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Toward a Biblical Perspective on People of Other Faiths

John E. Toews

Introduction

The question of pluralism and religious faith has been on the ecumenical agenda since the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago.¹ But evangelicals in the West have generally ignored the issue until recently. J. N. D. Anderson began addressing the topic in the 1960s.² The issue was not dealt with again in any substantial way until the 1980s, and then only by a few.³ The Lausanne II Conference in 1989 put out mixed signals. On the one hand, the Manila Manifesto uses traditional language to assert that other religions lead “not to God but to judgment.”⁴ On the other hand, the Manifesto acknowledges that “the religions which have arisen do sometimes contain elements of truth and beauty.”⁵ A paper by Colin Chapman calls for open dialogue with other religions and for a balanced and nuanced theology of religions, and cautiously raises the question about the fate of unreached peoples.⁶ Clark Pinnock hopes that the Lausanne II discussion of other religions will do for the pluralism agenda what the Lausanne I declaration did for evangelical social action.

The issue was also raised in 1989 by Hans Kasdorf for the first time in the

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- 1 See the following for some of the recent discussions: K. Cracknell, *Towards a New Relationship* (London: Epworth, 1986); G. D’Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); J. Hick and P. Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralist Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985); P. Knitter, *No Other Name* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985); C. H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); A. Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1982); G. Richards, *Towards a Theology of Religions* (London: Routledge, 1989); J. Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation of the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992); D. Wright, “The Watershed of Vatican II: Catholic Attitudes Towards Other Religions,” in *One God, One Lord in a World of Religious Pluralism*, A. D. Clarke and B. C. Winter, eds. (Cambridge, UK: Tyndale, 1991), 153-71.
- 2 See *Christianity and Comparative Religions* (London: IVP, 1970).
- 3 See Pinnock, “Towards an Evangelical Theology of Religions,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 33 (1990): 359-68; Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*; Sanders, *No Other Name*.
- 4 “Manila Manifesto,” in J. D. Douglas, ed., *Proclaim Christ Until He Comes* (Minneapolis, Minn.: World Wide Publications, 1989), 26.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 29.
- 6 “The Challenge of Other Religions” in *Proclaim Christ Until He Comes*, 179-83.

twenty-five-year history of the Association of Evangelical Professors of Missions.⁷ Two groups addressed the issue in 1992, the Evangelical Theology Group of the American Academy of Religion and the Wheaton College Theology Conference. The 1992 publication of two books challenging evangelical exclusivism is stirring significant reflection and response.⁸

To date the religious pluralism agenda is being addressed almost exclusively by theologians and/or missiologists. I find only a few exegetical studies by evangelical biblical scholars, virtually none by ecumenical scholars.⁹

I visited with Vinay Samuel, a theologian from India, about the issue of religious pluralism in November 1990. He believes that it is so explosive and threatening for North American evangelicals that it will be the central agenda for the next forty years. Several evangelical scholars echo Samuel's sense of the explosiveness of this issue. Harold Netland, a missionary in Japan, suggests the past science-theology debate among evangelicals will turn out to be "mere child's play when compared to the challenge to Christian theology of the faith of other men."¹⁰ John Stackhouse asserts that "no other question presents a more central challenge to evangelical identity and activity than the issue of Christianity and other faiths."¹¹

Clarifying the Issues

The question of people of other faiths is really a question of religious pluralism. Religious pluralism affirms differences in religious traditions and belief systems. It relativizes claims about the truth of a religion's teachings and practices, and rejects universal truth claims and norms. Each religion is viewed as one partial and limited way of understanding truth, never *the* truth. Religious pluralism, therefore, challenges and denies the uniqueness or exclusivity of Christ. Jesus is no longer the final revelation or norm for all people, only for Christians who choose to follow him. Jesus is one way to salvation among many ways.

The phrase "the exclusivity of Christ," used in much of the recent discussion, is the latest in a series of expressions that seek to identify Christ as the singular and unique Son of God through whom God offers a final and universal revelation as

7 See H. Kasdorf, "Toward an Evangelical Theology of Religions: A Missiological Viewpoint in Western Context" (Association of Evangelical Professors of Missions/Evangelical Theological Society, San Diego, November 16-18, 1989).

8 See Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*; Sanders, *No Other Name*; J. G. Stackhouse, "Evangelicals Reconsider World Religions: Betraying or Affirming the Tradition," *Christian Century*, September 8-15, 1993, 858-65.

9 See some of the articles in Clarke and Winter; and in W. V. Crockett and J. G. Sigountos, eds., *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).

10 "The Challenge of Religious Pluralism," *TSF Bulletin*, 10 (1986): 20.

11 Stackhouse, 862.

well as universal and unsurpassable salvation. Other phrases used in modern church history to make this same affirmation include “the finality of Christ,” “the supremacy of Christ,” “the absoluteness of Christianity.”¹² It is noteworthy that all the modern phrases for the exclusivity of Christ use non-biblical language to make a claim for Jesus. All carry baggage that must be unpacked in the context of interfaith dialogue and mission. The New Testament language for the claim contemporary Christians are making is “the lordship of Christ.”

This paper will use the biblical language as much as possible, and leave it to others to determine what modern language best translates the content and the intent of the biblical language. The purpose of the paper is to outline some New Testament perspectives on the issue of “people of other faiths,” and to suggest some implications for the Mennonite Church. Two questions are really involved in the question of Christianity and other faiths. First, is Jesus the only way to salvation? Second, is knowledge of Christ necessary for salvation?

The Lordship of Jesus Christ—The Question of Exclusivity

THE PLURALIST CONTEXT OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

The Christian church was born in a religiously pluralistic world. Ancient writers reckon with more than 30,000 gods in antiquity. Each city had numerous gods and temples, e.g., fifty in Corinth, forty in Nicomedia.¹³ Many of these ancient religions were not exclusive; people participated in the local cults of many gods. But there were exceptions—some religions were exclusive.

JESUS IS LORD

The offense of early Christianity in this pluralist environment was the exclusiveness of its fundamental confession “Jesus is Lord.” Its insistence that only “Jesus is Lord” was interpreted as atheism, as the refusal to worship the gods of the peoples, families, cities, nations, and empire.

This confession was one of the earliest confessions of the Christian church. It was the one that defined a person as a Christian (Rom. 10.9; 1 Cor. 12.3). But it also claimed much more. It affirmed Jesus as a participant in the creation of the world (1 Cor. 8.6; Heb. 1.2), and thus as lord over creation. It affirmed Jesus as lord of the universe, as ruler of the world (Rom. 14.9; Phil. 2.11; Eph. 1.20-22; Heb. 1.3; 1 Pet. 3.22), as the king of kings (Rev. 1.5; 17.14; 19.15f.). All powers in the universe, Christians claimed, either were or would be subject to Jesus as

12 See C. E. Braaten, “The Problem of the Absoluteness of Christianity,” *Interpretation*, 40 (1986): 341-53, for an introduction to the modern discussion.

