

Evangelical Review of Theology

A Global Forum

Volume 42 • Number 3 • July 2018

See back cover for Table of Contents



WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE

Theological Commission

Published by



The Holy Spirit and the Church as the Ordinary Means of Salvation

Steven Griffin

I. Introduction

The American historian of religion Darryl Hart has observed that whereas sixteenth-century Protestants like John Calvin and Martin Luther assumed that the Church was 'an objective medium of grace outside of which there was no ordinary possibility of salvation', later Protestants like Jonathan Edwards and Charles Hodge came to think of it as an essentially 'subjective, invisible quality shared by the truly converted'.¹ The impact of this shift on the modern evangelical movement should not be underestimated.

Many followers of Jesus today assume that 'a personal relationship with Christ' might begin and be maintained with little or no reference to the Church. Faith statements of not a few denominations define the church primarily, if not exclusively, in invisible terms. And the ordinary language we

use to speak of the means to be saved suggests an exaggerated concern to avoid confusion between the Church and salvation.

One example will suffice. On a Sunday morning some years ago in a large international, evangelical church in Southeast Asia, I took note of these words from one of the elders: 'Salvation does not come through the Church, but through a relationship with Jesus.' Just the following Sunday, as my family and I were being welcomed into that congregation, another elder read a statement that conveyed something rather different:

The Church is of God, and will be preserved to the end of time, for the conduct of worship, the due administration of His Word and Sacraments, the maintenance of Christian fellowship and discipline, the edification of believers, and the conversion of the world. People of every age and circumstance stand in need of the means of grace which it alone supplies.²

¹ D. G. Hart, 'The Church in Evangelical Theologies, Past and Future', in M. Husbands and D. Treier, eds, *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 25.

² Taken from *The United Methodist Hymnal*:

While the point made on the first Sunday was surely meant to safeguard the truth that the Church is not the source of salvation, or that salvation is obtained through the mere performance of ceremonies, sadly it reinforced the all-too-common notion that a relationship with Jesus is an essentially unmediated, Church-free affair. In the end, the precise way in which one was to approach the means of grace supplied by the Church *alone* without recourse to the Church as some sort of means of grace was left unclear.

Protestants are not alone in undermining the idea that sinners should not expect to be saved apart from the Church—that is, apart from that visible community that is gathered by, and sent into the world through, the proclamation of God's Word and celebration of the Gospel sacraments.³ Embracing the notion that non-Christian religions are taken up and fulfilled in the revelation of God in Christ, Karl Rahner spoke on behalf of those who are prepared to consider these, to varying degrees, valid ways of salvation. That is, on the assumption that non-Christian religions contain 'supernatural elements arising out of the grace which is given to men as a gratuitous gift on account of Christ', the Christian could

approach members of those groups as 'anonymous' Christians who in and through their respective traditions participate in the same salvation.⁴

With more pluralistic assumptions about the religions, i.e. without assuming that the religions find their fulfilment in Christ, but still speaking in Christocentric terms, Raimon Panikkar spoke for those who would see the religions as complementary, drawn by Christ towards a single end which has not yet been revealed. Thus Panikkar claimed that we cannot say 'how Christianity will look when the present Christian waters and the Hindu river merge into a bigger stream, where the peoples of the future will quench their thirst—for truth, for goodness, for salvation'.⁵

Even if we do not follow Rahner and Panikkar in this matter, however, we tend to think of the Holy Spirit not primarily as one who is sovereign in relation to the nations, with the liberty to confront or fulfil this or that element within culture 'from above' or 'from without', through means of his choosing, but rather as the One who works directly and immediately 'from below' or 'from within', i.e. in the heartbeat of religion itself. Hence the tendency to overlook the ways in which the religions have a way of distorting 'the light that gives light to everyone' (Jn 1:9) and, as Pope Benedict XVI pointed out in *Dominus Iesus*, to disregard the

Book of United Methodist Worship (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 1993), 45.

³ According to John Calvin, 'Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.' *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 20, ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1023.

⁴ K. Rahner, 'Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions', in *Theological Investigations*, vol. V. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 121, 131–33.

⁵ R. Panikkar, 'The Unknown Christ of Hinduism', in *Christianity and Other Religions* (Glasgow: Collins, 1980), 144.

