

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 12

Volume 12 • Number 3 • July 1988

**Evangelical
Review of
Theology** p. 195

plane without doing violence to the idea that God's Word if received in faith is the truth that saves from error as well as from destruction.

(b) The biblical idea of truth includes as essential aspect the two components of *trustworthiness* and of *normativity*. The truth therefore is not only something to rely on, but also that which must be obeyed. It is this last component of obedience that is very largely overlooked in the recent discussions on interreligious dialogue. Truth, it may be said, is that which God does (he is faithful) and which man must do (he must stand in the truth).

(c) To say that the Christian faith is true for me even as the [p. 225](#) Buddhist faith is true for someone else, only sidesteps the question of truth as a norm that holds for all. This norm asks for a response in faith from all who hear.

(d) The truth issue cannot be reduced to opposing truth claims, each having at the outset equal validity, for the basic truth claim is not that of one person against another but that of Jesus Christ who said that he was the Truth ([John 14:6](#)) and that God's word is truth ([John 17:17](#)). If Jesus, as he claims, will one day judge all the nations ([Matt. 25:32](#)) then this truth claim affects all people including those with conflicting truth claims. If this truth claim of Jesus, inasmuch as its scope is universal, does not hold for all, how can it hold for any?

(e) The truth about which evangelicals speak in final analysis is not the result of a quest on their part but of a search by God that has found them.

(f) The truth issue in dialogue will not be settled so long as we continue to view it on the plane of a human quest. There is indeed a human search for truth, but that is never the prime action; the human quest for truth is never more than secondary, a re-action. The divine truth that is embodied personally in Jesus Christ and searches and finds is of a different order from man's search for truth, and stands prior to it. In this truth we must continue to stand, as well in speaking with adherents of other faiths as in our worship of God in the community of his people.

(g) The evangelicals' claim to know Jesus, the Truth, is not a sign of arrogance but an acknowledgment of grace and should be made in humility, yet with conviction. It *would* be arrogance to claim that the truth we proclaim is the product of our achievement, or to assume that our understanding of the truth is of the same order as revelation itself.

(h) At stake therefore is not whether Christians have perfect knowledge, but whether their faith knowledge is sure. The issue is not absolute truth but saving truth.

(i) It is not triumphalism to say that there is no other way than faith in Jesus Christ. If it is done in the spirit of love, it is an expression of humility, as one beggar tells another where to find bread.

Paul G. Schrotenboer is the General Secretary of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA. [p. 226](#)

Divine Revelation

Chrys Caragounis

Printed with permission

This paper was presented at the 1986 Theological Consultation of the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians in West Germany, the theme of which was Universalism. Caragounis argues for the position that God has not given special revelation to all. He attempts to answer the questions of universality and consistency of special revelation on exegetical findings.

Editor

The essential meaning of revelation is that somebody reveals something to somebody. This implies four components: a revealer, an act or a process of revelation, a content that is being revealed and someone to whom a revelation is communicated. In our context the revealer is God, the content of revelation is God and his will, and the recipient of revelation is man. It is not likely that there will be any great disagreement about these three points, but the fourth one, the act or process of revelation, which discloses the mode or means of its occurrence, and hence relates to the very factuality of the revelation occurrence, is the pivotal point. Hence this is the chief issue that will engage us in the following discussion.

There are two ways in which divine revelation can be mediated to man: one, by means of nature (sometimes called General Revelation), and two, by means of Special Revelation.¹ I shall discuss briefly both of these questions.

NATURAL (OR GENERAL) REVELATION AND ITS LIMITATIONS

Both the Old and the New Testaments assert that creation bears valid witness to its Creator. For example, the Psalmist muses: 'The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork' ([Ps. 19:1](#)).² From this it might be concluded that if one were but to turn one's eye's towards the heavens one would discover God. And so one might be tempted to see in this as well as in other texts of similar tenor [P. 227](#) a Natural Theology. And it might be concluded that there is biblical support for the idea that God has given adequate knowledge of himself to all peoples by means of creation. But this is by no means the case. It is, of course, true that the universe is here portrayed as objectively manifesting its Creator, but that manifestation can be perceived only through faith. The *genre* of the texts, too, makes it plain that the language used here is one of faith and worshipful confession. That God's manifestation through nature is not of compelling force upon every spectator is proved by the fact that the 'fool', too, contemplates the sky, but comes to the conclusion that 'There is no God!' ([Ps. 14:1](#); [53:1](#))

The efficiency of Natural Revelation therefore depends upon two conditions: one, the objective manifestation of God through nature, and two, man's apprehension of that manifestation subjectively. The two conditions together constitute what was described above as *revelation occurrence*; in other words revelation *occurs* when it is both given and apprehended. This implies that God's manifestation through nature is not unconditionally experienceable by all. As we shall see these two conditions obtain also in the New Testament, and herein lie the limitations and inefficiency of Natural Revelation.