13 See B. W. Winter, “Theological and Ethical Responses to Religious Pluralism—1 Corinthians 8-10,” *Tyndale Bulletin*, 41 (1990): 210-13.

Lord (Eph. 1.20-22; Col. 2.10, 15).¹⁴ This confession made an exclusive claim of sovereignty and authority. Jesus as Lord alone carried the authority of the one God of all humanity. Jesus alone was the lord of all peoples, cultures, and nations. Therefore, all peoples and nations should or would submit to Jesus' lordship. Christians, consequently, could not participate in the worship and practice of other religions.

This fundamental confession of the Christian church affirmed cultural pluralism and challenged religious pluralism. Jesus as Lord meant his lordship was to be incarnated in every culture. But it also meant that no other lord in any culture compared with or could compete for the allegiance of this Lord. The confession "Jesus is Lord" was a claim about corporate and personal loyalty that defined the center of Christian faith. But it also was a profound, first-order claim about reality: there is one and only one Lord in the cosmos (e.g., Acts 10.36).

1 CORINTHIANS 8-10 AS A SAMPLE CASE

Corinth was a very religious city. Its multiple gods and temples testified to a worldview dominated by the religious and pluralist assumptions of antiquity. The churches established there by Paul were populated by converts from these religions, and faced the issue of how to relate to this religious environment on a daily basis. Chapters 8-10 offer an illuminating case study.¹⁵

The surface issue was a practical one: Should Christians eat meat that had been offered to idols? However, Paul immediately redefined the issue as a theological and ecclesiological one. The theological issue was monotheism, and the ecclesiological one was the identity of the people of God. Paul outlined a redefinition of monotheism and election by means of his christology. The purpose was to offer the church an alternative to paganism that was at the same time continuous with the Jewish heritage of many people in Corinth.

The first-level answer to the problem of idolatry and its practices is the monotheism of the Shema, Israel's best known monotheistic confession—"there is no idol in the world . . . there is no God but one" (8.4). The second-level answer is to confront pagan pluralism—"though there may be so-called gods . . ." (8.5). The third-level answer is that all that matters is the one true God revealed in Jesus.

14 See H. Bietenhard, "Lord, Master," *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. Vol. 2, 513-16; I. H. Marshall, "Jesus as Lord: The Development of the Concept," in *Eschatology and the New Testament*. W. H. Gloer, ed. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1988), 129-45; P. Perkins, "Christianity and World Religions. New Testament Questions," *Interpretation*, 40 (1986): 370-71.

15 See G. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 357f.; C. H. Talbert, *Reading Corinthians* (Crossroad, N.Y.: Crossroad, 1987), 56f.; Winter, "Theological and Ethical Response to Religious Pluralism," *Tyndale Bulletin* (1990): 209f.; N. T. Wright, "One God, One Lord, One People. Incarnational Christology for a Church in a Pagan Environment," *Ex Auditu*, 5-7 (1989-91): 45f.

Paul makes this third, and very revolutionary claim, by an expansion of the Shema in which he interprets “God” as “the Father from whom are all things and for whom we are,” and “Lord” as “Jesus Christ through whom all things are and we are through him” (8.6). Paul places Christ into the center of Israel’s best known monotheistic text, and thus claims that this monotheism finds its fulfillment in Jesus. He redefines Jewish monotheism christologically (christological monotheism) to answer the fundamental theological problem of religious pluralism.

Having answered the theological issue at stake christologically, Paul addresses the practical issues christologically as well. The followers of Jesus forgo their personal rights for the sake of the weaker members of the community of faith (8.7-9.27), and they express their redefined identity in the celebration of the Lord’s table as the real alternative to pagan celebrations. Therefore, they reject all forms of pagan pluralism and practices.

Paul confronts religious pluralism head-on in 1 Cor. 8-10 through a redefined theology that centralizes the lordship of Christ and that redefines the identity of the people of God in terms of what this christology means. The answer to the challenge of pluralism is the lordship of Jesus.

JESUS IS THE ULTIMATE REVELATION OF GOD

The offensiveness of the Christian confession that Jesus is Lord was intensified by two other exclusivist claims.

The claim that Jesus is the final revelation of God is made in different writings and different language in the New Testament. Only three are identified here as illustrations of the larger theological confession. The Colossian hymn, Col. 1.15-20, is an affirmation of christological monotheism. “The pre-existent lord of the world has become the human lord of the world, and in so doing has reflected fully, for the eyes of the world to see, the God whose human image he has now come to bear.”¹⁶ Jesus is the dwelling place of the transcendent God, the visible image of the invisible God.¹⁷ The writer of Hebrews asserts that God’s final address to humanity has come through the Son (Heb. 1.2). That Son, the rest of Hebrews argues, is superior to all other agents through whom God has spoken, e.g., angels, Moses, Joshua, Aaron.¹⁸ The Prologue to the Gospel of John makes an equally high claim for Jesus. He is one with the Father (John 1.1). “No one has ever seen God; the only Son of God has made him known” (1.18). True knowledge of God

16 N. T. Wright, “Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1.15-20,” *New Testament Studies*, 36 (1990): 461.

17 See P. T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, in *Word Bible Commentary* (Dallas: Word, 1982), 31-63.

18 See H. W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, in *Hermeneia* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 39-41; F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, in *NICNT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 1-9.

comes only through Jesus. All God's self-revelation comes to focus in and through Jesus.¹⁹

These texts, and others, make the claim that the clearest and final revelation of God is historically and culturally particular, a first-century Jew by the name of Jesus. The claim is made to Jewish-Christian people who are struggling with implications of Jesus' lordship for Jewish monotheism. How is it possible to say that Jesus is Lord and still affirm that "the Lord our God is one?" The answer is that the one God is revealed finally and fully in Messiah Jesus.

JESUS IS THE ONLY WAY TO SALVATION

Several very different texts make the claim that Jesus is the only way to salvation.

