

DEEP AND WIDE
The Fullness of Salvation in Review

For
Dr. Vinay Samuel
Towards an Evangelical Theology of World Religions
INDS 528

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Preamble

This is a paper I wrote while studying at Regent College in 1993. It does not represent a conclusive opinion on the question of how deep and wide the biblical notion of salvation is. However, it does mark out some significant signposts along my personal journey related to this question. When I sang the chorus 'Deep and Wide' in the Sunday School of my childhood, I had no idea that it would become the subject of the intense inquiry that it has become for me.

For many years I was afraid to ask questions openly about this subject for fear of being labelled a troublemaker. Indeed even now some of my readers may think of me in this light for raising some of the questions I do. However, I think that honest seekers of the truth owe it to themselves to dig below the surface when standard answers given by status quo religious practitioners trouble them. And I have to admit that the scope of salvation I was handed in my younger years does seem too restrictive for me now in my more senior years. I will be posting other writings related to this topic on Edgework.ca in the future. I invite you on board to explore with me how 'deep and wide' God's grace really is.

*Jack Heppner
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Introduction

The course, "Towards an Evangelical Theology of World Religions," taught during Winter School at Regent College in January of 1993, served to heighten my awareness of the need for a consistent, biblical view of world religions. I have struggled long and hard with many of the questions raised during the course. Can truth be found within the religions of the world? If God is revealing himself within the context of these religions, is that revelation salvific? If salvation can be found only in Christ, what happens to those who have never heard the name of Jesus? What does one do with the tension between the universalistic and particularistic texts within the Bible?

As an Anabaptist, I have always been more comfortable with

the inclusive concepts found in the Arminian tradition than the exclusive notions inherent in Calvinism. But while allowing for freedom of choice, Arminianism did not answer, to my satisfaction, the difficult question of what happens to those who have no opportunity to choose. The standard Calvinist answer that this question must remain locked within the mystery of God's sovereign election, appeared to cast a shadow over the very nature of God that I could not accept. So my search has continued.

My purpose in this study was not to develop a comprehensive theology of world religions; that would require more time and space than allowed here. Rather, I wanted to focus on a number of the major universalistic passages in the New Testament to determine the nature of their contribution to the question of the scope of salvation offered by Christ. I am fully aware that this is a sensitive topic, especially within the Reformed/Fundamentalistic circles in which I move quite regularly. However, it is a subject that must be addressed, not only to develop internal, theological coherency, but to delineate a framework within which to relate to the religions of the world.

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THE CHALLENGE OF PLURALISM

The challenge to define the scope of salvation from the perspective of the Christian faith has intensified in recent decades with the rise of pluralism as a world phenomenon. With increased mobility and advanced communication systems the world is fast becoming a single-world culture.¹ Living in the midst of this cultural mosaic, Christians are increasingly exposed to the claims of non-Christian religions. "The days when Western religious society could be thought of in terms of the 'Big Three,' Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism, are long gone."¹

The challenge of world religions has been transported to the heart of the western world, and can no longer be left to those who choose to cross cultural and religious barriers.

In light of these new developments some Christians are attempting to shore up an exclusivist position in relation to an understanding of salvation. On the other end of the spectrum, some are advocating pluralists concepts that affirm salvation within all religions. In between these two extremes various types of inclusivists are searching for a middle ground that will maintain historic Christian affirmations but allow for a "wider salvation."²

¹Harold A. Netland, Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth, (Leicester, England: Apollos, 1991), p.7.

²On the Canadian scene Clark H. Pinnock appears to be leading the search among evangelicals for an inclusive middle position. His article, "Why Is Jesus the Only Way?" in Eternity, December, 1976, brought the debate into the open, creating a significant backlash from traditional exclusivists.

