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Mission and Neo-Universalism

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THE writer of the Ecclesiastes said so well, 'There is no new thing under the sun,' for ancient heresies have a way of reappearing in new garb. The cosmological universalism of an Origen not only comes to flower in a nineteenth-century universalism but bursts out anew in modern approaches to an old subject. Variations there are in expression, but too often the mood established is reminiscent of the Edenic query of the serpent, 'Yea, hath God said?' to the divine affirmation, 'In the day you eat thereof you shall surely die'. In view of the fresh garb and modified approach to an older speculation, we speak of this movement as neo-universalism, or 'the new universalism'.

Among the anti-Nicene fathers Origen stands out as the first major thinker to develop a system of universalism. On the basis of an allegorical

interpretation of Scripture he developed the theory that all men (and even fallen angels) ultimately would be redeemed; thus the term 'cosmological universalism'. This cooperation of divine grace and human activity (synergism) reached evidently into heaven itself so that conceivably man could fall out of heaven by active choice and start the cycle of redemptive grace all over again.¹ The church of the succeeding centuries rose up in opposition to this universalistic thesis both in creedal and council definitions and prescriptive acts. The developing church stood firmly on the biblical teaching of the lostness of man, the necessity of salvation by the reconciliation of Jesus Christ on the Cross, the eternal felicity of the redeemed, and the eternal

1 Cf George Park Fisher, *History of Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh : T. T. Clark, 1896), pp. 112f.

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damnation of the wicked who died in their sins.

In the nineteenth century once again the belief in ultimate, universal salvation entered the life of the Christian church. At first many preachers of universalistic salvation remained more or less orthodox in other theological tenets. The principle of universalism was advocated on the basis of the eternal decrees of God. God in his sovereign grace was seen eternally predestinating all men to ultimate salvation. Gradually, and in some cases more swiftly, the Universalist ministers of the day not only denied other tenets of the Christian faith, such as the deity of Christ, the fact of the Trinity, or the authority of Scripture, but they openly espoused looser forms of conduct than the generally accepted norms of the day.

Once again the main stream of the Protestant denominations rose in strong opposition to the universalistic assumptions being propagated. As a result the Universalist denomination gradually atrophied. On one hand large numbers joined forces with the Unitarian movements. On the other, certain leaders were converted and entered or re-entered the ministries of the main denominations and churches.²

In all of this it is noteworthy that both in the Origen-istic heresy and in the development of nineteenth-century universalism, the main stream of the church stood firmly against the move-

ments as heretical. The early church of Origen's day and the Protestant church of the nineteenth century took their stand on eternal salvation and eternal damnation on the basis of the teachings of Christ in the four Gospels, the amplifications of Paul and other New Testament writers, and the inner meanings in the imagery of the Book of Revelation with respect to teaching on heaven, hell, judgment, eternal punishment, lostness of man, redemption alone through Jesus Christ, and eternal bliss. From this position came the sense of urgency to fulfil the commission of Matthew 28:19, 20; Mark 16:15, 16, and Acts 1:8.

A New Universalism

What then of the day in which we live? Once again a universalistic interpretation has been introduced into the theological thinking of the church. This time, in inverse ratio to the previous position of the church, one senses a spirit of tolerance on the part of the main stream of the church towards universalistic assumptions or directions of thought. Universalism is rapidly advancing in the theological expression of certain accepted leaders in Protestant churches—a striking reversal of earlier trends. In modern Roman Catholic theology there may be a parallel development which the Second Vatican Council apparently has stimulated by an extension of the notion of implicit faith and baptism by desire.³

2 For an illuminating discussion of the theological and moral trends of the preaching and teaching of nineteenth century Universalists. see the interesting volume contemporary to that day by Matthew Hale Smith, *Universalism Examined, Renounced, Exposed* (Boston: Tappen and Dennet, 1842).

3 J. I. Packer has developed this thesis somewhat at length in his first lecture of the 1965 Payton Lecture Series, Fuller Theological Seminary, 'The Problem of Universalism Today'.

Following the Second World War, and particularly in 1949, forthright expression of 'new universalistic' thinking was evidenced by Dr. J. A. T. Robinson in his exchange of views with Professor T. F. Torrance in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*.⁴ Subsequent writings by Dr. Robinson (now the Bishop of Woolwich)⁵ and Nels F. S. Ferre,⁶ and other theologians, all pointed in a greater or lesser degree to the concept of the ultimate salvation of all.⁷

The current climate of thinking in certain sections of the ecumenical movement is clearly seen in the provocative work by D. T. Niles, entitled *Upon the Earth*. This work in the final analysis represents, as Bishop

Lesslie Newbigin states, 'A unique effort of cooperative thought by many Christians of many nations and churches'.⁸ Dr Niles asks the question, 'Will everyone be saved?' After a fairly lengthy discussion in which a hiatus in thought is developed, Niles states,