John 14.6 : *I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the father except through me.*

The context is the farewell discourses of Jesus. Two parallel speeches, 13.33-14.31 and 15.26-16.33, describe Jesus' going away and the coming of the Counselor. Jesus announces at the beginning of the first speech that he is leaving for a place to which the disciples cannot go. Chapter 14, verse 6 is the beginning of an answer to Thomas's question about knowing where Jesus is going and about the way. Jesus' answer is that he is going to the Father, and that he is the way to the Father. Verse 6 is a word of assurance to a fearful and doubting disciple, and at the same time an assertion that the way to the Father is through the cross.²⁰

Acts 4.12 : *And there is not salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven which has been given to people by which it is necessary to be saved.*

The context is the first defense of the Christian mission before the Temple authorities. The speech of Peter in vv. 8-12 is an answer to the question of the authorities in v. 7: "By what power or by what name did you [heal the lame man]?" in 3.1-10. Peter's answer interprets the healing as a sign of messianic salvation ("heal" and "save" are the same word in vv. 10 and 12). The healing occurred in the name of Jesus, not in the name of the apostles. The genre of the defense is confessional, the confession that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel, as the

19 See C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*. 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 149-70; R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Anchor Bible, Vol. 1 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), 3-37; J. D. G. Dunn, "Let John Be John," in *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien*, P. Stuhlmacher, ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1983), 309-339; P. Ellis, *The Genius of John* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1985), 19-28.

20 See Brown, vol. 2, 628-33; Ellis, 209-21.

citation of Psalms 118.22 demonstrates. Jesus is God's new and holistic saving power for the Jewish people; he is the means by which "it is necessary to be saved." Therefore, the Jewish leaders should cease their rejection of Jesus. The setting is intra-Jewish. The "no other name" has no extra-Jewish referent.²¹

1 Cor. 3.11 : *For another foundation no one is able to lay beside what has been laid, who is Jesus Christ.*

The context is Paul's answer, 3.5-4.7, to the first rhetorical question posed in 1.13, Is Christ divided? The focus of the entire section is the role of Christian missionaries. Whatever the task assigned various ministers, they are intended for the well-being of the church. Paul, as one of these ministers, laid the only Christian foundation that can be laid, Jesus Christ. Other missionaries should build carefully on that foundation.²²

1 Tim. 2.5 : *For God is one, and one mediator between God and humanity, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself a ransom in behalf of all.*

The context is an exhortation to pray for kings and political leaders so that Christians may live peaceful and godly lives. The reason is that God desires all human beings to be saved. Verse 5, which together with v. 6 may be an early credal formulation, offers evidence for the divine desire that all people be saved. Three pieces of evidence are cited: the unity of God, Christ as mediator, Christ's death as a universally saving act. The point of the text is the universality of God's saving will. Therefore, the exhortation to pray for socio-spiritual conditions that will permit that goal to be fulfilled.²³

In summary, the confession that "Jesus Christ is Lord of all" is the central theological claim of the New Testament writings. It is an assertion that Jesus alone is Lord; beside him there is no other.

The concomitant claim that Jesus is the complete and final revelation of God is an affirmation of christological monotheism. It is a theologically inclusive statement rather than an exclusive one. It asserts that Jewish Christians can confess Jesus as Lord, can confess that God is revealed fully and finally in Jesus,

21 See F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 99-101; I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 100-101; Pinnock, "Acts 4.12—No Other Name Under Heaven," in Crockett and Sigountos, 107ff.; K. Stendahl, "Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism," in *Meanings. The Bible as Document and as Guide* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 237-41; R. C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1990), 61.

22 See Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 135-41; Talbert, *Reading Corinthians*, 3-8.

23 See Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (New York: Harper, 1984), 25-31.

and still be Jewish monotheists. It is a profound claim, and one that leads to the christological and theological debates which produced the classical ecumenical creeds. But it is a claim that is different from the current Christian conviction in inter-religious dialogue that Jesus is the only revelation of God. The latter conclusion represents a hermeneutical jump that must become sensitive to the difference in agenda between the first century and the late twentieth century.

The “exclusive soteriology” texts are even further removed from the current inter-religious conversation than the christological monotheist texts. The “Jesus is the only way to salvation” texts all address Christians. John 14.6 is a statement of assurance to a fearful disciple. Acts 4.12 affirms that Jesus is the Messianic cornerstone of Jewish eschatological expectations. First Cor. 3.11 states that Christ is the foundation of the church on which all ministers must build carefully. First Tim. 2.5 underscores the universality of God’s saving will. None of these texts was written to make the case that Jesus is the only way to salvation to the exclusion of other ways. The early Christians certainly believed that Jesus is the only way to salvation because only he is Lord, but the traditional “exclusive soteriology” texts were not intended to make the case for the exclusivity of Christ.

The Love and Justice of God: The Question of Inclusivity

The Christian message is exclusive: Jesus Christ alone is Lord of all. The exclusive Lordship of Christ is axiomatic for Christian faith.

A second axiom of Christian faith is that God loves the world and desires the salvation of all people and of the cosmos. John 3.16 states this axiom; the Great Commission, Matt. 28.18-20, issues its mandate. First Tim. 2.4 defines the intent: God “wills everyone to be saved and to come to know the truth.” The Apocalypse uses different language to describe the intent—“Behold, I am making all things new” (Rev. 21.5) and “the healing of the nations” (22.2). Paul articulates the means of God’s universal salvation, “through the righteous act of one all humans receive the righteousness of life . . . through the obedience of one the many shall be made righteous” (Rom. 5.18-19), and “God was in Christ reconciling the cosmos to himself” (2 Cor. 5.19). Titus 2.11 summarizes the results—“the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all humanity.”

The first axiom is exclusive, the second inclusive. The critical issue in inter-religious dialogue is the relationship of the two axioms, the exclusive lordship of Christ and the universal saving love and justice of God. More particularly, does the universal saving love of God make any room for knowledge of God outside of the special and final revelation in Christ? Or, to put the issue in different language, What is the biblical theology of other religions? Do other religions offer valid knowledge of God? Do they offer knowledge of God that can lead to salvation, that can be affirmed and built on in the proclamation of the gospel?

Many different texts, Old and New Testament, should be studied to address

these questions adequately. Space permits a brief study of only two, the theologies of Acts and Romans regarding other religious faiths.

1. ACTS

Luke writes his two-volume work, Luke-Acts, to address Jewish and Gentile conflict in the church. He assures his audience that the church composed of Jews and Gentiles is a fulfillment of the promises of God. The center of Luke's theology is salvation history: God offers salvation to Jews and Gentiles in Jesus Christ. The theology is structured as a travel narrative that moves first to Jerusalem and then from Jerusalem to Rome. The story line crosses a series of boundaries that are significant for understanding Luke's theology of religions. Three texts are especially significant; all narrate the extension of the gospel beyond Judaism to the world.

Acts 10.34-36: And Peter having opened his mouth said, in truth I understand that God is not partial, but in every people the ones fearing him and working righteousness are acceptable to him. The word which was sent to the sons of Israel, proclaiming the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, the one who is Lord of all.