'superstitions and errors' in them that 'constitute an obstacle to salvation'.⁶

Under the circumstances, a more *Chalcedonian* way forward is called for if we are to understand the relationship between the Church and salvation rightly. That is, we must strive neither to confuse realities that have their own integrity nor to separate realities that are meant to be held together. Thus, on the one hand, the Church and salvation are not to be confused, for to say that the Church is God's ordinary instrument of salvation is not to imply that God is bound by the regular outward means, for he may save through external means of his choosing those outside the Church who call on him for mercy.

As J. I. Packer explains, although the Bible 'sets forth Jesus Christ as the only Saviour from sin', we are not permitted to set limits 'to the dealings of the merciful God with individuals, even within non-Christian religions'.⁷ On the other hand, to drive a wedge between the two realities is to imply that 'life in Christ', or 'life in the Spirit', might be regarded as something quite separate or distinct from 'life in the Church'. It is one thing to acknowledge that 'God had some friends in the world outside

the commonwealth of Israel', as Heinrich Bullinger put it when he wished to account for those who might, through necessity or human weakness, obtain salvation apart from the regular sacramental life of the church (*Second Helvetic Confession* 17). It is quite another, however, to encourage the idea that the salvation that according to Peter in Acts 4 is found only in Jesus might be sought apart from the visible, apostolic fellowship of prayer, worship, teaching and remembering that we meet in Acts 1–2, and that is the creation of the 'Lord and life-giver' (Nicene Creed) that Jesus himself promised.⁸

If the Church, through its ministry of Word and sacraments, is to serve as the Holy Spirit's ordinary means to give new life to sinners and to keep them in Christ's fellowship, then at the most basic level the Church is called to be a visible sign of Christ's Kingdom. Just what sort of sign, however, remains a central question, because some proposals fall short of attributing to the Church a properly instrumental role in salvation.

Restrictivists propose a model of the

⁶ Mark Heim's proposal raises a similar problem regarding standards for discernment of truth and error in the religions. He argues that what God has in mind is not one particular religious end for all (i.e. 'Salvation'), but multiple ones ('salvations'), all of which are rooted in the same salvific purpose of God. See Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 77.

⁷ J. I. Packer, *The Thirty-Nine Articles: Their Place and Use Today* (Oxford: Latimer House, 1984), 73.

⁸ Proponents of a 'pneumatological' approach to the religions will no doubt object to my 'ecclesiocentric' assumptions. However, to the extent that the former approach rests on a view of the economy of the Spirit as something quite distinct from that of the Son (based in part on a rejection of the *filioque*), its trinitarian (and Chalcedonian) framework will require further study. In practical terms, the proposal to discern the work of the Holy Spirit within non-Christian religions without reference to Christ and his Church remains problematic. See e.g. K. E. Johnson, 'A "Trinitarian" Theology of Religions? An Augustinian Assessment of Several Recent Proposals' (Ph.D. Thesis, Duke University, 2007), chapter 4.

church as *ark of salvation* that effectively collapses salvation into the Church. So the Council of Florence (1442), for example, argued that 'those not living within the Catholic Church, not only pagans but also Jews and heretics and schismatics, cannot participate in eternal life, but will depart "into everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels", unless before the end of life the same have been added to the flock.'

Proponents of the pluralist thesis reduce the church to an *illustration* of the salvation that is at work in all cultures under different names, and in so doing they collapse the Church into salvation—in which case the latter is understood generically as transformation from self-centredness to God-centredness.⁹

Proponents of the fulfilment or inclusivist thesis suggest that the church is to be seen as a *vanguard* of a salvation that is latent in human cultures and therefore not fundamentally served by the Church, but only named by it. As Rahner put it, the Church is that 'historically tangible vanguard and the historically and socially constituted explicit expression of what the Christian hopes is present as a hidden reality even outside the visible church'.¹⁰

A properly *instrumental* role of the Church in relation to salvation comes into view when we come to the Roman Catholic model of the church as *sacrament* of salvation, as expounded by Popes Paul VI, John Paul II and Ben-

edict XVI. In what follows, I offer an overview and appreciation of that model from a Protestant perspective with a view to considering the relevance of the matter for Christian unity and mission.