¹ Human conscience, sometimes included within Natural (or General) Revelation, is not quite comparable to either Natural or Special Revelation, inasmuch as these imply a communication *ab extra* rather than something continuously residing within man's own self.

² See also [Ps. 8:1-3](#).

In what follows I shall discuss briefly some of the ‘classical texts’³ of Universalism one by one.

[Acts 14:15–17](#). In his address to the Lycaonians Paul calls upon them to turn away from their vain idols⁴ to the living God, who in contradistinction to them is the Creator of all things. He goes on to say that in past generations God allowed all nations to go their own way, that is, wander in idolatry, though he did not leave himself without witness, in that his providential care for mankind never ceased. The three central points of this short address are: one, that the pre-Gospel period is understood as a time of ignorance and revolt, when mankind went its wayward way. Now this pre-Gospel period is not simply a temporal marker, but above all an existential marker. Man, any man, of whatever time, place and culture, outside Christ belongs to this pre-Gospel period. The second point is that God’s witnesses here are simply his ordinances in nature, which actually bear sufficient testimony to an intelligent and powerful Architect and Sustainer. But these, while making man’s fall into idolatry fully reprehensible, cannot be said to disclose God’s Person, will and salvation. The third point is [p. 228](#) that now, in the Gospel period, God calls upon men through the preaching of the Gospel to turn to ‘the living God’. It is indeed strange that a text like this, which so clearly refutes Universalism, is sometimes cited in its support!

[Acts 17:22–31](#). This speech, according to Adolf Deissmann ‘the greatest missionary document in the New Testament ... a manifesto of worldwide importance in the history of religions and of religion’,⁵ has been looked upon as another cornerstone of Universalism. In particular, the view that the Athenians worshipped the true God without knowing him finds more than an echo in Karl Rahner’s ‘anonymous Christianity’,⁶ though this thesis has been vigorously controverted.⁷ But on what grounds can it actually be said that the Athenians worshipped the true God? The existence of an altar to the honour of an Unknown God can under no circumstances be a guarantee that the Athenian populace had received authentic revelation from the living God.

According to ancient authorities⁸ among the altars erected to a multitude of divinities and even to personifications of virtues and qualities,⁹ the Athenians had erected altars to ‘Unknown’ or ‘Anonymous’ gods. Paul had apparently stumbled upon one of these, and quite appropriately took the inscription on this altar¹⁰ as the starting-point of his address. It would be reading too much into Paul’s words to construe them as meaning that the Athenians actually worshipped the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who had recently

³ Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 83, 92.

⁴ The Greek word *mataios* is occasionally used of idols, cf. e.g. Jer. (LXX) [2:5](#).

⁵ *Light from the Ancient East*, 384.

⁶ See, e.g., ‘Christianity and Non-Christian Religions’ in *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 1, Baltimore 1966, 131–34.

⁷ E.g. H. Küng, *On Being a Christian*, New York 1976, and Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 128ff.

⁸ See Pausanias, *Attica*, 1, 4; V, 5; XVIII, 9; Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii*, VI, 3; Diogenes Laertius, I,x,110.

⁹ Such as *Eleos*, *Aidōs*, *Phēmē*, *Hormē*, (see Pausanias, *Attica*, XVII, 1).

¹⁰ Jerome thought that Paul had changed the plural, witnessed by ancient writers, to the singular; but these altars were probably dedicated each to one unknown deity; cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, London 1952, 336; *id.*, *Commentary on the Book of Acts* (NICNT), Grand Rapids 1954, 356, and B Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*, Uppsala 1955, 244ff.

given his final self-revelation through Jesus Christ. It is obvious through the circumstances that Paul seizes the fact of reverence toward unknown deities, which being unknown are undefined and consequently empty of any content, and pours into the term the content of his own Object of [p. 229](#) proclamation. The sentence ‘what therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you’ indicates neither continuity nor identity of being between the two. This is further corroborated by the use of the neuter form of the relative pronoun, which does not so much refer to the person worshipped (since the masculine would then have been more appropriate) as to the fact of worship,¹¹ a worship in ignorance.¹²