The context is Luke's narrative of the extension of the gospel to the Gentiles, but in this case Gentile god-fearers, Gentiles who worship Yahweh without becoming Jews. Cornelius is not distant from the Jews, but different. He is a Gentile, but his piety parallels that of a devout Jew (vv. 2, 4). One command dominates the narrative, "what things God calls clean, do not you go on calling unclean" (stated in 10.15, paraphrased in 10.28, repeated exactly in 11.9). The narrative line offers a concise and pointed antithesis, the conflict between the divine and human perceptions and actions. Peter confesses in 11.17 that he could not withstand God.²⁴ Peter enunciates two principles of Christian grammar and mission: God is impartial in relationship to all people—God is inclusive; Jesus Christ is Lord—the essential exclusiveness of the gospel.

Verses 34-36 speak primarily about God. God is not partial. Peter sees this impartiality of God "in truth." Since God's impartiality is not a new idea in Judaism,²⁵ Peter is seeing it in a new way. He is beginning to see how God is going to implement impartial goodness as salvation of Gentiles as well as Jews. Christians must accept the people God accepts. The proclamation of the good news in v. 36 is a summary of the angels' announcement of Jesus' birth to the shepherds in Luke 2. Jesus Messiah as Lord of all, however, interprets the message to the shepherds. The one who is Lord as Davidic Messiah is Lord of all people.

²⁴ See Tannehill, 131-41.

²⁵ See J. M. Bassler, *Divine Impartiality* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1982).

Peter's experience leads him to theological insight.

The narrative offers an instructive account of discerning the will of God beyond the church's "comfort zones." (1) There can be divine promptings of people in a state of receptivity. (2) People can respond obediently to these divine promptings even though they do not fully understand what is happening. (3) Openness to other persons through the mutual sharing of visions is important. The visions in the narrative, Peter's and Cornelius's, have the purpose of opening a relationship between people of different cultures. Each vision leads its recipient to be open to a stranger's experience of God. (4) God works from two sides at the same time to achieve the divine goal. (5) The new insight and the new relationship must be justified publically before the church (11.1-18). (6) The new insight and the new relationship must be worked out in public debate with contrary understandings of God (15.1-29).

Acts 14.16-17: Who in previous generations allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways, and yet not left himself without a witness, doing good, from heaven giving rains to you and so times of fruitfulness, filling your hearts with good and gladness.

The context is the first exclusively non-Jewish setting in the missionary expansion of the church. Paul heals a lame man in Lystra. The crowd's mistaken identification of Barnabas and Paul as Greek gods, and the plan of the priest of Zeus to offer sacrifices provide the setting for a speech by Paul. Paul's speech is to Gentiles untouched by Judaism. The people are not like Cornelius, "devout and fearing God." The challenge now is mission among people of other faiths. The reaction of the crowd points to the problem of religious superstition in mission. Paul's speech, and the one in Athens in ch. 17, show careful reflection on the problem of approaching Gentiles who do not share the biblical story or Judaism's belief in one God, major premises for the other speeches in Acts.

Paul proclaims God as Creator in the language of Exod. 20.11 and Ps. 146.6 ("who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them," v. 15b). He recognizes that various people have various religions. He does not condemn these histories but acknowledges the presence of God in them (God "allowed the nations to walk in their own ways," v. 16). God was not without a witness among these people. The gifts and sustaining faithfulness of nature was a witness to the goodness of the Creator (v. 17). This affirmation of nature as a witness to the goodness of the one transcendent God is rare in the New Testament. It recalls Old Testament themes—Ps. 145.15-16, 147.8-9; Jer. 5.24. Nature provides a point of contact between the biblical tradition and other traditions. While the varying histories of people divide, the goodness of nature is a shared experience of all people.

Mission does not end with an affirmation of religious diversity and the common grace of nature. It is centered in a call to repentance. Paul calls the people

to “turn from these vain things to a living God . . .” (v. 15a). The reason for repentance is quite different than in Peter’s sermons in Acts but repentance is necessary in all cases. People must turn from past ignorance of God because a turning point has occurred in world history.

Acts 17

The context is Paul’s speaking in the market place of Athens about “Jesus and the resurrection” with any who happen by (vv. 17-18). He is brought to the Areopagus to explain his teaching, and there addresses the Athenians’ desire to know (vv. 19, 20). The speech is the second of three major speeches of Paul in Acts, the mission speech to the Jews (13.16-41), this one (17.22-31), and the farewell speech to the Ephesian elders (20.18-35). The speech is strikingly different from the mission speeches to the Jews in chapters 2-13. It is related to the brief speech in Lystra, 14.15-17, and it highlights Paul’s encounter with Gentiles who have no relation to Judaism.²⁶ The speech makes two points about God: (1) God is the Creator of the world (vv. 24-29), (2) God will judge the world through Jesus Christ (vv. 30-31). First Thess. 1.9-10 outlines a similar message to the Gentiles of Thessalonica.²⁷

Paul begins with the religious practices of the Athenians and with the altar to the unknown God, and proceeds to make this God known as the Creator of all, who is independent of human creations. The speech moves from the proclamation of God as creator and sustainer of life to the assertion of the fundamental unity of humanity (God “made from one every nation of humans,” v. 26) and God’s availability to every individual (God is “not far from each one of us,” v. 27).

The speech is a charter of mission that can reach all people because it no longer depends on instruction of Gentiles by the synagogue. Effective mission requires a message that can address the whole world. More than instruction in the Jewish tradition is needed. Mission must discover latent resources within the tradition of the audience in order to preach a universal message. The resources are found through reflection on the relation of the Creator to the creation. This relation transcends every ethnic and racial boundary. Starting from this foundation enables Paul to say “all” and “each one,” to proclaim a message that excludes no one.²⁸

26 See J. Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 21ff.; D. L. Bock, “Athenians Who Have Never Heard,” in Crockett and Sigountos, 117ff.; L. Legrand, “The Unknown God of Athens: Acts 17 and the Religion of the Gentiles,” *Indian Journal of Theology*, 30 (1981): 158-64; Tannehill, 210-17; S. G. Wilson, *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 197-209.

27 For the description of parallel themes in Jewish missionary preaching, especially in Josephus, see F. G. Downing, “Ethical Pagan Theism and the Speeches in Acts,” *New Testament Studies*, 27 (1980-81): 544-63; and “Common Ground with Paganism in Luke and in Josephus,” *New Testament Studies*, 28 (1981-82): 546-59.

28 See Tannehill, 211-13.

If the speech builds from common ground, it also is critical of the religious traditions of the Athenians. Three negative statements expose misunderstandings of God: (1) God does not dwell in temples made with hands—v. 24, (2) God is not served by human hands—v. 25, (3) God cannot be represented by images of human creation—v. 29. All three represent a confusion between God and place, or an image that humans create, or within the mutual meeting of human need. The speech upholds the transcendence of God by understanding God's role in creating and giving as irreversible; God gives and creates for humanity.²⁹

The concluding call to repentance, vv. 30-31, contains the only explicitly Christian part of the speech. Even here Christ is mentioned only indirectly. A new era has dawned with the coming of Christ. God has been patient; God has "overlooked" Gentile ignorance. But the time of ignorance has ended: God will judge the world in righteousness through the resurrected Christ; people must break decisively with their religious past and repent.