The Exclusivist Option

Exclusivists, also referred to as restrictivists,³ maintain that the central claims of Christianity are true, and that where the claims of Christianity conflict with those of other religions the latter are to be rejected as false. Christian exclusivists also characteristically hold that God has revealed himself definitely in the Bible and that Jesus Christ is the unique incarnation of God, the only Lord and Saviour. Salvation is not to be found in the structures of other religions.⁴

Generally this position recognizes that God is active in the world, even in the context of other religions, but "...deny(s) that such revelation is sufficient for salvation."⁵ The strongest supporters of exclusivism generally follow the Augustinian arguments of election, and the need to keep standards of entry into the church high. This, according to Clark Pinnock, brought a severe paradigm in theology to the church community, "...a package of dismal beliefs which would eat its way into the consciousness of the western churches and erode the positive biblical spirit in their thinking."⁶ The famous Lausanne Covenant of 1974 summarizes the exclusivist position for most modern evangelicals.

We affirm that there is only one Savior and only one Gospel...We recognize that all men have some knowledge of

³Stanley Grenz, "Toward a Christian Theology of Religions," Unpublished paper, presented at Regent College, January, 1993. Grenz appears to use the terms exclusivist and restrictivist interchangeably.

⁴Netland, p.9.

⁵Grenz, p. 6.

⁶Pinnock, p. 39.

God through his general revelation in nature. But we deny that this can save...There is no other name by which we must be saved...To proclaim Jesus as "the Saviour of the world" is not to affirm that all men are either automatically or ultimately saved, still less to affirm that all religions offer salvation in Christ...⁷

While there are varying degrees of restrictiveness within the exclusivist camp,⁸ and differing theological schemes providing the rationale,⁹ the basic affirmation of exclusivists is that all persons are lost until they hear the message of the gospel of Christ and make a believing response to it.

The Pluralist Option

Pluralist, on the other hand, are increasingly prepared to grant that salvation is possible without reference to Christ. In 1973, John Hick began calling for a "Copernican revolution" in

⁷C. Rene Padilla, ed., The New Face of Evangelicalism: An International Symposium on the Lausanne Covenant, (Downer's Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1976), p. 49. It should be noted that since 1974, the continuing dialogue within the "Lausanne" community has pushed the consensus in the direction of inclusivism.

⁸For example, there is a range of opinion in relation to the salvation of infants. Earlier Calvinists insisted that infants can and do go lost, while later Calvinists found ways around the condemnation of infants by suggesting that all infants who die are part of the elect. Arminians have typically tried to get around the need for "a believing response to the Gospel" by suggesting that infants are saved because the death of Christ cancelled out original sin thus setting them free from the curse. (See: Sanders, p. 294-300.)

⁹John Sanders introduces the term "control beliefs" to refer to the set of definitive tenets the various theological systems use to define the parameters within which theological inquiry is legitimate. (See, Sanders, p. 30.) Calvinists feel compelled to cling to their view of the sovereignty of God, while Arminians must maintain the human freedom of choice. Different starting points lead to diverse lines of reasoning.

religious philosophy that would admit to salvation in non-Christian religions.

The revolution he advocates involves a shift from the view that Christianity, or even Jesus Christ, should be at the center of religious commitment to the perspective that there is one divine reality at the center of all religious belief and practice and that all the major religions are historically and culturally conditioned human responses to this reality. The proposal is that "the great religions are all, at their experiential roots, in contact with the same ultimate divine reality."¹⁰

Thus pluralists, including persons such as Paul Knitter, Gordon Kaufman and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, deny "...that there is anything unique, normative, or superior about Jesus Christ or the Christian faith."¹¹ All religions lead to salvation/enlightenment/liberation in their own way.¹² Having thus relativized Christianity, pluralists have brought to fruition the vision of Ernst Troeltsch in the early part of the 20th century that "...everything in Christian religion is interwoven in the fabric of its ongoing historical environment, and historical reality itself shatters every attempt to interpret Christianity as the absolute religion."¹³

The basic affirmation of pluralists is that different

¹⁰ Netland, p. 201.

¹¹ Netland, p. 26.

¹² Since pluralists consider all major world religions as valid, they must take into account their different understandings of ultimate goals. Thus it is not possible to speak of salvation in any one particular religion as being normative for all and the ultimate must be defined in broad categories such as salvation/enlightenment/liberation, or what ever other category a religion may consider to be the ultimate good.

¹³ Carl E. Braaten, No Other Gospel: Christianity among the World's Religions, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 36.

religions represent different roads to God, or ultimate reality,¹⁴ and sincere seekers within all religions will find that reality.