Paul goes on to present God as Creator of the whole cosmos, at the same time administering to their idolatrous practices a criticism which has at once precedents in Old Testament prophets¹³ as well as in such Greek authors as Xenophanes and Euripides.¹⁴ He underscores the unity of the human race, perhaps consciously opposing the Athenian claim to being *autochthonous*¹⁵ or perhaps for regarding all non-Greeks as inferior and barbarous.¹⁶ He asserts that God created men in order to live on the earth and to seek him,¹⁷ in the hope that they might *feel after* him and find him, just as a blind man or a man with sight in total darkness fumbles or gropes after something.¹⁸ The term *psēlaphaō* which modifies the meaning of *heuriskō* and purports a most inadequate acquaintance with the object of search, expresses well the kind and degree of knowledge which Paul could concede to Natural revelation. While the *modus potentialis* underscores that even such an inadequate acquaintance with God was and remained at best a very remote possibility. This is so even despite the fact that God is not far from men, as heathen poets have said themselves. The concessive clause in vs. 27b shows that men have not found God by [p. 230](#) their fumbblings. In light of this the earlier mention of the worship of the unknown god can under no circumstances be understood to imply a genuine discovery of the true God.

Vs. [29](#) is an incisive criticism of idol-making, couched in Old Testament language¹⁹ and v. [30](#) characterizes the pre-Gospel period as ‘times of ignorance’. With the advent of the Gospel a new aeon has broken in. God, having overlooked all past ignorance, now

¹¹ Cf. G. Schneider, *Apostelgeschichte* (HTKNT), Freiburg 1980, 238.

¹² *Contra* Heachen, *Acts*, 529, who seems to think of a true worship of God in ignorance.

¹³ See, e.g., [Isa. 44:9–20](#).

¹⁴ E.g. Xenophanes, *frgs.* 11, 12, 14, 15, 16 and 23; Euripides, *Heracles*, 1345; *frgs.* 63 and 292.

¹⁵ Euripides, *Ion*, 29; Aristophanes, *Vespae*, 1076.

¹⁶ Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 337.

¹⁷ The infinitives *katoikein* and *zētein* have been understood as epexegetic of *epoiēsen* (Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 337), but they are most likely final; so most commentators: H. Conzelmann, *Apostelgeschichte*, 99; E. Heachen *The Acts of the Apostles*, Oxford 1971, 523; G. Schneider, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, Freiburg, etc. 1980, 240; J. Roloff, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, Göttingen 1981, 262; I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (TNTC) Leicester 1980, 288; see also J. Munck, *The Acts of the Apostles* (AB), New York 1967, 171. Similarly, A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, Nashville 1934, 1020f.

¹⁸ The word *psēlaphaō* means properly a fumbling with the fingers as of a blind person. See Homer, *Odyssey* I, 416 of the blinded Cyclops. In Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazousai* 315 ‘feel after’ occurs together with ‘find’. See also Plato, *Phaedo* 99B.

¹⁹ cf. [Isa. 44:9–20](#).

commands all men everywhere to repent. It would be difficult to find a more emphatic phrase in order to express the absolute universality of the Gospel.²⁰ The command to repentance, and the announcement of the coming judgment by a Man whom God appointed by raising him from the dead, underscore the gravity of the new situation and the severity of God in judgment because of the special and full revelation which God has given now of himself, in sharp contrast to the gropings of men during the times of ignorance!

I conclude therefore that the Areopagus speech does not offer a Natural Theology, nor any support for the view that all peoples have been the recipients of authentic divine revelation. On the contrary, the speech regards the discovery of God by means of men's efforts as an academic possibility which has never been realized.

[Rom. 1:18–23](#). Following a superficial interpretation of its statements to the effect that God has revealed to men what can be known of him, so that the revelation assumed as given is adequate to render them without excuse, and then combining this data with [Rom. 2:14–15](#), where Gentiles without the Law are said to be fulfilling the Law, the text is often supposed to open the door to Universalism.

For a proper understanding of the passage we need to begin with v. [16](#): 'I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, because it is God's power [or effective working] unto salvation to everyone who believes'. This verse no doubt gives the theme of the Epistle.²¹ In the next verse 'For in it the righteousness of God is revealed ...' the word 'righteousness' comes very close to being the equivalent of salvation (*sōtēria*)²² p. 231 in v. [16](#). Now there is a conscious juxtaposition between v. [17](#)—'For in it [that is, the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed'—and v. [18](#) 'For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven'. This twofold revelation marks the difference between special revelation and natural revelation. If we are therefore to understand what is been treated in vv. [18–23](#) we must see them in their relation to w. [16–17](#), and not in isolation.