The strategy of the speech is to lay a foundation of common ground as the basis for raising the central problem, the teaching about Jesus and the resurrection. The speech is occasioned by the proclamation of Jesus and the resurrection, and it ends with a word about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

The late Colin Hemer asserts that the Areopagus speech "is a masterpiece of cross-cultural communication."³⁰ It is, he believes, "paradigmatic . . . as a classic of intercultural communication."³¹ Paul's speech illustrates how to communicate the gospel to people for whom it is completely foreign and unintelligible. It begins with natural revelation and instead of quoting the Christian scriptures (Old Testament) uses a quotation from a Greek poet. Paul understands that Greek wisdom is open to Christian interpretation. He begins with a religio-cultural value of his audience, and then denies that this value has been realized from within the belief-praxis system. Tannehill suggests

The Areopagus speech may provide a helpful model of the delicate task of speaking outside the religious community through critical engagement with the larger world. A mission that does not engage the presuppositions and dominant concerns of those being approached leaves these presuppositions and concerns untouched, with the result that the message, even if accepted, does not transform its hearers. The fundamental structures of the old life remain standing, and the gospel loses its culture-transforming power. Dialogue with outsiders may be risky, but the refusal of dialogue on cultural concerns results either in the isolation of the religious community or the

29 *Ibid.*, 216f.; Wilson, *Gentile Mission*, 198ff.; B. M. Winter, "In Public and in Private: Early Christian Interactions with Religious Pluralism," in Clarke and Winter, 128f.

30 Colin Hemer, "The Speeches in Acts. II. The Areopagus Address," *Tyndale Bulletin*, 40 (1989): 258.

31 *Ibid.*, 255.

compartmentalization of religion so that it does not affect society at large.³²

The view of revelation expressed in the speech is a universal one. God is presented as the God of the whole world; God is the Creator who rules over both nature and history. The purpose of creation also is universal: that people should seek God. Concomitantly, the resurrection of Jesus is a universally revelatory event. This is made clear by the parallel language used—“out of one he made all nations of people” in v. 26, “he commands all people everywhere to repent” in v. 30, and “in which to judge the world in righteousness by one man” in v. 31. The revelation of Christ is as universal as the act of creation and has universal consequences. The universality of God’s revelation is expressed repeatedly in the sermon through the use of “all” and related ideas: “God who made the world and all that is in it” in v. 24, “he gives to all . . . all things” in v. 25, “he creates from one every nation of people to dwell on the entire face of the earth” in v. 26, “he is never far from each one of us” in v. 27, “in him we live and move and are” in v. 28, “he commands all people everywhere to repent” in v. 30, and “he will judge the whole world” in v. 31.

Paul not only tries to commend the gospel to the Athenians from within the frame of their religious thought but also brings the gospel to bear on their thinking in such a way as to expose the distortions of their understanding of God. He begins where they are, with the general, in order to move them toward a new understanding of God, the particular. The gospel, the resurrection of Jesus, is central. It is the unusually particular that opens the door for the discussion of the gospel, and it is the regulative belief toward which the conversation and repentance move. Acts 17 outlines an apologia for the gospel which opens the door, which penetrates to the foundations of the prevailing culture, which calls the people of the culture to repentance, and which enables the gospel to begin transforming the culture at its center.³³

In summary, the theology of Acts offers some provocative thoughts about other religions. God is free to move beyond the categories of Christian believers:

- “What God calls clean, do not you go on calling unclean.”
- God is impartial in dealing with all people.
- God is present in the religious histories of people.
- Creation and nature bear witness to the presence and goodness of God.
- God has been patient with human history and ignorance, but that time is coming to an end.

32 Tannehill, 215.

33 See T. F. Torrance, “Phusikos kai Theologikos Logos, St. Paul and Athenagoras at Athens,” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 41 (1988): 13-15.

- All people must repent and turn to the living God.
- Jesus Christ is Lord, and the norm for God's eschatological judgment of all people.
- Mission must simultaneously build common ground with the people being evangelized and critically engage the center of each culture with the meaning of Jesus' lordship.
- God's new leadings in mission must be tested publically in the church.

2. ROMANS

Paul wrote Romans as a pastoral letter to resolve a crisis in Jewish-Gentile church relationships. The purpose is to aid in the reconciliation of disparate house churches in Rome. The pastoral theology Paul formulates for this problem centers in the equality of Jew and Gentile before God. Both are judged equally by God and both are made righteous equally by God through the faithfulness of Messiah Jesus. The equality of all in the gospel blunts the assumption of Jewish privilege and the Gentile presumption of superiority. Paul argues for the entry of Gentiles into God's plan of salvation which originated in Israel; that is why he simultaneously emphasizes both the equality of Jews and Gentiles and the priority of Israel. Jewish-Christian and Gentile-Christian congregations can live together in peace because both have been incorporated into the one people that God is creating in the world out of faithfulness to the promises and covenant with Israel. Both people become real children of Abraham.³⁴

In the process of developing this argument Paul says some things about Jewish and Gentile religions that are relevant for this paper.

The impartial judgment of God, 1.18-2.11

The theme of the letter is stated in 1.16-18: the gospel reveals the power of God, the righteousness of God, and the wrath of God. The thesis asserts that the gospel is the active manifestation of God's end-time power and faithfulness to make the world right. The text in 1.18-2.11 elaborates the meaning of the third thematic statement, that the gospel reveals the wrath of God against all unrighteousness. The focus of this unit is the just, impartial, and corresponding retribution of God. The judgment of God is in exact correspondence to the unrighteousness of humans. The point of the argument is God as righteous and impartial in judgment. God is knowable in creation so that humanity is without excuse. God will judge all people impartially according to their works. The argument clearly places Jew and Gentile under God's judgment. But the judgment is just and impartial, based on knowledge and works.

34 For the exegesis undergirding this discussion of Romans and the bibliography, see my forthcoming commentary in the Believers Church Series, (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press).

The role of the Law, 2.12-29

The emphasis of 1.18-2.11 on the impartiality of God's judgment of all people raises questions for the Jew. The critical question is, What about the law? Surely having privileged access to God's will gives the Jew a better position at God's judgment. The second text unit, 2.12-3.20, deals with that question, which really amounts to, What about God's election of Israel? The central argument shows that the law neither puts Gentiles at a disadvantage nor guarantees advantage for the Jews before God's impartial judgment. The principle about the law is stated in vv. 12-13. Having or not having the law decides the standard by which one is judged.

