

The Church in Conflict – Can Non-Believers Be Saved?

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Let me begin by saying that we are focused on the wrong question; the issue is not whether non-believers can be saved, but rather, whether those who yearn for God and seek God can experience God's gracious embrace outside the revelation of that grace as it has appeared in Jesus Christ and been mediated through the Christian tradition. I suspect the question means to raise that issue - can non-believers in Jesus Christ as the sole mediator between God and humankind be saved? But, we ought to be careful that we not give the impression that those who believe in Jesus Christ are the world's only believers. If pressed, I doubt any of us would claim that, but our language can be thus construed and create such an impression.

As for the first phrase in the day's theme, "The Church in Conflict," there is no doubt. The Church is in conflict and I have been at the center of that conflict. I was given the ultimatum by the Classis of Muskegon to recant my views on the extent of God's grace, on the possibility of knowing God savingly beyond the limits of the Christian tradition or leave the ranks of ordained clergy in the Reformed Church. Refusing to deny my conviction that the grace of God is broader than that grace operative within the Christian tradition, I resigned my ordination.

How did we come to such a point? A brief review is important in order to understand the conflict situation because the salvation question was not the issue that fomented the conflict. The catalyst for the Classis of Muskegon to investigate my ministry was a feature article in *The Muskegon Chronicle* on the Muskegon Metropolitan Community Church. For nearly two years that small community had been conducting Sunday evening worship in our chapel. We had hosted a pastoral care seminar on ministry to persons suffering from AIDS. At that seminar we learned from the pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church that they were meeting in the basement of a Muskegon bar because they could not

find a church facility open to them. We brought the matter to our Consistory which unanimously invited the group to use our facility without charge. The Consistory saw the invitation simply as an act of hospitality.

The newspaper feature appeared on the Friday before the Spring session of the Classis in March of 1995. The article mentioned that the group met in our chapel and accompanying pictures were taken in our chapel. At the close of the Classis session, someone brought up "Christ Community's ministry to homosexuals." There followed an emotional discussion of our ministry, which can only be explained as an outburst of pent-up hostility to our ministry in general.

That was the beginning. A task force was appointed to investigate our ministry to homosexuals. Our Consistory gathered at the request of the task force and answered their questions - the real question being, "Do you call these people to repentance?" Our Elders answered yes, that we are all called to repentance every time we gather in worship. Obviously, that was not the answer being sought. The interrogators wanted to know if the Metropolitan Community people were challenged to turn away from their homosexuality. Not being satisfied with the task force findings, the Classis Executive Committee requested I present myself for questioning from the floor of Classis at its Fall meeting.

At the October, 1995, meeting, I was asked to give my view of homosexual relationships. I answered that I believed sexual orientation was for the most part a given at birth and that homosexuality was not a moral issue. That viewpoint shocked the Classis. From there it led to the charge that I obviously did not believe in the authority of the Bible. And further, I was questioned about salvation through Jesus Christ alone. I am not even certain how that question came up. The meeting got out of control. There were calls for my immediate dismissal. Finally, it was moved that the Executive Committee engage me in theological discussion. On Reformation Day, 1995, the Executive Committee came to Christ Community for the discussion on the three issues that surfaced at the Classis meeting:

1. What do you believe and teach about the scriptures as the only rule of faith and life?
2. What do you believe and teach about the way of salvation apart from Jesus Christ?
3. What do you believe and teach about the need to repent of homosexual behavior?

For about two hours I gave account of myself. Although two tape recorders were used, neither one produced a usable recording. Therefore, one of the Executive Committee members summarized what they had heard from me and he and another committee member came to me with the summary. Scanning the summary, I said I felt my views had been heard and were quite well represented. I offered to take the summary and put it in my own words, keeping to the same

format and length. I also promised to be as clear as possible so that the issue in each case would stand out clearly. I then suggested the Classis meet to discuss my response to their questions at a session in which no vote would be taken.