And now, Paul charges mankind with a wilful perversion of the truth, which renders us inexcusable. From this it might be concluded that (a) God has actually revealed himself, and (b) mankind has had access to this revelation; in other words, that both the objective and the subjective aspects of the revelation occurrence obtain here. And from this the conclusion may again be drawn that the revelation occurrence is a continuous process, wherefore all peoples on earth today may be considered as being constantly involved in this ongoing process. In this way the passage may be turned into another pillar of Universalism.

The key to a correct understanding of what Paul is saying is to realize that Paul is treating mankind collectively and not individually. Thus, when in v. [19](#) he says that 'what can be known of God is manifest to [or among] them' Paul is treating mankind as a unity.

At the same time the present tense 'is manifest' underlines the fact that the revelation is there—objectively. Now the manifestation is there because God 'manifested' it to them—aorist tense, of a past historical manifestation. V. [20](#) states that 'his invisible things [or aspects] ever since the creation of the world are seen by the mind through the things

²⁰ cf. Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech*, 229ff.; J. Roloff, *Apostelschichte*, 265f.

²¹ Similarly C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans*, I, 87; J. Murray, *Romans*, 26; C. K. Barrett, *Romans* 27.

²² The Hebrew *tsedaka* often bears this sense in the OT, as in e.g. [Isa. 42:6](#); [45:8](#); [46:13](#); [51:6](#), [8](#) (see C. R. North, *The Second Isaiah*, Oxford 1964, 111f., 118, 152 and 166) and [Ps. 24:5](#); [31:1](#); [98:2](#); [143:11](#) (see H. J. Kraus, *Psalmen* (BKAT), Neukirchen 1978, I, 395; II, 847). Also Barrett, *Romans*, 29f.

that are made, his invisible things, namely, his eternal power and divine nature'.²³ Here, as the passive *kathoratai* shows, the point is not any subjective, factual, continuously recurrent apprehension of God's manifestation, but the means by which this manifestation is mediated and apprehended.²⁴ The point may be brought out better if we add the auxiliary 'can' just as the Modern Greek Version has done: 'the human mind can see them through the things that are created.'²⁵ This does not imply that every one who looks at nature at the same time catches a glimpse of God, but given certain conditions and attitudes, one can see that behind this amazing p. 232 universe stands an intelligent and powerful Creator, rather than that it all came about as a result of an accidental 'Big Bang'.

Since a true manifestation of God is there and man has had the possibility of apprehending it, he is without excuse for his refusal to recognize the Creator. Vv. 19 and 20 stated the naked fact that God manifested himself to mankind, and the means by which he did it, as well as the means by which he was to be apprehended. In vv. 21-23 Paul goes on to discuss mankind's response. He begins with a *participium conjuncture* with concessive significance, conceding to them the knowledge of God and thus enhancing their responsibility, and then uses a series of aorist indicatives²⁶ in order to describe mankind's negative response. These aorist indicatives show that Paul is not thinking of men's individual actions, but of mankind's original revolt against God through those who actually had knowledge of God. In other words, his argumentation is similar to that in Rom. 5. Paul is not therefore saying that each individual human being of his own day, who is confronted with God's objective manifestation in nature, has the possibility of apprehending God, but instead chooses to reject it and take to idol-making. No, this is a historical event, which transpired at the very beginning of history, though by his persistence in idolatry every man says his own individual 'Yes' to the original revolt and thus comes under judgment, in a similar way as all have sinned in Adam as well as in their own persons individually. There is thus an ambivalence between the historical event and the repeated occurrence (cf. 1:32). This text therefore does not hold out the promise of any revelation of God to mankind in general. Instead it deals with the manner in which the original revelation was rejected as well as the present plight of man as a result of that choice.

1 Cor. 1:21. The limitations and hence the weakness of natural revelation become evident in 1 Cor 1:21. A word-for-word translation might be: 'Because since in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through the wisdom, it pleased God through the foolishness of the preaching to save those who believe.' Now there are at least four *prima facie* ways of construing (A) 'in the wisdom of God', and (B) 'through the wisdom' into two groups of two alternatives each:

- 1:a. A and B refer to God's wise plan p. 233
- 1:b. A refers to God's wise plan, and B to human wisdom (that is, intellect or philosophy)

²³ On *theiotēs* see Käsemann, *Romans*, 41.

²⁴ Cf. O. Kuss, *Römer*, 36: 'Seit der Weltschöpfung ... ist die sichtbare Welt dem Menschen ein Weg zu einer Erkenntnis Gottes'.

²⁵ Similarly M. B. Newman - E. A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Romans*, UBS, Stuttgart 1973, 23.