The New Testament does not allow us to say either Yes or No to the question: 'Will all men be saved?' and by preventing us from doing this it forces on us the question: 'Will you fulfill your share of the task to which God has called you in the church—the task of making Jesus known and lived, confessed and obeyed, by all men in every area of life?'⁹

Concurrent with this line of thinking is a statement by Edward Farley: 'I am assuming that all men in some sense are the objects of God's reconciling activity, and therefore at the point of ultimate destiny the distinction between believers and unbelievers, heaven and hell, is overcome by the victory of God.'¹⁰

With the breaking of concepts

4 Dr Robinson wrote in favour of a new universalism in his article, 'Universalism—Is It Heretical?', *Scottish Journal of Theology* (SJT), Vol. 2, No. 2 (June, 1949), pp. 139-155. Professor Torrance questioned the position in his article, 'Universalism—or Election', *SJT*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (September, 1949), pp. 310-318.

5 See J.A.T. Robinson, *In the End God...* (London: James Clarke, 1950) and *Honest to God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963) Also cf. the rebuttal by Robinson to Professor Torrance in the article, 'Universalism—A Reply', *SJT*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (December, 1949).

6 E.g., Nels F. S. Ferre, *The Christian Understanding of God* (London: SCM, 1951). See specially Chapter Nine, 'The Work of God in the Last Things'. Also cf. Ferre, *Atonement and Mission* (London: London Missionary Society, 1960).

7 Prior to 1949 the theological writings of Karl Barth indicate a universalistic trend. While Karl Barth denies that he is a universalist, the development of the triumph of grace in the *apokatastasis* points in a greater or lesser degree to the concept of the ultimate salvation of all. See G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956).

8 Cf. the statement on the book jacket concerning Dr Niles' work which says, 'Its arguments and judgements have been thoroughly examined through long and searching debates among Dr. Niles and his associates in the Department of Missionary Studies of the World Council of Churches.'

9 For the full treatment, see Niles, D. T., *Upon the Earth: the mission of God and the missionary enterprise of the churches* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1962), pp. 92-98. Quotation from p. 96

10 Edward Farley, 'Dimensions of Death in the Life of Faith,' *Pittsburgh Perspective* (Journal of the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary), Vol. VI, No. 1, March 1965, p. 10.

embodying a spirit of 'new universalism' into the current ecclesiastical scene and theology, we are constrained in the context of our deliberations in this Congress on the Worldwide Mission of the Church to ask:

- 1 What in essence is the new universalism;
- 2 How, in the light of concepts of Church mission, is it manifested?
- 3 Where, in the light of neo-universalism, is our Mission?

I. The Essence of the New Universalism

The New Universalism is an expression of the belief that the Bible has a strain of universalism in it. Several classes of Scripture are produced which allegedly imply a universalistic scheme the ultimate reconciliation of all men.

First, there are passages which purportedly predict the actual salvation all men, passages such as the following:

Jesus' statement that if he should be lifted up, he would draw all men to himself (John 12:32).

Pauline statements as found in

- Ephesians 1:10: Paul's prediction that all things will be brought into unity in and under Christ.
- Romans 5:18: 'As through one man's transgression judgment came upon all, so through Christ shall the many be made righteous again.'
- Philippians 2:9-11: 'at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow.'
- 1 Corinthians 15:22-28: Paul speaking of the final triumph of the kingdom of Christ, the subjection of all things to him, including death the last enemy, and thus God finally being all in all.

Peter's reference to the restoration of all things (Acts 3:21).

Second, there are passages which allegedly consist of announcements of God's will to save all men, such as:

- 1 Timothy 2:4: 'God will have all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.'
- 2 Peter 3:9: 'God is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.'

Third, there are passages which allegedly declare that God stands now in such a relation to all men that they must be saved. His present relation to them supposedly involves ultimate salvation for them. There are such passages as:

- 2 Corinthians 5:19: 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself.'
- Titus 2:11: 'The grace of God which bringeth salvation to all men hath appeared.'
- Hebrews 2:9: 'By the grace of God he tasted death for every man.'
- 1 John 2:2: 'Christ Jesus is the propitiation not for our sins only but for the whole world.'

Fourth, in the same vein as the above, an attempt is made to equate Jesus' statement in Luke 12:58 and 59, and especially the words, 'I tell thee, thou shalt not depart thence till thou hast paid the very last mite,' as an expression of purgatorial and expiatory suffering. Or again in such Scriptures as Matthew 16:19 or 18:18, 8f. and John 20:23, the interpretation is that Jesus is speaking in the terms of binding and loosing and remitting of the authority and intercession of the church reaching beyond this life and beyond this world although not necessarily beyond the last judgment.

From Paul's writing the new universalism proponents cite the difficult passage in 1 Corinthians 15:29, and the potency of intercessory baptism of the dead as an evidence of Pauline hope for redemptive processes beyond the grave. For them there is a feeling that the new universalism shadowed in outline in 1 Corinthians is fully worked out in Romans. The argument is that as man's Fall is universal, so divine deliverance is set forth as including all.