This was done. On February 1, 1996, the Classis met in special session, breaking up into small groups to discuss my paper, hoping to come to a consensus on whether or not my views were within what was judged to be acceptable parameters of Reformed faith. Of the eight groups, five held I was beyond the limits, two that I was within and one group couldn't come to a consensus.

With that indication from the body, the Executive Committee called a special session for February 29. They had decided to drop the issue that had been the catalyst for the whole discussion - the issue of homosexuality. I suspect they realized the Classis was getting bad press on that issue and it was the issue the press grabbed on to. I think, too, they came to recognize that Christ Community was living out the General Synod's directives concerning pastoral ministry to persons of homosexual orientation more than any other congregation in the Classis.

The charge that I have an inadequate view of biblical authority has never been discussed. Again, I suspect the Classis was not overly confident they could make a case there and I resolutely rejected their charge.

Thus, the centerpiece of the case against me was that I denied that salvation was available through Jesus Christ alone. That issue was clear and simple and it generated emotional response. Because the conflict took on this sharp focus, we are here in conversation around the question of salvation, not whether non-believers can be saved, but whether only those who believe in Jesus Christ can be saved.

To the question put to me by the Muskegon Classis regarding salvation apart from Jesus Christ, I responded:

SALVATION

I am a Christian. I trust in, worship and serve God as God has been revealed to me by God's Spirit in the face of Jesus Christ. For me, Paul has expressed it well:

...the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness,"... has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. II Corinthians 4:6

That is the God I have preached for thirty-five years, twenty-nine of them in Spring Lake. The Good News that appeared in Jesus is the Gospel preached at Christ Community, the Gospel that has built this Christian community.

Is this God, Creator of all - God alone, known by any others through any other manifestations? Is God's Spirit operative savingly through any other revelation? My study, reflection and experience would say, "Yes."

There are three answers given to the question of salvation in the Christian tradition. Although there are shades of difference within each position, for simplicity's sake, let me define the three positions thus: The *exclusivist* position says salvation is available only through Jesus Christ consciously embraced by the believer. The *inclusivist* position holds that salvation was accomplished only through Jesus Christ but some will be included even though they make no personal appropriation through faith in Jesus Christ.

My position is the *pluralist* view: Jesus Christ mediates to the Christian community salvation, but the God of whom Jesus is a true revelation is known by others in their respective traditions.

I use the example of a cathedral resplendent with stained glass windows. The windows tell stories, biblical stories, but think for our purposes, for example, of Jewish folk gathered in the nave, the Christians in the choir, Muslims in the transepts. Each group is reading the story of faith in their respective areas through their specific windows, the windows of their tradition. But that is possible only because there is a common source of light that filters through all the windows.

I see the respective religions as historical concretizations of founding revelatory experience, but the common source of all true revelation is the one God - the God who, for me, is the God whose heart is revealed in the face of Jesus.

It is to that God that I witness; it is to the grace of God that I point. But I can enter authentically into dialogue with other faith traditions, bearing my witness but also listening, open to learn new nuances of truth.

All religions are not equally true (or equally false). That is where dialogue and mutual understanding come in. There is clarification, growth and transformation possible where such dialogue is entered into without fear and defensiveness, but with deep trust in the God whose Spirit leads into truth.

Salvation became the single focus of the inquiry into my theology and, in spite of my affirmation of God's saving grace through Jesus Christ as the center of my faith and my preaching and teaching ministry, I have been judged as outside acceptable parameters of Reformed faith because I will not go on to say that *only* those who come to God through Jesus Christ can be saved.

I have made this point concisely before the Classis. I was very clear that, if they would scratch the word "alone," I would gladly assent to the statement they called upon me to affirm. In "A Pastoral Letter to Muskegon Classis Churches

Regarding our Relationship with the Rev. Richard Rhem," the Executive Committee wrote:

- We affirm theological search, questioning, and struggle. Clearly these are values of the Reformed tradition. At the same time, we affirm the integrity and the appropriateness of communal belief.
- We affirm Dick Rhem's love for Christ.
- We recognize Dick Rhem's respect for and struggle with Scripture.
- We know that many have been very blessed by the work and ministry of Dick Rhem as it has been carried out for 25 years at Christ Community Church.