²⁶ Actually all the verbs in these verses (apart from the present participle *phaskontes*, which, too, takes on past time) are aorists: *edoxasan*, *eucharistēsan*, *emataiōthēsan*, *eskotisthē*, *emōranthēsan*, *ēllaxan*.

- 2:a. A and B refer to God's wisdom manifested through creation
 2:b. A refers to God's wisdom manifested through creation, and B to human wisdom

In 1:a and 2:a the two statements are almost tautologous, and the resulting meaning is clumsy. 1:b neutralizes the force of 'since' which thus becomes nonsense.²⁷ 2:b is by far the best alternative and is supported by four considerations: (1) Whether the 'wisdom' of these early chapters of 1 Corinthians is Greek wisdom (that is, philosophy) or Gnostic,²⁸ it is clear that Paul treats it as human wisdom ([21b](#)), from whose viewpoint the Gospel appears 'foolish', even if Paul does not shrink from applying the term also to God ([21a](#)); (2) [Vv. 19f.](#) shows that Paul is concerned with wisdom as a human means for apprehending God. Now Greek wisdom was not simply abstract speculation, but in fact an attempt to arrive at Truth Invisible through the observation of things visible (cf. for example Plato); (3). This interpretation gives 'since' its proper force, showing that the 'foolishness of preaching' becomes necessary because men cannot by the application of their minds to creation obtain such knowledge of God as can lead to salvation; and (4) this interpretation is in line with the texts discussed above, especially [Rom. 1](#),²⁹ according to which men can no longer arrive at a proper knowledge of God because of their perversion.

In view of the above reasoning, the passage should be translated: 'Because since the world through [the exercise of its] wisdom did not come to know God in wisdom [as revealed by creation], it pleased God through the foolishness of the preaching to save those who believe.'³⁰

The conclusion from the above discussion is that while the Bible recognizes the witness of Nature to God, and holds men inexcusable for their unbelief, perversion and idolatry, it does not consider God's manifestation through nature an adequate self-disclosure of God capable of leading to authentic knowledge of his person, his will and his salvation. [p. 234](#)

HAS GOD GIVEN SPECIAL REVELATION TO ALL?

In a lecture delivered in Uppsala in April 1986, Helmut Koester made the passing remark that it is illegitimate to distinguish between natural revelation and special revelation, because all the religions of the world have received adequate revelation from God. Indeed, many Universalists would not be content simply with natural revelation. They would claim that the religious insights of the living faiths (Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam) constitute genuine revelations of God. They would, of course, often recognize that the Bible does not state explicitly that God has given special revelation of himself through all religions. But they are of the opinion that certain biblical statements in combination with other factors tend to support Universalism. Some of the arguments put forward here are: the love of God, the unity of the human race, the fact that the Gospel has barely reached 20% of the earth's population during the 2,000 years of its proclamation; and so forth. It is thus argued that God must have other means at his disposal than merely the Christian Messiah. Thus, the 'indian' pluralist Stanley J. Samartha puts the religion of the River Ganga on a par with Christianity, while his 'compatriot', Raimundo Panikkar, rejects the

²⁷ This is Barrett's view, in *Corinthians* (BNTC), London 1968, 53.

²⁸ See U. Wilckens, article *sophia* in TDNT VII, 519–22.

²⁹ Cf. H. Conzelmann, *Korinther* (KEKNT), 2nd ed., Göttingen 1981, 64.

³⁰ This interpretation is adhered to by the Modern Greek Version of 1985; G. Bornkamm, *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, II, 1959, 120f.; U. Wilckens, TDNT VII, 521.

co-extensiveness of Jesus with Christ, who may be revealed as Jesus, Rama, Krishna, Ishvara, Purusha or Tathagata.³¹ But here we stand on non-biblical ground.

From the biblical perspective, the argument is based partly on a number of texts which seem to speak of the salvation of all men, and partly on texts that appear to support universal revelation.

