

Regarding the Conflict About Christian Exclusivity

Richard A. Rhem
Minister of Preaching and Theological Inquiry
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan

*Edited Transcript of the Spoken Address followed by Questions and Answers at
The Synod of the Mid-Atlantic, Reformed Church in America
Ramapo, New Jersey
October 4, 1996*

Editor's Note: See "The Church in Conflict – Can Non-Believers Be Saved?" for the prepared text of the address.

Thank you for the opportunity of being with you today (I think). I want to begin by saying that I am not here on a crusade. I am here because I was invited to come and, having taken the stand I have, I feel there is some responsibility to give an account of myself.

I have all of my life been a part of the Reformed Church in America, and being outside at this point in my life is the most surprising thing that has ever happened to me. And yet, I don't want simply to turn my back on that which has been my whole life, but continue in a dialogue and conversation to the extent that that is desired. And so, I am here today to do that very thing. But, I want to be clear, I am not here because I am trying to win a battle or make a point. I'm not on a crusade. I was not on a crusade in Michigan, either. I was simply ministering in my own concrete community of faith, in my own congregation, and there was no idea ever that what we had discovered at Christ Community to be an effective embodiment of the grace of God should be exported anywhere, to our local community or beyond. We simply were trying to be faithful as the people of God in that place, and what has transpired over the last year has come to us from the outside; it is not something that originated inside, and it is not something that has happened because we were trying to move out. I want to be very clear about that.

I am here to be in conversation with you and to be of whatever help I can be in lifting up aspects of the question that is before us, namely, that the grace of God is limited to those who come to God through faith in Jesus Christ; in other words, Christian exclusivity. I think there is no one that would deny that we are dealing with a very important question for the Christian church, but I begin with that disclaimer, that I am here for conversation and not as a crusader, not moving out now to convince the whole world, after all, that I was right or that I am right.

The other thing I want to say is that I am a Christian minister of the Gospel. I have for 36 years been involved in the ministry. Four of those years I was in graduate study in The Netherlands. Other than that, I have been a pastor and have preached every week, been involved in pastoral care, preaching, teaching, just a garden variety pastor, committed to the local congregation – all of that done as a Christian minister. I preach the grace of God as it has appeared in Jesus Christ and no other message. We don't get up on Sunday morning at Christ Community and say, "Well, let's look at the menu this morning. Shall we have a pinch of Buddhism or a dimension of Islam, or whatever." No, I preach every week from the scriptures. I try to be faithful in my wrestling with scripture and its interpretation, and to proclaim the God whom I have come to experience as the one embodied in Jesus Christ. So, let me be clear on that, as well.

I suppose there will be some other things that will come out as the day progresses, but I think I want to say those things by way of introduction. I am here at your invitation, not at my initiative, and I'm here as one who continues to be what he has always been and that is a minister of the Gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

I've tried to think of how I could best get the story, the issue before us, and sometimes to tell one's own story is about as effective as anything. Obviously, in the last weeks and months I have had good opportunity to try and track the pilgrimage on which I have been engaged, and the way that I have come to where I am presently in my understanding of Christian faith and other faiths. It seems to me that, when I was in New Jersey in the middle 60s when my "little system" was coming up short in terms of being able to deal with the experience of a pastor in a congregation, and my ability to interpret life, understand human experience, and to preach my theological system, my understanding of the faith, was limited. I came out of a very conservative nurture and continued in that very conservative track through my college and seminary education. I went into the ministry a very conservative, evangelical pastor and I certainly would have been at the far right of the theological spectrum. Human experience has a way of humbling us and creating situations in which our tight little systems are not adequate. I was beginning to run into that when I made the move from Spring Lake to New Jersey.

My first four years were in Spring Lake, Michigan. At the time that I came to New Jersey, the Reformed Church was engaged in some controversy over a Church School curriculum, *Covenant Life Curriculum*, and this was the first time in which the church at large was being introduced to some of the critical views of the scripture. It was really very good stuff and very responsible and actually conservative material. But, nonetheless, there were those who were threatened by some of the things that were handled in the *Covenant Life Curriculum*. I began to study that curriculum and it began to address some of the questions that I was having in my own pastoral ministry. It was time for me to go to Europe in 1967 and find out if I really had anything to say, if I had a Gospel to preach.

I went there wanting, for the first time in my life, to know the truth. I went through my whole college and seminary education seeking to buttress the presuppositions with which I came, those I had imbibed with my mother's milk. I did not want to be stretched and I was not aware of it, but I was very defensive against those questions that put my faith understanding in question. But one eventually has to deal with that and so I went to Europe and found a very wonderful mentor in Hendrikus Berkhof who was at the University of Leiden. He helped me identify what the real questions were. Berkhof would say, when I would come with a question, "Ja, ja, ja. That's the question."

I said, "I know that's the question. What's the answer?"

He'd say, "Ja, ja, ja, ja. Just live with the question for a while."

So I did and they were four wonderful years in which I imbibed as much as I could. I read and read and read and wrote and read and wrote and thought, and had, what was for me, my first real immersion in an educational experience.

I sat in his study one day and I said to him, "You know, in the Reformed Church, we can't really deal very effectively with any of the specific theological questions that come up because we have never dealt with the issue of the authority of scripture and how scripture is to be used. It seems as though with everything we're debating, we never debate the issue. We debate the issue in terms of what it will do to our doctrine of scripture."

I think at the time it may have been the ordination of women to the Elder-Deacon office, and I could see that nobody was asking whether women could be spiritual, whether women could be gifted, whether women could be effective leaders in the church. It seemed to me that the issue always came down to, "Well, if we grant that, what will happen to First Timothy, whatever, and what about this passage?," so that it was not the issue itself, but it was that authority which informs all of our decisions. I said to Berkhof, "What I really should do is write a dissertation on the place of scripture and the use of scripture in the church," and he looked at me and he said, "You go back to the Reformed Church in America and the United States of America and do that, do you know what they will do to you?" And so, I came back and I didn't do that. But I was aware that that needed to be dealt with.