However, setting aside the issue of personal faith and based on our serious and sincere consideration, we believe that what is being taught and preached by Dick Rhem at Christ community Church in regards to the authority of Scripture and salvation by Jesus Christ must be considered unacceptable.

This conviction comes from out of a time of honest wrestling, and causes us much pain and sorrow. To the extent that this stance will hurt and bruise fellow children of God, we do grieve that result.

Having said this, we hereby recommend that, unless Dick Rhem publicly recant his views, as clearly espoused, which are not fully supportive of the definitive authority of Scripture and salvation by Jesus Christ alone, Rev. Rhem and the Muskegon Classis purposefully move toward a peaceful separation, with humility and a gentle spirit.

Muskegon Classis Executive Committee February 22,1996

It was the "alone" I could not in good conscience declare. I stated in the special session of February 29, 1996, that I did believe the revelation of God was possible beyond the Christian tradition and that the grace of God could be mediated other than through Jesus Christ. I also affirmed that I felt it arrogant to deny that, as well as presumptuous to declare that God must save universally. But the "alone" was the part at issue and on February 29,1996, Classis Muskegon voted 2 to 1 against me, thus leading to my being set outside the Reformed Church of America.

At its June, 1996, session, the General Synod of the Reformed Church seemed to confirm the decision of Muskegon Classis relative to the exclusivity of salvation through Jesus Christ. A news release stated:

RCA General Synod Reaffirmed Doctrines of Christ and the Scriptures

The General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting June 8-14 at Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa, strongly reaffirmed two tenets of the church - that salvation is only through faith in Christ and that the Bible is the Word of God, the only rule of faith and practice. It also approved (subject to approval by two-thirds of the RCA's 46 classes) a *Book of Church Order* change which would require ministers to annually affirm these beliefs.

The news release did not go on to relate the further action of the Synod which was reported in the July/August, 1996, issue of *The Church Herald*.

THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRIST

The General Synod adopted the following resolution upon the unanimous advice of the advisory committee on theology:

The 1996 General Synod of the Reformed Church in America joyfully and gladly reaffirms its confession that God's unique, unrepeatable, and decisive activity in Jesus Christ is the only sure hope for this world. God's work in Jesus Christ alone saves all who believe. Indeed, there is salvation in no one else, as the Old and New Testaments themselves teach.

Further, this position marks not the end, but the beginning of the church's attempts faithfully to witness to the gospel. In our culture, there is an increasing tendency to view religious issues merely as matters of personal preference. Such an attitude renders the church's confession more difficult for many to understand and to embrace. Increasing contact with adherents of other religious traditions and those outside the Christian faith also stretches the boundaries of Christian understanding, as Christians recognize truth and value in religions and perspectives other than their own, even while challenging them with Christ's unique claims about himself. Therefore, in light of these changes in our world, the Reformed Church in America seeks fresh guidance on how to interpret and to live out its faith in the uniqueness of Christ in the midst of a pluralistic world with diverse religious perspectives; and further,

The General Synod directs the Commission on Theology, in consultation with Evangelism and Church Development Services, to engage in a study on "Christian Witness to the Uniqueness of Christ among People of Other Faiths" which will both interpret the nature and character of Christian claims regarding the uniqueness of Christ and also guide Christians in understanding and assessing the religious experience and claims of those outside the Christian faith.

Thus, the conversation in which we are engaged today is part of the RCA agenda at the present time.

Let me move on now to give the background of my claim that God's gracious embrace is broader than the Christian Church.