1. Texts using such expressions as 'all men' and 'whole world'

Among these may be mentioned [Jn. 12:32](#): 'And I, when I am lifted from the earth, will draw *all men* to myself'; [1 Tim. 2: 3-4](#): 'God our Saviour, who desires *all men* to be saved ...'; [Heb. 2:9](#): 'By the grace of God he might taste death for everyone'; [1 Jn. 2:2](#): 'He is the expiation/ propitiation ... for the sins of the whole world'.³² In texts like these the expressions 'all men' and 'whole world' are taken to imply that all individuals without exception are considered as saved. This simplistic interpretation breaks down on two scores: (1) the expression 'all men' (Gr. *pantes*) is used in Scripture sometimes [p. 235](#) representatively rather than inclusively. Thus, for example, [Mt. 3:5](#) tell us that 'all Judea and all the region about the Jordan' went to John's baptism. It would be, however, absurd to deduce from this that Matthew meant that every single individual in Judea had become a follower of John. Besides, such a supposition is expressly contradicted by [Mt. 3:7](#) and [21:32](#). Similarly in [Jn. 12:19](#), 'the whole world has gone after him' simply means that Jesus had convinced a large number of people, but obviously not the whole world, in the case of [1 Tim. 2:3-4](#) 'all men' presumably means all men, but the text speaks of God's desire that all men be saved, not of their actual salvation. That the salvation of all is not contemplated in Scripture is proved by the fact that Scripture does speak of the perdition of some! (2) These passages in one way or another involve the activity, particularly the death, of Christ, as the pre-condition for the announced salvation. Thus [Jn. 12:32](#) speaks of all men being drawn to none other than Jesus as the Christ as a result of his crucifixion and resurrection, but this so far from being the solution to the Universalist's problem would actually be *anathema* to his position! The same holds true of texts like [Rom. 5:18](#), and [1 Tim. 2:3-5](#), and [Tit. 2:11-14](#), and [Heb. 2:9](#), and [1 Jn. 2:2](#), and [2 Cor. 5:19](#). In each of these texts salvation does not come to men directly from heaven but through Jesus Christ. It would therefore seem that God has no dealings with mankind apart from Christ.

2. Does the New Testament recognize Special Revelation on a universal scale?

The most important text here would be [Rom. 2:12-16](#),³³ which is normally understood as in some way setting forth Paul's classical statement of the heathens' salvation outside Christ. This text has often been treated in isolation from its context, as if it were a parenthesis containing Paul's view of the salvation of Gentiles outside of Christ. Thus, the very difficult problem of the fate of those Gentiles who never heard the Gospel is supposed to get its answer in vv. [12-14](#). [p. 236](#) This is no doubt very convenient. It is another matter, however, whether this is what Paul is discussing here.

It appears to me that this text must be viewed in the light of Paul's argument in chs. [1-3](#). Paul's overall argument in these chapters is to show that all mankind without national

³¹ See Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ*, 1981 ed.; Knitter, *No Other Name?* 152ff.

³² Other 'universalistic' texts include [Acts 3:21](#); [Rom. 5:18](#); [2 Cor. 5:19](#); [Col. 1:20](#); [Tit. 2:11](#), [1 Pet. 3:9](#).

³³ On the exegesis of this text see Barrett, *Romans*, 49ff.; Murray, *Romans*, 69ff.; E. F. Harrison, *Romans* (EBC), 30ff.; E. Brunner, *Romans*, 21; Sanday-Headlam, *Romans*, 54; Barth, *Romans*, 65ff.; Bruce, *Romans*, 88f.; O. Kuss, *Römerbrief*, 68-82; P. Achtermeier, *Romans*, 43-9; O. Michel, *Römer*, 117-26; H. Schlier, *Römerbrief*, 75-81; U Wilckens, *Römer*, 131-46; Käsemann, *Romans*, 61-8; Cranfield, *Romans*, I, 153-63.

or individual exception is guilty before God. In ch. [1](#) Paul has established the guilt of all mankind corporately, before it was divided into Jews and Gentiles. In [2:1](#) Paul addresses the man, any man, who judges others, but who does the very same thing himself. Who is this man? Some commentators understand this to refer to certain Gentiles, who did not indulge in the gross sins mentioned at the end of ch. [1](#).³⁴ But this is hardly tenable. The man in view must be none other than the Jew. (With this judgment concur a number of commentators.)³⁵ This view finds support in vv. [4–5](#) which speak of his ‘hardness of heart’, a term particularly applicable to Jews;³⁶ in vv. [9–15](#), according to which the Jew stands out as one who regards himself as superior to the Gentiles and is therefore put in his place by Paul; and in vv. [17–29](#), which identify the judgmental ‘man’ expressly with the Jew.

How does Paul prove that this man, the Jew, is guilty of the things he criticizes in the Gentiles? He does not argue for it; he just assumes it. On what grounds? Again, he does not indicate, but the grounds may be presumed to be, first the original, corporate revolt of mankind against God, treated in ch. [1](#), which naturally includes the Jews as well; and, two, the empirical knowledge that Jews also do come short of keeping the Law.