II. The Church and the Fullness of Salvation

In *Lumen Gentium* (1964), or the 'Dogmatic Constitution on the Church' that expounds the Church's role in relation to the nations, Pope Paul VI sets forth at the outset a sacramental model, according to which the Church serves as the light of Christ in the world in the power of the Holy Spirit. Being in Christ who is 'Light of nations', the Church bears brightly on its countenance the light of Christ, and as such is held to be a 'sign and instrument' of salvation, understood as union with God and with the whole human race (1). Through the Holy Spirit's outpouring (2), and being indwelt, empowered, equipped, directed, and aided by the same Spirit (3), the Church as a 'structured' society is neither confused with nor separated from the mystical Body of Christ (8); rather, what is invisible is built up by what is visible, under the Holy Spirit's direction (8).

In this way, the Church is to be held as the ordinary means of salvation, for whoever comes to know that God has made it indispensable for man's salvation may not seek to be saved apart from it: 'Whosoever, therefore, knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by Christ, would refuse to enter or to remain in it, could not be saved' (14).

While appropriating the classical *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* in this way,

⁹ See John Hick, 'A Pluralist View', in D. Okholm and T. Phillips, eds., *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 43.

¹⁰ Rahner, 'Christianity', 131–33.

Lumen Gentium did not overlook the fulfilment theme.¹¹ In fact, some have found that the 'spirit' of Vatican II encourages the idea that non-Christian religions might function as 'legitimate paths of salvation for their members.'¹² Some support for this is suggested in Article 16, which acknowledges that elements of truth and goodness which may be found in non-Christian religions are to be reckoned as 'preparation for the Gospel'. However, the same article affirms, as Paul explains in Romans 1, that 'often men, deceived by the Evil One, have become vain in their reasonings and have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, serving the creature rather than the Creator'.

It is for this reason that H. Van Straelen argues that in *Lumen Gentium* the positive elements within non-Christian religions are considered to be forms of preparation for the Gospel at best, since 'natural religion cannot be more than a groping for the truth', and that in Acts 17 pagans in general are seen to be on the wrong path.¹³ On this

point van Straelen differs rather sharply from Karl Rahner, who suggested that in the modern era we need no longer share Paul's pessimism regarding the salvation of non-Christians.¹⁴

Whatever the case, it is clear that in their writings on the subject Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI would not seek like Rahner to get beyond Paul's supposed first-century cultural limitations when it came to the fact of other religions. On the contrary, by upholding the Second Vatican Council's reluctance to speak of non-Christian religions as ways of salvation, and in seeking to expound the nature of the Church as described in *Lumen Gentium* as the 'sacrament' of salvation, they demonstrated that their aim was to clarify the way in which the Church remains central in God's plan to save sinners, even in cases where individuals have no apparent contact with the Church.

To establish the Church's instrumental role in salvation, in *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) John Paul II notes, in the first place, the threat which the pluralist thesis represents for that conviction. He challenges the idea that salvation might be reduced to a benefit which remains 'within the confines of the kingdom of man' (i.e. within strictly human efforts for liberation), for by

11 Since they believed that the world was already permeated by the Gospel message, defenders of the axiom *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* had in mind those who had fallen away from the Gospel having heard it, and not the status of non-Christians or their religion as such. See Gavin D'Costa, 'Extra ecclesiam nulla salus Revisited', in *Religious Pluralism and Unbelief: Studies Critical and Comparative* (London: Routledge, 1990), 130.

12 J. Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 170.

13 H. J. J. M. Van Straelen, *The Church and the Non-Christian Religions at the Threshold of the 21st Century: A Historical and Theological Study*, trans. R. Nowell (London: Avon, 1998), 270, 275. Van Straelen adds that the seeds of Logos theology (in e.g. Justin Martyr) sup-

ports the idea that 'some philosophers had reached insights which contain a partial truth. But the idea of canonizing pagan religions was totally alien to them' (276).