Then, after some years, having returned to Spring Lake where I had continued to wrestle with the faith, I went to the University of Michigan in the fall of 1983 where Hans Küng was a guest, giving public lectures on Monday night. They were held at Racham Auditorium, with overflow crowds. He gave the lectures, now published, entitled *Eternal Life?* On Tuesday afternoon I was engaged in a cross-discipline seminar with him for three hours. There were about 35 of us from the various schools of the university, medical people, artists, a couple of pastors – a marvelous experience. He was working from mimeographed material on paradigm change in theology – wrestling with that whole shift in perspective that

comes when current data put the present conception of things into question. Then there seems to arise a new model that can include and embrace the fresh data and there is a significant shift.

It happens, of course, in the sciences, and there was a significant book by Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, in which he said this is actually what happens in the natural sciences. Hans Küng and David Tracey of the University of Chicago had gathered a consultation in Tübingen prior to 1983 about the application of paradigm shift through theological understanding. So I really got into that paradigm shift dimension early on. Küng helped me to understand that, in all of my training, I had come up with the scriptures as the authoritative word of God and all of human experience, the ongoing human experience, really had little impact on the faith understanding that came out of the scriptures. I had one pole to which I was lashed, and yet life was going on “out here.” Küng helped me to see that the theological task is to live between the two poles – that which is given, the history of Israel and Jesus in our scripture, and ongoing human experience, the present horizon. And that theology does not pass along through history untouched by historical circumstance, some deposit of faith as though it fell out of heaven, simply to be delivered to the next generation as it is. Rather, theology is that hermeneutical task that constantly runs between the given revelation that is in the scripture and the ongoing human experience, so that from the scripture the present is illuminated and the present elicits new life and new understanding from the scripture. There is a coordination between those two poles.

And when I saw that, I realized that my whole experience prior to that had been living out of this pole of the scripture without any significant regard as to what was happening out in the world. I also realized that what had happened in the liberalism of the 19th century, that had come on bad times, was that there was such an earnest attempt to understand and accommodate what was going on in the world that the pole of the scripture was not taken seriously. I began to realize that the task really for us in the church is to live between that biblical story and our ongoing story, and to understand our lives in the light that comes from the story, the founding story, but that the founding story has spurred a tradition that has resources that are rich, being enlarged through ongoing human experience, that can continue to be reclaimed to bring the faith to fresh expression as we go on in our pilgrimage. For me, I think that was a very significant moment.

On Monday night Küng spoke on heaven and hell and purgatory, judgment and death to overflow crowds in this vast educational institution where only a professor's half time is given to a program in religious studies in this huge state university. There is just a smidgeon of interest in the whole phenomena of religion. This was a new experiment at the time, Küng being the first guest lecturer in Religious Studies. The Vatican was putting the heat on him in Germany; they wanted him put under censure for his views, and he came to the University of Michigan almost on a lark in order to have some leverage back in

Tübingen because Michigan did say to him, "If you want to stay here, you can stay here." He didn't do that because, when you're a professor at Tübingen in the German system, you want to retire out of that system, which he has done.

So there I was, preaching every week, and now I see in this huge secular arena sophisticated, educated, cultured, cultural despisers of religion sitting for two hours to hear the rather difficult English of this Catholic theologian talk about death, purgatory, hell, judgment, and I said to myself, "Good grief, I don't even preach on those things in my own pulpit. In this secular setting I gathered with people, fully human, listening to lectures on such issues. Maybe they know, too, they're going to die, and they must wonder, and maybe they've lost someone, and they must wonder."

And so it was like a revelation to me that there was this intense existential interest in the human person, whether they were connected with the institutional religion or had any particular faith profession. Those end questions engaged them, and I came home and began my own search. That is what has gotten me into trouble, because I discovered the expanse, the extent of the grace of God was much broader than I had ever dreamed.

It was about that time that the Reformed Church founded a journal of theological investigation whose purpose was to stimulate theological discussion in the Reformed Church and, because I was a pastor at a rather safe pastorate, I seemed to be the one that got the assignments to write on the issues that would address the Reformed Church in terms of those questions that we felt needed to be talked about. And so, an early article was on purgatory.

I never would have believed that I would have been concerned at all about purgatory, but I began to see what was the wisdom of the ancient church and what was behind that whole construction of things, and to recognize that, as a child of the Reformation, I never got a fair shot at understanding what that was all about because we were in such sharp reaction precisely at that point in the 16th century. And then I began to investigate the extent of God's grace and I found out that, in the early church, there was a strong strain of universalism, that the grace of God would finally be triumphant in regard to all. And I found some high Calvinists who simply were more logical than some of the rest who also came to that same position of the ultimate triumph of the grace of God. And then, of course, there was my own mentor, Hendrikus Berkhof and his reference to Karl Barth and to the contemporary discussion of that issue. And so, again, I wrote in *Perspectives*. The "Letters to the Editor" revealed that some people were upset. There were also a few positive comments and there was engagement. However, it was in black and white. Over the next decade I continued to address these issues in the journal until 1995, when I published an article on interreligious dialogue and my recognition that we had within the Christian church some serious thinking to do before we could enter authentically into religious dialogue. That

got me to where I am and there was never any question about it until the spring of 1995.

The catalyst for the discussion on salvation was the fact that we allowed a group from the Metropolitan Community Church ministering largely to gay and lesbian people simply to use our chapel. When that was called in question, then one thing led to another, and then my theological views were called in question and eventually the Classis recognized, I think, there wasn't much point in pursuing the original issue, but they were deeply concerned, then, about this question of salvation apart from Christ.