Vv. [7–10](#) are chiastically structured, having two groups in view: [7](#) and [10](#) talk of ‘those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honour and immortality’ and w. [8](#) and [9](#) ‘those who are factious and do not obey the truth’. Now it is interesting that each of these groups include *both* Jews and Gentiles. What has happened here is that Paul overturns the old, Jewish, distinction between Jews and Gentiles, and instead divides mankind into two groups each of which is constituted by both Jews and Gentiles! But how shall we understand this? Is Paul saying that there are some Jews and some Gentiles who are evil and therefore will be judged according to their evil works, and again, there are some Jews and some Gentiles who do good and therefore will be [p. 237](#) saved? This is a usual way of understanding Paul’s statement. But had he meant this he would be delivering the funeral speech over his own mission and preaching! According to Paul the only ground upon which Jews and Gentiles are brought together and united in one body is Christ.³⁷ Conversely, if Paul had admitted for a moment that Jews *as* Jews fulfilled God’s law, that would disrupt his whole fundamental understanding of human guilt, faith and salvation, and would conflict too flagrantly with (e.g) [3:9](#), [20](#), and [23](#). As Cranfield puts it, ‘the inconsistency which this explanation attributes to Paul is altogether too colossal and too glaring to be at all likely’.³⁸ The two groups must therefore be Christians and non-Christians of both Jewish and Gentile descent. This is the only legitimate division of mankind which Paul as a Christian recognizes.

In v. [11](#) Paul takes up the Jew’s special problem, namely the false notion that since God favoured him with his law, God is going to show also special favour and leniency towards him. Paul tells him that this is not so. God is impartial. V. [12](#) may be interpreted as supporting a double way of salvation but what that verse actually does is to speak only of the damnation of Gentiles and Jews; *not* of their salvation. The verse deals with one of the two groups, the group that is outside of Christ and is composed of both Jews and Gentiles.

³⁴ E.g. Bruce, *Romans*, 86f. thinks of Stoics like Seneca.

³⁵ See e.g. Murray, *Romans*, 54; Brunner, *Romans*, 20; Sanday-Headlam, *Romans*, 53; Cranfield, *Romans*, I, 138, where see for reasons.

³⁶ Cf. e.g. the LXX text in the following passages: [Ex. 33:3](#), [5](#); [34:9](#); [Deut. 9:6](#), [11](#), [27](#); [2 Chr. 30:8](#); [Ps. 95:8](#), as well as [Mt. 19:8](#) and [Mk. 10:5](#); [Acts 7:51](#).

³⁷ [Gal. 3:26–29](#); [Eph. 2:11–22](#).

³⁸ *Romans*, I, 152.

With respect to the other group, those that are in Christ, inasmuch as Paul is arguing against Jewish bigotry and exclusivism on the grounds of physical descent, he singles out for treatment only the Gentile element of this second group, just the element that is problematic to the Jew. Paul first tells the Jew that his possession of the Law without the performance of it is worthless before God, and then states that Gentiles (note the absence of the definite article!) who by nature do not have the law,³⁹ perform the things commanded by the Law, and thus show that the [p. 238](#) Law is written on their hearts. Without doubt we have here a reference to the new covenant in [Jer. 31:33](#), which commentators without good reason have dismissed.⁴⁰ The Gentiles referred to here are the Gentile part of the Christian Church.⁴¹ The written law is, of course, the *distillation* of Moses' law as in (e.g.) [Mt. 7:12](#); [22:40](#); [Rom. 13:8–10](#).

3. Is universal Revelation free from inconsistency?

Finally, God's revelation of himself through various religions must exhibit continuity and coherence. Not only must a clear continuity be discernible, but in addition, since God cannot contradict himself, the revelation given to various religions may be complementary (i.e. *additive*) but not contradictory. We may remind ourselves of one of the basic principles of exegesis, the assumption that an author tries to be consistent in what he writes and does not intentionally contradict himself. This rule certainly applies to God, too. If he were to give contradictory pictures of himself and his will, how could humans ever be accountable to him, or be sure of his will? Thus, by studying the various religions—if there is genuine revelation from God—one ought to be able to discern the same Revealer and the same Revealed One! If these indispensable presuppositions of