The Inclusivist Option

Inclusivists are not comfortable to remain on either end of the theological spectrum. While affirming that persons can be saved without a genuine opportunity to respond to the Christian gospel, "...they are firm in the conviction that Jesus is God's unique means of salvation."¹⁵ Karl Rahner, for example, has developed the theory of the "anonymous Christian," stating that it is possible to be an implicit Christian and consequently saved, even without having come in contact with the gospel of Christ or the church.¹⁶ Hendrick Kraemer outlined an inclusivist position in his landmark publication in 1938, The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World.¹⁷ He followed Karl Barth's early view that "Religion is the vain human attempt at self-salvation,"¹⁸ but he insisted that the true seeker will find God in Jesus Christ if he follows the light he has.

There are two main categories of inclusivists. The more

¹⁴ Since some religions don't conceive of a personal God, pluralists have been forced to generalize their references to God with such terms as "ultimate reality."

¹⁵ Grentz, p. 10.

¹⁶ Netland, p. 25.

¹⁷ Hendrick Kraemer, The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1938).

¹⁸ Braaten, p. 92.

radical inclusivists are also known as "classical universalists." While affirming the necessity of salvation to be through Jesus Christ, they hold that ultimately all human beings will be reconciled to God and that none will be damned. Universalists generally point to Origen (184-254 A.D.) as their mentor. He argued that since God is supreme he can not countenance any ultimate dualism, and in the end all persons and spiritual beings would become his servants.¹⁹ In the more recent past, John A. T. Robinson has made a lucid appeal for the ultimate restoration of all creation in his book, In the End God (1968),²⁰ focusing his argument, as did Origen, on the attributes of God.²¹

A second category of inclusivists argue, that while salvation through Christ is universally accessible, not all persons will in the end be saved. Some will not accept the gospel available to them and therefore will bring damnation upon themselves. Some inclusivists in this category focus on the idea that all persons will have a chance to respond to the gospel in this life, at the moment of death, or after death,²² and thus

¹⁹ Sanders, p. 98-99.

²⁰ John A. T. Robinson, In the End God, (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).

²¹ Robinson insisted that humanity deserves hell, but found it impossible to reconcile God's omnipotent love with the damnation of at least some persons. The only option that he saw was to reconcile universalism with human freedom, since he also held to the control belief that a faith decision was demanded from all. He overcame this difficulty by arguing that "...since God can not fail, it must be the case that all human beings will freely be restored. (See: Sanders, pp. 104-105.)

²² For an expanded discussion see Sanders, pp. 154-214, and Pinnock, pp. 168-172. The primary assumptions are that all

everyone will be without excuse. Others center on the notion that "People who lived before Christ or after him in non-Christian cultures may find salvation through Christ, even though they do not know his name, by casting themselves on the mercy of God."²³

Neal Punt, a Reformed theologian, argues the latter position quite forcefully in his book, Unconditional Good News (1980).²⁴ He says that we must accept a "biblical universalism" which recognizes the clear biblical teaching that in Christ the whole world has been redeemed. That means that "There can be no essential human act or attitude in establishing us in the state of grace."²⁵ He avoids classical universalism, in which all persons are eventually saved, by arguing that the Bible declares that some will go lost, concluding that these are the non-elect. In this way he maintains his Calvinist control belief of election and non-election. However he departs from classical Reformed doctrine by concluding that human instrumentality is involved in

persons must respond to Christ to be saved, but that God will not damn anyone who has not had an opportunity to make a choice. This leads to the conclusion that those who did not have the choice in life, must get it either at the moment of death or after death. I Peter 3:18-20 and 4:6, the passages describing Christ's descent into hell to preach the gospel to the dead, are used to suggest that Christ will be merciful to those who have died without hearing about him.

²³ Stephen H. Travis, I Believe in the Second Coming of Jesus, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 204, as quoted in Greutz, p. 10.