Exegetical Problems

Here, then, is an attempt to develop a concept of universalism on the basis of biblical proof-texts. However, such a new universalism developed on this basis can be so stated only on the grounds of a fragmented usage of Scripture, not on an exposition of the Scripture in total wholeness and context. Scriptures used to buttress claims of universal redemption, when taken in the total context of the scriptural passage, or when juxtaposed with contextual Scriptures which clearly imply that some do perish, can be shown to have a different meaning entirely.

For example, we noted that in Acts 3:21 Peter talks about the restoration of all things, but then two verses later (v.23) we hear him saying, 'And it shall come to pass, that every soul, which will not hear that prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people.' In the light of those who will perish, the restoration speaks of that time when 'Jesus Christ would come back again from heaven and the whole world would experience the glad "times of restoration" of which all the poets and prophets have sung. Forgiveness of

sins has been made possible by the first coming of Christ, by his sufferings and death; but universal blessing is conditioned upon his appearing a second time. Every repentant believer is hastening that day, and such messages as this of Peter lead men to repentance.'¹¹

Or again, note Paul, who in Ephesians 1:10 speaks of the heading-up of all things in Christ, declaring in Ephesians 2:3 that some are the children of wrath. He states in Ephesians 5:5 that such have no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Also, Paul speaking in 1 Corinthians 15:25 of the subjecting of all things to Christ, can be understood and interpreted only in light of 1 Corinthians 1:18, where he writes of those who are perishing, to whom the cross of Christ is foolishness. And Paul, speaking in Philippians 2:9 of every knee bowing before Christ, goes on to aver in Philippians 3:19 that there are some whose end is 'destruction'.

Perhaps most telling of all is the misuse of the statement of Jesus that if he be lifted up, he would draw all men to himself (John 12:32). When we remember the clarity of the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ in the four Gospels on the subject of hell, the fire that is not quenched, the issues of judgment, then the insufficiency of the new universalism-view of even this Scripture becomes more evident. 'To draw all men' is entirely different from 'to save all men'. The Spirit of God can draw even where the heart of man remains in utter rebellion.

¹¹ Charles R. Erdman, *The Acts: An Exposition* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1919), p. 39.

We may speak a word of appreciation for those who use biblical quotations. But where such quotations are used out of context, we may well query what the essence of the proposed interpretation may be. While there is a liberal use of quotations from Scripture by some of the advocates of universalism, this does not mean that the proponent of the new universalism quotes his Bible as the word of an authoritative, infallible Scripture. He still subscribes to varying views of higher criticism not consonant with the evangelical position that the Holy Scriptures were verbally inspired by God, that the Bible constitutes the authoritative, fully trustworthy Word of God.

The neo-universalist, by his very attempt to make certain Scriptures speak in a contrary direction to other Scriptures, inherently rejects the positive-authoritative view of the Scriptures. He may well do it on the grounds that it is unpalatable to the modern scientific mind. But we repeat again, in a most peculiar manner he takes proof-texts (often out of context and with highly questionable exegesis) and ascribes to such a sense of infallibility at variance with his usual biblical modes of interpretation. This is done, therefore, not from an objective stance on the Bible as the Word of God in its totality, but rather from a subjective position in which 'I accept this from the Bible as being authoritative to me in this situation'. In this the element of human reason and judgment versus divine revelation is most apparent.

Biblical authority

On the other hand, evangelicals today stand in the historical stream of Chris-

tianity, maintaining that God has given man a supernatural revelation in the Bible. Such revelation is a disclosure by God to man of himself or of his will beyond what he has made known by reason or the light of nature. Such revelation is unique and exclusive in its written form and in the person of Jesus Christ. Conversely, the tendency of the new universalism proponent is to claim that God is too great, too unknowable to reveal himself in a single, once-for-all revelation.¹² The revolt may even go so far as to deny a unique revelation in history, that God actually made himself known in a particular person at a particular time.

Where God speaks in an infinite variety of ways, but never decisively, man is thrown back on himself to determine how to reach ultimate truth. He seeks through his reason or intuition to find the answer. One senses the new universalist taking this position.¹³ Having stated that God cannot be known alone in a revelation, the door is open for speculative thought as to his character, purposes, and program.

Thus, the new universalist bases his doctrine of eternal destiny on a development of the concept of God as a God of love. Equating divine love with human love, he patterns God after man. If man would not confine any

¹² In Nels F. S. Ferre, *The Christian Understanding of God*, Chapter Seven, 'The Work of God in Revelation,' is most pertinent. See especially pp. 178f. for the attitude on infallibility and inerrancy.