14 Van Straelen, *The Church and the Non-Christian Religions*, 271, citing K. Rahner, *Mission and Grace: Essays in Pastoral Theology*, v. 3, trans. by C. Hastings (London: Sheed and Ward, 1966), 6. Van Stralen notes that the council did not accept Rahner's position (277).

restricting the work of the Church to the promotion of peace, justice and dialogue which is aimed merely at mutual enrichment, the so-called theocentric approach to the religions effectively collapses the Church into the Kingdom, thereby reducing the Church to a mere sign of salvation (17).

In the second place, against a fulfilment thesis found in the *vanguard* model of the Church in relation to salvation, he insists that dialogue with members of other religions is to be 'conducted and implemented with the conviction that *the Church is the ordinary means of salvation*' (55, emphasis in the original). Thus the Church is sent to the ends of the earth by the Holy Spirit, who is the 'principal agent of the whole Church's mission' (21), with the confidence that '*she alone* possesses the fullness of the means of salvation' (55, emphasis in the original) and that those who are finally saved apart from it will enjoy a 'mysterious' relationship with the Church that is mediated by the same Spirit and based on Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross, but in ways known to God alone (10).¹⁵

In *Dominus Iesus* (2000), Pope Benedict XVI (as Cardinal Ratzinger) develops John Paul II's concerns with his affirmation that 'God has willed that the Church founded by him be the instrument for the salvation of all humanity' (22). He begins with a sharp critique of the relativistic assumptions

which guide the pluralist approach to the religions. Those who understand the fundamental truth regarding the definitive character of the revelation of Jesus Christ to be superseded, he notes, are motivated by the erroneous presupposition that what might be true for some might not be for others, or that the Incarnation represents 'a mere appearing of God in history' (4). Here we recall John Paul II's insistence that 'Christ is none other than Jesus of Nazareth' (*Redemptoris Missio* 6).

Benedict XVI's challenge to the inclusivist proposal is made with reference to the nature of the sacraments. Thus, while God may use 'some prayers and rituals' of other religions to prepare individuals to receive the Gospel, these are not to be understood as coming from God in the same sense that the sacraments convey, *ex opere operato*, the benefit to which they point. The distinction between the two kinds of external things is based on the fact that while the latter serve as efficacious means to apply the benefit of Christ's sacrifice to the believer by faith, the former are inevitably mixed with other rituals that stand in the way of salvation to the extent that 'they depend on superstitions or other errors' (*Dominus Iesus*, 21).¹⁶

To the theme of *fulfilment* understood in a qualified way Benedict XVI adds the theme of *fullness* of salvation that is made available in and through the Church. In this way, the classical *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* remains true,

¹⁵ As Van Straelen argues, 'The fact that the followers of other religions can receive God's grace and be saved by Christ apart from the ordinary means which he has established does not thereby cancel the call to faith and baptism which God wills for all people' (*The Church and the Non-Christian Religions*, 280).

¹⁶ See also Pope Francis on the Holy Spirit's use of elements within non-Christian religions as preparation for the Gospel but in non-sacramental ways in *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), 254.

for the fullness of salvation is held to be available only in sacramental fellowship with the Catholic Church. Benedict XVI recalls from *Lumen Gentium* that the Church is the 'universal sacrament of salvation', mystically inseparable from Christ (20), and called to announce 'the necessity of conversion to Jesus Christ and of adherence to the Church through Baptism and the other sacraments in order to participate *fully* in communion with God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit' (22, emphasis mine). Moreover, while it is acknowledged that adherents of other religions 'can receive divine grace, it is also certain that *objectively speaking* they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation' (22, emphasis in the original).

In Benedict XVI's teaching, it is specifically to the Church that is in fellowship with Peter and those overseers considered to be his successors that one is to look for the fullness of salvation. It is clear, however, that fullness is to be understood only in relation to Christ. That is, it is only as the Church finds itself *in Christ* that it enjoys the fullness of the means of salvation. This is based on the truths that, as Paul says in Col 2:9 that the fullness of divinity dwells in Christ (*Dominus Iesus*, 5), that the fullness and centre of salvation is found in Christ (13), and that the Church possesses 'the fullness of Christ's salvific mystery', being one with Him (16). Here Benedict introduces a welcome Chalcedonian affirmation: 'just as the head and members of a living body, though not identical, are inseparable, so too Christ and the Church can neither be confused

nor separated, and constitute a single 'whole Christ' (16).