²⁴ Neal Punt, Unconditional Good News: Toward an Understanding of Biblical Universalism, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

²⁵ Punt, p. 104.

determining who the non-elect are. He states that "...it is the decision of unbelief and disobedience which is the instrumental cause, or an essential element, in causing God's wrath to be carried out against all who refuse to walk in the way of faith, repentance, and obedience."²⁶ On the question of infant salvation, Punt then goes beyond traditional Reformed theology to argue that all infants are saved because "...the death of an infant is evidence of this child's election..."²⁷

Archie Penner, an Anabaptist theologian, agrees with Punt's main thesis but does not accept Punt's concept of non-election to salvation. Reflecting his Arminian leanings, Penner asserts that all persons are elected for salvation, and so can not accept any instrumentality on the part of God for the damnation of anyone. All persons are saved through the atoning work of Christ, and remain so until they consciously choose to reject the Christ that saved them, at which point they walk out on a God of eternal love into a damnation of their own making.²⁸ Since infants and imbeciles are incapable of walking out on God, their salvation is secure. To the universalist charge that it would be pointless for God to save all and then let some go lost again, Penner maintains his control belief of free will. "Only he who is both objectively and subjectively saved is effectually saved...God can

²⁶ Punt, p. 106.

²⁷ Punt, p. 127.

²⁸ Archie Penner, The Gospel Revisited, unpublished lectures presented at Steinbach Bible College, Steinbach, Manitoba, Canada, January, 1990.

not have robots in heaven."²⁹ Penner calls his position "Consistent Universalism" because it is consistent both with the character of God as revealed in the Bible, and the biblical teaching that not all are saved.

Punt and Penner do not appear to be driven by the pressures of modern pluralism, but rather by a passion to develop internal, coherency within their theological systems. Neither develops sufficiently the implications of their theology for missions in the context of non-Christian religions.³⁰ However, their work is likely to contribute significantly to the church's understanding of mission in the context of the increasing cultural and religious pluralism of the modern world.

KEY UNIVERSALIST TEXTS - IN REVIEW

In this section we will focus on a study of some of the key passages Punt and Penner use to develop their arguments.³¹ It should be noted that the texts they choose for careful exegesis

²⁹ Archie Penner, "Unpublished letter in defence of his thesis," May 1, 1990.

³⁰ Theologians like Sanders and Pinnock come to the dialogue more specifically concerned to develop a theology of world religions, and so reach back into theological systems to find an answer. Punt and Penner appear to be more concerned to "revisit" the gospel to find new levels of internal coherency, and consequently have not developed the implications of their findings to the extent that others have.

³¹ Space will not allow for an examination of all the passages Punt and Penner use to support their theses. The texts chosen for discussion here are representative and serve to illustrate well the line of their arguments. Other passages they refer to include: John 3:17, John 12:32,47, I. Corinthians 15:22, Titus 2:11, and Hebrews 2:9.

are those which "...affirm God's desire to save all people...proclaim the unlimited atonement of Christ..." and "...articulate the implications of the universal atoning work of Jesus."³²

Conspicuously absent, however, are texts referring to "...the `consummation' of God's plan of salvation in which all people are finally redeemed,"³³ such as Acts 3:19-21, Philippians 2:9-11, and Colossians 1:19-20. The absence of such texts probably reflects the starting point for Punt and Penner - their concern is to broaden the scope of salvation through a reinterpretation of classical Christian doctrines such as atonement. Presumably they would eventually get to these "consummation" passages.

Classical universalists would be more inclined to begin with these "consummation" passages and then move backwards to interpret standard Christian doctrines in the light of this ultimate, biblical vision. So even before Punt and Penner should be invited to explore the implications of their positions for a theology of world religions (see above), they should be challenged to account for these consummation passages in the defense of their theses.

Nevertheless, an analysis of some of the key texts Punt and Penner use will be helpful to understand the heart of their

³² See, Sanders, P. 83ff., for a discussion of four types of universalistic passages in the New Testament.

³³ Sanders, p. 84.

theses.

I Timothy 2:3-6.³⁴

³This is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. ⁵For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, ⁶who gave himself as a ransom for us all, the testimony to which was borne at the proper time.

The first universalistic statement in this passage is found in verse 4, "...who desires all men to be saved..."