¹³ For a fuller elaboration of the discussion above see Louis L. King, 'New Universalism: Its Exponents, Tenets, and Threats to Missions', *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Summer 1965), pp. 3f.

human being, no matter how perverse, to eternal suffering, neither purportedly is God capable of such retribution. Hell there may be, but it 'will be adequate to cause the sinner to know that the strange country is not good for him and to come to himself enough to want to go back to his father and home'.¹⁴

In this we see the process of human reasoning which is out of accord with both the climate of historic Christianity and the Scriptures. The presumptions of the neo-universalist, and particularly his usage of biblical proof-texting, can stand only if the belief in the authority of Scripture is rendered ineffective. Thus we declare the neo-universalist has no right to lay hold of proof texts because he does not subscribe to the authority and infallibility of Scripture.¹⁵

Background factors

In considering the essence of the new universalism, we may well question why such a theological development has occurred in the context of quotations of Scripture to buttress a viewpoint. One suspects that at the point doubt enters concerning the infallibility and authority of any area of the Bible, a propensity to move into further areas of human reasoning becomes apparent. For instance, the downward trend in statistical results of Christian

evangelism enterprises and an exploding world population with a resultant sense of hopelessness in the task may consciously or unconsciously have had significant influence in the development of new universalism thinking. A leading evangelical theologian, Bernard Ramm, who certainly does not accept universalism, analyses possible reasons for a universalist position being taken when he says:

The first cause for universalism gaining a new foothold in contemporary Christianity is that the task of world evangelism seems so hopeless. It was the burning hope of the great missionary statesmen of the 19th century that the world could be evangelized in one generation. If each convert would win but one more convert in the space of one generation, the entire world would hear of the Gospel of Christ!

The situation appears far differently to the missionary statesmen of the 20th century. Missionary evangelism proceeds at a slow rate. Only one-half of one percent of Japan's millions are Christian. The figures are equally discouraging for India, China, and Indonesia.

But there is a factor more discouraging than the slow process of missionary evangelism. That factor is the world-population explosion. Modern medicine and sanitation introduced to African and Asian countries are having a boomerang effect.... Populations are literally booming and that at a geometric ratio. India alone increases from 12 to 14 million a year! The population of the earth at the year A.D. 2000 will be fantastically large. The

¹⁴ Ferre, *The Christian Understanding of God*, p. 229. The context to the phrase bears out, the writer believes, the interpretation as given in the setting of the phrase here. See pp. 228f.

¹⁵ Harry Buis, *The Doctrine Of Eternal Punishment* (Philadelphia, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1957), p. 115. Buis discusses the scriptural implications involved.

problem of Christianity is no longer whether it shall reach these people, but rather it is in danger of being engulfed by them.

The evangelistic and missionary statesmen are faced with a decision: do we write all of these countless people out of the kingdom and proclaim them lost, or in an act of Christian generosity do we write them all in with a doctrine of universalism? If we write them out, then this reduces Christianity to a small band among earth's millions. It also means that the lives of the vast throngs of heathen are meaningless for meaningfulness is found only in Christ. To write them all in means that every life is meaningful even though lived without a consciousness of the saving work of Christ. Thus universalism saves significance for the Christian Church and the millions of lives upon the face of the globe.¹⁶

Ramm's analysis of the situation and the resultant rise of neo-universalism undoubtedly is true of too many who at one time may have been orthodox in belief. And yet as we think of such, do we not stand amazed at the lack of comprehension of the biblical statement, 'Evil seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving many and being deceived' and the biblical command, 'Occupy till I come'? To be so discouraged that you cast away theological moorings is to be utterly lacking in eschatological comprehension. We see again the subjective rather than objective characteristic of such

thinking. 'I feel disturbed, therefore, I must change my stance' rather than, 'He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh and shall declare a decree.'

The challenge of the hour then is to recognize the validity of any and all evangelistic enterprises which are both relevant to the hour and based on the full authority of the biblical message. The essence of that message we shall see in the third major point of this discussion.

II. The Manifestation of Neo-Universalism

In the view of the 'what' of the new universalism, we come to the 'how' of its manifestation, especially as it applies to our consideration of its impact on missions and evangelism. If the theological development of a new universalism concept could have remained sealed off in the inner chambers of theological dialogue, we might not have felt the sharp impact of its presence today. But in a practical way, the concept has burst over into the arena of missions, evangelism, and other church enterprises.

'Missions' and 'Mission'

Here in this Congress we are using the term 'mission' in a more traditional vein. By it we refer to the implication of such Scriptures as Matthew 28:19-20, and Romans 10:8-18. However, one suspects that the increasing use of the term 'mission' in certain theological circles to a certain extent may be an outgrowth of the invasion of universalistic concepts into current church and missions programs. An example of this can be found in the statement, 'From Missions to Mission'.

16 Bernard Ramm, 'Will All Men Be Saved', *Eternity* (August, 1964), pp. 22, 23.

To some, quite frankly, this has become a pet type of cliché, more or less innocuous, just a new term, no more, no less. Basically such still conceive of the term mission as embodying the concept of the Great Commission just as definitively as the former usage of missions.