To the Christological basis of the Church's identity Benedict XVI adds the qualification that the Church remains a pilgrim people. In *Truth and Tolerance*, he encourages a view of religions—including Christianity—as dynamic, not static, entities. Thus he suggests that we do well to approach religions not so much as realities which exist in 'one single form', but as a complex of traditions which may or may not be related to the Gospel.¹⁷

For instance, Benedict explains that in our day Islam can be encountered in forms which reflect 'a certain proximity to the mystery of Christ' as well as destructive ones.¹⁸ Since the *direction* of a religion is more important than its shape in a given moment, Benedict XVI includes Christianity among the religions which are not to be canonized as they already exist, as if to excuse the faithful 'from any deeper searching'.¹⁹ In light of this he can assert that 'salvation does not lie in religions as such, but it is connected to them, inasmuch as, and to the extent that, they lead man toward the one good, toward the search for God, for truth, and for love.'²⁰

17 J. Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, trans. H. Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 53.

18 Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, 53–54.

19 Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, 54.

20 Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, 205. A similar dynamic is at work in Gavin D'Costa's quest for the 'ecclesial significance of the presence of other religions'. Given that according to *Redemptoris Missio* 29 the Spirit's universal work is 'not to be separated from his particular activity within the body of Christ, which is the Church,' D'Costa suggests that

III. The Church and the Assurance of Salvation

It is from Benedict XVI's claim that salvation does not lie in religions as such that a Protestant appreciation of papal contributions to the topic might take its point of departure, for there is much to welcome and affirm in that body of teachings. The first is the model of the Church in relation to salvation that comes into view. As a *sacrament* of salvation, the proposal which we have surveyed presents to us an image of the Church as that *city set on a hill* (Mt 5:14–16). The people whom Jesus describes as 'light of the world' are called through their good works to let their light shine for all to see. And lest the glory be attributed to that city—lest the nations assume that the light that saves is to be found in the city's own resources—Jesus declares, 'Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.' At the same time, the image of an established city speaks to the truth that salvation is *here and now*; that insofar as it finds its identity in Christ, the Church becomes the Holy Spirit's means to draw sinners to the light of Christ's fellowship.

In the second place, the teaching that the Church is God's *ordinary* means to save sinners echoes an important theme found in the Reformed tradition. Bullinger wrote that just 'as there was

no salvation outside Noah's ark when the world perished in the flood, so we believe that there is no certain salvation outside Christ, who offers himself to be enjoyed by the elect in the Church' (*Second Helvetic Confession* 17). Similarly, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* would speak of the visible Church as 'the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation' (XV.2).

Implicit here is the refusal, in the words of Lesslie Newbigin, both 'to limit the saving grace of God to the members of the Christian Church' and to reduce the matter of salvation to a question 'about our destiny as individual souls after death'.²¹ As important as such personal assurance is, Benedict XVI is surely right to insist that salvation is not to be reduced to a question about who finally gets into heaven. Rather, Christians are justified in asking 'what heaven is and how it comes upon earth', since 'future salvation must make its mark in a way of life that makes a person 'human' here and thus capable of relating to God'.²²

In the third place, Benedict XVI introduces into the discussion regarding the Church's sacramental nature a welcome distinction between prevenient grace and special (or efficacious) grace. Without assuming that salvation takes place strictly within the sphere of religion,²³ he is nevertheless confident that God may use elements within non-Christian religions ('some prayers and rituals', as noted above) as forms

the Spirit's work in the world is ecclesiological in the sense that it is through non-Christian religions that the Holy Spirit wishes to challenge, develop and deepen the Church's devotion to God. See D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 12, 108, 117.

21 L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 182, 179.

22 Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, 205.