Paul makes the shocking assertion in vv. 12-13 that the function of the normative law is different for the Jew and the Gentile. Performance, not possession, is the critical criterion in judgment. Verses 14-16 test the thesis of vv. 12-13 on the Gentiles. The sentence emphasizes two things: Gentiles do not by nature (by birth and inheritance) have the law; Gentiles have the ability to keep the law. Although the Gentiles have not been raised in the knowledge of the law by virtue of their birth, they now know it and actually desire in their hearts to obey it. They, therefore, can stand as equals before the Jews at the final judgment with their own advocates and their own inner copy of the law. The written Torah offers no special privilege. Jews and Gentiles are equal before God's eschatological tribunal. The judgment of God is impartial: all people will be judged on the basis of their faithfulness to what they know, Jews by the revealed Torah and Gentiles by the law in their hearts.

The righteousness of God for all people, 3.21-26

The second and major argument of the letter runs from 3.21 through 11.36. It makes the case for the revelation of the righteousness of God for all humanity. The thesis of the argument is stated in 3.21-26: God has revealed end-time righteousness in the world through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. The text is framed by the righteousness of God, the revelation of it (vv. 21-22b), and the demonstration of it (vv. 25b-26). Three successive purpose clauses indicate the intention of God's new revelation, to demonstrate God's end-time and powerful righteousness in the present world. "Because of the passing over of sins previously committed" indicates the reason for the action. The means of the "passing over" is "the restraint of God."

Paul asserts that God has now acted righteously in relation to the previous sins of the Gentiles. God has dealt positively with the sins of non-Jews. Christ is the means of expiation for the Gentiles. For the first time they too now have access to an *hilasterion* (propitiatory sacrifice), as the Jews had for generations through the sacrificial system. God purposed Christ as a means of expiation in order to make right God's relationship to the Gentiles as well as their relationship to the Jews. The God who judges sin righteously and impartially is a patient God who desires

the salvation of all people. God has acted in Christ to demonstrate righteousness by dealing totally and comprehensively with the power of sin. The revelation of God's righteousness eliminates all human boasting and all human claims on God (3.27-4.25).

Jesus effects universal salvation, 5.12-21

The revelation of the righteousness of God through the faithfulness of Jesus has enormous consequences, as outlined in 5.1-8.39. It means peace with God (5.1-11), victory over sin (5.12-21), the death of the old humanity (6.1-7.6), victory over the flesh/sin through the Spirit (7.7-8.11), and a new family relationship with God (8.12-39).

One text in particular has a significant bearing on the subject of this paper, namely 5.12-21. The central image in the text is of God as king. The action of the text is carried by words for "reign" (*basileuo*); a form of the word is used five times. The issue is, Who rules the world and humanity?

The passage begins with sin and death as the rulers of all humanity and all creation. Then, beginning with v. 15, Jesus establishes the powerful, gracious, and righteous rule of God over all people and creation. Adam is replaced by Jesus. The reign of sin and death is replaced by the reign of grace, righteousness, and life. Both Adam and Christ are universal paradigms; whatever happened in Adam happens to all human beings, and whatever happened in Christ happens to all human beings. The picture is that one group composed of all human beings is first ruled by one king who is conquered by another king who becomes the ruler of all the people. A change of lordships takes place by a unilateral action of God. Human beings have no choice; they are transferred from Adam's people to Christ's people, from the lordship of sin and death to the lordship of grace and life without any role in the action. Verse 18 says it most clearly: "just as through one trespass there is condemnation for all human beings, so also through one righteous act there is righteousness of life for all human beings." Every statement between vv. 15 and 18 affirms that whatever humanity lost in Adam it "much more" regained in Christ. Sin and death are universal. Salvation—grace and life—are universal. Both are determined by one person for all other human beings and for the entire cosmos.

There is a minor theme in the text unit—human responsibility. The universality of sin is qualified in v. 12 by "because all sinned." The universality of salvation is qualified in v. 17 by a participle, "the ones receiving" (*hoi lambanontes*). But the theme is a minor one, not the major one. That is why theologians have struggled so much about the relationship of Adam's sin and human responsibility in the interpretation of v. 12. The same issue applies to the relationship of Jesus' righteous act and human responsibility in vv. 15-19.

God's faithfulness to Israel, 9.1-11.36

Despite the magnitude of God's salvation outlined in 3.21-8.39, the Jews remain a problem. Individual Jews like Paul confessed Jesus as Messiah, but the Jews as a people said "no" to the gospel of Jesus' messiahship. The Jewish "no" raised profound theological questions for the Christian church. Did it mean that God had revoked the promises to Israel, had rejected Israel, had nullified the election of Israel? That is the question Paul addresses in ch. 9-11. The answer is a resounding "no." God is and will be faithful to the promises to Israel, and will yet save Israel.

What has astonished and troubled scholars over the centuries is the limited role of Jesus in these chapters. There is no christological reference in chapter 9. Christ is mentioned for the first time in 10.4 as the fulfillment of the Jewish law, and then again in 10.9ff. as the basis of Christian confession and proclamation. The explanation of Israel's temporary hardening by God and Israel's ultimate salvation in ch. 11 occurs without an explicit christological reference. The amended Isaiah 59.20 reference in v. 26 can be interpreted christologically, but some interpreters also make the case for a theological referent.

The point is that in the midst of a very critical discussion of the future salvation of the Jews, there is ambiguity about the role of Christ. What is clear is that God will save Israel, and that this salvation will have enormous eschatologically universal consequences for all people and the cosmos. If that end-time salvation of the Jewish people will be centered in the confession of Jesus as Messiah, it is not explicitly stated in the text—much to the dismay of many. The precise role of Christ in the final salvation of the Jews is part of the eschatological mystery Paul talks about in ch. 11, as is the meaning of "all Israel."

Paul makes the following claims in Romans about other religions:

- Knowledge of God is possible through creation.
- God is just and impartial. God judges on the basis of what people know and their faithfulness to this knowledge.
- Gentiles can know and do the law without the special revelation of the law given to the Jews.
- Christ is the revelation and the norm of the end-time righteousness of God in the world.
- God, who has passed over Gentile sin, now deals righteously with this sin through the faithfulness of Christ to demonstrate end-time righteousness in the world.
- God has effected universal salvation for all human beings in Christ "to the ones trusting."
- God will save "all Israel" in the future as a manifestation of mercy for Jews and Gentiles.

What about the "Universalism" of ch. 5?

