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**The Problem with Double Predestination and the  
Case for a Christocentric-Missional Universalism**

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Introduction

A. Survey of the Debate over Double Predestination

B. Revelation and Trinity

C. Instrumental Soteriology

D. Toward a Christocentric-Missional Conception of Christian Universalism

Bibliography

**Introduction**

This paper is a reflection on the problem of election and predestination for the sake of building an argument in favor of Christian universalism. In recent years, a lot of work has been done on this issue. In 1999, Thomas Talbott published *The Inescapable Love of God*, which addressed this problem as an evangelical Christian philosopher.<sup>2</sup> In 2006, the pseudonymous Gregory MacDonald released *The Evangelical Universalist*, which made Talbott's argument, but from the perspective of an evangelical biblical theologian.<sup>3</sup> These works are notable because they argue in favor of universalism from a decidedly *evangelical* point of view.

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.ptsem.edu](http://www.ptsem.edu).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Talbott, *The Inescapable Love of God* (Salem, OR: Universal Publishers, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Gregory MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2006).

And while “evangelical” is certainly a contested label, here it means primarily (1) a commitment to biblical authority, and (2) the belief that salvation is by faith alone (*sola fide*). Between Talbott and MacDonald, the edited volume *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate*<sup>4</sup> was released, in which a variety of evangelical scholars responded to Talbott’s book. Furthermore, numerous other essays have been published over the past few decades which deal with philosophical arguments regarding eternal damnation, exegetical arguments on certain key texts (e.g., Rom. 5:12-21, 1 Cor. 15:22, Col. 1:20), and theological arguments over election, christology, soteriology, and eschatology. Suffice it to say, the problem of universalism has become mainstream, even within the seemingly inhospitable environment of American evangelicalism.

It is in light of this background that I seek to enter the debate as a systematic theologian. Thus far the debate has remained almost strictly philosophical and exegetical. The articles that deal with theological *loci* tend to be commentaries on the positions of theologians, such as Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Karl Barth, and Hans Urs von Balthasar. There are not many arguments for universalism that look at the problem on primarily theological grounds. While this essay is only a primer, meant to stimulate discussion and further reflection, I do hope to raise the key questions that must be addressed in order for this debate to progress any further. I cannot claim to have “solved” these problems. Instead, I hope to show why some of the so-called “orthodox” positions ought to be called into question. In other words, I hope to unsettle people on all sides of this debate, so that we can learn to see this issue from a fresh perspective.

### **A. Survey of the Debate over Double Predestination**

The double-predestinating God of magisterial Protestantism has been called many disparaging names over the centuries: cold, distant, tyrannical, and even demonic. But perhaps the most common charge in modernity is the label of “unfair.” While this is, admittedly, a rather subjective sentiment, the label seeks to point out that the

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<sup>4</sup> Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Partridge, eds., *Universal Salvation?: The Current Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

classical doctrine of double predestination seems entirely arbitrary. Some are predestined for salvation, others for damnation; some are elect, while others are reprobate. More importantly, this determination of God is made in pre-temporal eternity; it is part of the “secret will of God” hidden in God’s eternal life. When God reveals Godself in Jesus Christ, God only reveals God’s general will to redeem humanity and the particular means by which this salvation will be accomplished. The “secret will” regarding who is actually redeemed remains hidden. We will have to return to the trinitarian problem later. For now, it will suffice to point out that while classical Protestantism rightly made God’s grace alone the basis for salvation, this came at the expense of Jesus Christ being the full revelation of God. Classical Reformed scholasticism ended up with an arbitrary God and a soteriology that often seemed indistinguishable from fate. It was inevitable that descendents of the Reformation would find this intolerable. The divide between “Calvinism” and “Arminianism” thus reflects the apparent conflict between the theological presupposition that God alone is the source of salvation (Calvinism) and the anthropological presupposition that human beings are free creatures and not merely breathing marionettes (Arminianism).