As I do that, I want to be clear that my movement from an Exclusivist position - that salvation is possible only through the atoning death of Jesus Christ consciously embraced by faith - to a Pluralist position - that God's revelation "happens" not only within the biblical tradition (Israel and Jesus), but also beyond that tradition in other religious traditions, and, further, that God's saving grace is mediated also through other traditions beyond the biblical tradition - is the result of long wrestling with the biblical tradition and the theological tradition of the Church in the light of my own human experience.

Those three, the biblical witness, the theological reflection of 2000 years, and present human experience, must be understood as the mix out of which my present position is arrived at. They are the matrix upon which thoughtful reflection - the exercise of one's rationality - is focused as one carries on the interpretive function of the theological task. If I were to identify the catalyst for my in-depth probing, I suspect it would be my experience of a world marked by global consciousness in which the great religious traditions, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and the Eastern religions, Hinduism and Buddhism in their respective expressions are being practiced in close proximity to each other. I have for some time questioned the idea that the whole world would be brought to embrace the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It simply does not appear a likely possibility, given the long traditions of those great traditions that arose in the First Axial period, 800-200 B.C., and their present vitality.

Questioning the possibility of world evangelization, I found my concrete experience calling into question the propriety of the effort to turn the respective traditions from their path to Christian faith. That experience was a close encounter with Jewish faith in its concrete observance. In a day-long dialogue between Rabbi David Hartman and Bishop Krister Stendahl in 1991, sponsored by the West Shore Committee for Jewish-Christian Dialogue in Muskegon, Michigan, David Hartman raised the question,

Do I have to deny your truth to affirm my truth?

Do I have to deny your joy to celebrate my joy?

From the depths of my soul, I answered, "No, of course not." It was not only the actual content of this all-day discussion that deeply impacted me; it was the manner in which two totally committed religious scholars and leaders in their respective traditions engaged each other. It was a moving experience to watch these two persons wrestle with the issue of faithful interpretation.

That experience led me to accept an invitation to join the West Shore Committee and that experience has led to many concrete encounters with Jewish people and Jewish observance - a *briss* in which I recognized precisely the same yearning for God's grace to embrace the child, the same commitment of parents and grandparents and community that I experience at the baptism of an infant in the Christian community; a *Bat Mitzvah* at which I experienced the same passage into spiritual adult faith that we experience at the confirmation of our youth; Sabbath worship in which the Word is heard and prayers are offered before the mystery of the God of Israel. Beyond these formal moments of ritual and worship, it has been my privilege to come to know in meaningful friendship persons in the Jewish community and sense with them our solidarity in the human family.

Such experience is powerful; it is transforming. It calls in question one's traditional posture that would disallow the validity of the religious tradition of the other. One finds the sharp divide created by religious exclusivism eroding. What does one do with that experience?

If one would be serious and responsible to one's calling to be a minister of the word and sacrament, one will necessarily be sent back to one's own tradition: to the biblical story and the theological formulation of the faith. For me, this was not a new endeavor; I had been wrestling with the biblical word and Reformed confessional formulations for a quarter century since my return from study in The Netherlands with Hendrikus Berkhof.

While with Berkhof I recognized that the inability of my own conservative Reformed tradition to deal with ongoing human experience stemmed from its understanding of the nature of scripture.

My theological education had taught me that Scripture is God's inspired word, infallible in all that it intends to teach. Further, I was taught that Scripture is to be interpreted by Scripture— an individual passage in light of the whole testimony of Scripture; there could be no contradictory material within the Bible. The presupposition was that there was finally one unified biblical witness. To determine the content of that witness, one had to apply a confessional hermeneutics – that is, one approached the biblical material with a pre-formed doctrinal system. To be sure the biblical theological scholars and the systematic theologians carried on their debates, the biblical people pointing out the gaps and flaws of the system by reference to biblical texts that did not “fit.” However, in the Reformed Church and in conservative evangelical theology generally, the system prevailed – Scripture interpreted by Scripture subsumed and explained away the contradictions.