Or again, the word may be used as an attempt to emphasize the sense of total church involvement in witness to a total world. Here 'mission' demands the elimination of the seeming dichotomy in the concepts of foreign and home missions or of missions on one hand and service situations on the other. The argument is that joining the two connotes the total involvement of the entire church. One professor of missions puts it like this:

The frontiers of the mission are no longer at geographical far ends of the earth, but are wherever there are men and groups unreconciled to God and fellow men in Jesus Christ. This does not lessen responsibility for points and peoples overseas, but it does mean the disappearance of a sharp distinction between mission and evangelism. The churches within the Church must now be concerned with the total witness to the total world.¹⁷

Provided one properly understands the intent of the use of the idea of reconciliation, there can be little quarrel with this statement. However, lest it seem to be a case of semantics to stress mission as lessening the import of mis-

sions, and therefore much ado about nothing, we should look more sharply to see if another concept may not be back of the terms 'mission,' 'church mission,' 'mission of the church'.

Sometimes people use terms because of a bent for new phrases, or to get away from platitudes, or because they are merely ignorant of the inner essence of the meaning or intent of words. Terms so often have a way of becoming relative. The sense of the absolute in the definitions of words increasingly is being lost.

The problem of word relativity is to be seen most sharply in theological terminology. Whereas formerly the simplicity of a fundamental versus liberal expression was one of sharp definition (e.g. Jesus, Christ, the Redeeming Son of God over against Jesus the Man, a great Leader), now one must probe behind the term or title used, the word spoken, to ascertain what is really meant. When a preacher or scholar speaks of the Incarnation or of the Deity of Christ, just what does he mean? Is he giving himself an out by some mental reservation in which he uses the word but does not quite mean what the evangelical means by it? Is he speaking as does Nels Ferre of the Incarnation and mean by it the juncture of the Logos—the Christ—with the human Jesus at some given point within the life of Jesus?¹⁸ Can he even state he believes in the Incarnation without the necessity of the virgin birth, even with the suggestion that Jesus could be the illegitimate son of a

¹⁷ R. Pierce Beaver, *From Missions to Mission* (New York: Association Press, 1964), p. 108.

¹⁸ For the development of this concept, see Ferre, *The Christian Understanding of God*, Chapter Seven and note particularly pp. 190f.

German mercenary?¹⁹ One is convinced that within the demythologising concept of a Bultmann, the use of myths by a Robinson, or the philosophical relativism of a Ferre, this too often is true.

We suggest, then, that the same process could well be true in the movement of the term 'missions' to 'church mission,' or 'mission of the church'. We must repeat we certainly are understanding of any movement to combine home missions, foreign missions, relief and welfare work, and service ministries into one agency where this is functional and administrative and is effected with a theological motivation of worldwide concern to effect the Great Commission. However, questions are raised when an ecumenical leader declares:

At the same time we are forced to contemplate the prospect of a giant and increasing jumble of programs and relationships if these two streams of 'mission' and 'inter-church-aid-and-service' continue to run in separate channels. In Europe there has been a tendency to conceive 'mission' in a rather narrowly evangelistic sense. In organizational terms, therefore, the Division of Interchurch Aid, Refugees and World Service has a mandate covering virtually all the action programs of the word church except evangelism. On this continent, by contrast, the comprehensive understanding of mission has persisted and expanded.

Unless we are to confine mission to verbal evangelism—which means

largely ineffectual evangelism—there is no way of maintaining a clear distinction between mission and services on either practical or theological grounds.²⁰

Theology of mission

We ask what is really meant here. Is this a movement pressing for the joining the two areas of missions and service purely on a functional basis, a basis which we have suggested can make sense biblically, or is it an attempt to get away from the dichotomy felt between what is termed a rather narrow evangelistic sense and a wider area of service? What is implied in alleging that verbal evangelism means largely ineffectual evangelism? What kind of evangelism, what kind of theology, what type of program is envisaged under the 'church in mission'?

If the joining of terms as stated refers only to a method of mission, a new theological direction is not necessarily taking place. But where the inference that 'verbal evangelism' is ineffectual or 'evangelistic effort' is narrow is drawn from a change in the message of mission, then the course is sharply set in a new direction. Such a change can be seen in any suggestion that we need today a death of traditional symbols such as heaven as the abode of saved souls and hell as the place of torment for the damned. To speak of evangelism in mission as 'plucking brands from the burning' or to look upon the urgency of mission as inherent in the lostness of humanity

19 Ferre, *The Christian Understanding of God*, p. 191.

20 David M. Stowe, 'A New Look at an Old Subject' (pamphlet), pp. 3-5.

without Christ is considered as being irrelevant to the life of modern man.²¹

What happens then can be seen in at least six propositions we deduce from a presentation by Dr. Pieter de Jong entitled, 'The Difference the Gospel Makes'.

1. Evangelism has cosmic implications.

'We can regain a sense of urgency only if we are clear about the difference the gospel makes in every area of life. Evangelism has cosmic implications.'

2. Man under God is the master of nature.

'Where the good news of creation and redemption is proclaimed the world becomes *world*. Thus, it is no longer regarded as a divine reality which must be influenced by magic or religious practices. Instead, there is born a true secularity in which man under God is the master of nature.'