This has become a conversation within the Reformed Church and the question, as it has been phrased, is "Can non-believers be saved?" I want to say that that is the wrong question. I'm not interested in the question of whether non-believers can be saved. I am interested in the question of whether those who have a yearning for God and seek after God and who pursue that yearning and that seeking in another faith tradition can be saved, because we are not talking about people who are Christian and the rest of the world as non-believers. We are talking about a world that is laced with believers of many stripes, and we are living in a context today, a global context in which these people are our neighbors and our children are bringing home people of other faiths and presenting them as their future spouses. We meet them at work and down the street there is a temple or a meditation place or a shrine of some sort that was not the case some years ago. So, the question is not whether non-believers can be saved. The question is "Must I insist that there is salvation through Jesus Christ alone?"

Now, let me be very clear again. Before the Classis of Muskegon I said, "If you will scratch out one word, I'll sign your document" that affirms that there is salvation through Jesus Christ. I believe that and I would affirm that, and I have affirmed that. But, when you tell me that I must say it is through Jesus Christ alone, then I don't know what to do with Jewish folks that I have come to know so well and have become so fond of, working in the Jewish-Christian Committee for Dialogue in the West Shore area of Michigan. Then, what do I do with all of those about me in our world today who seem to manifest all of the fruits of the Spirit, whose questions are my questions, and whose experience seems to be the same experience as mine – what am I to do with them? The issue is not whether or not there is salvation through Jesus Christ. It is whether or not I must be held to an exclusivist position that says through Jesus Christ and through no other, and that apart from Jesus Christ there is only condemnation, there is no salvation and light, and no eternal life for any who come not through Jesus Christ our Lord. That I will not say. And that is the issue upon which I have been put out.

Obviously you might expect me to argue my theological conclusion on the basis of scripture. But that is not as simple as it sounds because, as has been claimed in many arguments, anything can be "proven" by scripture. I learned from Professor Berkhof the rich diversity of the biblical witness, for example, on the very

question of the extent of God's grace. In his *Well-Founded Hope*, he has a chapter entitled "The Double Image of the Future."

He deals seriously with the biblical witness but concludes 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."

When my article, "The Habit of God's Heart" was published in 1988, I was the Preaching Professor at Western Theological Seminary. The piece caused a stir. I was called before the Executive Committee of the seminary board to give an account of myself. I remember distinctly when I suggested that scripture spoke in more than one voice on the matter of the extent of God's grace, I was immediately "corrected." Scripture interpreted by scripture leaves no ambiguity – salvation comes through Jesus Christ *alone*.

I remember a conversation with the wonderful Lutheran bishop, the late Krister Stendahl, who was a guest at our Jewish-Christian Dialogue. He spoke of the brilliant apologist for Christianity, C. S. Lewis. He spoke of how much he loved the Lewis of *Shadowland* and of *A Grief Observed*, the result of his grievous loss of his wife to cancer. Lewis, in his grief expressing the loss of his love, spoke the language of the heart. But, said Stendahl, when Lewis argues for the existence of God, the incarnation, the atonement, I don't take him seriously because he is so brilliant he could be just as effective on the other side of the question.

So it is with the Bible. As Luther argued, scripture is a wax nose; one can be as honest and responsible as possible and have someone on the other side of the question come up with a contrary conclusion. And thus I have not really engaged in the whole biblical debate.

That said, it does not imply that I do not believe there is a legitimate biblical witness to God's universal grace. In Luke's Acts we read the story of the movement of the Gospel beyond its community of origin – to the vast Gentile world. The story of Peter and Cornelius is paradigmatic, showing the expansive movement of the Gospel to the Gentile world. Luke records the story and then

has Peter rehearse the whole experience before the Jerusalem Elders who called him to account for going to the Gentiles. In light of his concrete experience of the Spirit of God anointing the Gentiles, Peter says, according to Luke's account, "...who was I that I could hinder God?"

An even larger crisis was generated by Paul who brought the Gospel intentionally to the Gentiles. Acts 15 records the story of the first "Church Council." The Jesus Movement was at a crisis point; a decision had to be made concerning the non-Jews who were embracing the Gospel and becoming a growing part of the Jesus Movement that, to begin with, was a Jewish movement.

Peter recounted his experience with Cornelius. In Luke's recounting of the story, he has Peter declare,

And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us...we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will. (Acts 15:8-11)

Following Peter's witness Barnabas and Paul told of "the signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles" (verse 12). And then the leader of the Jerusalem Church, James, gave his "decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who were turning to God..." (verse 19).

Luke is recording the most momentous decision that early Jesus Movement was called upon to make. Luke records the pivot point of the whole Jesus Movement. Gentiles could become Jews. That was not new. What was new in Paul's argument is that Gentiles can become God's children without first becoming Jews.

Paul is arguing for Grace, the Grace of God embracing the Gentile apart from those specifically Jewish rituals, circumcision, dietary laws, whatever, and Paul's experience is that God is embracing the Gentiles through faith as Israel had been embraced through all the generations. Peter's experience is that God is embracing a Cornelius and his household, the Holy Spirit falls on them, the waters of baptism are applied to them. In Jerusalem the leadership asks, what's going on here? That was a critical point because they could have said it would be necessary for the Gentiles to come to faith in Jesus as the Messiah, but they would have to do it by way of full participation in the Mosaic legislation following the Torah. And they decided not. They decided that the grace of God could embrace the Gentile without that Gentile becoming a Jew, and that was a paradigmatic shift.