In this hermeneutical approach the rich diversity of the biblical witness was smothered and the diverse voices that came to expression within the canon of Scripture were silenced.

My awareness of this failure to listen to the whole diverse biblical testimony dawned as I read Berkhof's *Well-Founded Hope*, a study of the biblical teaching of themes of heaven and hell, judgment and salvation. From his study I learned that the scheme of things I had always believed – that faith in Jesus Christ brings salvation from eternal damnation and failure thus to believe destines one for eternal punishment – was not the whole story. From Berkhof I learned there are also passages that point to a universal salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Further, I learned that this was not something that lessened Berkhof's passion for witness to God's grace in Jesus Christ but, rather, gave him the hope that ultimately God's "Yes" to humankind would prove stronger than the human "No." Cautious, not presumptive, nevertheless a positive hope that the gracious God would overcome all human alienation.

Yet it was obvious that, not only the followers of other religious traditions lived and died without knowledge or experience of Jesus Christ, but in the secular society of the West many lived and died without any apparent Christian faith or practice. How would all those who "died without Christ" be reconciled to God through Christ? If it were the case that God's grace was universal in its embrace, how would that grace be mediated to those who never heard or heard but never heeded? I was moving away from exclusivism toward an inclusivist understanding of salvation but had no sense of what was involved in such a move.

After twelve strenuous years of building Christ Community, it was time for a sabbatical. Without this as my goal, my sabbatical experience set me on a course of investigation that gave foundation to my nascent inclusivism and paved the way for my eventual movement to a pluralist position.

In the fall term of 1983, Hans Küng, the noted Roman Catholic theologian, gave a series of lectures at the University of Michigan entitled, "Eternal Life?" It was an investigation of life after death as a medical, philosophical, and theological problem. He faced squarely and straightforwardly all the difficult questions surrounding the subject, dealing with ancient and contemporary issues, the question in the history of religions, the modern denial of anything beyond death, and the near-death experiences recorded in recent years. He dealt with biblical material, the question of resurrection, the resurrection of Jesus, and the church's teaching on judgment, heaven, and hell. The lectures were subsequently published under the title *Eternal Life*. By virtue of my sabbatical, I attended the lectures and was a participant in a cross-discipline seminar with Küng for the term.

I came away with two striking realizations: first, that there was intense interest in these questions of death and dying, of life after death, of heaven and hell on the campus of a large secular university. The lectures had to be moved from the largest lecture hall available to the Rackham Auditorium. Secondly, I realized

how little these vital questions were probed in the church, how little reflection I had personally given to them in my ministry, and how comfortably and uncritically we in the church have accepted traditional answers.

Once awakened to the questions that are not nearly so simply answered as once I had thought, and also to the deeply existential interest of today's people, both secular and religious, I began to open again questions on which I had come to premature closure. For me, the greatest surprise came in a new appreciation for the teaching of purgatory, which was resolutely rejected at the time of the Reformation and which has received little serious reflection in the Protestant tradition.

For the first time ever I sought to understand what the ancient tradition of the Roman Church taught. To my surprise my own mentor, Hendrikus Berkhof, also recognized a place for some process of purgation following death. He wrote,

God is serious about the responsibility of our decision, but he is even more serious about the responsibility of his love. The darkness of rejection and God-forsakenness cannot and may not be argued away, but no more can and may it be eternalized. For God's sake we hope that hell will be a form of purification. (*Christian Faith*, Revised, p. 536)

I found C. S. Lewis' treatment of the subject in *The Great Divorce* profound and helpful. And in his *Letters to Malcolm* the imagery is moving.

Our souls demand Purgatory, don't they? Would it not break the heart if God said to us, "It is true, my son, that your breath smells and your rags drip with mud and slime, but we are charitable here and no one will upbraid you with these things, nor draw away from you. Enter into the joy"? Should we not reply, "With submission, sir, and if there is no objection, I'd *rather* be cleaned first." "It may hurt, you know." – "Even so, sir."