Romans 5.12-21 is one of the critical texts for people who argue that Paul taught universal or unlimited salvation (the others are Rom. 11.26-36; 1 Cor. 15.22-28; 2 Cor. 5.19; Phil. 2.6-11; Col. 1.15-20). Universal salvation means that God will save all people. The text, taken by itself, stresses universal salvation as the answer to universal sin. That is its clear and plain meaning.

The critical phrase is "taken by itself." Rom. 5 presents one image of sin and one image of salvation. Sin is defined as a cosmic lord who pulls all people and all creation into its magnetic field. Salvation must always answer the problem of sin. There are many different metaphors for salvation in the New Testament because sin is many different realities. Whatever the human predicament, whatever the nature of sin's expression, salvation must answer and correct it. Images of sin as broken relationships, or alienation, or lost community are answered by righteousness, reconciliation, election, or adoption, not by the victory of Christ over sin. But sin as the powerful cosmic lord requires an even more powerful cosmic lord to triumph over it and its child, death. Humans play no part in this drama because they are only slaves of a lord. Universal sin requires universal salvation—an evil cosmic lord must be dethroned by an even more powerful cosmic lord. Talk about healing broken relationships, or reconciling enemies, or incorporating people into a family are only bandaids on a totally dysfunctional world made up of totally dysfunctional communities filled with totally dysfunctional individuals. The government of the world has to be changed—sin and death have to be replaced by grace and life—so that sins can be corrected by appropriate salvific solutions.

Other texts make the minor theme here the major theme; they emphasize that humans are responsible to respond to the victory of Christ over sin. One just has to think of the "trust" (faith) and obedience texts which assert that "trust in Christ" is a condition for salvation. Paul also speaks often of "those who are perishing" or who face "the wrath of God" because of their rejection of God (Rom. 1.18-32; 2.7-8, 12-16; 6.23; 1 Cor. 1.18; 6.9; 8.11; 2 Cor. 2.15; 4.3; Phil. 1.28; 3.19; 2 Thes. 1.8-9). These texts make it clear that "trust in Christ" is essential for salvation, and that apart from Christ everyone will be condemned. Or, think of Rom. 9-11: Paul genuinely worries that God's people Israel may be lost.

The difference between the two sets of text—universal or unlimited salvation and particular or limited salvation—is usually explained by subordinating one to the other (the majority subordinate the universal to the particular, a minority subordinate the particular to the universal), or by claiming that Paul is contradictory or at least incoherent, or by claiming that Paul says more than he intends in the universal texts. But Paul claims both the universal and particular. Why not let both stand as different answers to different questions? Each theme has its own inner logic and meaning which should be accepted and respected in its respective answer to different issues. Both agree that there is salvation only

through Christ. Both divide humanity into different groups, e.g., those subject to the rule of sin or rule of Christ, those who reject Christ as God's way to salvation, or those who "trust in Christ." There is universal salvation because Christ defeats the powers of sin and death, and there is particular salvation because salvation is only through Christ. The universal does not deny the particular but affirms it, and the particular needs the universal to be authentically and divinely transformative. God's grace is universal and humans are responsible to respond to that grace. It is "both/and" rather than "either/or."

Conclusions

What do the biblical perspectives outlined in this paper mean for the formulation of a theology of other faiths or of pluralism? I propose a series of conclusions for testing.

First, the New Testament consistently confesses that "Jesus Christ is lord of all." That is the exclusive claim of the early church. But the exclusivity of that confession is designed to be inclusive. The confession asserts that Christ is the definitive revelation of God in history and is God's means of salvation for humanity and the cosmos. God is making the world right through Jesus Christ, making all things new through Jesus Christ, reconciling the cosmos through Jesus Christ, healing the nations through Jesus Christ.

The meaning of the lordship of Christ for other religions is not worked out systematically in the New Testament. But the New Testament writers, especially of Acts and Romans, outline a paradigm that suggests a direction. Jesus as Messiah and Lord is the fulfillment of Jewish scriptures and hopes. Acts also presents Christ as the fulfillment of other people's faiths. Jesus is the paradigm of God and of salvation for all peoples and all nations. The lordship of Jesus does not negate the presence of God in other cultures and religions. How God will judge people from these religions is answered with the assurance that "God shows no partiality" (Acts 10.34; Rom. 2.11).

What is proclaimed is that God is offering a new and unsurpassed self-revelation and salvation for humanity through Jesus Christ. The religious history of various peoples is a kind of pre-history for God's new revelation and salvation in Christ, just as Jewish "salvation history" is a preparation for the gospel of Jesus Christ. The mission of the church is to proclaim the new revelation and salvation of Christ to all people.

The confession that "Jesus is Lord" is simultaneously exclusive and inclusive. The lordship of Christ—the exclusivity—is stressed in the New Testament in relation to three issues: (1) the assertion of christological monotheism, Jesus as the full and final revelation of the one God; (2) the claims of rival lords, whether gods, idols, religions, principalities and powers, or emperors; (3) the struggles of Christians with doubts, prior religious commitments, leadership rivalries in the church, and socio-political conditions in the world. The confession of the lordship

of Jesus functions primarily to center and nurture the faith of Christians living in the world. Exclusivity is driven as much by internal needs and struggles in the church as by the missionary proclamation of the gospel. Whatever the issue facing the church, the starting point for theologizing and strategizing is the confession that “Jesus is Lord.”

When the church is engaged in mission, Jesus’ lordship means inclusivity. Jesus represents the fulfillment of people’s religious activities and searchings. All religious knowledge and practice is good to a point. Jesus represents the God who is patient and impartial with all people in order to offer something greater than their current religious realities. Jesus is both a paradigm of judgment and fulfillment regarding other religious faiths when the context is mission and inter-faith dialogue. Inside the church Jesus is the exclusive one. In the mission of the church in the world, Jesus is both the exclusive and the inclusive one. Inclusivity and exclusivity are biblical polarities that must be held together rather than juxtaposed.

Second, the New Testament consistently emphasizes the universal soteriological significance of Jesus. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are for the salvation, the healing, the wholeness, and the re-creation of all people and the cosmos. The theological implications of this teaching are not as clear. Two questions have troubled Christian thinkers over the centuries: Does a person have to personally appropriate the work of Christ in order to be saved? Will God extend the opportunity of salvation for those who have never heard the gospel of Jesus Christ?