Paul said God is doing a new thing; God is creating one new humanity. In Romans 9, 10 and 11, Paul is struggling because he does not see how his Jewish brothers and sisters can fail to see what he sees in Jesus. How they can fail to see

what God is doing in history. He says, “My heart is deeply distressed. I, myself, would be accursed for my brothers and sisters if only they could see.” He goes on in those three chapters struggling with that issue, and he comes to the end of that struggle in the 11th chapter in verse 32, where he says, “God has reckoned all in disobedience, the Jew and the Gentile, Israel and the nations, in order that God may have mercy on all.” And then he breaks out into the one great doxology that has no reference to Jesus Christ, just praising the eternal God, the God of Israel, for His unsearchable ways, His inscrutable judgment, and he says, “Source, Guide and Goal of all there is, to God be glory forever.” He finally believes that a mystery is at work here, that Israel finally will be saved, he knows not how, and, in the meantime, the grace of God has come to the Gentiles.

Now we are talking about a hinge point in history. We are talking about the fact that Peter had to do that which is contrary to the scripture by which he had lived. He could quote scripture and verse, the ritual, the tradition that would have said don’t enter the house of Cornelius, don’t do this, don’t do that. He was going contrary to that which had been deeply inbred in him, and he did it because he said who can fight God? He was so inwardly compelled and the evidence, what he saw before his eyes, made him say, “I have to do this.” And it was confirmed in the experience.

So I would say we are at another hinge point in human history. I don’t know where we got into it and I don’t know when we’ll get out of it, but I think that we are living through a time of global change. We live in that period of history in which the whole human family is experiencing its history at the same time and together. This is a time of global consciousness, of a global community, and it does not seem reasonable to me that the whole world is going to be evangelized and the Gospel is going to be brought to the whole world. That was a noble dream and a noble vision, and it was an honest response to an apocalyptic vision, that conviction that they were standing on the end of the age and that the whole cosmic drama would be wrapped up rather soon.

But, can you imagine that the Christian church could hold its breath for 2000 years and still be talking about the imminent return of our Lord Jesus Christ? As we approach the year 2000, are we not going to hear more and more about it? And how can we honestly do that when we come to recognize that those New Testament documents were written by those who believed they were at the End and they were not at the End.

The Jewish scholar Paula Fredrikson of Boston University has written *From Jesus to Christ*, and she says, “Why did the Jesus Jewish movement fade out first, and why did the Christian movement become a Gentile movement?” She says, first of all, because the one who was to come didn’t come. Nothing happened. Three times in the Gospel of John it speaks about being put out of the synagogue. Why? Well, if you were a Jew and if you had responded and believed that this Jesus was the Messiah that you were expecting and according to the message,

history was all going to end very soon and this one would return, but nothing happened. And now the Pharisaic, Rabbinic Judaism, the movement of Judaism after the temple which became the ascendant group, the ongoing Jewish community – that community now is saying, “If you say Jesus was the Messiah, you’re going to be put out of the synagogue.” And now you have to say, “Am I going to remain with my religious heritage of all of these centuries, or am I going to be put out of the synagogue on the chance that this one really was the Messiah and he’s going to come back very soon?” What would you do?

Paula Fredrikson said the reason that the earliest movement faded, first of all, nothing happened; and secondly, there were just too many Gentiles. Paul was too successful. And if Paul succeeded, if Judaism had stayed with the church, there would not have been the question of assimilation of the Jewish people in the 20th century. It would have happened in the first century. And I think our world would have been diminished for lack of that ongoing Jewish community.

Now it seems to me that what was going on then is going on now. We are not seeing the death of the great religious traditions; we have seen their renaissance and their resurgence, and, not only that, we have found that they contain riches and gifts that can enhance our own understanding and our own experience. I believe that we are faced with a global reality that calls us, in light of the power of religion and its volatility, to discourse together, to learn from each other, to live in mutual respect and civility in order that all together we may work toward the building of community and world understanding.

Karl Jaspers was a German philosopher who spoke about the first axial period. The pre-axial period was when the human family was pretty much caught up in the rhythms of nature and the cosmos. Then the first axial period, 800-200 BCE, independently, in three places around the globe, India and China and the eastern Mediterranean, the great religious traditions arose. They all arose in that period of time effecting a transformation of human consciousness, a transformation that shaped the first axial period to the present. Ewert Cousins, Fordham University, suggests that we may be in the second axial period and that the image for us is that view of the globe that the astronaut has seen, that beautiful, fragile, blue globe hanging in space. For the first time our kind has been able to look back and see it whole and to realize that all the borders and divisions and the lines that we draw over which we fight and for which we kill, that all of that has no reality because we are a part of one inner-connected whole. And, if we are part of one cosmic whole and we are part of one human family, and if we are serious that God in the beginning created the heavens and the earth, then I believe that it is high time for us to deepen our particularity and to learn again from Jesus Christ and all of that which has been revealed through him of the purpose and heart of God and to recognize that God has a grander scheme and a broader purpose and that there is so much enrichment, so much greater possibility as we live together in the human community transcending those barriers and divisions that have separated us.

As I said, Krister Stendahl was in Michigan. He was at the temple on Friday night, a Sabbath service, and then Saturday lectures, and then he preached at Christ Community Church on Sunday morning. My son came up to me afterwards and said, "Dad, I've had a religious experience," and I said, "I know." He said, "This feels so right," and I said, "I know. If it feels so right, you don't need an argument, do you?"

He said, "No."

I said, "Once you have had that sense that it's so right, then you can simply be there and invite others to share that same sense of shared humanity. You don't need to prove anything or demonstrate anything."

But, I'll tell you, my own experience is that I have never experienced such openness from the other and desire to hear about my Jesus than since the time I laid down my arms and did not feel that monkey on my back of world evangelization, but rather speaking of the grace of God in Jesus Christ and listening and receiving and giving and taking in a mutual enhancement that builds toward world community that is so much better than anything I have ever known.