Universalists, especially those coming via the Reformed tradition, generally argue that since God is sovereign, he will ultimately get his wishes fulfilled. Penner, however maintains along with Hendrik Berkoff, "...that we must take serious the defenceless power of God's love...a power which is not great enough to limit itself, cannot be almighty power...God cannot save a man who does not want to be saved."³⁵ Further, he holds that the will of God, while in essence one, can only be understood in a multifaceted way.³⁶ So while God's entire orientation is focused on saving all mankind, his concessive will leaves the ultimate outcome of his will to his created beings. "Since God has so made free, rational, intelligent agents,

³⁴ All texts in this section are quoted from the Revised Standard Version, unless where indicated otherwise.

³⁵ Penner, The Gospel Revisited, pp. 45-46.

³⁶ Penner, The Gospel Revisited, pp. 40-41. Penner discusses at length five aspects of God's will which can be seen in scripture: 1) God's determinative will, 2) his directive will, 3) his impeding will, 4) his permissive will, and 5) his concessive will.

together with a right to counter his will, there comes a point at which God is powerless to intervene."³⁷ So while God would wish all to be saved, the fact that he gave persons a choice to turn away from him means that not all will be saved.

The second statement of note occurs in verse 6: "...who gave himself as a ransom for all..." Penner says it is worth noting that Christ gave himself, which means that there is nothing more to give - the full embodiment of God's grace was present in Christ when he became man.

However, the central thought here is that of Christ being a "...ransom for all..." Both Punt and Penner reject the standard Arminian argument that what is meant here is a potential salvation for all persons if they would only believe, as well as the Calvinist assertion that salvation is here provided for "all kinds of people, irrespective of race or nationality."³⁸ While careful not to concede absolute universalism, Punt and Penner suggest that the intent of this passage is universalistic in scope. Punt qualifies the universalism here intended by his "exception" technique, namely, declaring that all are saved except those who the Bible declares will be lost.³⁹ Penner's caveat is that while the ransom was objectively valid from God's

³⁷ Penner, The Gospel Revisited, p. 41.

³⁸ Punt maintains that while "all" can be translated as "all kinds" in a few cases in the New Testament, that is not so in the majority of cases. Thus this understanding should not be used unless there is specific reason to do so. (See: Punt, p. 35).

³⁹ Punt, p. 46.

point of view, it is not necessarily subjectively effective because of the free choice of persons.⁴⁰

I Timothy 4:10

We have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially those who believe.

The usual way that this passage is dealt with is to recognize two separate categories of salvation. For Reformed theologians, the first category "...who is the Saviour of all men..." is generally taken to be a reference to the general grace which sustains all earthly life, while the second category "...especially those who believe," is considered to be a reference to salvation from sin. Arminians commonly consider the first category as having reference to Christ being the potential Saviour of all men, and the second as Christ being the effectual Saviour.⁴¹

Penner appeals to Punt in his defense of a single category of salvation in this verse.

The text...says quite plainly that God is the "Saviour of all men," and to be their potential Saviour or only to have made provision for their salvation would not make God their Saviour any more than one who desired or attempted to save a drowning victim could be called the victim's Saviour.⁴²

The word "especially" does not in any way allow for a new

⁴⁰ Penner, The Gospel Revisited, p. 60.

⁴¹ The Wesleyan Commentary appears to combine the two concepts of common grace and potential salvation with reference to the first category. See, Charles W. Carter, general ed., The Wesleyan Bible Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963).

⁴² Penner, The Gospel Revisited, p. 60, quoting Punt, p. 48.

category of salvation to be introduced into the sentence. For Penner it introduces an intensification of what is already present. "Christ is the factual Saviour of all men, but the ones who believe have more of that salvation. They are existentially experiencing it."⁴³

So according to Punt and Penner, this verse leads to the conclusion that, from God's point of view, Christ is the objective Saviour of all persons in the world - past, present and future.

2 Corinthians 5:14, 15, 19.

¹⁴ For the love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. ¹⁵ And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

¹⁹...in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them...

The question in focus in these passages relates to the effect of Christ's death. A straight forward reading of the text would lead one to the following sequence of ideas: "When Christ died, all mankind died with him, resulting in God not counting the sins of all mankind against them. This should motivate all persons to live for God instead of for themselves."

