seems to be paraphrasing the Bhagavad Gita IV, II.:

"Howsoever man may approach me, even so do I accept him; for, on all sides, whatever path they may choose is mine."

transforming work. The Spirit's grip will not let him go till he has been justified, sanctified and glorified. In the back of the seeker before the dawn of time is the mystery of God's loving election in Christ. The true seeker will find Christ and his fullness. This would lead us back to what we have already said about direct revelation. We appeal therefore, that our theology of the seeker be firmly enclosed within the full biblical plan of salvation and not made an exception to it (save for the fact that the saving gospel comes without medium of preaching).

But this seems to be just what Anderson, Kraft and Lewis seem unwilling to do. Most seekers are not moved by saving grace but simply a general conviction of sin and need. This only reliable test of a true seeker is if he finds Christ. The perpetual nibblers, the incurably curious are like Bunyan's "Talkative" -- often in the company of believers but moving in the opposite direction and to an ultimately opposite destiny. This distinction is not clearly made. Lewis is perhaps the most vague on this. His suggestion that the religious seeker who explicitly rejects Christ may still be accepted by God (possibly after some sort of purgatorial experience) is a triumph of the imagination over the authority of Scripture. It owes more to Hindu mystics than Hebrew prophets.

What of Cornelius? Doesn't Peter say that he is accepted by God because of religious good works? Isn't this the case of a seeker saved by works of devotion? Peter's comments in Acts 10:34-36 on the case of Cornelius proves three things: a) **God does not show favoritism** (v. 34) Election to salvation is not limited to Israel. Cornelius proves that there are elect people from among the Gentiles (For the primacy Peter gives to election in his doctrine of salvation cf. 1 Peter 1:1-2). b) **God accepts those who fear him and do righteousness** (v. 35) Is this not a paraphrase of Micah 6:8, "Do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God." Do not miss the inherent contradiction of this verse. The one who does righteousness (on his own) is therefore self-righteous and has cause to boast and claim merit before God. He therefore cannot walk humbly (or truly fear God properly -- a God who rejects and punishes the self-righteous). Only the regenerative work of the Spirit of God, could debase a man in his own eyes while producing righteous behaviour. God accepts the righteous fruits of his own grace working in the lives of his elect. c) **This message [fear God and do righteousness] is shorthand for the gospel.** (v. 36) Peter calls v. 35 "God accepts those" ...the gospel of peace through Jesus thus making clear that Cornelius' godly fear and righteousness were a fruit of election and regeneration issuing in explicit faith in Christ. Because Cornelius accepted Christ, Peter could see that God truly accepted Cornelius. Therefore the

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case of Cornelius proves that God will save Gentiles who accept his son as Saviour but as Carl Henry observes "Contemporary non-biblical religions do not duplicate such a situation, however."<sup>33</sup>

**Conclusion:**

While our investigation has turned up some promising notes, we are forced to conclude that the case for salvation outside Christian faith has not been well served by the majority of arguments that have been so far put forth. If we want to give a credible word of hope to Christians here in Africa concerned with the question of the ancestors we must do so within the Reformer's exclusive notes (grace alone, Scripture alone, faith alone, Christ alone) and not outside of them. The spokesmen we have listened to in this study all offer views that in various ways and to various degrees require us to step outside these safeguards of the gospel. Perhaps the final point of a study such as this is to remind evangelicals of the certainties which Scripture presents to them. "The overwhelming biblical datum" says Demarest, "is that all people are lost and need to come to Christ for salvation."<sup>34</sup> We must continue to tackle the questions posed by our time but not at the expense of the agenda set by our Lord.

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33. Henry pp. 368-369.

34. Demarest, p. 261