Thank you.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

- Q. The rise of fundamentalism in all world religions frightens me. How can people engage with Christians and other fundamentalist groups when they are willing to kill for their faith?
- A. Well, it scares me, too, and I do believe that that is part of the reason why it is so imperative that we enter into dialogues in a broad scope. James Davison Hunter, in his *New Culture Wars*, points out the fact that the breakdown in civil discourse and in communication between people has created such a threat throughout the world, and I think that the militant mind in the respective traditions, there's a Jewish fundamentalism, an Islamic fundamentalism, a Christian fundamentalism, you don't have to have a particular badge in order to have that mentality and that mind set, and I do believe that as the times become somewhat anxious and people become somewhat unsteady and afraid, they tend to this kind of fanaticism and absolutism, wanting to find security and wanting to find the answer that is absolutely clear and simple. So to me, I don't know why, I just know that, in such a world, at such a time it is critical that we dialogue together and open up the channels of communication together. Now, for a lot of these things I do not think that it is a question of being right or wrong. I mean, there's such a broad spectrum of understanding, and there are various symbol systems

and it's not like one will work and the rest won't. I think that we need to find that which communicates meaning and connects us to that sense of transcendence, meets that hunger for God, and if that is in place, then I think that, rather than enforcing that on everyone else, in that sense of connectedness with the transcendent to find a freedom and a resting place in which to open oneself up to the other and thus create the bridges of communication. So, I don't know what the answer is, but I know it's a serious problem.

Q. Will you describe more fully your phrase “Monkey on your back?” You applied that to world evangelization.

A. Did I say that this morning? Well, if I didn't, I should have. I came into the ministry, I grew up, feeling that I had to defend God. I had to defend the faith. I felt such an urgency; I was insecure. I didn't know how insecure I was. I didn't know how defensive I was. But I thought it was up to me to defend God and to keep God enthroned, and it seemed to me that it was my responsibility that you believed correctly, that you dotted the i's and crossed the t's and that is a terrible, terrible burden. I can remember the experience of believing finally that God could take care of God's self, whether or not I could defend God. Now, that was Step One. And then to believe, as well, that God had a marvelous embrace of people who had an experience quite other than mine, and yet which seemed to be also very similar in terms of that which it generated within the individual. And when I could simply affirm that and not have to change someone to my image ... I had lived with a monkey on my back. I had to get the world to Jesus. And I had no sense of letting that in God's hands and simply being an instrument, and so that's what I meant.

Q. We have just heard for over an hour about the love of God for everyone, but 10% of those God has created are homosexuals who cannot change their identity and are ostracized by the church. These are people who are looking for God's love. How can the church deny them?

A. Well, I don't think the church can deny them, but the church does deny them. I have to say that this was the catalytic event that got this whole conflict started for us because, as I said to you, we gave a group ministry, largely lesbian and gay people, the use of our chapel. For us it was an act of hospitality. Again, I was not looking to take on a crusade. This was not my issue. Subsequent to what has happened, I think it should have been my issue a long time ago. It is an issue of justice; it is an issue of the love of God and the grace of God. I had heard stories, people pouring their heart out to me, beautiful human beings and I thought, “My God, where was I all these years?” Just not even concerned about this thing with people who were suffering and being ostracized and being shunned and so, when you say how can the church deny them, I don't know how the church can deny them love, and I will now speak anywhere, everywhere for... In fact, I've got a lot of stories.

Q. Does God's grace extend to non-believers, too, in your theology? Could your position be better supported by the teaching of Christ himself rather than appealing to St. Paul? Who now holds your credentials? Will the Spring Lake church align itself with another denomination?

A. The congregation holds my credentials at present, and we have done some very preliminary kind of investigation, but I have found that it's a little bit like marriage, it's a lot easier to get in than to get out, and I'm – just scratch that one – I'm at this advanced age, you know, and in the springtime of my senility, and I don't know if I really want... I believe in the connectedness of the church and I believe in mutual covenants of accountability, I believe in all that, but I may just keep investigating long enough to where it won't be an issue anymore, and in all that time no one will be able to criticize me for living in splendid isolation and I'll say, "I'm working on it, I'm working on it," and one day they'll bury me. Sort of like Peter Paulson today, as Bob said, you know, Paul Fries tells me that he suggested to Peter when he went into the pastorate that he always keep a body at hand in case he needs a funeral.

Can my position better be supported by teachings of Christ? I do believe that. Yes, I do believe that. But, you know, when you've got Dutch Calvinism in your blood and your genes, you have to argue with Paul and I do believe, yes, Jesus. Again, I'm hesitant to get into biblical discussions about this because you can argue it all over the place. But, I would say that, apart from any specific biblical reference, just the God I see in Jesus is a God that would make me reach out and embrace my neighbor and listen to the other and live in harmony with the other, and that's not by having a text, it is by the whole context, the whole encounter with Jesus Christ which says to me God is bigger than anything we've yet dreamed of, so I would agree with that.