23 Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, 53.

of preparation for the Gospel. However, the promise of efficacious grace is not attached to these external things, which are in any case ambiguous on their own.²⁴ In this way, Benedict XVI can draw the distinction between those who, on the one hand, enjoy the fullness of the means of salvation in the Church and those, on the other, who may be saved apart from it but who are in 'a gravely deficient situation', since it is only to the sacraments that God attaches the promise of saving grace.²⁵

This last point is particularly welcome, for it introduces the theme of confidence based on God's *promise* that is central to Protestant reflection on the relationship between the Church and salvation. That tradition has tended to recognize the devastating nature of sin in the lives of individuals, and on that basis has acknowledged the sinner's need to embrace God's promise personally, and therefore to enjoy the assurance of God's pardon. In light of this emphasis, the Protestant has been drawn not primarily to the Church as a *city on a hill* that mediates the fullness of salvation, but rather as a *herald* that announces the promise of a salvation

that, while anticipated in the here and now, belongs properly to *the city which is yet to come* (Heb 13:14).²⁶ As John Webster put it:

the active life of the church is best understood, not as a visible realization or representation of the divine presence but as one long act of testimony—as an attestation of the work of God in Christ, now irrepressibly present and effective in the Spirit's power.²⁷

As a model which approaches the Church as the Holy Spirit's means to assure sinners of their salvation, the Protestant model complements the sacramental one in three main ways. The first has to do with the Church's nature as a sign and of the salvation that it signifies. While the *herald* model has, here and there, tended to reduce the Church to a sign that 'simply points' to the city that is yet to come, and therefore to undermine the sacramental model,²⁸ properly speaking

²⁴ To these external things we could add elements which lie outside the sphere of formal religion, such as the hospitality shown to Joshua's spies, whom Rahab welcomed 'by faith' (Heb 11:31).

²⁵ Chalcedonian logic applies here too: just as we should not confuse common (or prevenient) grace with saving grace, neither should we distinguish them radically. As Richard Mouw says, for all we know, 'much of what we now think of as common grace may in the end time be revealed to be saving grace.' See Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 100.

²⁶ In developing ecclesial models this way, I am indebted to A. Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Dublin: Gill & MacMillan, 1987).

²⁷ J. Webster, 'The Visible Attests the Invisible,' in *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology*, ed. M. Husbands and D. Treier (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 96.

²⁸ 'Testimony is astonished indication. Arrested by the wholly disorienting grace of God in Christ and the Spirit, the church simply *points*. It is not identical or continuous with that to which it bears witness, for otherwise its testimony would be self-testimony and therefore false. Nor is its testimony an action which effects that which it indicates; the witness of the church is an ostensive, not an effective, sign; it indicates the inherent achieved effectiveness which the object of testimony has in itself' (Webster, 'The Visible', 106).

it announces benefits from God which are present as well as future. In this way, it is to be approached, in Newbigin's words, as a 'sign, instrument, and foretaste of God's redeeming grace'.²⁹ Thus salvation is precisely all about how heaven 'comes upon earth' (Benedict XVI), for it is, following Newbigin once again,

the completion of God's whole work in creation and redemption, the summing up of all things with Christ as head (Eph. 1:10), the reconciling of all things in heaven and earth through the blood of the cross (Col. 1:20), the subjecting of all hostile powers under the feet of Christ (1 Cor. 15:24–28).³⁰

A related concern about the Protestant model is that with its emphasis on the personal encounter with God in Christ it tends to render the Church an *occasional*, less than historically continuous, reality: 'practically a series of totally disconnected events' brought about through the ministry of the word and sacraments (Newbigin).³¹ However, to the extent that Christianity is concerned not simply with events in history, but also with the meaning of those events, then historical continuity would properly be sought in the Church's confessing tradition as a means to safeguard the integrity of that interpretation.

The second way in which the Protestant model complements the Roman Catholic one has to do with the importance of assurance in the life of

the believer. Here again the Church's nature as a sign is relevant, for apart from being 'the light of the world', the Church is also called to be 'the salt of the earth' (Mt 5:13–16). If the 'scattered' identity is established through the Holy Spirit's sending of the Church as witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8), the image of salt highlights the temporal dimension of that work (to the end of time as we know it). This is because salt introduces the virtue of anticipation, for it serves to preserve.

Paul says, 'Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person' (Col 4:6), indicating that godly conversation requires the kind of restraint that is proper to listening and waiting. And this virtue is linked, in turn, to holding on to God's promise: 'For I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me' (2 Tim 1:12; see also Job 19:25, Rom 5:2). It is in the light of faith understood as 'a most firm trust and a clear and steadfast assent of the mind' with regards to God's promise that Bullinger speaks of the Church as the only certain means of salvation (*Second Helvetic Confession* 16 and 17).

