

My Spiritual Pilgrimage Toward Universalism
Finding God's All-embracing Love in Scripture
Arch B. Taylor, Jr.

Biographical Note

Arch B. Taylor, Jr. is an ordained Presbyterian minister who served for over thirty years in Japan and taught Bible at Shikoku Christian College (Shikoku Gakuin University.) After retirement he went on short delegations, twice to Nicaragua with Witness for Peace and Habitat for Humanity, and once to Israel-Palestine and Presbyterian Peace Fellowship and Christian Peacemaker Teams. He is a retired member of Mid-Kentucky Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, the Witherspoon Society, Fellowship of Reconciliation, and the Society of Biblical Literature. He is author of *Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima & Beyond: Subversion of Values* (<trafford.com/05-0981>).

Permission is granted to quote freely from this pamphlet and share it widely, on the sole condition of giving proper acknowledgement.

Arch B. Taylor, Jr.
2200 Greentree North #1120
Clarksville IN 47129
<archtaylor@att.net>

MY SPIRITUAL PILGRIMAGE TOWARD UNIVERSALISM

Arch B. Taylor, Jr.

I was born, baptized, and nurtured in the Presbyterian Church in the United States (the old "Southern"). My church nurtured me in the faith of my forebears, but it assumed without question the culture of the South: white supremacist, 100% segregated, male dominant and female subordinate, prejudiced against Catholics and Jews, and against homosexuals. My pilgrimage of faith has been a steady growth away from all those cultural presuppositions, one after another. I have been "born again" several times as my growing understanding of Scripture has challenged and impelled me to move beyond. As a Presbyterian I think of my theology and my practical Christianity as being reformed and continually being reformed.

Another element in the Christian religion in which I grew up was the belief that without faith in Christ as Savior, no one could be saved. This conviction underlay at least in part my sense of call into the ministry at a Presbyterian Synod Youth Conference when I was a high school student, and later into foreign mission work when I was a student at Louisville Presbyterian Theological

Seminary. But just as my growing understanding of Scripture challenged my cultural presuppositions, so did it lead me at last to the position that is popularly called universalism. I am firmly convinced that the God revealed in the Bible, and supremely in Jesus Christ, has a plan of reconciliation that includes the whole of creation.

I. My experience as an observer and as a Bible teacher

I spent the greater part of my career as a missionary teaching Bible at Shikoku Christian College in Japan. I soon became aware of the polytheistic worldview that characterized Japanese culture and the thinking of my students, especially in contrast to the monotheistic worldview of the Bible. I observed that many of the features of indigenous Shinto religion in Japan bore striking similarities to the Canaanite religion against which the biblical monotheists struggled. I saw in the Bible's monotheistic worldview the significance of the supremacy of the one Creator God. Before this God, all that is not god stands on the same level. Monotheism encourages egalitarianism; polytheism encourages hierarchy. More and more I came to the conviction that a fundamental aspect of belief in the Oneness of God must be that this One God is the God for all.

I had the duty and privilege of teaching an introductory Bible course to first year Japanese students, first semester Old Testament and second semester New Testament. Our textbook was the 1955 colloquial Japanese translation of the Japan Bible Society. Through the years, I underwent the annual discipline of teaching the Bible as a whole in a connected manner, not concentrating narrowly on some particular portion of it or on some special question. Needless to say, I fully recognize the value of those kinds of Bible study and teaching.

One year during the Old Testament course I had finished the discussion of the prophet Amos, seeing him in the context of the waning years of the northern kingdom of Israel. In his famous opening speeches, Amos condemns the sins of the nations surrounding Israel, and then zeroes in on Israel itself, with even harsher condemnation. Before the one and only God, the sins of all stand condemned. The "Chosen People" cannot expect special treatment; indeed, the privilege of their chosenness places all the greater responsibility upon them. "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities" (Amos 3.2). Amos stresses the divine impartiality—no favoritism.

Next I took up Hosea, Amos' younger contemporary. Hosea seems to pay no attention to the moral condition of surrounding nations or to God's attitude toward them. Hosea's sole concern is the relation of God to Israel, compared to husband/wife, or parent/child. If anything, Hosea more vehemently than Amos condemns Israel's sin and describes God in frightfully ferocious figures. And yet Hosea finally describes God as gracious and merciful in terms difficult to duplicate elsewhere. On the human level, a spouse repeatedly betrayed by a habitually unfaithful partner would be fully justified in divorce. On the human level, parents of a persistently delinquent child would be fully justified in expulsion. But God does not act in such human ways. "I am God, and no mortal," the Deity declares (Hos 11.9). At the end the divine spouse/parent declares: "I will heal their disloyalty, I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them" (Hos 14.4).

From Hosea we learn, “*This is the way God loves this Israel!*”

The juxtaposition of these two messages struck me forcefully: Amos’ message of God’s impartial judgment and Hosea’s message of God’s unconditional love. If God loved *that* Israel like *that*, how could an impartial God *not* love the other nations as well?

Just at that very time there occurred one of those periodic tragedies in Bangladesh, a terrible typhoon sweeping inland from the Bay of Bengal. Abnormally high tides driven by preternaturally strong winds inundated islands and plains and drowned uncounted thousands of human beings. Bangladesh, formerly East Bengal, at one time had had a self-sustaining economy, until British colonial policy destroyed its system of communal land use and converted its fields from food agriculture to mass production of commercial hemp and sisal.

Since 1947 this had been East Bengal province of Pakistan, but it was born in blood and declared itself independent Bangladesh in 1971. For the region had suffered another of those cruel typhoons; world relief money and goods poured into Pakistan’s central government offices in the western region, where corrupt politicians siphoned it off before it reached its intended destination. So East Bengal declared independence, only to suffer attack from Pakistan. Besides wreaking great damage and killing many, Pakistani armed forces raped Bangladeshi women and girls, whose families then rejected them and drove them out as worthless, damaged goods. At the time Bangladeshi life expectancy was only about forty years, and the majority of the people never had enough to eat.

Just when I was meditating on the messages of Amos and Hosea another typhoon brought Bangladesh to world notice and caught my attention. God impartial, not granting favored treatment even to the chosen people, as Amos said? Yes. God merciful, forgiving Israel in spite of all her sins, as Hosea concluded? Yes. And so, what about Bangladesh? Only a tiny handful of Bangladeshis were professing Christians who had formally accepted Jesus Christ as Savior. What about all the rest? Did they suffer oppression, poverty, malnutrition, disease, and the ravages of wind and water during their short and bitter life on earth, only to spend eternity in hell? Must I believe that God’s decree destined them for eternal damnation, because of a narrow interpretation of the Bible texts that say there is no other name by which people can be saved; and no one comes to God the Father except through Jesus?

What I knew of God as revealed by Jesus in Scripture, and the various texts in Scripture which spoke of God’s concern for “all” and “every” began to come together in my mind as I tried to put Amos and Hosea and Bangladesh all together. And out of that came the answer, “No! I cannot believe that the God revealed by Jesus in Scripture, the God who has blessed me without my deserving, would by eternal decree inflict such a cruel fate upon any of the race of humans. The Bible teaches that God is the Creator of *all*, and that God created *each* person in the image of God.

After I reached retirement in Japan at the end of September 1986, I went with my son Samuel for

a three-week adventure in China. On our own, not participating in any conducted tour, we had very close and personal contact with some of the masses of Chinese, in crowded cities, in rural areas, by train, by bus, by boat, by bicycle. We spent nights in little inns where the ordinary Chinese stay, and we ate the kind of food they ate. We saw them laboring at heavy, heavy work, and we saw the hardship of their lives. In my mind I kept wondering about these people, humans like me, made in the image of God, and in a very basic sense my sisters and brothers. I couldn't help thinking of them as part of God's vast human family, and becoming more and more convinced that God embraced them, too, in the eternal plan for reconciliation.

On the way back to the US we visited my brother-in-law, the Rev. William H. Hopper, and his wife Mollie, who lived in Lahore, Pakistan, where Bill served in a special capacity as representative of the Global Missions Unit of the Presbyterian Church (USA). Once more we saw masses of poor people in the city and in the country, whose lot in life seemed even more desperate than that of the Chinese we had so recently seen. Bill asked me to preach on the coming Sunday to a congregation of expatriates and English-speaking Pakistanis, and I accepted. Using Romans 5.12-21 as my text, I put together my very first sermon focusing on God's plan of universal redemption: "The One and the Many"—"Therefore, just as one man's trespass led to condemnation and death for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all" (Rom 5.18). On several occasions since returning to the US I have preached this same message. In an expanded version I include it as part of this personal testimony.

The combination of Amos, Hosea, and Bangladesh drove me to abandon the view of so many western Europeans and Americans that God deals with us solely on an individual basis. In the Old Testament we see God dealing with Israel as a people, and with the Gentiles as nations. My sermon based on Romans 5.12-21 takes seriously Paul's teaching about the solidarity of the human race in Adam and in Christ. As the sin of Adam brings death to all, the act of Christ brings life to all.

II. Early preparation for a universalistic view

My being "born again" to a universalistic view was not so sudden as it might appear. In retrospect I realized that certain influences in my seminary days had laid a foundation for the later development of my thought.

A. My debt to Benjamin B. Warfield

As a student at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in 1942-45 I came strongly under the influence of my teacher of church history and apologetics, Dr. Andrew K. Rule. Dr. Rule had come to the US from his native New Zealand expressly for the purpose of studying with Dr. Benjamin B. Warfield of Princeton Seminary. I readily absorbed much of Dr. Rule's influence, reading and eventually purchasing nearly all of Warfield's writings. The first and most impressive of those writings that I read was the little book, *The Plan of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1942.). Through the years I read the book several times, writing comments in

the margin. My acquaintance with Warfield at an early stage in my theological education made a lasting impression upon me. As I reflect on my spiritual pilgrimage toward universalism, I credit Warfield with giving me a good start.

From the Reformed theological position stemming from Calvin, Warfield places utmost emphasis upon the sovereignty and initiative of God, rather than upon anything that humans can do to gain salvation. This has become a cornerstone of my own belief; in this respect I am a thoroughly convinced Calvinist. Warfield, assuming that God deals with humans as individuals, distinguishes between those who believe that humans can or cannot contribute anything to their own salvation. Some people teach that although God desires the salvation of all, and Christ died for the sins of all, one must respond to God's offer of salvation by accepting it, by believing the message, by confessing sin and requesting forgiveness. If a person refuses to respond in this way, he or she can frustrate God's purpose. On the other hand, if the person does respond positively, that act of response is what effectively accomplishes salvation, for without it the person would not have been saved. In effect, one saves one's self, and Warfield dismisses this as autosoterism.

Warfield presents the alternative view of Classic Calvinism (which as I understand it stems ultimately from Augustine): 1) No one deserves salvation, but all deserve death because of sin. 2) No one can contribute in any way to one's salvation, which depends solely upon God. 3) Since some texts of Scripture teach (and observation seems to confirm) that some are saved and some are lost, this difference of ultimate destiny must result from God's sovereign decree.

In view of the logic of Warfield's description of the plan of salvation according to the doctrine of the sovereignty of God, one cannot escape the conclusion that somehow or other God determined beforehand not only that some people would be saved but that others would not, indeed that God would determine their damnation. Certain biblical texts, significantly clustered in the Gospel of John, seem to support the conclusion that those who refuse Christ and so are lost do so because of a divine decision:

- John 6.44, "No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me."
- John 8.47, "Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God."
- John 12.37-40, which declares that Jesus' opponents "could not believe" in fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah that God had blinded them and hardened them, lest they be healed.
- John 14.6, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

According to Warfield, righteousness is the determining aspect of the divine nature, and it is the righteousness of God that determines the decree.

God in his love saves as many of the guilty race of man as he can get the consent of his whole nature to save. Being God and all that God is, he will not permit even his ineffable love to betray him into any action which is not right. And it is therefore that we praise him and trust him and love him. For he is not part God, a

God here and there, with some but not all the attributes which belong to true God: he is God altogether, God through and through, all that God is and all that God ought to be. (p 74)

No matter how urgently people like Warfield stress the goodness and love of God and express this “double predestination” in as moderate terms as possible, most people who encounter it react with some degree of revulsion.

Warfield, of course, was but expounding on the doctrine as expressed in the Westminster Confession of Faith, a foundational statement of Christian doctrine held by major Presbyterian churches, which describes the fate of the lost in the following terms (Sec. V par. 6):

As for those wicked and ungodly men whom God, as a righteous judge, for former sins, doth blind and harden, from them he not only withholdeth his grace, whereby they might have been enlightened in their understandings, and wrought upon in their hearts; but sometimes also withdraweth the gifts which they had; and exposeth them to such objects as their corruption makes occasion of sin; and withal, giveth them over to their own lusts, the temptations of the world, and the power of Satan; whereby it cometh to pass that they harden themselves, even under those means which God useth for the softening of others.

Although the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (US—“Southern”) never revised this and other sections of the Westminster Confession that seemed repulsive to many faithful ministers and members, it nevertheless added a paragraph to the effect that no one would be forced to accept this belief against one’s personal conscience.

I was happy to accept this “escape clause” in the Westminster Confession of Faith; but I certainly did not like to think of myself as what in Warfield’s terms is an autosoterist, for he had convinced me of the supreme importance of divine sovereignty. Still, I could not be fully satisfied. For besides those texts of Scripture used to support the divine reprobation of some people, there were others that spoke in terms of God’s love for the *world*, God’s concern for *all*. The first time I read the book, on a page where Warfield discussed this question of God’s righteous decrees I wrote: “Double predestination and universalism can both be supported by scriptural texts. Each position expresses one of the opposite logical extremes of supernatural evangelicalism. I reject both as extremes.”

On universal salvation, Warfield had some remarks that eventually came to fruition in my spiritual pilgrimage, leading me to accept the “extreme” of universalism:

So far as the principles of sovereignty and particularism are concerned, there is no reason why a Calvinist might not be a universalist in the most express meaning of that term, holding that each and every human soul shall be saved; and in point of fact some Calvinists (forgetful of Scripture here) have been universalists in this

most express meaning of the term. (p 98)

Resting strongly on Warfield's words as expressed in the paragraph above, I join the ranks of those Calvinists who have become universalists. I have become a universalist not, as Warfield would charge, by being "forgetful of Scripture," but precisely because I take seriously the universal texts within Scripture itself (see below).

B. My debt to Catherine and Peter Marshall

During my second and third years in seminary, 1943-5, I served as student pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Charlestown, Indiana. The women of the church asked me to lead a study of Ephesians based on a guide titled *The Mystery of the Ages* by Catherine and Peter Marshall. Recalling that experience, I can't be sure how much the women learned, but I received a deep impression of the scope of God's eternal purpose as I followed the Marshalls' leading.

In their introduction, the authors alluded to the ongoing World War and raised the question whether Christianity had any answers for the world's problems. They proposed that Ephesians could guide Christians as we anticipated the task of reconstructing some sort of world order after the war ended. They offered Ephesians 1.10 as the key to God's purpose to which we should devote ourselves: "That in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth." The Marshalls gave three lines of evidence Paul adduced to support his view that God would eventually overcome all divisions by gathering together all things in Christ.

1. Death is the greatest force dividing people. God has overcome this maleficent force by his "mighty power, which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead" (Eph 1.20). Resurrection, then, is the first ground of ultimate unity.
2. Sin is the next divisive power, which separates us from God and from one another. by the forgiveness of sins through Christ, God has brought us to new life and reconciliation with himself (Eph 2.1-10).
3. Divisions among people most poignantly shown in that between Jews and Gentiles has been overcome by the cross of Christ, who broke down the wall of partition and made "one new humanity" (Eph 2.11-22).

In my sense of call to mission service and my early years in Japan, I followed the Marshalls' concept that this unity of humankind would be accomplished "through the Church." I shared the Marshalls' supersessionist view, that God rejected the Jews and Christians had superseded them. Now the Church must be the locus for the oneness of humankind. In the course of my pilgrimage I have come to believe that God's universal plan of reconciling all people is broader than the Christian church, though I am committed to the church in which I was born and nurtured, and I continue to witness and serve through and in the church as well as by other means. Nevertheless, Catherine and Peter Marshall gave me the vision of God's eternal plan of reconciliation, which has now become my universalism.

III. Universal texts in the Bible (NRSV)

Certain biblical texts support the view that God's plan of redemption embraces the entire creation, including every person. Admittedly, other texts propose a final separation of saved and lost. Simply to list individual texts like this does not fully serve the purpose; we need to examine texts more completely in their immediate as well as in their full canonical context. Here I wish only to call attention to the occurrence of words like "all" and "every" and "world" and to urge that we give them due weight.

JOHN. 1.9: The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

1.29b: Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

3.16-17: For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

12.32: [Jesus said] And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people [margin: all things] to myself.

PAUL. Romans 5.18: Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.

Romans 11.32a: For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

Romans 14.11: For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God."

1 Corinthians 15.22: For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.

2 Cor 5.19: In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.

Philippians 2.9-11: [Because of Jesus' obedience unto death] Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

DEUTERO-PAULINE. Ephesians 1.9-10: [God] has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

Colossians 1.19f: For in [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

PASTORAL: 1 Timothy 2.3-4: This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

1 Timothy 4.10: For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.

Titus 2.11: For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all.

REVELATION 5.13-14: Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"

One should not get the impression that only the New Testament supports the concept of God's universal mercy; the Old Testament is replete with texts of a similar purport, but I will mention only a few. Note that in Romans 14.11 and Philippians 2.9-11 above Paul quoted a portion of Isaiah 45.22-23: "Turn to me and be saved all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: 'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.'" The Bible begins with God's creation of humankind as male and female, both made in the image of God and both blessed with dominion over the rest of creation (Gen 1.26-28). Sin affected not only all humankind but the world of nature itself, and following the judgment of the flood, God made a covenant of mercy never to do it again, signified by the rainbow, as was announced to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you for all future generations" (Gen 9.12). The psalmist praises God, declaring, "Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your judgments are like the great deep; you save humans and animals alike, O LORD" (Ps 36.6). The original ancestor of the chosen people, Abraham, was called and promised to bring blessing to all the families on earth (Gen 12.2-3). The juxtaposition of Amos and Hosea, as we have seen, implies that the God revealed through the prophets is best characterized by mercy for all.

If we take the texts of ultimate separation of "saved" and "lost" to be the final word, then we have to ignore the teaching of these universal verses. One must bend logic and word usage to make them say something different from what they actually say, or else honestly admit that they do not belong in one's personal canon of Scripture or theology. On the contrary, we should use these universal texts as the standard by which to interpret the rest of Scripture.

IV. Sin and Judgment

Obviously, the universalist has to face the whole question of the fate of "the lost." If all are saved, does that mean that there is no difference between good and evil, right and wrong, and that there is no ultimate reckoning or judgment? Warfield expressed the traditional and popular view:

It is all too certain that all men are not saved, but at the last day there remain the two classes of the saved and the lost, each of which is sent to the eternal destiny which belongs to it. (p 74)

The universalist who builds upon the Calvinistic basis laid down by Warfield according to Scripture takes utterly seriously the sinfulness of sin and the following judgment. In Jesus' parable of the judgment (Matt 25.31-46) the Son of Man sits on the throne, and "all the nations" come before him. The basis of separation between "sheep" and "goats" is whether or not people have acted out of generosity, compassion, and loving service to people in need—whether or not they have done good deeds. As Paul wrote in 2 Cor 5.10, "all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body." In Revelation 14.10 we read a metaphorical description of the fate of the "lost" that "they will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence

of the Lamb.” Surely these metaphors describe the intense pain that self-serving and other-harming people will feel in the presence of Christ who revealed the true nature of God by self-giving.

In light of the total context of the teaching of Paul and of Revelation, we understand that the torment of judgment felt by those who have rejected or opposed the rule of God as revealed in Christ arises from their having flouted and transgressed the moral foundations of God’s created universe as exemplified in the very nature of God revealed in Christ. Even among people who never heard of Christ, there are many who act out of compassion and generosity, as we see in the sheep and goats parable. Judgment is without partiality, as Paul states in Rom 2.11, and he goes on to state, “When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts . . .” (Rom 2.14-15). We must give full credit to the good works of all people, whether they confess Jesus as Savior or not. Yet those good works, however excellent, do not win salvation. Good works win rewards, but God alone gives salvation.

Now, the Judge before whom all must finally stand is the Christ of compassion. Contrary to popular ideas, power is not the chief characteristic of deity, nor is it righteousness as Warfield would define it. As expressed in Col 1.20, through Christ “God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.” In Revelation the Lamb who has the authority to open God’s book of destiny and who occupies the throne with God is precisely the one who was slain, who sacrificed his life for the sins of the world.

All who have understood and acted to any extent on the principle of loving service for others will find themselves more or less comfortably at home in the divine presence; but all who have lived principally for self at the cost of others will suffer intense torment. No one is perfectly good nor is anyone perfectly evil—we all fall somewhere along a continuum. And so, we each will suffer some sense of pain because of our sins. But the judgment of Christ is not for destruction but for regeneration.

To use spatial terminology, the “heaven” and “hell” of popular conception are the same place—in the presence of God. In God’s presence earthly concepts of time and space no longer prevail. The infinitude of God embraces all creation and every creature. Can we not conceive of the expectation that within the infinity of God’s grace, eventually all will enter into the joys of reconciliation?

V. The question of free will

As a universalist I have to consider the question of the freedom of the will. People often object that my view requires that God overrule the freedom divinely bestowed on human beings by “saving” even those who have exercised their freedom and choose not to believe the gospel or even to reject and revile God, as they understand the concept of deity presented to them.

Without engaging the complex theological and philosophical aspects of the matter, I will state only that I base my view on my understanding of the biblical doctrine of God's creation of humankind. We are all made "in the image of God" (Gen 1.27). Expositors struggle how to interpret that statement, but to me it means at least that, as the Quakers say, "there is that of God in everyone." I reject the view I once held that only those who believe in Jesus Christ are children of God. By creation we are all God's children; we are all sisters and brothers. I cited Paul's statement in Romans 11.32: "God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all." Paul follows immediately with the exultant cry, "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ... For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen." (Rom 11.33, 36).

In Acts 17.27b-8 Luke has Paul quote approvingly two pagan poets in the course of his exposition of the "unknown God" whom the Athenians venerated: "Indeed he is not far from each one of us. For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.'" I share the belief expressed by both our biblical faith and insights from other religions: along with all the rest of creation, human beings are embraced within the divine being, and therefore none of us can ultimately be "lost" outside the divine.

God endowed us with some degree of freedom to choose, and God honors the choices we make, not sparing us the consequences of our bad choices. But beyond those realities and in the continuing life in the presence of God, the essential nature with which God has endowed us will respond in keeping with that nature such that we will each and all rejoice in the eternal blessing God intends for us

VI. Is there a "second chance" after death?

Consistent universalism must reject the idea that the end of biological life on this earth and judgment before the throne of Christ shut off any further possibility of repentance and reconciliation. One cannot be dogmatic or absolutist on this point but say only what seems consistent with the total thrust of the biblical revelation of the essential nature of God and a few admittedly difficult biblical texts.

Early Israel believed that at death everyone, both good and evil, descended to Sheol to remain in a shadowy existence separated from God, unable to praise God and without God's presence (cf Psalm 6.5; 88.3-6; Isaiah 38.18). In time, however, the understanding of God grew to the point of conviction that God was present even in Sheol (Psalm 139.8). During the persecution of the faithful under Antiochus IV Epiphanes around 167 BCE, the Jews believed that God would raise from the dead those who had died for the faith (Daniel 12.2-3 and 2 Maccabees 7.20-23).

Our Christian faith rests upon the bedrock of the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus died and his body was placed in the tomb on the Friday after noon and remained there until he rose again on the

morning of third day. As the Apostles' Creed says, "he descended into hell" (i.e. to Sheol) or as the modern ecumenical version says, "he descended to the dead." What did Jesus do while he was in the place of the dead? As Savior of the world, was he passively inactive, or did he in some way continue his saving work?

Two texts from 1 Peter chapters three and four indicate that the early Christians expressed their conviction that Christ effectively exercised his saving work even in the realm of the dead.

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark. (1 Peter 3.18-20)

This idea of somebody preaching to the people who had been drowned in Noah's flood comes from an old Jewish writing called "The Book of Enoch." These verses in 1 Peter express the Christian belief that before the resurrection, Jesus in Sheol or hell was preaching to those sinful people who died in Noah's flood. A similar idea is found in 1 Peter 4.5-6. The writer is speaking about the certainty of final judgment. Here we read of the fate of persistent sinners:

. . . they will have to give an accounting to him who stands ready to judge the living and the dead. For this is why the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead, so that, though they have been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit like God. (1 Peter 4.5-6)

Jesus the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, proclaimed the good news of saving grace even to the dead.

For many years, because of prejudice against the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory, Protestants either overlooked these verses or interpreted them in such a way as to deny what they seem to say. These verses seem to tell us that Jesus, between his death and resurrection, was actually carrying on his work of salvation among people who had already died. I like what the English Presbyterian scholar C.E.B. Cranfield says about these passages in his little commentary, *The First Epistle of Peter* (London: SCM Press, 1950). Cranfield admits this is a mystery, but it gives us a hint we should accept gratefully, that ". . . the scope of his saving activity is such that we dare set no limits to it. . . thank God that the reach of Christ's saving activity is not to be limited by our human desire to get things neat and tidy in pigeon-holes of our choosing" (p 86). "In the opinion of men the dead have had their judgment; but the Good News has been preached even among them, in order that those who respond to it might live eternally" (p 91).

In the light of my life-long study of God's word in Scripture, and my experience as a preacher, teacher, and missionary, I have reached the deep conviction that God truly does include everyone in the gracious purpose of reconciliation. Without God's overruling the freedom with which God endowed human kind, all of us, in God's presence, will still have the opportunity to make the

voluntary move from the “goats” side to the “sheep” side. Indeed, I am convinced that that is precisely what all will do, for God deals with us not in terms of imposing the divine will from without by sheer power, but by generous giving, by loving persuasion from within. Then, indeed, God will be all in all; for from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen. (1 Corinthians 15.28; Romans 11.36)

VII. Christian universalism and the Jews

The universalist interpretation of Scripture that I have tried to promote has to face the criticism of those who put forward the texts on which they base their view that apart from faith in Christ no one can be saved. They apply their principle to Jews as well as to people of all other faiths or of none at all. Before taking up the broader question, I wish to explain my understanding of the Bible’s own teaching on the matter of the ultimate fate of the Jews.

A. Supersessionism, or replacement theology

Many Christians through the centuries have insisted that the Church of Jesus Christ has now superseded (displaced, replaced) the Jews to become the “true Israel” the “true people of God.” Supersession indicates this process, and supersessionism the beliefs and doctrines related to it. Such a view is based on the following presuppositions: 1) Jesus came, Messiah of Israel, but the Jews rejected and killed him. 2) Those who accept Jesus as Messiah/Christ (i.e., Christians) now constitute true Israel. 3) Jews who do accept Jesus as Messiah enter true Israel, but Jews who do not are lost like all the rest of those without faith in Christ.

Many texts in the Gospels, especially particular ones in Matthew and John, seem to set up an unbridgeable chasm between “believers” or those who accept Jesus as Messiah, and “Jews” who oppose and even persecute them. The Johannine texts noted in section II.A above encourage this view. In popular understanding, “Jews” in the New Testament has been taken to mean all adherents of Judaism as a religion over against Christianity, or simply as members of a particular ethnic group.

Recent scholarship calls attention to the fact that in the primitive church and at the time of writing the New Testament, practically all the participants were ethnic and religious Jews (as was Jesus himself). In the earliest times the final break between Jews and Christians had not taken place; there was a degree of overlapping and intermixing in particular synagogues in different localities. The Jesus movement drew its early strength from Galilee, while the strongest opponents occupied the small geographical area of Judea and Jerusalem, centering on the Temple and its sacrificial system. “Judaism” in the modern sense of an identifiable religion did not then exist, having emerged only after the destruction of the Temple in a rather lengthy process. The New Testament word traditionally translated “Jews” and thus assumed to describe what only later came to be identified with adherents to “Judaism” should in many cases more accurately be rendered by “Judeans.” We may take it as beyond doubt that to some extent the religious power structure in Judea/Jerusalem did persecute and oppress the minority followers of Jesus/Messiah

in the middle decades of first century CE. It may well be, too, that in particular synagogues their local leaders may have encouraged the majority members to persecute or eject fellow Jews who followed the Jesus way. The Apostle Paul, according to the narrative in Acts 8.1 and 9.1-2 and his own testimony in 1 Corinthians 15.10 and Galatians 1.13, actively participated in persecuting Christians, and after his conversion, he suffered the same treatment from fellow Jews (1 Thessalonians 2.15b-16a).

One need not go into detail here to review the familiar story of how the Jewish Jesus movement, or Way gradually attracted attention from Gentiles, or non-Jews, and how after considerable debate the progressive wing of the Way that later achieved ascendancy gained agreement that Gentiles could become Christians without first becoming Jews. This decision opened the door to many “God-fearers” among Gentiles to accept Christ and embrace the perceived advantages of Jewish monotheism and moral superiority without taking on circumcision, kosher, and other requirements of the law as proselytes, or full-fledged converts to Judaism. The actual process leading to accepting Gentiles was much more complicated than this simple statement, or, indeed, the texts in the New Testament itself would suggest.

Paul, the “apostle to the Gentiles,” struggled (largely unsuccessfully) for full equality between Jewish and Gentile Christians within one fellowship. He tells of his efforts in Antioch of Pisidia. Some of the Jewish believers, including Peter, promoted eating separately from Gentile believers who did not keep the Jewish laws concerning food, even though they had recognized Gentiles’ inclusion in the church on the basis of faith alone, which Paul called “the truth of the gospel” (Galatians 2.5; Acts 15.1-11). In Paul’s view, when Peter withdrew from fellowship with Gentile believers this also was another violation of “the truth of the gospel” (Galatians 2.14), and he publicly rebuked Peter for it. Nevertheless the Jewish/separatist policy appears to have prevailed in Antioch. Paul evidently lost the debate, for he does not claim final success there, and he has no more relations with the Antioch congregation. This circumstance gives rise to a certain degree of anti-Jewish sentiment we may sense on reading Paul’s letters.

Despite Paul’s own insistence on the matter, the two-pronged question of how Gentiles could be saved, and under what conditions they could have table fellowship with Jewish Christians, was not altogether clear in the primitive Christian congregations. In churches Paul established he encountered a problem caused by some people’s following him around and trying to persuade his Gentile converts to be circumcised and keep some parts of Jewish law. Traditionally, Christians have assumed that Jews took the lead in this movement, and that the effect of their teaching was to promote salvation by works of the law. When Paul argues against this principle and speaks in negative terms of the law, people have tended to assume that he was describing Judaism itself as a legalistic religion completely opposite from Christianity based on faith. This assumption has underlain traditional supersessionism.

Ever since I read E. P. Sanders’ *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), I have abandoned that assumption. To me, Sanders demonstrates beyond question that the Pharisaic Judaism in which Paul was brought up did not promulgate a doctrine of

works-righteousness; Jews rested upon God's gracious choice of them and the gift of the covenant. Obedience to the law was, for Jews, the response to God's grace, and they expected rewards on the basis of works within the context of having been chosen by grace. Sanders asserts that Paul and Rabbinic Judaism "are not antithetical" (p 11). In his final summary, Sanders states: "[T]here are substantial agreements and a basic difference. Further, the difference is not located in a supposed antithesis of grace and works (on grace and works there is in fact agreement, and an agreement which can hardly be called 'peripheral'), but in the total type of religion" (p 548 italics original).

Without absolving Jewish Christians from all blame for teaching and behavior that could lead Gentiles to a legalistic conclusion, I am personally inclined to think that one aspect of the problem Paul faced came from morally earnest Gentile converts who, on reading the Old Testament (the only Bible they had) became favorably impressed by Jewish law and tried to apply it in their new religious experience. Having been brought up on the pagan principle that humans had to do something for the gods in order to receive benefits in return, they would find it difficult to follow the principle of grace consistently. There was always the risk that people would claim that the principle of justification by faith alone would encourage people to sin, so that grace might abound, an accusation Paul vehemently rejected (Romans 6.1-2). Paul's arguments, then, are addressed to Gentiles, who in desiring to keep the law violate the principle of grace in a way that Jews keeping the law would not.

Some texts on the status of Jews:

1. Romans

In Romans, Paul appears to address a somewhat different question. Although there were Jews in the Christian community at Rome, Paul's principal addressees in this letter were Gentiles (see 1.13; 11.13). Some had a tendency to look down on others whom they called "weak in faith" because they had scruples about foods and days (14.1-6). I assume that the so-called "weak" ones were Jewish believers or Gentiles who misunderstood the true function of law, while Gentile believers, who had taken seriously the Christian teachings on freedom, considered themselves the "strong" and devalued the scruples of their "weaker" brothers and sisters. One of the motifs running through Romans is Paul's insistence on some degree of priority for Jews ("the Jew first" 1.16; 2.9,10), and in this letter he defended Jews against haughty Gentiles. He hoped to encourage their mutual respect and solidarity as one community (Romans 14-15). Paul does not state his argument in logical step-by-step order, but we must educe it from his writing as a whole.

As a Jew, Paul appreciated more than others the universal implications of the monotheistic worldview of Scripture. The one God is creator and sovereign over all, and all else stands on the same level before God, who shows no partiality (2.11). Though God chose the Jews and they have some advantages in that respect, in the final analysis all—both Jews and Gentiles—"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3.23).

But God's grace is greater than human sin. Christ died precisely for the ungodly, that is, for all

(5.6). Christ totally reversed the process of death for all humankind brought about by the transgression of the one man Adam. “Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all . . . Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (5.18, 20b). [Note: the occurrence of *all* in 5.18 is the equivalent of “*the one*” and “*the many*” using the definite article in 5.15, 19.] Indeed, in God’s plan, ultimate reconciliation embraces the totality of creation (Rom 8.18-23; see also Eph 1.10, Col 1.19-20).

Humanly speaking Paul could feel sincere sorrow that his fellow Jews had not experienced the same joys and blessings of personal experience of Christ that he had enjoyed (Rom 9.2-3; 10.1). Nevertheless, any inclination Paul might have had toward wanting to write off Jews was overridden by his faith in the God who keeps covenant, despite the other partner’s betrayal of the covenant. In 9.25-6 Paul refers to Hosea 1.10 and 2.23 where God restores those he had once called “Not Loved” and “Not my People,” calling them now beloved and children of the living God. Hosea ends with God’s declaration of unconditional mercy: “I will heal their disloyalty; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them” (Hos 14.4).

Paul’s basic theology rested first of all on his view of God as sole creator and sovereign, God of Gentiles as well as Jews (Rom 3.29). No one can question God’s freedom to choose some and reject others, to show mercy to some and to harden others (9.6-29). These texts are among those cited by Calvinists like Warfield to support their view of “double predestination.” But they have done so by ignoring the broader aspects of the total biblical teaching and by misinterpreting Paul. God chose the Jews and entrusted to them the oracles of God (3.2). “To them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever” (9.4-5). In God’s inscrutable freedom, God bestowed these privileges on Israel, and in spite of Israel’s failures, “God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew” (11.2). Israel is the root and trunk of the olive tree into which Gentiles have been grafted “against nature” (11.13-24). “For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (11.29). See also 8.29-30: “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined...and those whom he predestined he called...”).

The apparent unfairness of God in choosing some and rejecting others must be seen in the light of God’s basic impartiality and within God’s plan of salvation for all. God hardened Pharaoh to show mercy to Israel (9.17). God hardened some of Israel in order to bring blessing to Gentiles, but this hardening is only temporary: “a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and so all Israel will be saved” (11.25b-26a). Paul concludes: “For God has imprisoned all [Jews and Gentiles] in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all” (11.32). This verse forms an appropriate closure to the universal thrust which began with 5.12-21: Where “the one” Adam had brought sin and death to “the many,” i.e., to all, so “the one” Christ has brought justification and life to “the many,” to all. This universal mercy is the context for reading and interpreting the apparent favoritism of God.

In view of this overwhelming mercy of God, Paul makes his appeal to the Romans: those who are “strong” (Gentile believers’ estimate of themselves) ought to put up with the failings of the “weak” (Jewish believers and Judaizing Gentiles, according to Gentile opinion), and not to please themselves (15.1). “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs” (15.7-8). Christ guarantees the faithfulness of God in keeping covenant with the patriarchs, with Israel, and with “every living creature of all flesh” (Gen 9.15), and also God’s promise to bless all nations through them. In Christ, “every one of God’s promises is a ‘Yes’” (2 Cor 1.20), and we might add, to the Jew first and to the Gentile.

Paul struggled always to maintain the unity and equality of Jewish and Christian believers in one unbroken fellowship, but unfortunately he failed in Antioch, as we saw above. In Rome, Paul hoped the Gentiles would be more charitable toward the Jews and not try to force them to live like Gentiles, but again, Paul failed. Centuries-long Gentile arrogance grossly misrepresented God as being unfaithful to the extent of breaking covenant with Israel and rejecting them. In practical terms, Christians exactly reversed Paul’s metaphor of the olive tree. Christians claimed to be now root and trunk of the tree of a “new Israel,” while Jews are unnatural branches that have to be grafted in as a result of accepting Christ.

2. Ephesians

One may presume a similar situation in Ephesus—Gentile contempt for Jewish Christians. Some scholars deny Paul’s authorship of Ephesians, partly because he makes no personal references at all, even though he had spent a lengthy period of time in Ephesus. Markus Barth (*Ephesians*, Anchor Bible) supports Pauline authorship, arguing that since Paul’s departure the character and membership of the church had largely shifted from people Paul knew personally to a Gentile majority. I am not fully persuaded of Pauline authorship; he was too much of an egalitarian to support the social hierarchy of Ephesians 5.22-6.4. Nevertheless, I think the texts on relations of Christians and Jews is an extension of Pauline thought, so I use “Paul” in my comments.

Before taking up the question of relations between Jews and Gentiles in Ephesus, the author states his basically universal doctrine concerning God’s eternal purpose, “to gather up all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph 1.10). The persuasive interpretation of this text by Catherine and Peter Marshall formed part of the theological foundation on which I have developed my understanding of biblical universalism.

Ephesians 2.11-22 uses an even more powerful figure to argue the same theme we found in Rom 11.17-24, Israel as the olive tree’s root/trunk and Gentiles as wild branches grafted in. In Ephesians, Paul describes Israel as the true commonwealth with its covenants of promise, those who are “near” to God. Contrariwise, before becoming Christians, Gentiles were outsiders, foreigners, far off, without hope, and without God. But now, “You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God” (2.19).

These words, “saints” and “household of God,” describe the Israel into which Gentiles have now been welcomed.

By his death Christ broke down the wall of partition separating Gentiles from Israel (Barth rejects the familiar comparison to the wall in the Jerusalem Temple courtyard). “He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances” i.e. those very laws that Gentiles would have to observe if they became converts to Jewish religion. Jesus makes it possible for Gentiles to participate fully in the promises, covenants, blessings, citizenship, and sainthood that belonged already to Israel because of God’s initiative.

Christians have imposed on this passage of Scripture a supersessionist interpretation and excluded Jews from the Israel of God. Where Jesus broke down the wall of commandments so Gentiles could freely enter in, Christians built a new wall and turned Jesus into a narrow door, insisting that Jews must come through that door now in order to participate in the blessings. The effect again was to turn Paul’s doctrine upside down.

Gentile Christian numerical and political ascendancy in world history, fueled by ancient resentments, mistranslations, and misinterpretations of Scripture, have led to the woeful record of anti-Jewish persecutions and pogroms, climaxing in the Holocaust. Supersessionist presuppositions brought to the interpretation of Scripture have been among powerful factors leading to failure to appreciate the motif of universal redemption which threads its way all through the Bible. Once we identify the lethal fallacy of supersessionism, we can begin to appreciate the permanence and primacy of Israel in the divine plan, and open our eyes to God’s eternal purpose of universal reconciliation, two concepts that mutually reinforce each other.

B. Christians and Jews

In his comprehensive study, Sanders concluded that though Jewish rabbis and Paul fundamentally agreed on the question of grace and works, in reality they offered two total types of religion. The Presbyterian Church (USA), along with some other ecumenical Christian communions, after rescinding supersessionism, has officially recognized that for Jews the total type of their religion is effectual for them so that we ought not try to “convert” them to our religion. In my view, this recognition correctly presupposes that the God of Judaism and the God of Christianity is the same, in the sense that this infinite God transcends the necessarily finite, or limited, understanding of deity held by either Jews or Christians. In other words, even though our Christian concept of God and of what it means when we say that God saves sinful people is different from that of the Jews, we nevertheless accept that the God who transcends the comprehension of both Jews and Christians graciously forgives and embraces both them and us.

The immediate conclusion to be drawn from this position should be at least “live and let live” in an atmosphere of peaceful co-existence, characterized by mutual respect in separation. But in light of the rise of religious fundamentalisms spurring hatred and violence worldwide, some people question whether it is sufficient simply to coast along in this way. More and more people,

both Jews and Christians, are actively seeking to learn more about each other's faith and practice and to come to know members of the other religion in more than a merely superficial way. Besides serious dialogue among authorities at high levels we see both formal and informal gatherings in other venues. Jews invite Christians to attend Passover Seder, and Christians invite Jews to their worship services.

What happens when people on both sides want to go farther, to begin to break down the walls of separation and attempt to become an example of the vision of "one new humanity" (Eph 2.15)? The author of Ephesians didn't suggest any process to follow—surely it would have to be in the freedom of the one Spirit through whom both have access to the Father of us all. In Philadelphia Presbytery the congregation of Avodat Yisrael offers itself as a good-faith attempt to express the "new humanity" in one body where Gentiles and Jews together acknowledge Jesus without surrendering either Jewishness or Gentileness. If, as some charge, Avodat Yisrael is just a more subtle attempt of Christians to proselytize Jews, then that is a serious question that calls for serious attention. If, on the other hand, it provides a spiritual home for sincere Jews and Christians to share faith and life, mutually supporting and enriching each other in devotion to the One God who transcends their respective background traditions, then I believe they should be encouraged and assisted. Let's see what happens. Jesus said, "By their fruits you shall know them."

VIII. Christianity and other religions

Now that the Presbyterian Church (USA) has officially recognized that for Jews the total type of their religion is effectual for them so that we ought not try to "convert" them to our religion, the time has come for us to consider the implications for our relation to other religions. With regard to the third of the three interrelated monotheistic religions, namely, Islam, people may say, as President Bush did, that Christians and Muslims worship the same God. I can affirm this only in the same way that I affirm that the God Christians and Jews worship is the same, namely, the One who transcends the cultural and historical and other human circumstances that filter and focus our respective finite understandings of God. Furthermore, I would say the same about any and all other religions. Following the universalism that I find in the Bible, I believe that all people, regardless of religion or character, are embraced in the total divine plan to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven.

In saying this I do not mean that I ignore differences among the religions of the world, or that I approve the idea that one religion (or none) is as good as any other. I do believe that each religion in its own way transmits to its adherents some aspects of the character or essence of the infinite, transcendent One. We must concede that no single religion, and not even the latest manifestation of any particular religion that has undergone change and development over time, completely reveals deity to finite human minds and spirits. My college philosophy professor remarked that human knowledge might be compared to a series of concentric circles. As knowledge increases, as we move from the center toward the periphery, we may reach a boundary only to realize that the extent of the yet unknown is even greater than we previously thought. This observation holds

equally true for our knowledge and experience of God, I believe.

Judaism has found the revelation of deity given to Israel through YHWH as preserved in the Hebrew Bible and interpreted by their rabbis as sufficient for them. The early Christians, and especially their Gentile converts, found the revelation of deity offered by Jesus and interpreted by Paul and other teachers who produced the New Testament helpful as a supplement to their understanding of the YHWH of the Bible. Jesus reveals God, surely, but as Dr. Catherine Gunsalus Gonzales remarked at a Synod seminar, “Yes, but Jesus doesn’t reveal *all* of God.”

Therefore we must not arrogantly assume that others of the world’s religions have nothing to contribute to our understanding of God. Standing firm on our Christian foundations, we can boldly open ourselves to whatever is of value anywhere in the universe of the One divine Creator’s making. To a Corinthian congregation on the verge of splitting up into factions following different leaders, Paul wrote: “For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God” (1 Cor 21b-23).

In the course of preparing this paper, I referred back to another book that I now realize contributed much to my spiritual pilgrimage toward universalism, John Hick’s *Death and Eternal Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976). To me, this work is an outstanding example of a Christian scholar taking seriously Paul’s assurance that “all things are yours.” On the dust cover we read the following summary that I found accurately described the book’s contents:

The philosophical, but firmly based picture of human destiny emergent in *Death and Eternal Life* is an exciting, profound collage of the experience and insights of the world’s major religions, natural science, anthropology, psychology, and philosophy. In the most encyclopedic treatment of the subject yet to appear in English, John Hick has prepared and presented a global theology of death.

More accurately stated, Hick has presented a global theology of eternal life, based not only on biblical teaching considered authoritative by Christians, but also on evidence from other religions and fields of human intellect and experience. Within this broader context Hick takes up the question of universalism: “The situation is that nearly all of us today would like to accept the universalist view but find ourselves hindered by the apparent impossibility of reconciling it with the reality of human freedom” (p 242). In the margin I wrote: “That’s me.” As I read on I found myself persuaded by the author, who argued that God has created humankind with a basic orientation toward God in such a way that “there is no final opposition between God’s saving will and our human nature acting in freedom; and that accordingly the universalist argument is not after all undermined by the fact of human freedom” (p 254). In the context of the general question of eternal life, Hick concludes: “If there is continued life after death, and if God is ceaselessly at work for the salvation of his children, it follows that he will continue to be at work until the work is done” (p 258).

Hick has marshaled all his erudition and Christian commitment in this work. In my view he has persuasively argued the case that the One God who created all and transcends all, the Ultimate Reality beyond and within all, has a loving purpose for all humanity that “consists of the wholeness of ultimately perfected humanity beyond the existence of separate egos.” Reading and re-reading this book has strengthened my personal Christian faith and commitment, while at the same time enriching my appreciation of other religions and systems of thought in other fields of human knowledge and endeavor. It gives me confidence to persevere in my quest of the monotheistic faith in the One God who created all, who transcends all, and who embraces all in eternal divine love.

* * * * *

THE ONE AND THE MANY

Genesis 1.26-28; Romans 5.12-21; John 12.27-32

In October 1986 after I retired as a missionary to Japan, my son Samuel and I spent three weeks traveling in Central China. China—land of well over one billion people, at least one-fourth of the world’s population. We didn’t go in a tourist group but on our own, in close contact with a lot of Chinese—on trains, busses, streetcars, riverboats, using common toilets and washrooms in little hotels, riding bicycles on city streets and country roads. We saw human beings like pack animals: pulling loaded carts, carrying heavy burdens up and down the steep streets of Chongqing to and from the riverboats. We saw farmers, thigh deep in mud behind water buffalo, plowing their paddies. We saw the shacks and hovels where so many of them live. I understood the Chinese phrase I first learned years ago: chr ku—eat bitterness. Then and now the question weighs on my mind: In the light of my Christian faith, what am I to think of this swarming mass of Chinese? I have to answer honestly:

I. They are all human beings like me. Each of them is a unique individual, just like me, feeling, thinking, desiring, suffering, rejoicing, loving, hating. Why do so many of them eat bitterness, while my life is sweet? Why do they have to work so hard, while I have such an easy time? I am not intrinsically worth more nor more deserving than they. They might justifiably complain: “Life is not fair.” Yet according to our Bible, the One God created them and me, created us in God’s image. I have no greater claim on God than they do. Before God we are equal.

II. The unique creation story in Genesis emphasizes human equality, but in other ancient lands, the rulers used sacred myths to uphold royal authority and elite power structures. A famous old Sumerian account begins: “When kingship was lowered from heaven . . .” In other myths, the first human being to be created was the king. We may find a reference to such a myth in Ezekiel 28. The passage evidently reflects the popular mythology of Tyre, emphasizing the divine right of the king. The Hebrew prophet picks up on this theme specifically to debunk it. Ezekiel addresses the ruler of Tyre: “You were in Eden, the Garden of God; you were blameless in the day you were created. But your heart is proud. You say you are as wise as god, you say that you are a god.

Therefore you will be thrown down . . .”

In China, too, the king was nearly a god. At Xi'an we visited the royal tomb of the Emperor Qin Xi Huang Ti. The tomb was filled with rich treasures. Thousands of life-sized terra cotta soldiers guarded the tomb. Tens of thousands of Chinese peasants were put to forced labor, many of them literally worked to death, for this one man. You and I are most familiar with the pyramids of Egypt, where the king was god. Think how many living human beings he exploited and ground down in poverty and misery to build these tombs for a handful of dead people! Religious teaching, mythology, cult, and ceremony all served to reinforce the idea of the divinity of the rulers and to maintain their superiority and control over the masses of the people, not only in this world but also in the world to come.

In contrast to that, the Bible bases its message on the liberation of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt. The true God took the side of the exploited Hebrews, not that of the Pharaoh who was worshiped as god. Out of the faith in this God who liberates the slaves, we get the Genesis creation story. The Bible “democratizes” the old pagan myths. God did not first create the king; God created humankind. God did not first create just a masculine person; God created a human couple, male and female. Let me read the passage, giving a literal translation of the Hebrew, eliminating the sexist overtones that have usually been included:

So God created the human race in the divine image; in the image of God it was created; male and female God created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion...” (Genesis 1.27-8)

God did not give dominion over the earth to the king, not to one particular race or nation, not just to males. God gave dominion over the earth to human beings, women and men.

III. Biblical faith rightly understood subverts all tyranny, all exploitation, all elitism of sex, wealth, power, race, intellect, etc. When English peasants got the Bible in their hands, they wouldn't put up with the divine right of kings any longer. They read Genesis, and they had this bit of doggerel they quoted:

When Adam delved and Eve span,
Where was then the gentleman?

African slaves in our own United States read Exodus and sang, “Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt land; tell ole Pharaoh to let my people go.” Yes, the Bible, rightly understood, is a powerful weapon against tyranny and oppression, the authentic basis for democratic equality.

In the Book of Deuteronomy, we find a related strand of tradition: because there is only One God, this God does not show partiality. You know the famous declaration of faith in Deut 6.4: “Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is One.” Then in Deut 10.17-18 we read:

The LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, the terrible God, who is not partial and takes no bribe; who executes justice for the

fatherless and the widow, and loves the resident aliens, giving them food and clothing.

The New Testament picks up this emphasis on God's impartiality. When Peter, against his will, had to go and preach to the Roman Centurion Cornelius, he said, "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality" (Acts 10.34). In Romans, Paul presses home the lesson that God is God for all people, not just for Jews, for, he says, "God shows no partiality" (Romans 2.11).

Well now, in the light of my Christian faith, what should I think about this swarming mass of Chinese, these one billion of my fellow human beings?

IV. Traditional or popular Christian theology gives an answer: All Chinese who believe in Christ are saved, and all the rest are lost. Adam and Eve sinned against God and were condemned to death. All human beings, descended from Adam and Eve, are guilty of original sin and our own sins. Therefore we must suffer the punishment for sin. That means death, torment, or annihilation. But God sent Christ to bear our sins, and all who accept the salvation offered in Christ are saved. So, how many Chinese are saved? Nobody really knows.

We have all heard, I'm sure, the encouraging news about the revival of the church in China since the end of the Cultural Revolution. Nobody knows how many believers there are. There must be at least ten million; suppose even one hundred million Chinese Christians! Praise the Lord! But wait—that still leaves over nine hundred million Chinese who are not Christians. What about them?

Traditional or popular Christian doctrine says that all who do not believe in Christ are lost, condemned for their sins. Those nine hundred million Chinese are lost. Ninety-nine percent of the people of Japan are lost. Two-thirds of the world population today is lost. Counting from the time of Christ till today, the vast majority of all the men, women, and children who ever lived are lost, because they have not believed in Christ as their Savior.

V. Now here are some logical conclusions from popular theology:

- 1: God's power for salvation is less than God's power of creation.
- 2: God is willing to destroy the vast majority of all the world's people, in spite of having created them in the divine image.
- 3: God shows partiality if God saves me and condemns nine hundred million Chinese.
- 4: The power of sin is greater than the power of forgiveness.
- 5: The power of death is greater than the power of life.
- 6: Adam is greater than Christ

VI. Let's begin with the last point. Surely you don't believe Adam is greater than Christ! In Romans 5.12-21, Paul's argument is precisely that Christ is *far greater* than Adam. The whole purpose of this passage is to persuade us that Christ has completely overcome the tragic

consequences of Adam's sin. Paul starts out in verse 12: "[S]in came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all because all sinned." This one man was Adam, considered along with Eve of course, to be the first ancestor of the whole human race. Adam's sin and its consequence, death, affected all his descendants, what ancient Church Fathers called "original sin." Here Paul bases his argument on Jewish traditions found in extra-biblical writings. These are attempts, somewhat fanciful, to interpret the biblical creation story, but this teaching itself is not found in the Old Testament, and outside the letters of Paul it is not found in the New Testament. Paul learned this teaching as a former Jewish rabbi, but as a Christian apostle Paul now declares his liberation from this teaching. He says that whereas the whole human race was condemned because of Adam's trespass, God has totally reversed that fate by a free gift, by the obedience, death, and resurrection of Christ. Look at v 18: "Then as *one man's trespass* led to condemnation for *all*, so *one man's act of righteousness* leads to acquittal and life for *all*."

Popular theology says "Yes, Christ's salvation is great enough for all, but it is effective only for those who believe." Then they might point to v 19: "For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous," that is, (so they say) however many believe on Christ.

But Paul doesn't say that here. Paul doesn't talk about "one" and "many" in indefinite terms. Paul uses the definite article: "the one" and "the many." And that makes all the difference in the world—literally *all the difference in the world*. For Paul's argument involves the whole human race, whether in relation to Adam or in relation to Christ. Consider the analogy of a symphony orchestra in concert. One person, the conductor, stands in front of many musicians, the orchestra. Speaking of the whole orchestra, we speak of *the one*, the conductor, and *the many*, the musicians. Paul uses exactly the same language pattern, describing the whole human race in relation to Adam and to Christ.

VII. With this in mind let us respond to those six logical conclusions of popular theology, in reverse order:

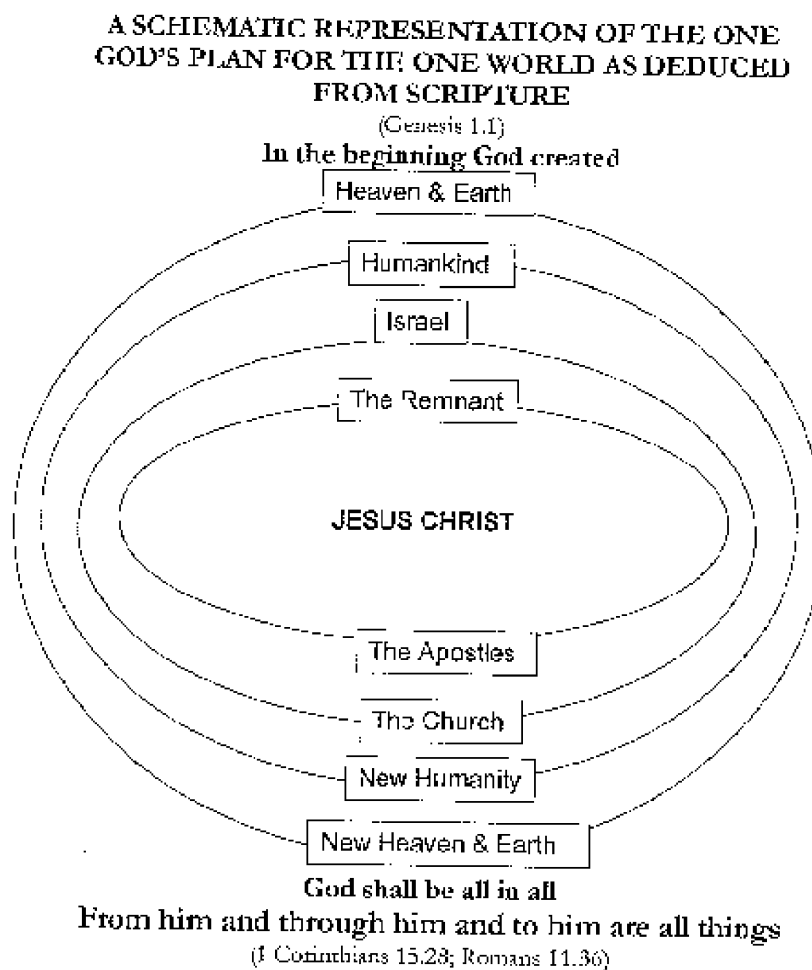
- 6: Christ is far superior to Adam. Christ has totally reversed the condemnation that Adam brought on the human race. Through Christ, God freely gives acquittal and life to everyone.
- 5: The life which God created and which God renewed in the resurrection of Christ, is far more powerful than death. For where death formerly reigned, eternal life through Christ reigns supreme.
- 4: God's grace of forgiveness is far more powerful than our sin. "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more!"
- 3: God does *not* show partiality, saving a special few and condemning all the rest. As Paul said in 2 Cor 5.19: "God was in Christ reconciling the *world* to God, not counting their trespasses against them." And Jesus said, "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw *all* unto myself."
- 2: It is clear therefore that God is not willing to destroy the vast majority of the

- world's people, all of whom God made in the divine image.
- 1: The scope of God's plan of redemption is at least equal to, and perhaps even greater than, the scope of God's work of creation. Again, in Romans 8.21, Paul says, "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God."

VIII. This reversal of popular theology has extremely important consequences for all of us:

1. Here we see the right idea of God. Here we see a deity who can truly be defined in the well-known words: God is love (1 John 4.8, 16). Jesus Christ revealed God who is not an angry tyrant willing to destroy the majority of the human race. God is patient, long suffering, willing to go to any length to cancel out the results of human sin and rebellion. Since this is the God we know, we are now commissioned to tell other people this wonderful story.
2. The story that we tell, the message that we bring, is really Gospel, good news in the most literal sense of the word. Christ really and truly died for all. God has already reconciled the world. Because we have received that reconciliation and experienced God's love, we are called to show that same kind of love in our dealing with other people. We mustn't try to scare people out of hell, or to scare the hell out of people. We must tell them that in Christ God has already accomplished reconciliation, that God is not counting their sins against them, for Christ is Savior of all. We invite them to enter into the joy and peace which reconciliation brings.
3. All our claims to superiority or to special status are completely undercut. It's not "us and them" the "saved and the lost." We simply cannot look down on anyone as inferior to ourselves, since we share with all others a common humanity, and since One God is above all and through all and in all. We all are made in the image of God, and we are all brothers and sisters in the family of God. We all share in God's ultimate purpose for the whole creation to obtain the glorious freedom of God's children. Therefore it behooves us here and now to learn to live with others in peace and solidarity and fellowship, to work for those conditions where they are lacking.
4. Finally, we are prevented from any tendency to be complacent or lazy. We cannot say to ourselves: I don't need to be concerned about the two-thirds of the world's people who don't know about Christ, for eventually God will take care of them. We cannot say to ourselves: I'm not responsible to work for justice and peace, for eventually God will make everything right. On the contrary, we have the most powerful motive for mission, to do whatever we can to bring to reality here and now the conditions of love, justice, peace, and reconciliation that we believe are God's purpose for the whole creation. As Jesus said: "Freely ye have received; freely give."

A schematic Representation of the one God's plan for the one world as deduced from Scripture (Genesis 1.1)



//

(Design by Arch B. Taylor, Jr.)

EXPLANATION

According to this way of understanding the comprehensive teaching of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, God who is Love has revealed the divine purpose of redemption and reconciliation for the totality of creation. Nothing that God has created remains outside divine grace.

The diagram represents the divine plan schematically: God who exists eternally began a work of creation including everything, expressed in Hebrew by **Heaven and Earth**. In modern terminology, at least the planet; perhaps the cosmos. The totality of created being is the product and the object of divine love.

To show more specifically what divine love involves, the Bible teaches that God entered into a special relationship with **Humankind**, in some respects different from relationship with the rest of creation. As seen in the Bible, reflecting human reality, humankind has become alienated from God, having refused to accept dependent status as creature and rejected the loving authority of the Creator. Confronted with the sin of human creatures, God acted to overcome sin by initiating a process of redemption, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

In order to make more explicit the divine love, God entered a special relationship with one group of people—family, race, nation—which came to be known as **Israel**. Israel experienced liberation from Egypt, the establishment of the covenant, the giving of the divine guidance (Torah), and settlement in a homeland. But Israel did not respond faithfully to the guidance nor keep the covenant, so God made use of a faithful Remnant within Israel to make more explicit what relationship with the One God means. Through the **Remnant**, particularly the prophets, God made known the divine judgment upon sin and God's will for repentance in response to reconciliation. As a result, there arose the expectation that God would bring eventual redemption of Israel through an anointed leader, a Messiah.

One should beware of misinterpreting what might appear like a certain narrowing of the divine concern, from **Heaven and Earth**→ to **Humankind**→ to **Israel**→ to a **Remnant**→ to **Jesus Christ**. God did not show increasing degrees of favoritism toward some to the neglect of others, even though there is always a temptation to see it in that way. God, who is Love, in order to make more and more clear the divine love for all creation, acted in more and more particular ways with and through **Humankind**, **Israel**, the **Remnant**, and **Jesus Christ**. They became, in a sense, paradigms of what God intends for **Heaven and Earth**, that is, for all.

Out of the faithful remnant of Israel there came the man **JESUS CHRIST**. In him the revelation of the loving purpose of God for all creation finds its central focus. Jesus is the supreme paradigm for humanity and all creation embraced by God. At the same time, Jesus is the paradigm of revealer of God.

Jesus was crucified, the victim of human political and religious authority alienated from God. But God raised Jesus from the dead. Those who had known him and who experienced him as resurrected and alive acclaimed Jesus the Messiah/Christ of expectation. They saw the death and resurrection of Jesus as the sign that God has forgiven human sin and desires not destruction of the sinner but reconciliation.

The close associates of Jesus who experienced him as resurrected were, like him, members of the Remnant of Israel. Jesus appointed them **Apostles**, ones sent to bear witness to what they had

seen and heard. Very soon, not only others of Israel but many Gentiles, or non-Israelites, accepted the message about Jesus and became believers/disciples/followers. From that time to the present, the body of these believers constitute **the Church**, which has received from the risen Lord the commission to proclaim the good news of God's reconciliation in Jesus Christ to all people with the goal of a **New Humanity**. As the Church faithfully carries out its mission, God's purpose is gradually being realized in human history, to culminate in the **New Heaven and New Earth**. As expressed in 1 Corinthians 15.20-28, the risen Jesus, Lord and Head of the Church, will come eventually to be recognized as Lord of history and all humanity. Then Jesus will turn authority back to God, so that God shall be All in All.

I wish to stress that I have tried to represent the scheme as I see it in the Bible, the authoritative Scripture of Christians. In the Bible we have no specific mention of major systems of belief other than Judaism and Christianity. I do not believe that the Bible anticipates the total "Christianizing" of all the world's people, or that eventually the Christian Church will include everybody. But the Bible certainly expects those who have come to know God by means of the Scriptures and in Christ to share the good news as broadly as possible, confident that the One God who transcends the inadequate concepts of "God" held by adherents of any and all systems of belief (including our own) will be at work in and through us and will thereby be glorified.

NOTE: I adapted this schematic representation from Arnold B. Rhodes, *The Mighty Acts of God*. Rhodes used an hourglass figure, which was susceptible of giving the impression of a gradual narrowing leading to Jesus Christ. In my teaching I used that figure myself until my son Samuel called my attention to the impression of narrowing, and I have tried to correct that by using the comprehensive symbol of the circle.

Arch B. Taylor, Jr.