3. Man is called to become co-creator with God and to help Him in leading the world to its final goal.

'The right interpretation of the doctrine of creation leads to the deification of the world and to the sanctification of man's active life. Through the good news, man is set free to make himself and his own world. Through the gospel man is called to become co-creator with God and to help Him in leading the world to its final goal.'

4 The gospel with its concern for one's neighbour becomes a penetration of this value into other cultures and religions.

'Under the influence of the good news a human life is considered worth more than before. The gospel demands concern for one's neighbour; and we can almost speak of an "osmosis", or penetration, of this value into other cultures and religions. This remains a fact even if Christians themselves have often disregarded this principle, both as individuals and as groups.'

5. The gospel is the impetus for a converging trend.

'The United Nations would be inconceivable apart from the fact that there is in the human race a converging trend of which the gospel is the impetus and Pentecost the beginning.'

6. The Lord of the Church is the Lord of the world.

'The Lord of the Church is the Lord of the world. Many people in their daily work serve God without knowing it, and the Church gathered in worship offers thanks to God on behalf of the world.'²²

In this light the case now made for the mission of the church is that it is the process of informing men that they are in fact redeemed by Christ and should start living accordingly. This precludes having to win them to Christ. As Dr. Bernard Ramm summarizes the position, 'The missionary does not

²¹ Cf. Pieter de Jong, 'Evangelism in Contemporary Theology', chapter 3 in Gordon Pratt Baker (ed.), *Evangelism and Contemporary Issues*, (Nashville: Tidings, 1964).

²² Pieter de Jong, 'Evangelism in Contemporary Theology', pp. 21, 22, 23.

bring Christ to India or Africa, for Christ is already there, being the universal Saviour of all men. The missionary comes to announce the universal lordship of Christ and summons men to acknowledge it in their lives.²³

In the broadest sense the implication is stated by Robert Beach Cunningham:

The good news is that God loves the world, and that, in Christ, He has given Himself to humiliation and death for the redemption and renewal of this world. Thus, for the Church to witness in the city means simply that some sinning human beings who have become aware of God's loving action in history are sharing with other sinning human beings who, as yet, have not come into this awareness. In other words, sinners who know that they have been reconciled of God are seeking to tell other sinners, who do not know this that they too have been reconciled to God.²⁴

When it comes to the scriptural demands of the gospel for salvation and the statement that few will be chosen out of the many who are called (Matthew 20:16), the interpretation of 'mission' now affirms concerning this imperative,

In these sayings, and many others

like them, our Lord is speaking about the movement of the Kingdom which He has come to inaugurate and the few who, at all times, will yield to its pressure and share in the tasks. The words 'salvation' and 'eternal life' have also this meaning of participation in the life and activity of God in Christ in the world. (Mark 10:20) ... In this sense 'salvation' is actually the experience of the few. But the question still remains concerning the final end of all.²⁵

Universalism and mission

The movement of the concepts of the new universalism in the program of 'church mission' now becomes clearer. It connotes once again a sense of the brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God and then goes beyond to suggest that service becomes the act of reconciliation of the 'church in mission'. In this concept, sin is asserted to be not an individual act which must be dealt with by the message of reconciliation in personal redemption but rather the corporate deed by which man is alienated from God. Corporate sin rends the fabric of the human and makes peace a fugitive. To reweave the torn fabric and have peace restored there must be a coming once more into a right relationship with God. But this coming will be on a corporate end not an individual level. This leads to the next step, the feeling that if missions and evangelism enterprises are going to witness to peace, missionary and evangelism bodies ought far more visi-

23 Ramm, 'Will All Men Be Saved?' p. 23. This is an objective analysis by Dr. Ramm and does not in any way express his personal viewpoint and theological position.

24 Robert Beach Cunningham, 'Evangelism and the Challenge of the City', Chapter 10, Baker (ed.), *Evangelism and Contemporary Issues*, p. 87. This quotation is the position held by the author!

25 Niles, *Upon the Earth*, p. 94.

bly to reflect the complete reconciliation of the nations and races that is accomplished in Christ.²⁶

A further step in the whole process of development in the concept of the mission of the church can then be the belief that all religions may be brought under the beneficent reconciliation of God through a sense of inter-religion harmony. It is but a step to the assertion of Dr. Niles, 'But what of those who already have "faith" to whom this declaration is made? Are there not those who have not consciously accepted God in Christ, but who nevertheless in some measure respond truly to God's action on them? Are these not those who, being outside the Christian faith, still do the truth? (John 3:21) The answer must be "yes".'²⁷

From this position it is but a step to a new universalism of all religions and faiths—a veritable universalistic syncretism of Christianity with other ethnic faiths.²⁸ A leading journalist has pictured it recently as follows:

Although religious conflicts still divide some countries, emphasis in recent years has turned toward the many things which all religions have in common. Announcement was made in Geneva, Switzerland, in July that the Lutheran and Roman Catholic Churches of the world had

agreed to make their 'first official contacts' in several centuries. Two months earlier, the Roman Catholic Church began conferences with the Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox Churches 'centered on unified action and the ending of competition' between churches.