Does God's grace extend to non-believers, too, in your theology? Yes. Because ... I don't know. How do I know? This is what I think and that is that God is not through with us at our death. This is what I began to wrestle with Hans Küng and then I would never have thought that I would think twice about purgatory and I go to these lectures and find, why did the ancient church have this? What were they talking about? Then I read from C. S. Lewis, his *Letter to Malcolm*, where he talks about purgatory as, you know, being in the dentist's chair and when you're coming around the dentist says, "Wash your mouth out with this." And he says, that's purgatory. I began to read Lutheran and Reformed theologians as well as Catholic theologians who speak about our encounter with God at our death, and so, what does it mean to be a non-believer? What does it mean? Does it mean that I have been so damaged by the institutional church? I'll tell you what - I could almost leave the institutional church. This past year with that experience in the church – I'll tell you what – if I wasn't a stubborn Hollander, I'd be out. I'm just too ornery not to go. But then, how many people have not been damaged and hurt by the attitudes, by the spirit, by the structures? So, non-believers - who are

they, anyway? I don't find as many non-believers out there as I used to. I used to know how many there were; I used to know what percentage of the population they were, and now I found out when I don't know so much, they're really interested and they really want to talk and I think there's something deep down in the human spirit that can be appealed to that makes that category of non-believer somewhat fuzzy. One of the old, early American preachers, Lyman Abbot, said if he were a Calvinist he would be a universalist, but he said, because I respect the human will, I cannot be a universalist because I believe that God will not finally crush my human Yes or No. I think God respects our Yes or No to such an extent that... So, non-believers? Someone wants to finally say, "Not thy will be done, but my will be done?" will God say then, "Thy will be done?" I don't know. Of course, I don't know those answers. But, I don't think there are as many non-believers out there as I used to.

Q. You said that you didn't want to get into scripture, but there are a few people here who would like you to at least address some issues. One question: please speak on the question of the necessity of the cross of which Jesus speaks often, particularly consider the incident of Jesus in Gethsemane saying, "If it is possible for the cup to be removed," but God demanded Jesus to drink of it, nonetheless.

A. Yes. I would say that one of the areas of revision as I reflect on Christian faith and doctrine, as I have learned it and I have preached it and taught it, is my understanding of atonement. I think that when Jesus said, "Let this cup pass from me," that Jesus was saying, "Bring that kingdom about, effect your purposes apart from my having to go through with tomorrow." I think Gethsemane was just what it appears to be and that was the real existential struggle of Jesus in the garden at the threshold of his own death, a horrible death, in which he could have slipped out of town and gotten away with it. I don't think that Jesus died to bear our sins; I think Jesus died *because of our* sins. I think Jesus died the way he died because he lived the way he lived, and his dying was the authentication of the life that he lived, which was the embodiment of the kingdom of God and the rule of God in the midst of human society. And so, when he said, "Let this cup pass from me," I think he wanted out, like I would want out. And I think when he said on the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" that's not like my Calvinist theology said, that in that time he was experiencing the torments of hell because God turned God's face away from Jesus in those moments. I think he was experiencing hell; he was experiencing forsakenness. That which he had staked his life on and pointed to and embodied was not happening. He was dying! He was being crucified. And I think anybody that lives the way he lives is going to end up pretty much like he ended up, and that's why most of us are smart enough, most of the time, not to do it. And to follow the Way of Jesus is a most radical way to go, and I'll tell you what - I'm not ready for it.

Q. How do you respond to such scripture as "No one comes to the Father but by me"?

A. I refer people to Bishop Krister Stendahl's little paper on "From God's Point of View, We're all Minorities." Now, he's a New Testament scholar; I'm not. And he says, you know, to take a text in the intimacy of conversation between Jesus and his friends, and then to lift that up out of its context and absolutize it as though it is the end all and the be all.... I wouldn't be in any trouble if it weren't for John 14:6 and Acts 4:12. "No other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved." In other words, *save* as *healed*, and they're talking about the crippled man who was just healed. And they are saying in Acts 4:12, in your name did you do this? And Peter says, "No, not in our name. There isn't any other name. The only name is the one Jesus, that name. That is the healer, that Jesus who was in our midst who was the embodiment of God who brought the healing power of God to bear."

And in 14:6, "In my Father's house there are many resting places." Krister Stendahl says that's in the world. In the world there are many places you can be, and so, be there. And as I go to prepare a place for you and so forth. I do not think that one ought to take John 14:6 and try to explain it as though it had no nuances of exclusivism because there is a genuine biblical exclusivism, there is that track in the scripture, and I think that it is most understandable that there would be, because the Bible, New Testament documents, this is not a book on interreligious dialogue; this is not a book on religious philosophy; this is a book of proclamation. This is a book written by those who believed they were at the end of the age, that God had appeared in Jesus Christ, that the answer was in Christ, everything was in Christ, this was their message; this was their preaching, so, I don't think I ought to try to whitewash that thing and say there is no possibility of constructing that kind of exclusivist view where there is salvation through Jesus alone and no other. The only thing that I would argue is that that's not the only voice of the scripture, and that if we look at it in its context and in its time and then, through the tradition of 2000 years and our present situation, you put all of those things together, then I think that's the basis on which I would say that if Jesus said John 14:6, which Jesus Seminar says he didn't, of course, that's too easy, isn't it, then I think that there's the possibility of nuanced interpretation, but maybe that's exactly what John wanted to say.

Q. Has human experience taken precedence over the authority of scripture?

A. Yes, I hope so. And that's why I'm in trouble, because I say things like that. You see, and now Dr. Fries can't be that foolish because he still holds an institutional position. But, the reason I'm in the trouble I'm in is because I think human experience and scripture need to be in dialogue and need to be coordinated. I need to give human experience a lot of credence in order to make up for the first fifty years of my life, when I didn't know that human

experience even existed. I had a text and I had a book and it didn't matter whether human experience was being honored or regarded at all. So, I think there is the scripture, there is the tradition, there is present human experience and then there is the reflection of reasonable faith, and Krister Stendahl who was with us some years ago in a dialogue with David Hartman, the Rabbi from Jerusalem, spoke about tradition as an instrument for continuity and change. Now, I know of tradition as an instrument for continuity. I didn't understand it as an instrument for change. As Krister Stendahl spoke of it, I could see that it is the living tradition that connects us with the founding story, and that living tradition is a constant re-interpretation of the founding story in light of ongoing human experience, so that at every point of the historical spectrum, as you look back at this event, you see it from a bit of a different angle, you see new wrinkles and new nuances because what goes on is also God's history and the spirit of God is still active in the world. It's not as though it all happened back there and now it's just waiting for the applause at the end. We have to constantly look at that story in light of our experience, in light of that way we have traversed, and we do it, we use our heads, we think! And in that mix we come to our present understanding of the faith which helps us to interpret present human experience. So, I think that's a red herring. I think that's a false dichotomy. I don't think you can understand the Bible apart from human experience, and I don't think that human experience apart from the critique of the founding story will ever connect you to the transcendent. I think that both of them have to live in tension.