The exegesis of this paper suggests that Christians should be cautious and gracious in addressing these questions. There are at least four reasons for such caution: (1) The application of the four traditional “exclusive soteriological” texts to these issues is hermeneutically questionable. These texts were not written to answer these questions. (2) The consistent emphasis on the impartiality of God means that these kinds of questions must remain open-ended. There are clear biblical texts which teach that God will deal justly with people in relation to their level of knowledge and obedience to that knowledge. (3) Equally devout and faithful Christians have been divided over the answers to these questions for centuries. The view that all unevangelized people will be eternally lost (so C. F. H. Henry, following Augustine, Melancton, Arminius, Hodge) is not the only orthodox understanding in the history of the church. A second interpretation of long standing asserts that the unevangelized will receive a future opportunity to accept Christ (so Donald Bloesch and Clark Pinnock, following Clement of Alexandria, Luther, Forsyth). A third view teaches that the unevangelized are saved on the basis of their response to the knowledge they have (so E. J. Carnell, C. S. Lewis, William Dyrness, following Justin Martyr, Shedd, Strong). All of these interpretations appeal to scripture, and wrestle carefully with the theological

logic and implications of the respective positions.³⁵ Whenever Christians disagree over the interpretation of texts that are subject to differing interpretations, we must be cautious and gracious. (4) The central issue concerns the justice of God rather than the adequacy of redemption through Christ. That full and universal salvation is available in and through Christ is not the issue in this discussion, but rather the justice of God. Will billions of people spend eternity in hell through no fault of their own, because they did not hear the gospel? Christian thinkers have been reluctant to answer that question with one voice. Pinnock and Sanders are making that clear again in evangelical circles.

The biblical perspectives outlined in this paper are critical both of the restrictivist-exclusivist (e.g., C. F. Henry and R. C. Sproul, following Augustine and Calvin) and of the universalist-pluralist interpretations (e.g., John Hick and Paul Knitter following Origin, Schleiermacher, and Tillich). The recent revival of inclusivist theology (e.g., Pinnock and Sanders following Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Erasmus, and Zwingli) seems much more compatible with a biblical theology of God's grace and justice, the universality of God's salvation in Christ, and a theology of other faiths.

Two other issues are part of this discussion. The first concerns the salvation of the Jews. Some scholars have made the case for a two covenant theology, one for the Jews and a second for Christians.³⁶ The covenant with the Jews, in this view, establishes them as God's favored people for all time, and makes faith in Christ for salvation unnecessary. Therefore, any Christian mission to the Jews is inappropriate, even anti-Semitic.

The New Testament is clear that Jesus is God's Messiah in fulfillment of the promises to Israel and the hopes of the Jewish people. In Christ "every one of God's promises is a 'yes'" (2 Cor. 1.18-20). A Christian mission to the Jews is a priority, "to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1.16). But it is also clear that only individual Jews responded affirmatively to the gospel of Jesus as God's end-time Messiah. The Jews as a people did not respond. Therefore Paul speaks about a future time in which "all Israel will be saved." That "peoplehood salvation" will be a unique eschatological and universally significant act of God.

35 See Pinnock, "The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions," in *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World*, M. A. Noll and D. F. Wells, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 152-68, 318-20; "Toward an Evangelical Theology of Religions," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (1990): 359-68; *A Wideness in God's Mercy* (1992); and Sanders, *No Other Name*.

36 For example, see L. Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987), 80ff., 135ff.; J. G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 239f.; F. Mussner, *Tractate on the Jews* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 1-51; K. Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976); and *Meanings*, 233-44.

Many scholars, myself included, think that end-time event will center in the confession of Jesus as Messiah and Lord, but also acknowledge that the Rom. 11 text can be interpreted more narrowly as a uniquely theological salvation.³⁷ What is clear in the New Testament is that Christ is God's Messiah for Israel, and that Jews must be called to repentance and confession of Jesus as Messiah.

But it is also clear in the New Testament that Christians have not replaced the Jewish people. The term "God's people" is used primarily for Israel. "The Israel of God" in Gal. 6.16 refers to Israel, not the church.³⁸ Israel remains the elect people of God despite its rejection of Jesus as Messiah, and God will yet do something eschatological with this people. The Christian Church does not become Israel or replace Israel. Paul argues consistently that the incorporation of Gentiles into the people of God is in fulfillment of God's promises, not in contravention of the promises or the covenant.

The special status of the Jews as a people is an issue of utmost sensitivity in theologizing about other faiths. On the one hand, Christians must define their Christian identity in continuity with the biblical story of Israel without encroaching on Jewish identity. The Jews remain the people of God. On the other hand, Christians must proclaim the gospel as the fulfillment of the biblical story that expands the boundaries of God's people to include all people through Messiah Jesus. But this fulfillment and expansion does not negate the special status of Israel, nor the promise that "all Israel will be saved."

The second soteriologically related issue concerns the adequacy of a theology of creation or nature. Both Acts and Romans assert that knowledge of God is possible through creation and nature. In the language of traditional Protestant theology, Luke and Paul suggest a high view of God's universal or general revelation. Evangelicals have been reluctant to grant any "gracious" element to general revelation. They tend to affirm the reality of general revelation, but then deny that "it does anyone any good or was even intended to."³⁹ Luke and Paul assert that God has given all people a self-revelation in creation and nature, and that it is present in their religious traditions in order that they might seek and find God. That would suggest that a theology of creation and nature and a theology of

37 See S. Hafemann, "The Salvation of Israel in Romans 11.25-32. A Response to Krister Stendahl," *Ex Auditu*, 4 (1988): 38-58; D. A. Hagner, "Paul's Quarrel with Judaism," in *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity*, C. A. Evans and D. A. Hagner, eds. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1993), 128-50; R. Hvalvik, "A 'Sonderweg' for Israel. A Critical Examination of a Current Interpretation of Romans 11.25-27," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 38 (1990): 87-107; E. P. Sanders, "Paul's Attitude toward the Jewish People," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 33 (1978): 182-83; E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 192ff.

38 See P. Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church* (Cambridge U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 74f.

39 See Pinnock, "The Finality of Christ" (1988), 160.

religions have an importance in mission and inter-religious conversation that needs new and creative reflection. Can nature and other religions be bridges to the gospel of Christ in the postmodern world, just as the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition provided the cradle for much classical Christian theologizing?

Finally, the teaching of the New Testament calls us to achieve balance in our thinking and practice. The lordship of Jesus and the impartiality of God, the presence of God in the various religious histories of people and completely in Jesus Christ, are complementary, not contradictory. This need for balance is especially important in postmodern inter-faith conversation. Christians, conciliar and evangelicals, used to emphasize the exclusiveness of Christ while depreciating other faiths. Today, in part because of some very demonic distortions in the history of Christendom, there is a tendency to over-idealize other faiths and to waver regarding the “exclusiveness” of Christ’s lordship. The church needs to be simultaneously clear that there is no gospel if Jesus is not Lord, that Jesus is normative for assessing all faiths, and that God is present in the various religious histories of all people. All religions, including Christianity, must be approached critically. There are dark and demonic dimensions in all religious faiths and communities that must be subjected to the lordship of Christ.