Called to be both salt and light in the world—to taste as well as to see 'that the Lord is good' (Ps 34:8)—the Protestant model's conception of the relationship between word and image suggests a third way in which it complements the sacramental model. The Psalmist's declaration that 'the unfolding of [God's] words gives light' (Ps 119:130) reminds us that illumination depends on God's Word (rather than the other way around), and reflects

²⁹ Newbigin, *The Gospel*, 233.

³⁰ Newbigin, *The Gospel*, 178–79.

³¹ L. Newbigin, *The Household of God* (New York: Friendship Press, 1954), 48.

the logical priority of sound over sight which we find throughout in Scripture.

With the Word Incarnate now removed from our sight, as long as the pilgrim 'is in this mortal body', as Augustine put it, 'he is far from the Lord; so he walks by faith, not by sight' (2 Cor 5:7).³² On this basis, the *herald* model of the Church serves as a safeguard against the notion that God's chosen instrument (the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper, or the Church itself) might be understood simply to contain within itself that to which it points, thereby inviting the faithful to confuse the instrument with the Source.

To this necessary reduction of the sacrament from 'container-sign' to *instrumental* sign we might add the reduction of the rite of ordination, on which the sacramental model rests in part. While it is one thing to affirm baptism and the Lord's Supper as sacraments, since by faith, and on the authority of Christ's promise, they mediate what they signify, it is another to attribute sacramental status to the ordained ministry and other lesser signs which 'have not any visible sign or ceremony ordained of God' (Article 25 of the *Thirty Nine Articles*).

As such, a Protestant may very well appreciate and welcome the concern for historic continuity to which the papacy bears witness without having to assume that it is primarily the See of Peter that the Church is to consider as its focus and instrument of unity. In the Protestant model, it would be primarily to faithful overseers in council, such as

we meet in Acts 15, that the Church would look to as the Holy Spirit's outward means to keep his people in fellowship.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, having suggested some of the implications of our survey for Christian unity, what might the lessons learned here mean in practical terms for the Church's message in the world? To review, we have understood salvation as everything that God has done, is doing, and will do to bring all things under Christ's lordship. We have understood the Church as the society throughout the world that professes faith in Christ as Lord and that remains in the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers. Finally, we have affirmed that the Church is God's ordinary instrument of salvation. I think that three practical implications follow.

First, with the focus in salvation being on the whole objective, historical movement of God, once we have sensed that God has called us into fellowship through the ministry of his people, we are not to expect or to look for salvation apart from that fellowship. In positive terms, we are to announce with confidence that the reconciliation of all things under Christ's authority is to be worked out in history precisely through the fellowship that He has provided in the Church; by the same token, we are to preach that individuals may find assurance that they belong to Christ precisely in that fellowship. Individuals who, as far as we can tell, are intellectually incapable of embracing the truth that they belong to God are not thereby left out, and nei-

³² Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998), XIX.14.

ther are those individuals who, as far as we can tell, have never been given the opportunity to embrace the hope of the Gospel, simply the lost. If they were, then God would be bound by human instruments (both external and inward) in reaching them.

Second, the truth that God may reach some through extraordinary means does not mean that for some individuals salvation is relatively easy (since, for example, they were born into a Christian family), but hard for others because they have more cultural barriers to negotiate along the way. 'Strive to enter through the narrow door' (Lk 13:24) applies to all. Moreover, the fact that God may reach individuals in an extraordinary way—since Jesus promises in the same passage that there will be surprises—does not mean that God is reaching them apart from Christ. To be reached is to be reached by God in

Christ, because all salvation is in Jesus Christ, through him, and for him; and if anyone is saved without ever hearing of Jesus, it will be because God's love, mercy and forgiveness were made known through a means that we'll know about only on the other side.

Third, and finally, the evangelistic proclamation of the Church will not be motivated by a sense of panic (which is the logical implication of *restrictivism*), but by an experience of the love of the Father that compels believers to invite others to know the same forgiveness and freedom that they have experienced. Such forgiveness is never less than urgent, because we are miserable sinners as long as we do not receive divine pardon, and because the promised freedom will have a wider impact that cannot be measured on this side of Jesus' return in glory.