Traditional Reformed and Arminian theology, however, do not allow for such a simple reading. The former follows the standard

⁴³ Penner, The Gospel Revisited, p. 62.

interpretation that Christ died for "all peoples - both Jews and Gentiles, and that "those who live" are the elect of God. The latter understands the passage to mean that Christ's death provided a potential salvation available to all who will receive it.

But Punt and Penner insist that when the passage is allowed to speak for itself the universalistic logic of the text can not be denied. They point to absence of the article in the phrases referring to Christ's death, suggesting totality or universality; and the presence of the article in the phrases "...therefore all have died," and "...those who live...", suggesting individualized application. But in no way has the scope of God's action been narrowed with the application of the universal salvation of God.⁴⁴

Although he will develop his point more fully in his discussion of Romans 5:12-19, Penner maintains that the major question at stake here is the nature of the incarnation. He appears to side with Karl Barth in his later view that humanity can only be fully understood from the perspective that Christ took all of humanity into himself in a radical identification.⁴⁵

Penner states

If it is admitted that there is a relation to Christ, or God, so "organic" that, for Christ to die effects the death of the whole world, then the implication must be that this "organic" relation should also bring about an effect on the "life side" of this relationship. At least, this could be

⁴⁴ Punt, pp. 40-42; Penner, The Gospel Revisited, p. 63.

⁴⁵ Karl Barth, The Humanity of God, (John Knox Press, 1960).

expected.⁴⁶

Punt and Penner agree that verse 19 is simply a re-affirmation of the message of verses 14 and 15. While admitting that the concept of "the world" could here be taken to mean the world of men extensively and inclusively, it is obvious that Paul has in mind all "individuals" in that world since he uses the pronouns "them" and "their."

So Penner ends his discussion of this passage with a doxology, tinged with sadness because of the thought that some will choose to walk out on this great salvation. "Finally, the GOOD NEWS of the Gospel is no bluff any more. There is nowhere to hide from the good news. The only sad news is that there are those who destroy themselves for all eternity."⁴⁷ Punt's only qualifier remains his assertion that this good news is not effective for the non-elect.

Romans 5:18-19

¹⁸ So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. ¹⁹ For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous. (NASB)

These verses must be read as a summary statement of Paul's thesis developed in 5:12-21. Again a straight forward reading of

⁴⁶ Penner, The Gospel Revisited, p. 64.

⁴⁷ Penner, The Gospel Revisited, p. 66.

the entire passage would appear to imply a universalistic salvation. "The first Adam led the way into condemnation for all people since all have followed his example of disobedience. The second Adam (Christ), by his act of obedience, reversed this negative situation resulting in the justification of all persons."

According to Punt, at least three ways have been used by interpreters to avoid such an absolute universalism in this passage. Some have claimed that the justification or acquittal offered in these verses refers only to the grace required to remain alive in this present life since all deserve immediate death because of their sin. Arminian interpreters assert that the benefits in Christ spoken about in this passage come to all men by way of an offer, thus making salvation available to them. Calvinists traditionally say that the extent of the salvation is limited to the elect, justifying this reading with the assertion that one must add the understood phrase, "...in Christ" at the end of verse 18. It would then read, "...so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men 'in Christ'."⁴⁸

Both Punt and Penner insist, however, that such attempts to limit the universalistic impact of this passage are unwarranted.

Penner points out that there are no verbs in verse 18, making a strong case for a simple equation: Adam's trespass - condemnation

⁴⁸ Punt, pp. 9-15.

for all. Christ's obedience - salvation for all.⁴⁹ Punt says that verse 19 dispels any doubts about the similarity of the extent of the effects of the actions of Adam and Christ; in both cases the impact is experienced by the "many."⁵⁰

Penner feels that the central issue at stake here is the nature of the incarnation, because Paul is here bringing together the concept of incarnation with radical salvation. He feels that if we can accept the biblical teaching of radical incarnation, that is that Christ took on human sinful nature yet remaining sinless, then we can more readily accept the truth of the radical, universal nature of the salvation that he brought to the world.⁵¹

Having established the universalistic intent of this passage, Punt and Penner, each in their own way back away from absolute universalism. Punt argues, on the basis of the analogy of Scripture, that there can and will be exceptions to the general principle of universal salvation. In the case of the first "all," Christ was the exception since he did not become a sinner; in the case of the second "all," the exceptions will be those whom the Bible declares will be lost, i.e. the non-elect.⁵²

Penner argues that the fact that some will turn their backs on this great salvation in no way takes away from the reality of the

⁴⁹ Penner, The Gospel Revisited, p. 75.

⁵⁰ Punt, p. 15.

⁵¹ Penner, The Gospel Revisited, pp. 71-82.

⁵² Punt, pp. 15-16.

completed work of Christ on behalf of all men. Lack of subjective verification does not take away objective reality.

TOWARD CONSISTENT UNIVERSALISM

In our study we have delineated three main categories of opinions in relation to the scope of salvation offered in Christ.

Exclusivists hold that salvation is available only in response to hearing and responding to the gospel, pluralists are hopeful of salvation outside of Christ, and inclusivists hold that while salvation is only available in Christ, it is distributed much more liberally than exclusivists allow. Punt and Penner represent attempts to accept a "wideness in God's mercy," in the words of Clark Pinnock, while holding to a high view of Scripture. It could be argued that they are exclusivists with inclusivist sympathies, or, on the other hand, that they are inclusivists with roots in traditional exclusivism.

One thing that is clear is that neither Punt nor Penner allow themselves to be counted as absolute universalists. Both agree that the Bible declares that some will go lost, and that it has something to do with rejecting salvation in Christ, however they are not in full agreement as to why God allows lostness in the ultimate state of affairs.

Punt repeatedly reverts to his Reformed roots to draw on election/non-election concepts. While he has moved a long way from traditional Calvinism in which God is seen to create persons

for damnation, he is somehow compelled to explain the lostness of some in terms of non-election. The weakness of his line of reasoning is particularly evident in his view that "...non-elect infants do not die in infancy."⁵³ Perhaps Punt needs to re-think his understanding of the sovereignty of God.

I find Penner's line of argument to be more consistent than Punt's. His system allows for a reconciliation of the two unchangeable truths of the universal love of God and the free will of persons. The gospel is always good news because the nature of God is to save to the uttermost. But in his weakness, he is not able to save those of his free created agents who choose to walk away from him. To force them into salvation, against their wishes, would negate the very essence of humanness in the creatures of his making. In Penner's system there is no need for "theological gymnastics" to assure the salvation of infants; all are included in the salvation of God until they choose to move out of it. There is, in my opinion, good reason to call Penner's position Consistent Universalism, because his conclusions appear to be consistent with the nature of God and other major doctrines within scripture.⁵⁴

⁵³ Punt, p. 126.

⁵⁴ Penner summarises his position as follows: There are some conclusions which can be drawn:

First, from these Scriptures, it must be affirmed that Christ has died for the whole world.

Second, His atonement is efficacious for the whole world, every person.

Both Penner and Punt need to wrestle more specifically with the implications of their positions for a Christian theology of world religions and how that would affect the mission of the church. However, in my opinion, their work deserves to be recognized as a major contribution to the growing awareness among many Christians that the fullness of God's salvation is both deep and wide.

Third, every person is not merely potentially saved, but actually saved.

Fourth, this means that God has forgiven every man, and deals with them as forgiven.

Fifth, this view also fits the belief that when moral and spiritual accountability occurs, full responsibility occurs, full responsibility of decision of faith and obedience are necessary to be saved.

Sixth, even the lost which will not be able to stand in the final judgment, and those in hell are totally saved as far as God, His work, His power, His grace are concerned. But they are lost because of their own disobedience and sin. So, also those in this world who have rejected Christ are as totally lost, though they are saved, as the Scriptures say they are lost, and under the wrath of God.

Seventh, this kind of salvation for all is made necessary in order that God can execute His plan of redemption at all.

Eighth, grace is universal and resistible. While grace is usually seen as multiple, there is only one grace. It is the same grace which creates, which also saves. The purposes of creation, providence and redemption are a single parcel.

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¹ Clark H. Pinnock, A Wideness in God's Mercy, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), p.9.

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