This is not a new objective. Thirty-five years ago in India, Bhagavan Das, a noted Hindu scholar, traced similarities of Judeo-Christian doctrines and those of ancient Persia, Arabia and China, comparing the teachings of Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, Confucius and earlier spiritual leaders. The concept of a supreme being was dominant in virtually all. He concluded: 'So long as men and women are taught to believe that religions differ in essentials, so long will they continue to differ, quarrel, shed each other's blood. If they are led to see that all religions are one and the same—in essentials—they will also become one in heart, and feel their common humanity in loving brotherhood.'²⁹

Here then this particular sense of the mission of the church comes to full universalistic syncretistic flower. Here there is no necessity to challenge men to flee to the Lord Jesus Christ from the city of destruction. Here there is no 'Woe is me if I preach not the gospel.' Here there is no wishing oneself accursed for his kinsmen's sake because they are lost! Instead here is the overflowing spirit of a love and ser-

26 Cf. R. Pierce Beaver, *Envoys of Peace: the peace witness in the Christian world mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), pp. 58f.

27 Niles, *Upon the Earth*, p. 238.

28 In addition to ethnic faiths being involved, even animism may be brought into the picture. An example of this is the declaration from the Consultation on the Evangelization of West Africa Today held in Yaounde, June 23 to 30, 1965.

29 David A. Lawrence, a quotation taken from *The New York Herald Tribune*, 'Unifying Force', in the *Readers' Digest*, Oct 1965, p. 19.

vice which looks to dialogue with the faiths and practices of the world with a view to introducing them to that which they already are by the grace of God and which they will be whether they accept it or not in this life!

To those who say, 'But without the shedding of blood is no remission of sins,' the benign reply can now be given, 'True, but who of us can perceive how God in his infinitude will so apply the provision to all?' The issue of the new universalism is no longer 'God hath spoken' but 'Man hath reasoned'.

I am convinced that inherently such a concept of mission is the path to a new universalism when followed to its logical conclusion. For those who believe in the ultimate salvation of all men, acts of 'mission' will be performed in terms of the corporate situation rather than of the individual. Acts of 'mission' may then lead to involvement in political situations where the call to revolution and civil disobedience becomes the gospel of the hour. A strange, perhaps even unpremeditated, alliance may exist in this to the spirit of political, sociological and economic turbulence now apparent in other areas. On the highest level, the very essence of the question mark in the necessity for personal evangelism will render ineffective, if not destroy, the urgency to preach the gospel. The Pauline 'Woe is me' (and especially the sense of 'woe') becomes a useless and outworn appendage in the emotional and evangelism thrust of the church and mission body.

No wonder that in the light of all this the call to the harvest fields in so many quarters is but a glimmering light, that volunteers are dwindling away, that the sense of evangelism in the Great

Commission is no longer one of urgency.

III. The Church's Worldwide Mission

To establish further the 'mission of the church' today in the light of the onslaughts of neo-universalism, I suggest four things are necessary:

Inspiration of Scripture

First, we must reaffirm and relevantly define our belief in the inspiration of Scripture. I have referred to this before. This will also be developed more fully by others in this Congress. Nevertheless, we need again and again to remind ourselves that we must take the Holy Scriptures to be the utterance of God, given to us in the form of the utterance of men.

The Scriptures are inspired in the sense that is certainly implied by 2 Timothy 3:16—breathed out from God through their human authors. It is therefore not merely a record of revelation, but it is revelation itself—the present address of God to us, no less than it was a present address of God to the first recipients of the various biblical documents. It is what God is saying to each reader in this twentieth century, no less than it is what God said to the first writers and readers of the biblical documents centuries ago. For anyone so accepting the Bible as the authoritative Word of God, inspired verbally in the autographs, certain things stated in the Bible will come through with renewed force.

Exegetical Basis

Second, we must continue and

broaden our exegetical study of Scripture relating to eternal punishment and the call to redemption and reconciliation. The Wesleyan Theological Society should be a rallying point for biblical scholars to give special attention to this area so as to produce up-to-date studies and literature presenting in depth the biblical exegesis on eternal punishment, hell, the lake of fire, and other similar concepts as well as the truths of grace, mercy, redemption and reconciliation.

This is not to suggest that we are without help here. Works are available, presenting in some detail not only a historical sketch of views on eternal punishment, but also excellent summaries of Old and New Testament teaching thereon.³⁰ Nevertheless, what we need is a wider or tangential presentation of the subject under consideration here which will encompass a study in depth of John 12:32 or similar key passages. Such a study could be similar to the in-depth study by Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones of John 17.