Q. How do you view Buddha and Krishna?

A. Hardly ever do. I don't know, and frankly, I am an incurable Christian theologian and I have not really dipped with any breadth or depth into the world of religious dialogue. The only specific relationship I've had is with the Jewish community which has been a very enriching kind of relationship, but I am not a scholar of world religions. However, when I hear someone like John Hick who advocates a pluralist position, or when I hear someone like Huston Smith, then I sense that perhaps if I am going to make sense of what they tell me about the authenticity of that spiritual experience, then I would say that the spirit of God can take up residence within Buddha, Krishna. I think that the historical, concrete figure may be agent and instrument of the Spirit of God, and that there have been those in whom that transcendence came to shining expression to a degree far beyond that which is true of us ordinary mortals. So, I think where there are great religious leaders, if there is truth there, I would guess it is the truth of God.

Q. Where or how do you fit in the 250,000 Jewish people who have come to believe in Jesus as Messiah since 1967, and who believe that the Messiah is still to be preached to their own people?

A. I am aware that there is such a movement. I just got a letter from Isaac

Rottenberg who wrote to a Rabbi in New York City about the Jesus Jewish movement and the fact that that ought to be a part of the agenda of the discussion, the dialogue between Christianity and Judaism. I think in all of the religious traditions there ought to be the possibility of crossing over. I believe that one ought to deepen one's own tradition and one's own particularity. In other words, don't hear me say that you ought to put all the traditions into a blender and homogenize them and come out with some new kind of mush. Let's be authentically what we are. Let's even deepen what we are. Because I do believe that the universal is accessed only through the particular. But, I think that there should always be the possibility for a Jewish person to see Jesus and say, "Messiah!" And if that is the authentic experience of that person, wonderful. Ironically, in the Muskegon Classis in the last two years, I'm the one who has baptized two Jews, adult Jews! I almost did it with a bad conscience. I said, "Are you sure you want to do this? You know, you don't really have to do this," but they wanted to do that. Okay. But, on the other hand, seriously, about myself, maybe I'll join the synagogue. I could become a Jew because I see Jesus very much in his Jewishness and to follow Jesus and practice Judaism, live out of the Torah, so if I want to do that, I think the Rabbi should receive me. But, all I'm saying is that you can cross over, pass over, if that is where you find that connects you, God bless you. And if you are a Jew and you want to find in Jesus the Messiah today and you want to tell your fellow Jewish people about that, I think that's witness, that's fine, that's fine. I respect that.

Q. If your views moved the Reformed Church closer to the Unitarian position, if so, what would be gained for the church body, and what might be lost?

A. The doctrine of the Trinity is a mystery and I can understand how the church, seeking to come to terms with the raw material of its experience, its Christological creedal formulas, I understand. I understand what those doctrinal symbols are pointing to and seeking to communicate. Would my views move the church more toward Unitarianism? Maybe, but not necessarily, because I think that, even within the Jewish tradition, that which comes to expression in the doctrine of the Trinity, there are echoes of that in Judaism, as well. And so, I think that that is not necessarily the issue of where I would go. I would say this: I understand the impetus to Unitarianism when it happened. I can understand why there was such a movement and such a development, and I'm not nearly as scandalized by it as once I was or probably some of you would think I should be. But, I want to maintain the embodiment of God in the flesh of Jesus. That's the God I know. That's the God I see, and I am not as impressed with some of the contemporary discussions of the Trinity where that's reflective of community within a godhead which is modeled after community of humankind - frankly, it never really grabbed me, but that's for esoteric theologians like Dr. Fries. I mean, you know, we wouldn't need seminaries, we wouldn't need such brilliance if there were not those kinds of questions to think about.

- Q. Will you please respond to the question once posed to Karl Barth – “Professor, will there be a hell?”
- A. Hell, no. I think that Hell is the experience of separation from God and I do believe that I believe in judgment. I believe that no one will get away with anything. Thank God. True for all of us. So that there will be this authentic encounter with God so that my life will be there and I will face my life, and then, you know you have to talk in symbols and images. I love *The Great Divorce*, where C.S. Lewis says on the other side of death you can sort of float around in those misty grey flats as long as you want to, and then if you want to get on board the bus a little farther in, a little farther up, okay. You get up there and say, “Ooh, this is too bright. I think I like it down below,” the ambience of the misty flats. But, it is always the individual in authentic encounter with God. God is not mocked and I will see myself consciously in the presence of God. I believe in judgment. But, I believe that judgment is redemptive. I think that in the scriptures that judgment is always for salvation. So, Hell for as long as you want it, but it doesn't have as many folks in it as it used to have, for me, and it doesn't last as long as it used to last.
- Q. Dick, it would have seemed that Joseph Campbell addressed this issue without the controversy, why is it now considered controversial?
- A. Well, Joseph Campbell wasn't talking within the rather narrow limits of the Reformed Church in America. I mean, Joseph Campbell had a world stage and the whole mythology tradition of which, of course, he was expert. I cannot believe that this issue is of such interest that it would get on the front page of the *New York Times*. I can't believe it. Others have said it better; they've said it years and decades and centuries ago more eloquently, more explicitly. I do not know why now this issue is so big. I think it's reflective, perhaps, of the church being afraid, being threatened. And rather than in faith saying, “What in the world is going on?” and “Is there something bigger? Does God have a grander scheme that is more than I ever, ever conceived of?” Rather, there's this growing in, and why it is now, I don't know. I don't feel like I have said anything new. I've not said anything very well. I am pretty much mainstream, down the middle. In my context? No, but in the broader human context, certainly, and even within the broader Reformed Church, I believe that I would come somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. So, it baffles me.
- Q. As a seminary student that shares your views, should I consider a longer engagement, both live together for a while, or break it off now?
- A. If I answered that in all honesty, I would be answering out of a deep woundedness that would not be a fair answer. I am wounded. The church has hurt me. And I should not be giving counsel to anybody for another year or two.
- Q. Why is there no movement to change our creedal statements? Why are we

stuck in 15th and 16th century statements?

- A. I said to the Classis of Muskegon that I would be willing to sign the formula for ordination which speaks of those statements as faithful, historical witnesses to the Christian faith. I do believe that those statements were authentic statements of faith. They were affirmations; they were proclamations. In their context they addressed the questions and the issues of that time. It's simply a human quality - we tend to say it, the movement erupts, there is this prophetic flame, there is an eloquent statement, and then we absolutize it and we perpetuate it through history as though it no longer will be touched by ongoing historical experience. It happens all the time. It happens in every tradition. You don't have to be the Reformed Church in America, and I think that's the question. Until we can honor our creedal tradition as being a faithful expression in a given context, recognizing that that faith needs constant translation and fresh expression - until we do that, we'll be going through the torment of this past year in Michigan. Historical consciousness is a relatively late arrival on the scene of the human disciplines. I think that science of history, historiography, is an 18th century phenomena, and it, when it really soaked into the human psyche... I mean we all think historically today. It is the very lens through which we see everything, but we have somehow or other compartmentalized our faith and our theological expression, and made out as though those expressions do not need to continue to bring new light through translation in light of ongoing experience. I don't know. I don't know why we can't learn that. I've learned it.

I said in New Brunswick Seminary when John Beardsley - John Beardsley, where are you? What year did you go to New Brunswick? Could it have been '64? I sat there on behalf of Western Theological Seminary and stood in your procession and John Leese gave a lecture, and John Leese's lecture pointed out the historical condition of every creedal statement, and it was like a light went on, and I sat there and thought, why didn't I understand that in my first 30 years? Why didn't I know that? And then I could see. It happened. It's just amazing to me, but I can remember it like it was yesterday. The historical conditionedness.

You want to read a great story? *The Presbyterian Controversy* by Bradley Longfield, the fundamentalist controversy from 1920 to 1936 in the Presbyterian Church, the one where _____ came out and started Westminster Seminary. Henry Sloane Coffin, I think, Robert McCartney, William Jennings Bryant, anyway, six of these outstanding church leaders, and the controversy of those, assembly after assembly, where the fundamentalists in the decade of the 20s, it is an amazing story, and Jay Gresham Machen said this is the deposit of faith and this thing goes down through history and nothing touches it.

I can remember as a student reading Machen who said never go down on the playing field. They'll slaughter you. Stay in the citadel of faith. Okay, you got it here, stick there, just keep saying it. Fundamentalism is simply the reiteration of yesterday's answers to today's questions, and so, you don't go down. He said, don't get out of the citadel and go down there. In other words, you can't reason with those people. Don't draw swords with those people. Don't dare try to go mind to mind, thought to thought. No encounter, because they'll slay you, because if you have the citadel of faith, and you have this pure source of revelation, you just keep repeating it. Well, to think that that deposit of faith can just sort of move through history with all of the... was it Einstein who said after the explosion of the first atomic bomb? Everything is changed, except our thinking. I would say that, on the threshold of the year 2000, if the church would open its eyes, it would have to say everything has changed and it's time we think about it. And then it's a question of whether one really believes in God, really has faith, you see. I believe in God. I trust God for the future. I think it's going to be great. I'm going to keep preaching.

- Q. What can be done by a Reformed Church minister to engage in a serious Christian-Jewish dialogue where the Consistory is opposed to this dialogue?
- A. Take a call. I don't think you can do it without leadership in tune with it. The only reason I've survived this past year is because my own congregation has been wonderfully solid and supportive. If my congregation were torn up, I would be torn up and I would be out of here because I am not a fighter. I don't go around looking for confrontation and I couldn't stand it if my own people were not together in this thing. So, I would be very hesitant to recommend a minister or a church leader of any sort to get involved in that which is not affirmed by his or her own leadership. It's a formula for disaster, I think.
- Q. Of course, a lot of things can feel right, even demonic persecution which takes the persecutor beyond need for argument. What are the critical criteria for putting holds on affirming all kinds of behaviour, such as your ouster ...?
- A. Well, you see, I think that if we operate with a biblical tradition, with the biblical story, with the Christian tradition in a concrete community of faith, and if we are in dialogue together and in conversation together, then I think that we'll make some mistakes, but I think we'll correct ourselves, too. I trust, basically, the people. I think that there's a terrible gap between the academy and the congregation. Your pastors have known a lot of things they've never told you about over many, many years, and my experience has been that I can trust my people with anything I'm thinking about, anything I'm toying with, and it's a community and the Spirit of God lives in that community. And so, I have the biblical story, I have the tradition, I have the concrete community. And then, I think we test the spirits, and sometimes we make mistakes, but

we have the freedom to fail, and then we can turn around and say that didn't work or the consequences of that were not foreseen. I'm going to back down from that. I don't know any other magic, but I do think that the Christian community can be trusted.