I assume that the process of purification will normally involve suffering. Partly from tradition, partly because most real good that has been done me in this life has involved it. But I don't think suffering is the purpose of the purgation. I can well believe that people neither much worse nor much better than I will suffer less than I or more. "No nonsense about merit." The treatment given will be the one required, whether it hurts little or much.

My favourite image on this matter comes from the dentist's chair. I hope that when the tooth of life is drawn and I am "coming round," a voice will say, "Rinse your mouth out with this." This will be Purgatory.

I was convinced. Whatever the nature of the encounter with God at our death, the redeeming intention of the God of all merely seemed to me consistent with the whole movement of God in the historical outworking of the covenant of grace. I returned to the biblical story, reading with new eyes, with new questions, and I discovered a rich vein of material that pointed to a wideness in God's mercy I had never discovered in the Scriptures before. Along with the witness of Scripture, I found a long line of theologians from the early Church Fathers who affirmed the universal triumph of God's redeeming grace.

I summarized my research in an article I wrote for the journal *Perspectives* (September, 1988)"

Throughout Christian history some have understood God's redemptive action in Jesus Christ to be universal in its scope. The early church was far more universalistic in its understanding of the radical renewal of reality, the radical alteration of the human situation through God's action in Jesus Christ, than was the church of subsequent centuries. Among the fathers of the early church we find statements pointing to the final conquest of evil and rebellion, if not within history, then beyond, through some kind of purgation process. Clement of Alexandria wrote,

Punishment is, in its operation, like medicine; it dissolves the hard heart, purges away the filth of uncleanness, and reduces the swellings of pride and haughtiness; thus restoring its subject to a sound and healthful state (*Pedagog*, 1.8).

Clement's more famous pupil, Origin, wrote,

...God is a consuming fire, what is it that is to be consumed by him? We say it is wickedness, and whatever proceeds from it, such as is figuratively called "wood, hay, and stubble" (I Cor. 1:ii), which denote the evil works of man. Our God is a consuming fire in this sense; and he shall come as a refiner's fire to purify rational nature from the alloy of wickedness... (*Contra Celsum*, Lib. IV, 13).

Gregory, bishop of Nyssa, declared,

All evil, however, must at length be entirely removed from everything, so that it shall no more exist. For such being the nature of sin, that it cannot exist without a corrupt motive, it must, of course, be perfectly dissolved and wholly destroyed, so that nothing can remain a receptacle of it, when all motive and influence shall spring from God alone (*De Anima et Resurrectione*).

Theodore of Mopsuestia held

That sin is an unavoidable part of the development and education of man; that some carry it to a greater extent than others, but that God will finally overrule it for their final establishment in good.

Among these early Christian thinkers there is no denial of evil and sin, but they seem to entertain no doubt that God will finally conquer the last vestige of evil and restore all things through remedial punishment.

It was not until 544 A.D. at a local council called by Justinian that the teaching of universal salvation was condemned.

In the *Perspectives* piece I brought the discussion closer to our time, referencing Karl Barth.

In our century the question of universalism has surfaced in Reformed theology in the work of Karl Barth. Berkouwer's early study of Barth was entitled, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*. Barth's detractors labeled him a Universalist and wrote him off as dangerous. Yet the matter is not that simple. Barth resisted systematizing; he defied neat pigeonholing. In a lecture delivered to a Swiss Reformed minister's association in 1956, he reflected on those early, heady days and the theological ferment he fomented. He entitled his remarks, "The Humanity of God." One consequence of the humanity of God, Barth maintains, is that the sense and sound of our word must be fundamentally positive. He writes:

To open up again the abyss closed in Jesus Christ cannot be our task. Man is *not* good: that is indeed true and must once more be asserted. God does not turn towards him without uttering in inexorable sharpness a "No" to his transgression. Thus theology has no choice but to put this "No" into words within the framework of its theme. However, it must be the "No" which Jesus Christ has taken upon Himself for us men, in order that it may no longer affect us and that we may no longer place ourselves under it. What takes place in God's humanity is, since it includes that "No" in itself, the *affirmation* of man (*The Humanity of God*, p. 58).