Preaching of Divine Judgement

Third, we will have a renewal in our preaching and our teaching of the testimony of the Bible that it is painfully clear from the Scriptures that bad news is fundamental to good news. More than that, we will with renewed vigour stress the awful reality of eternal loss through sin and unbelief for those who are found out of Christ at the

cessation of this life. We will reckon with the fact that condemnation rests upon all unbelievers. The judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah, Bethsaida and Chorazin, will become vividly real. The finger of God in the '*Mene Mene Tekel Upharsin*' will be evident in our concern for our fellow man. The vivid imagery of our Lord, as reported in the Gospels is seen especially in the impact of Matthew 25, will never be out of our consciousness. The story of the rich-man, Dives, and the poor-man, Lazarus, will speak for the immeasurable and uncrossable gulf there is for the lost. We shall begin where the apostle Paul began at Athens in Acts 17, and again where he begins in Romans chapters 1 and 2. We shall speak of the reality of divine judgment and divine retribution, punishment of sin and unbelief eternally. On that basis we shall take very seriously the reality of hell and the lake of fire.

Despite the grotesque terminology of several decades ago, from which so many of us have understandably revolted; despite the fact that the very biblical vocabulary of hell has been cheapened—such terms as, hell, wrath, eternal punishment, weeping and gnashing of teeth, the worm that dieth not and the fire that is not quenched; despite the fact that these phrases have been bandied about so irreverently and tarnished that they are now hard for a Christian believer to use and grasp with the full sense of moral and spiritual horror which they connote when used in the scriptural sense; we must learn to take the reality of hell seriously, for we cannot take seriously the universalist alternative to it.

At that, some present-day univer-

³⁰ An excellent work is Harry Buis, *The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1957).

salists in their own way recognize hell. Some develop theories as a sort of bluff, not letting their hearers in on the fact that it is not so serious after all.³¹ Others come right out and speak of it only as a purgatorial and expiatory experience for a longer or shorter time, a means of grace on the path to God's final reconciling action. We on the other hand must ask God to make us serious about a grim reality, recognizing as we do from Scripture its eternity.

But we may well ask, 'How shall we preach hell?' Here the wise evangelical will be careful to preach hell ethically. This will be to emphasize not merely the physical horror of the biblical imagery, but also the moral horror of that state of remorse in which one knows God's displeasure with a vividness of an eternal choice made—the realization of a soul that he is where he is because he refused to know God's will in this world. He is where he is because his own choice has brought him there.³² Our preaching of hell will be in the terms of John 3:19: 'This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.' John 3:18 will ring sharp and clear: 'He that believeth not is condemned already.' No one can question the justice of giving a man what he has chosen. No one can deny that God in

pouring out judgment on such a man is respecting his own image in man and thus respecting man's free responsible choice. This is man having the darkness for which he has opted.³³

Committed to the Harvest

Fourth, we must acknowledge again that the mission of the church is the proclamation of a harvest. The words of our Lord come incisively down two millennia: 'The harvest truly is great, but the labourers are few. Pray ye, therefore, the Lord of the harvest to send forth labourers into his harvest' (Luke 10:2). Such a commission will come in the face of the same statistical dimension of the harvest which may have created the neo-universalist. It will be heard with the same cry for freedom on all hands. It will be seen in a day of unprecedented tools in hand for proclamation. Such a commission will be felt against the backdrop of limited resources to complete the harvest, resources limited because no one is burdened to listen, limited because of a debased theology, limited in the face of the revitalization of faiths and cults, limited by the forces of anti-Christ.

Such a commission will speak not only of the 'dimensions of the harvest', and of the 'dilemma of the harvest', but also of the 'demand of the harvest'. The incisive imperative—you pray!—will come through with the ringing tones of a commanding Christ.

Let us therefore acknowledge that to us today as leaders in the Lord's

³¹ Cf. Robinson, *In the End God...* Chapter Nine, 'All In All.' Note particularly pp. 117-123.

³² This interpretation of 'choice' is held by practically all shades of evangelical thought today. It is interesting to note that it was stressed by J. I. Packer in the Payton Lecture Series referred to in footnote No 3 above.

³³ Cf. J. A. Motyer, 'The Final State: Heaven and Hell,' Chapter 43 in Carl F. H. Henry, (ed.) *Basic Christian Doctrine* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962).

church comes fresh and new the prophetic commission of our Lord in Matthew 28:19 and 20, and that we hear it anew as the prophetic word in Ezekiel 3:17-19.

The Lord said to his prophet: Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at my mouth and give them warning from me. When I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life; the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand. Yet if thou warn the wicked, and he turn not from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul.

The Gospel of Salvation

Let us see it positively. The mission of

the church involves a concern for the poor, the sick, the needy, the oppressed, the problem of human relations, all of this in the context of the message that without the shedding of blood is no remission of sins, that with the application of the blood of Christ through faith in him, lost humanity can be restored to the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of the Lord Jesus Christ. The mission of the church is to proclaim powerfully the fact of sin, divine wrath, judgment and hell, so as to pave the way for powerful proclamation of the grace of God through Jesus Christ that saves men from eternal punishment to everlasting life. This is the grace of a Saviour who delivers men from this evil as well as from all evil (cf. 1 Thess. 1:9-10).

Let the mission of the church be the proclamation of the dark side of the story so as to proclaim with power the gospel of deliverance.

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