³⁹ The expression 'by nature', which is usually understood as belonging to the following words, 'do the things of the law' (so Käsemann, *Romans*, 63f.; Wilckens, *Römer*, 134; Schlier, *Römerbrief*, 77; Kuss, *Römerbrief*, 69; C. H. Dodd, *Romans*, 37; Michel, *Römer*, 117) can with equally good reason be connected with the preceding 'Gentiles who do not have the law', that is, *by nature*, in other words, by virtue of their descent. For this connection speaks verse [27](#), where the uncircumcised are said to be such by nature, and which, according to the argumentation, are the same as 'Gentiles who do not have the law by nature' here! Grammatically the other alternative is fully possible—hence the wide support it enjoys—however, theologically it is less probable. See Cranfield, *Romans*, I, 156f. Achtermeier's remarks against the usual interpretation are apposite: 'If Gentiles know by nature what is good and they do it, they are morally superior to the Jews, who need the law to tell them what is good and how to do it. Such inherent moral superiority of Gentiles over Jews not only makes the chosen people morally inferior to all other but it also makes nonsense of Paul's argument ... we ought to relate the phrase in [2:14](#), not with 'do the law', but rather with 'have not the law'. Paul is describing Gentiles who 'by nature' (by birth) do not have the law ... not Gentiles who 'by nature' (inherently) do what the law requires (God's will)'.

⁴⁰ Because the Jeremiah reference is to an eschatological act of God on Israel. So, e.g., Michel, *Römer*, 80, 83; Bruce, *Romans*, 91; Barrett, *Romans*, 52; Käsemann, *Romans*, 64. But as Cranfield, *Romans*, I, 159 appositely remarks, 'As soon as it is recognized that the Gentiles whom Paul has in mind are Gentile Christians, the objection to seeing here an intentional reference to [Jer. 31:33](#) disappears; for it is abundantly clear that Paul did think that God's eschatological promises were already beginning to be fulfilled through the gospel in the lives of believers, both Jews and Gentiles'.

⁴¹ Two of the earliest writers to voice this interpretation were Ambrosiaster and Augustine. It is also supported by Barth in his shorter commentary on Romans, p.36, and Cranfield, *Romans*, I, 156. The majority of commentators prefer to see here heathen people rather than Gentile Christians, without, however, making any strong case for their view. (Cf. e.g. Wilckens, *Römer*, 133, who thinks that reference to Gentile Christians is excluded because 'das artikellose *ethnē* sowie die Konjunktion *hotan* (nicht *ean*) zeigen, dass er nicht etwa die Heiden insgesamt den sündigen Juden gegenüberstellt'! others include Schlier, *Römer*, 77; Michel, *Römer*, 117; and Käsemann, *Romans*, 65, who speaks of 'Augustine's mistake', though he does not offer a positive argument for the contrary view.

continuity and coherence do p.239 not obtain, then the revelations claimed by the various religions cannot *all* be authentic.

One final matter. Universalists often explain the variety of religion as a cultural phenomenon. Thus, Christianity is said to be a religion for Westerners, Hinduism a religion for Orientals, and so on. This, of course, still leaves the plurality of religions in the East unexplained! At the same time it reduces God's self-revelation to what human culture makes of it.

Moreover, it is misleading to say that Christianity is a Western religion, for it is, in fact, if anything, a Near Eastern religion. It is true that it has received certain Greek elements. But this circumstance cannot validate the notion that, just as a Western (i.e. Greek) superstructure was placed upon a Semitic foundation, so now we may erect an Eastern superstructure again in order to make Christianity accessible to the Eastern mind. This is nothing to do with Paul's becoming all things to all men. The Greek element entered Christianity during its formative stage, and it was inserted by those who under God's sovereignty and guidance gave Christianity its normative form. The changes which pluralists like Panikkar, Samartha, Ariarajah, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, John Carman, Paul Knitter and others advocate are of a nature that (as the Jewish scholar, E. B. Horowitz, pointed out), Christianity cannot admit and still be true to itself.⁴²

Chrys Caragounis is a professor of New Testament at Uppsala, Sweden. p. 240

Exclusivism, Tolerance, and Truth

Harold Netland

Reprinted with permission from Missiology, April, 1987

Christian 'exclusivism' has increasingly come under sharp attack for supposedly being indefensible in our religiously pluralistic world. In this article several influential arguments against exclusivism—arguments which claim that it must be rejected since it is inherently intolerant or that it is based upon faulty notions of religious truth—are critically examined and are convincingly shown to be wanting. He concludes that if we are to have a view of the relation among religions which is epistemologically sound, and accurately portrays the values and beliefs of the respective religions, something like traditional Christian 'exclusivism' is unavoidable.

Editor

Few issues confronting Christians today are as significant or as controversial as the problem of the relation of Christianity to other religious traditions. What makes religious pluralism so problematic is the fact that adherents of various religions seem to be making very different, even contradictory, claims about the human condition and its relation to the religious ultimate. At the centre of issues stemming from religious pluralism is the

⁴² in 'A Jewish Response' in *Christian Faith*, 64ff.