Defenders of the Reformed scholastic position on predestination have an easy time defeating claims of “unfairness.” Quite simply, if all people are sinners, then no one deserves to be saved; no one has a claim on God. The “fair” thing would be to consign us all to the damnation of hell. That any person is rescued by God from this well-deserved fate is an act of pure grace. Claims of “unfairness” are attempts, as C. S. Lewis famously put it, to place “God in the dock.” We make ourselves the judge of what is “fair” and “unfair,” and then we expect God to meet our demands for “fairness.” Defenders of the doctrine of predestination have every reason to repudiate such notions. But not only them. Any Christian committed to the idea that God is Lord and Judge and we are not must stand in opposition to the modern emphasis on the self as the sole arbiter of what is true or false, fair or unfair. In other words, the question, “Does the doctrine of election make God unfair?” is entirely the wrong question. The rejection of double predestination must come from a wholly different starting-point.

At the same time, the Arminian criticism of predestination fails as well. This criticism gets off the ground only by making Jesus merely the *possibility* for salvation which individual human beings must complete through their decision of faith. Often this results in a kind of “salvation by works”—it is the human work of faith in God that actually saves us, and Jesus simply makes such faith a real possibility. Besides the problem of contradicting the NT passages that speak of Christ’s work as a completed atoning act of God which includes us wholly by God’s grace alone, the Arminian position also involves a rosy picture of human freedom that is neither found in Scripture nor accepted by the central teachers of the church, including Augustine (*The Spirit and the Letter*) and Luther (*The Bondage of the Will*). The only way to escape this version of semi-Pelagianism is to make faith a gift from God. Faith comes to us as a gift of the Holy Spirit, as Paul declares (Rom. 8:12-17; Gal. 5:16-18, 22-25). However, once we acknowledge that faith is a divine gift that comes to us out of the grace of God, we are thrust back into the same problem of predestination. For if God determines who comes to faith, then God is still predetermining who is saved and who isn’t. It may be a predetermination that occurs in the present-tense moment rather than in a pre-temporal decision, but it is a predetermination nonetheless, fraught with all the same problems.

At this point, we need to rehearse what those problems are in more detail. I will address them in the following order: (1) the problem of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, (2) the problem of the immanent and economic Trinity, and (3) the problem of a soteriology of instrumentalization. Since the first two are so interconnected, I will treat them together. Before I turn to these problems, though, I must state up front that I view classical double predestination as the only biblically and theologically viable alternative to universalism. In many key passages, Scripture makes it clear that our wills are in bondage to sin, faith is a gift from God, the work of Christ on the cross is a completed, effective event of salvation, and God alone determines our salvation as an act of divine grace. These are axiomatic for any theology that seeks to attend faithfully to the biblical witness. Certainly, the “free will” or Arminian position finds some biblical support, and a fuller treatment

of those passages would be necessary in a larger analysis of this issue. Here, however, I presuppose that double predestination and universalism are the only options on the table. It is with this in mind that I now turn to the theological problems involved in the classical position on divine election.

### **B. Revelation and Trinity**

At the heart of the problem with double predestination is the doctrine of revelation and the corresponding doctrine of the Trinity. What is revelation? What exactly does Jesus Christ reveal? And how does our view of revelation influence our view of the Trinity? In various ways throughout history, the Christian church has made a sharp distinction between God's being *ad intra* (immanent Trinity) and God's being *ad extra* (economic Trinity). While there are certainly reasons to protect this distinction, classical thinking about election has a poor reason for doing so. In short, the ineffable mystery about why some people come to faith and others do not was translated into a metaphysical distinction between the ineffable aspect of God which remains unrevealed (immanent Trinity) and the effable aspect of God which is revealed (economic Trinity). The doctrine of election was located in the ineffable, immanent being of God. The Protestant scholastics thus spoke of election as God's *decretum absolutum*, the absolute decree hidden in God's "secret will" from all eternity. Revelation was only a revelation of the *means* to salvation, a problem which I address below.

The question is: how do we come to know of the Trinity? The answer is, both historically and theologically, through Jesus Christ. