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“Constitutionally Christian”: A Classical Pentecostal Appraisal of Founders and Figures in World Faiths with Attentiveness to Inclusivist Implications

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Introduction

In 1958 Pentecostal prophecy teacher and writer George L. Britt went so far as to say Socrates, Plato, and Confucius can be called “constitutionally Christian”.² What might he have meant by this

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² George L. Britt, *When Dust Shall Sing: The World Crisis in the Light of Bible Prophecy* (Cleveland, TN: Pathway, 1958), pp. 188-89.

somewhat surprising statement? How might it be developed by us today? How far might we appropriately extend his idea to religious others? A very affirmative Foreword was written for Britt's book by Charles W. Conn, a highly respected author, historian, and administrator in the Church of God (Cleveland, TN USA), one of the oldest, continuing Classical Pentecostal denominations in the world today and a leading voice among Pentecostals and Charismatics.³ Furthermore, *When Dust Shall Sing* was published by the denominational publishing house. Accordingly, assuming neither Britt nor his book championed any brazenly anti-typical or heretical doctrines from a Classical Pentecostal perspective seems reasonable.

Britt was not a theologian of religions. Nor did all Pentecostals of the period agree with his position.⁴ Rather, his words are an example of a comparatively studied and scholarly appraisal of leading founders and figures of world religions from a Classical Pentecostal point of view in mid twentieth century. For this reason, Britt's description of non-Christian religious founders and figures as "constitutionally Christian" could have enormous import for contemporary Pentecostals working through increasingly intense issues of religious pluralism.⁵ I wish to utilize Britt's approach as an instrument for discussing an implicit inclusivist current in Pentecostalism. Although my focus is on my own movement, I suggest that application may apply beyond it to others as well, particularly to Evangelicalism as a global phenomenon.

1. A Pattern of Abiding Concern

Noting Britt's pattern of abiding concern to understand the status of those outside the immediate influence of biblical Christianity is

³ C. W. Conn, "Church of God (Cleveland, TN)", *New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements (NIDPCM)*, eds. Stanley M. Burgess and Eduard M. Van Der Mass (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), pp. 530-34.

⁴ Britt is not entirely alone in his position either. See "Tony Richie, Precedents and Possibilities: Pentecostal Perspectives on World Religions in a World of Religious Pluralism," *Pneuma Review*, article in brief 9:2 (Spring 2006), pp. 70-71; full article in Pneuma Foundation In Depth Resources online index: www.pneumafoundation.org/resources/in_depth.jsp. The amazing diversity of beliefs and practices of contemporary Pentecostals and Charismatics is becoming increasingly evident. See Wonsuk Ma, "When the Poor are Fired Up': The Role of Pneumatology in Pentecostal-Charismatic Mission" in *Cyberjournal of Pentecostal Charismatic Research*, www.pctii.org/cyberj/cyber15.html (February 2006).

⁵ Kärkkäinen argues this is one of the most pressing issues facing Pentecostals today. See Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "'Truth on Fire': Pentecostal Theology of Mission and the Challenges of a New Millennium", *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies*, 3:1 (January 2000), pp. 33-60 (pp. 54-59).

helpful. Britt labors to balance the ancient history of idolatry and immorality among Gentile peoples and the need for special revelation through a particular people, first the Jews and then the Church, with an admission that some divine light broke through at times even among Heathen.⁶ He says:

It is true that the Spirit of Him who lighteneth every man that cometh into the world penetrated even the darkness of the heathen world to the extent that the Greek philosophers, such as Socrates and Plato, taught certain values of morality. Nevertheless, the idea of an individual's immoral acts displeasing a holy God and the truth of conversion and mystical union with a God that lives was unknown outside the Hebrew religious system.⁷

Britt obviously avoids a pluralistic equalizing of all religions.⁸ Yet he still affirms a pneumatology of universality in which true divine influence and presence reach beyond the boundaries of biblical religions. In my own humble opinion, this *via media* of inclusivism between pluralism and exclusivism, probably is the position behind his statements on constitutional Christians, and establishes a balanced, positive precedent for contemporary Pentecostal theology of religions.⁹

2. Prophetic Context

Britt focused on the field of biblical prophecy, a perennially popular subject among Pentecostals. He plumbed the Bible for insights regarding the second coming of Christ and related events.¹⁰ A strong eschatological orientation to his thought, including at its

⁶ Britt, *When Dust Shall Sing*, pp. 83-96.

⁷ Ibid: p. 87.

⁸ Though not unproblematic, still the most popular typology toward religions is pluralism, exclusivism, and inclusivism. "Inclusivism" describes an openness regarding the present state and eternal fate of the unevangelized or adherents of other religions; "exclusivism" a closed attitude, positing that a conscious personal response to the preached gospel is absolutely necessary; and, "pluralism" equating all religions while denying superiority to any. A great deal of ambiguity exists among these broad categories. For a good look at these various views between the covers of a single volume, see *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, eds. Stanley N. Gundry, Dennis L. Okholm, and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996). Charles B. Jones lists a fourth view, "parallelism", that all religions are parallel contextualized constructs of experienced Absolute Reality, *The View from Mars Hill: Christianity in the Landscape of World Religions* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2005), pp. 156-64.

⁹ Regarding such Pentecostal balance see Tony Richie, "Neither Naïve nor Narrow: A Balanced Pentecostal Approach to Christian Theology of Religions", *Cyberjournal for Pentecostal-Charismatic Research* at www.pctii.org/cyberj/cyber15.html (February 2006).

¹⁰ In this vein he also wrote George L. Britt, *The Hour has Come* (Cleveland: Pathway, 1966) and *The Bodily Resurrection* (Boston: National Braille Press, 1971).

intersection with interreligious issues, ought to be acknowledged. Context is important for understanding his statement about constitutional Christians. *When Dust Shall Sing* is in many ways a standard Pentecostal work during the period. Britt addresses subjects such as the logic of prophecy and the place of the Jew in prophecy. He speculates about a contemporary version of the ancient Roman Empire and the place of Russia in prophecy. Mostly, however, Britt deals with themes such as mystery Babylon, the times of the Gentiles, the age of the Church, the second coming of Christ, the kingdom of heaven, and the new heaven and new earth—all from the standpoint of expectation of imminent fulfillment of prophecy.

3. Validity of Jewish Faith

George Britt, however, also shows a penchant for individual originality. For the purposes of this paper I wish especially to identify his attitude regarding religious others. Britt evinces an amazingly empathetic attitude toward the Jews.¹¹ For him their continuing place in the plan and purpose of God is of central importance. Explaining his perspective without recourse to a theology of religions that affirms the continuing validity of Jewish faith would be problematic at the least.¹² Nevertheless, he exemplifies an unflinching Christian commitment.¹³ Appreciation of piety in a non-Christian religion and personal participation in Christian piety do not seem inconsistent to Britt. However, as Judaism and Christianity obviously have a unique paternal relationship, one must frankly ask, does Britt's view go any farther? It does.

¹¹ Early and influential but enigmatic Pentecostal Charles F. Parham also evinced great empathy toward "our Jewish brethren". See Charles F. Parham, *The Sermons of Charles F. Parham* (NY: Garland, 1985 pr), pp. 103-04 (a compilation of Parham's writings around turn of the twentieth century).

¹² Cf. Britt, *When Dust Shall Sing*, pp. 27-38 and 83-96.

¹³ *Ibid*: pp. 107-37. As one biblical scholar shows, staunch commitment to Christ is not inconsistent with acknowledgment that the Bible itself attaches varying levels of validity to different religions. See James R. Edwards, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 209-16.

4. Christians before Christianity

The quote in question, on “constitutional Christians”, occurs in a chapter on the mystery Kingdom, that is, on the “spiritual phase” of the Kingdom of God.¹⁴ Britt is concerned to show that the mystical Kingdom “would break through the confines of national boundaries and include people from every nation”, and cites Jesus’ words in John 10:16 with universalizing effect. Britt believed “Christ had in mind souls out in the heathen world” beyond the boundaries of traditional biblical religion. Biblical examples such as the centurion, the Ethiopian eunuch, and the Syrophenician woman, exemplify people “who were constitutionally Christians and were ripe for the kingdom of heaven.” Furthermore,

[b]efore Christ came there had lived out in the heathen world many souls such as Socrates, Plato and Confucius who had been constitutionally Christian and spent their lives yearning for truth. Although they were strangers to the God of Israel and did not have the law of Moses, they were a law unto themselves (Romans 2:14, 15).¹⁵

Therefore, to Britt, that “the particularism of Judaism” had been transformed into “the universalism of Christianity” seemed evident.¹⁶ However, one acknowledges that his view built upon a foundational affirmation of limited but genuine religious experience beyond the Judeo-Christian tradition.

5. Questions to Consider

If Britt had not commented about constitutional Christians among heathen we might think he was simply referring to the potentially salvific reach of the gospel to all nations and peoples. While that idea is obviously included in his words, it does not exhaust their implications. This mid twentieth century Classical Pentecostal is plainly arguing that some of the leading founders and figures of other religions were somehow *Christian* in a special sense.¹⁷ Important

¹⁴ Ibid: pp. 183-90. The following chapter discusses the “literal phase” of the Kingdom, pp. 191-98.

¹⁵ Ibid: pp. 188-89.

¹⁶ Ibid: p. 189.

¹⁷ Britt wrote these words before Vatican II or Karl Rahner’s infamous phrase “anonymous Christians” regarding adherents of non-Christian religions. I do not know but that Britt’s phrase is better than that of the famous theologian—though we appropriately ask whether it is open to some of the same criticisms (see below).

questions are to be considered. First, what might “constitutionally Christian” mean? We need definition and clarification of this term before attempting to apply it. Then, in what way can we draw on a concept of a constitutional Christian in developing a contemporary Pentecostal theology of religions? A basis for respectful regard toward religious others may lie latent in the description. Finally, how far can we appropriately extend this idea for including and informing our understanding of religious others in history and in contemporary society? Our adjectival phrase obviously does not include all religious others. Discernment is important.

First, a fairly safe suggestion is that “constitutionally Christian” means that something genuinely constitutive of Christianity also exists in some form to a degree in certain great non-Christian religious founders and figures. Second, constitutional Christianity provides Christians with a way of respectfully regarding the reality of truth and goodness in great religious persons outside our own religion and yet unapologetically proclaiming the good news of the gospel of Christ to their heirs. Third, if some of the great founders and figures of other religions were constitutional Christians, then we may say that, at least those among their subsequent followers who sincerely imbibe and exhibit the same spirit may also be called constitutional Christians.

6. Constitutive Christianity

That which comprises Christianity exists in some form to some degree in great religious founders and figures outside Christianity itself, according to Britt. Many others have sometimes spoken along the same lines. Justin Martyr spoke of those beyond the borders of Israel who had the “seeds of the Logos” before Christ came. John Wesley emphasized the divine image and prevenient grace in all human beings as a basis for the light of general revelation and human conscience even among those of other religions.¹⁸ C. S. Lewis wrote of “hints” of truth and “good dreams” about a dying and rising god that had never been wholly absent from the consciousness of

¹⁸ For an in depth overview of Wesley’s theology of religions see Tony Richie, “John Wesley and Mohammed: A Contemporary Inquiry Concerning Islam”, *The Asbury Theological Journal* 58:2 (Fall 2003), pp. 79-99. I also address the view of Justin Martyr (and others such as Clement of Alexandria and James Arminius) in this article.

humanity.¹⁹ Karl Rahner posited a “supernatural existential” making it possible for the non-Churched to be called “anonymous Christians”.²⁰ Contemporary Pentecostal-Charismatic theologians Clark Pinnock and Amos Yong champion a sophisticated pneumatology as a basis for the universality of the divine presence and influence.²¹ The particular means by which some non-Christians might be called “constitutional Christians”, however, is secondary to my purpose here—though important in itself also. Mainly, I want to note that in various ways many devout Christian disciples have testified to recognizing something in common with at least some of the greatest non-Christian religious persons.²² Most particularly I want to point out that some Classical Pentecostals of note have affirmed Christ in certain non-Christians. That in itself is significant for Pentecostals in our religiously plural context today.²³

Descriptive phrases such as “ripe for the kingdom” and “yearning for the truth”, coupled with the telling “values of morality”, however, do suggest something of the possible nature of constitutional Christianity in Britt’s teaching. He seems to be suggesting that wherever people are on an honest quest for truth that is unequivocally expressed in ethical and moral behavior there may be acknowledged in them something of the same energy and vitality that also moves Christianity. All genuine truth is claimed in Christ, the personification of truth (John 14:6). Also, in agricultural imagery, faithfully following after the truth prepares these persons to be “ripe” for Christianity itself. Spirituality, if we will, is not necessarily a static

¹⁹ For an analysis of Lewis’s theology of religions see Tony Richie, “Hints from Heaven: Can C. S. Lewis Help Evangelicals Hear God in Other Religions?” in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 32:1 (January 2008), pp. 38-55.

²⁰ Cf. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1978), pp. 311-21.

²¹ See Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (InterVarsity Press: Downer’s Grove, IL, 1994), pp. 185-214 and Amos Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Theology of Religions* (*Journal of Pentecostal Theology* Supplement Series, Sheffield: Sheffield, England; 2000). I deeply appreciate Yong’s suggestions on an earlier draft of the present paper.

²² Edwards says, “Through the lens of the gospel we can see the God-breathed characteristics that are present and intimated in other religions. In some cases those characteristics are few, in others many—but in all cases they are corrected and completed in Christ.” *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (p. 231)

²³ Britt is further confirmation of my thesis that inherent in Pentecostalism is an ecumenism and inclusivism frequently breaking forth whenever superimposed dogmatic blinders, such as, for example, Fundamentalism, are removed. See Tony Richie, “The Unity of the Spirit: Are Pentecostals Inherently Ecumenists and Inclusivists?” *Journal of European Pentecostal Theology Association*, (2006.1), pp. 21-37.

state in which one is entirely a Christian or not. Some may be in a dynamic process through which they are growing toward Christ. Since something of that religious reality which constitutes or comprises the essentiality of Christianity exists also in these they may be thought of as constitutionally Christian, or as sharing in the essence of real Christianity. The reality of genuine spirituality is displayed in a moral standard that surpasses cultural differences (cf. Matt 7:15-20).²⁴

7. Religions West and East

In addition to biblical examples, Britt names Socrates, Plato, and Confucius constitutional Christians.²⁵ These are specific founders and figures of important religious movements in history. Though Socrates and Plato are often thought of today more as philosophers than religious thinkers, fine distinctions between philosophy and theology prevalent today did not exist in the past. Much of what these persons thought and taught was explicitly “religious” in the sense of having to do with the divine and ultimate reality. Not surprisingly, Socrates was purportedly martyred as an atheist because of his teaching against immoral polytheism and Plato is one of the Western world’s greatest rational advocates of ethical monotheism.²⁶

Britt’s inclusion of Confucius indicates he intended to widen his words to embrace not only Western religions but Eastern ones as well.²⁷ We might, then, without overt violence to Britt, perhaps also

²⁴ C. S. Lewis’s superb defense of natural moral law, including shared suppositions among the major religions, “resonates not only with ideas from the giants of Western thought (including Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas), but also draws on the wisdom of the East, including Confucius and the sages of Hinduism”. See John G. West, “*The Abolition of Man*”, *The C. S. Lewis Readers’ Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), pp. 67-69 (p. 67). Britt seems to have the same kind of concept in mind.

²⁵ Britt, whose denomination (which is also mine) is noted for its Wesleyan Pentecostalism, not surprisingly seems to share Wesley’s opinion of luminaries such as Socrates. E.g., *The Complete Works of John Wesley* (The Wesleyan Heritage Collection; Ages Software, Inc. Rio, WI: 2002), 6:381, 6:385, 7:280.

²⁶ E.g., the early overlap of philosophy and religion, Heraclitus (ca. 5th cent. BCE) thought the universe changes according God’s reason and that wisdom is the most important attribute of the soul. See Samuel Enoch Stumpf, *Philosophy: History and Problems* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983), p. 14. On Socrates and Plato see *ibid.*, pp. 33-43 and 44-77.

²⁷ Interestingly, an important early Wesleyan theologian, John Fletcher, also uses Confucius as an example of an Eastern/Asian figure worthy of critical approbation. See *The Works of John Fletcher* (The Wesleyan Heritage Collection; Ages Software, Inc. Rio, WI: 2002) 3:253. Jones points out a generally positive impression of Confucianism on Enlightenment Europe as well, *The View From Mars Hill*, pp. 62-64.

include the Buddha or possibly Lao-tzu (founder of Taoism), and maybe others, as constitutional Christians. Confucianism is today often described as a moral philosophy more so than a religion, but a review of its history and identity reveals otherwise. Strong religious assumptions of Heaven's concern for humanity are often in the background of Confucius' original teachings and practices.²⁸ Therefore, conceivably, not just the biblical Hebrews, familiar philosophers of Greece, or other occidentals, but also oriental thinkers can be claimed for Christ. In a day of Evangelical and Pentecostal revival in Asia this fact may have immense import.

Of course, neither Britt nor contemporary Christians would want to affirm everything any of these—Socrates, Plato, Confucius, and so on—taught and practiced. That is not the question under discussion. Rather, what is at stake is whether anything exists in the faith and life of any of the world's great religious figures that is consistent with, complimentary to, and completed by Christian experience and revelation.²⁹ According to at least one mid twentieth century Classical Pentecostal, the answer seems to be “Yes!” Contemporary Pentecostals would be well advised to concur.

8. Categorical Applicability

One consideration crying out to be confronted is the applicability of the category of constitutional Christians to contemporary adherents of non-Christian religions. Britt's examples all clearly comprise specific religious figures that lived and died before the incarnation of Christ. The fate of these people of faith was also a cause of concern for the early Church.³⁰ But since the coming of Christ is for Christians the pivot on which history and eternity turns, how does the category

²⁸ John Berthrong, “Sages and Immortals: Chinese Religions”, in *Introduction to World Religions*, ed. Christopher Partridge (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), pp. 394-402 (esp. 394-98).

²⁹ Edwards, building on Galatians 4:1-7 and Ephesians 1:10, refers to previous religions “foreshadowing” Christianity and Christianity as their “recapitulation” or summing up and fulfillment. Cf. *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* pp. 213-16.

³⁰ Clark Pinnock, in *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), p. 35, and John Sanders, in *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 267-80, name numerous fathers who wrestled with the faith and fate of religious others and espoused inclusivism, as it has come to be called, in some form. George R. McDermott defines an inclusivist as one who says “Jesus is ontologically but not epistemologically necessary for salvation” and lists Clement of Alexandria, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus from among the Church Fathers as representatives (*Can Evangelicals Learn From World Religions: Jesus, Revelation & Religious Traditions*. IVP: Downers' Grove, IL, 2000, pp. 40-41).

which Britt so readily applied to pre-Christian era peoples, apply to non-Christian peoples in the Christian era? Two matters come to mind. First, many people of non-Christian cultures actually exist in a state very similar to that of pre-Christian peoples. Many have never heard of Christ; those who have at least heard may not have heard, as John Wesley put it, authentically.³¹ Second, as Bishop J. H. King, pioneer leader of the International Pentecostal Holiness Church, pointed out, in the mind of God the incarnation of Christ was not only a temporal, historical event but also eternal, trans-historical.³² Accordingly, arguably the same paradigm applied to literally pre-Christian people can also legitimately be applied to at least some contemporary non-Christian people. For example, though Mohammed lived after Christ and Islam chronologically is post-Christian, this same category may sensibly apply nevertheless.³³

The term constitutional Christian does not automatically apply to every non-Christian adherent. I myself would apply it to those who are authentic heirs of the great religious leaders to whom it would have originally applied. Indeed, Yahweh specifically reveals himself as one who voluntarily honors those outside the biblical religious tradition who are faithful to the vision of their ancestor (Jr. 35:19). I cannot speak authoritatively for others, but I assume that just as Christianity has those who name the name of Christ but are not true Christians, so other religions may have similar members. Those not even living up to the light they already have are not very likely candidates for further flashes of light. Neither would I apply the category of constitutional Christian to those who have indeed been authentically exposed to the gospel and have willfully, that is, rebelliously, resisted its message of life and truth. Walking away from revealed light leads first to dimness and then finally to darkness. But those who authentically imbibe and exhibit the same spirit as a Socrates, a Plato, a Confucius, and so on, may be confidently

³¹ Cf. Richie, “Wesley and Mohammed”, *ATJ*, pp. 90-91. Presenting the gospel authentically means, among other things, that the gospel is presented effectively, that is, in truth and power with love and grace, and also that the gospel is presented genuinely, that is, through holy words and deeds. Of course, that distortions in perception may exist on the part of hearers is also possible and no doubt at times actual.

³² Cf. Tony Richie, “Azusa Era Optimism: Bishop J. H. King’s Pentecostal Theology of Religions as a Possible Paradigm for Today,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 14:2 (April 2006), pp. 247-60.

³³ Cf. Fletcher, *The Works of John Fletcher*, 3:253.

described as constitutional Christians. None of this suggests the world religions are in and of themselves salvific. For that matter, no religion, not even Christianity, is salvific.³⁴ What *Christians* believe is not that *Christianity* saves but that *Christ* saves. A constitutional Christian therefore rises above religion to enter relationship with Christ; perhaps hints of truth in a higher religion point him or her, even ever so slightly, in the right direction, or perhaps he or she must reach for truth in spite of the error and aberrations with which he or she is inundated through a particularly deviant religious tradition.³⁵ In any case, *what counts is Christ* (John 14:6).

9. A Double Edged Sword

Utilizing the category of constitutional Christian may be a double edged sword. While it helps cut away Christian prejudice thereby enabling us to appreciate religious others, it could also cut into the tender flesh of religious others thereby wounding and offending the very ones we are trying to open ourselves up to for improved understanding and interaction. Unfortunately that is exactly what happened with Rahner's "anonymous Christian" concept.³⁶ Perhaps the Buddhist or Jew or Muslim does not necessarily appreciate being told he or she is a Christian unawares after all. Would Christians take kindly to being told they are Hindus unawares after all? I think not.

Perhaps our perspective can be appropriately adjusted enough to counter such problems. First, let us get our claim clear. The phrase "constitutional Christian" does not necessarily assert that a non-Christian is really a disciple of Christ in disguise. It suggests rather that there exists a shared commitment to and element of religious reality between real religious persons, transcending perceived boundaries, which from a Christian perspective can be identified as common ground. Second, let us each forthrightly affirm our own faith. In developing a *Christian* theology of religions describing its contours from a Christian perspective with Christian terminology is, or ought to be anyway, expected and accepted. The same should be

³⁴ Cf. David L. Mueller, *Karl Barth: Makers of the Modern Theological Mind*, Series Editor, Bob E. Patterson (Waco: Word, 1976): pp. 91-93.

³⁵ In a Christian teleological view of religions, the proper destination of religions is Jesus Christ, who fulfills all creation. Cf. Edwards, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (pp. 222, 228)

³⁶ E.g., Hans Küng, *Theology for the Third Millennium: An Ecumenical View* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), p. 236.

true in the converse. Christians ought to realize that interreligious dialogue partners will inevitably describe both themselves and others from the vantage point of their own faiths. This will work as long as all partners around the table are sensitive to each others' feelings about their faiths. Finally, let us openly admit our assumptions. That each respective religious adherent inherently, whether consciously or unconsciously, probably accepts the special identity and quality of his or her own faith should be also accepted and respected. Thus imperialism, Christian or otherwise, disadvantageous to the entire interreligious process, can be avoided. Nevertheless, as Christians we cannot but conscientiously confess our uncompromising commitment to the utter uniqueness of Christ and authentic Christianity.

10. Protection against Pluralism

One has to carefully guard against the preceding position being pushed to the point of opening up the door for rampant pluralism's admittedly unacceptable relativism.³⁷ Attempting to work together with mutuality and reciprocity does not mean one condones pluralism and its concomitant relativism. For me, pluralism and relativism, in the sense of essentially equalizing all religions while denying the absoluteness of any, are untenable. Every religion simply cannot logically be equally good and true: they diverge too much for it to be so. (Though we here stress real common ground we do not deny real radical differences.) The moment we acknowledge this inevitably unavoidable conclusion we set up a scale that supposes some one religion is at least the closest approximation to ultimate reality and verity.

If the above is accurate, understandably most of us will then probably assume our own religion is that one most nearly correct version of religious faith. As a Christian, I wholeheartedly believe, and attempt to behave accordingly, that the Lord Jesus Christ is the Son of God and Savior of the world through whom the one true and

³⁷ An example of theological pluralism at least attempting to seriously relate to Christian mission and tradition is Paul F. Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names: Christian Mission and Global Responsibility* (New York: Orbis, 1996). For my part, recognizing God's work among religions must be carefully consistent with an uncompromising commitment to the absolute uniqueness of Jesus Christ. Cf. Tony Richie, "God's Fairness to People of All Faiths: A Respectful Proposal to Pentecostals for Discussion Regarding World Religions", *Pneuma: the Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies*, 28:1 (Spring 2006), pp. 104-19.

living God has made God's self known uniquely—that is, in an unprecedented and unparalleled manner. I am not unaware that adherents of other religions may have similar convictions regarding their own faiths. I am reasonably satisfied that in the eschaton God will make fully clear what we all now know only in part (1 Co 13:9-12).³⁸ That is why we call it *faith*. At the great judgment everything will be made open and we will all be accountable accordingly. This provisional approach puts ultimate judgment on the religions squarely where it belongs: in God's hands! In the meanwhile, we should all humbly pass our pilgrimage through this world with a strong sense of holy fear and trembling (Pp. 2:12). Would not Jesus have us be generous to our religious neighbors?³⁹

11. The Evangelistic Impulse

As Simon Chan advances emphatically, Christian salvation inevitably involves a life of spiritual progress.⁴⁰ Yong suggests salvation is not so much a static *ordo salutis* in which one has arrived, but more a dynamic *via salutis* in which one is on the way.⁴¹ Regarding religious others Edwards quaintly quips that some “take a step on the wrong foot in the right direction”.⁴² John Wesley's partner in preaching and chief theological systematizer, John Fletcher, declared that there are varying degrees of glory available to the righteous according to their faithfulness to walk in the light of God

³⁸ The eschatologically validated provisional form of present knowledge is posited by Wolfhart Pannenberg when discussing Christological exclusivity and soteriological universality in *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 53-55. Cf. Amos Yong: “revelation is eschatological, the truth we long for”, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), p. 299.

³⁹ Answering in the affirmative is the heartbeat of Kenneth Cracknell's *In Good and Generous Faith: Christian Responses to Religious Pluralism* (Werrington: Epworth, 2005).

⁴⁰ Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), pp. 77-101. Chan is no doubt on the right track in his comparison-contrast of Christian and non-Christian conceptions of ultimate goals, pp. 77-79. S. Mark Heim, in *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1995), explores diversity of religious ends among the religions. While I speculate that elements of the major eschatological aims of the highest religions might in some ways complement and contribute to Christian concepts that is too far afield for the present discussion. Honestly, I cannot, however, conceive of authentic but innately contradictory ultimate ends.

⁴¹ Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*, pp. 103-09.

⁴² Edwards, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (p. 216).

they have graciously received in this life.⁴³ Also, the great Christian apologist C. S. Lewis spoke of some “slowly becoming Christians though they do not yet call themselves so”, and suggested that “a Buddhist of good will” may be moving closer to Christ even while “Christians who are slowly ceasing to be Christians but who still call themselves by that name” are moving farther away.⁴⁴ The biblical principle behind such statements is the proclamation that salvation is a dynamic process culminating eschatologically (1 Pet 1:5). God, according to his own infinite righteousness and wisdom, will reward everyone appropriately (cf. Matt 20:8-16; 25:31-46; 1 Co 3:10-15; 2 Pet 1:11).

Implicit in the above is a three-fold impetus to Christian evangelism and mission.⁴⁵ First, the wicked and worldly are headed to Hell and desperately need to hear the good news, repent, and believe for the benefit of their very souls. Second, those ignorant of any real in depth knowledge of the truly divine are crying out in agony for the message of help and hope that the gospel brings. Third, even constitutional Christians are immeasurably advanced in relation to God through coming to comprehend explicitly the life and truth of God in Christ by the Holy Spirit. Possibly our problem is that we tend to collapse all three categories into the first. These multiple motivations for witnessing ministry are much more true to life. All need to hear the gospel and respond in faith and obedience to its claims on their life, but not necessarily in the same way or for the same reasons.⁴⁶ Yet Christians have an equal and unequivocal responsibility to proclaim the love of God in Christ to one and all (John 3:16; 1 John 2:2).

The objection is also heard that if some who have not yet heard the gospel are not automatically lost then we might actually harm them by giving them a chance to refuse Christ’s gospel, in which case they would then assuredly be lost. Usually this argument is presented

⁴³ Cf. Richie, “Wesley and Mohammed”, *ATJ*, pp. 88-90. I quite agree with Yong that “reframing Fletcher” is a particularly valuable avenue for contemporary theology of religions. See *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*, pp. 247-53.

⁴⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: Collier, 1952), p. 162.

⁴⁵ Sharing the gospel across religious boundaries is a special challenge but the responsibility to do so certainly exists. See Edwards, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (pp. 222-24)

⁴⁶ I see all this as completely consistent with Kärkkäinen’s contention that today’s Pentecostal missiological perceptions and practices are ready for transforming, “‘Truth on Fire’”, *AJPS*, pp. 33-36.

to expose the supposed ridiculousness of religious inclusivism. That totally misunderstands the nature of the message. As Fletcher also said so well, an attraction or repulsion to light is actually only made manifest by the gospel being authentically presented.⁴⁷ Jesus said it even better: some love the light and will come to it because their deeds are good; some love darkness and flee from the light because their deeds are evil (John 3:19-21). Plainly put, the gospel exposes the hidden qualities of an inner life; the visible reception or rejection of the gospel we observe is simply the acting out of what was inside all the time. And that is true not only for some of them but for all of us. The overly facile observation that inclusivism discourages evangelism because some do not need it or may be harmed by it is therefore fallacious.

12. Eschatological Orientation

Already mentioned is the centrality of biblical prophecy or eschatology in Britt's writings as part of the context for his reflections on religious founders and figures and their faiths. As Steve Land has so persuasively proposed, the Pentecostal movement as a whole has been characterized by ardent commitment to the coming Kingdom of God. The impact of that felt fact upon Pentecostal Christian identity, ministry, spirituality, and theology is evident.⁴⁸ Christ's own arrival and announcement of the coming Kingdom of God and the advent of the eschatological Holy Spirit have inaugurated the "last days" (Mk. 1:15; Acts 2:17). In theological parlance, as Gordon Fee so well presents it, the future has already begun even as we move toward a consummation not yet complete, the "already-not yet" or "now-not yet" paradigm.⁴⁹ Poised (sometimes precariously!) between an under realized eschatology that denies or diminishes the present experience of God's power and an over realized eschatology that denies or diminishes present encounters with human weakness, Pentecostalism at its best proclaims a properly realized eschatology that affirms and

⁴⁷ Richie, "Wesley and Mohammed", *ATJ*, p. 90; see also fn. 112.

⁴⁸ Steven J. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom* (JPTSup, 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

⁴⁹ Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), pp. 803-26.

integrates both dimensions of existence in Christ and in the Spirit as we move toward a divinely ordained destiny of ultimate triumph.

Now-not yet eschatology affirms and elucidates Evangelical and Pentecostal theologies of religions in incredibly rich ways. I wish to highlight three aspects: God's working in the world of religions today; the present incomplete state of all religions; and, the consummation of all religions in Christ. As the Kingdom of God breaks into this world the most viable, visible sign of its presence is the Church. Nevertheless, the Kingdom is larger than and therefore not limited to the Church.⁵⁰ Some signs of God's presence and influence ought to be expected throughout the whole world—including the world religions. The Kingdom is not present merely where the word is spoken but where the power is operative (1 Co 4:20). This is, of course, actually made possible by Christ, and as people of world faiths are brought into more direct contact with Christ the signs (and substance) of the Kingdom increase exponentially. Agape love, for example, begins to illumine all of life (John 13:35). Not surprisingly, however, in a religious world still fraught with human frailty, much that is not pleasing to God in accordance with God's self-disclosure in Christ may be discerned. The faults and failures of the world religions from the Christian point of view should never be minimized. But they should not be a cause for casting stones either (John 8:7). Then no religion really wins. Rather, we can construe this life as an ongoing opportunity to construct a life of faith moving toward a glorious consummation in which all is forever fulfilled graciously in Christ (Eph 1:10). In the meanwhile, today the real battle to be fought and the victory to be won by faith in Jesus Christ is against the demonic perversions of righteousness and truth expressed in deviant human belief and behavior that is truly diabolically inspired (1 Ti 4:1-16).

Conclusion

I wish to pull all of this together in a concrete life application or a Pentecostal testimony. We have in the congregation where I serve as

⁵⁰ Especially suggestive is Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen's statement in *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical, & Contemporary Perspectives* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 346: "All agree that the kingdom is bigger than the church, but the kingdom is the kingdom of Christ". Expanding the scope of the Kingdom beyond the Church does not limit but rather enlarges perception of the scope of the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

pastor an African American man with whom I have spent many hours talking about his spiritual journey. Raised as a Christian by his mother and grandmother, he was wounded as a young adult by rampant racism in some so-called “Christian” whites.⁵¹ In college he was mesmerized by the message of the Black Muslim movement, particularly the Nation of Islam, and converted. For some years he gave himself completely to consecration to that faith. Eventually, however, he had an enlightening experience in which he realized that he had himself succumbed to preaching a religion of hate, a reverse form of racial prejudice.⁵² Shocked to the core of his soul, but still with a heart for God, he returned to his Christian roots, a religious “reversion” rather than a “conversion” perhaps. Thus he became a Spirit-filled leader and worker in our Pentecostal congregation and in the surrounding community. He has a special passion for helping local African Americans make it through the same maze he has traveled—racially, socially, and spiritually.

I am glad God is the Judge and not me! How would I judge this man? How would you? He seems to have been sincerely trying to walk with God all the while. For me the key is probably when he realized what was happening to him. This may be the point of comparison with the destiny of the unevangelized. He received more light and he willingly walked in it. What if he had not? Judgment is a genuine possibility. Universality is not universalism. But he did. Thank God! May we all do as much! Perhaps then we will be not only constitutional but complete Christians.

⁵¹ On February 6, 2006 at 10:00 p.m. (ET), I watched a PBS television documentary (channel 3, WKOP) on Dietrich Bonhoeffer in which filmmaker Martin Doblmeier profiles the young Christian theologian’s life. Doblmeier proposes Bonhoeffer’s encounter with racist treatment against African American Christians in New York City prepared him to recognize and resist Adolph Hitler’s Holocaust persecution of the Jews in World War II. I was floored by the comparison.

⁵² My brother explains to me that not all Black Muslims, or even all members of the Nation of Islam today, many of whom he says have evolved ethically, are racists or hate mongers. That was his experience and this is his testimony.