After developing that notion, Barth raises the question, "Does this mean universalism?" He then makes three observations "in which one is to detect no position for or against that which passes among us under this term" (p. 59).

Barth suggests one ought not surrender to the panic that that term seems to spread before informing oneself exactly concerning its sense or non-sense. One should, he contends, at least be stimulated by Colossians 1:19 and parallel passages to determine whether the concept could not perhaps

have a good meaning. And he suggests finally that the ‘danger’ with which universalism seems to be attended should be balanced by concern for an even greater danger: a theology that fosters suspicious questioning because of its own legalistic perspective and morose spirit.

Of this Barth is certain: we have no right to set limits to the loving-kindness of God which has appeared in Jesus Christ. Rather, he argues, it is our duty to see and to understand it as still greater than we have seen before.

And, of course, my mentor, Hendrikus Berkhof, was an important guide for me as I wrestled with issues of ultimate concern. I wrote,

Hendrikus Berkhof gives a full discussion to the question before us in *Well-Founded Hope*, the chapter entitled “The Double Image of the Future.” He deals seriously with the biblical witness but concludes, as was stated above, that Scripture leaves us with a double track. Countless attempts have been made to subsume one track of texts under the other by ingenious “exegetical tricks” but, Berkhof concludes, “we cannot smooth out this contradiction in the New Testament.” All that we read about the future, texts offering consolation and texts of warning, do not “fit together like a jigsaw puzzle.” In the case of the passages giving warning, these present the gospel in its nature as a call to decision; the passages offering consolation give hope and the promise of eventual salvation of all.

We must hear both witnesses; we must not reduce one to the other. But we cannot simply allow them to stand with no link between them. Berkhof suggests we pronounce them “one after the other,” for “only the person who has learned to tremble at the possibility of rejection may speak about universal salvation.”

It is the believing church, declares Berkhof, that can confess the last secret. In the end it is the power of God’s “yes” that triumphs over the recalcitrance of the human “no.” This is our last word but a last word that must be spoken if we believe God is ultimately not powerless or cruel or arbitrary, but rather infinite in mercy through Jesus Christ.

Summarizing his conclusion on the issue in *Christian Faith*, Berkhof writes:

We know that the covenant means that God’s faithfulness ever and again does battle with man’s unfaithfulness. What ultimately will be forced to yield: divine faithfulness or human unfaithfulness? Paul raised that question with respect to Israel, as the trial grounds of God’s relationship to man; and he ends with the confession: “God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy

upon all" (Romans 11:32). These considerations compel us, not to detract from the gravity of the human "No" against God and its consequences, but to think just a little more of the divine "Yes" to recalcitrant humans. God is serious about the responsibility of our decision, but he is even more serious about the responsibility of his love. The darkness of rejection and God-forsakenness cannot and may not be argued away, but no more can and may it be eternalized. For God's sake we hope that hell will be a form of purification. (Revised edition, p. 536).

Is this universalism? Karl Barth was unwilling to be so labeled and rightly so. In my own wrestling with the question I have come to realize that it is not for us to dictate to the Eternal God what is or what must be. It would be arrogant to deny that God's gracious embrace did not include all; it would be presumptuous to insist that it must. But for me, the serious revisiting of the biblical story and reflection on the Christian theological tradition convinced me that the extent of God's grace is far wider than I had ever thought. As I concluded the piece I wrote for *Perspectives*:

In light of God's gracious election in Jesus Christ, of God's steadfast love and covenant faithfulness, of God's infinite power and patience, we have good reason to trust and confidently hope that the habit of God's heart will finally heal every wound, overcome all opposition, and gather all God's children safely home.

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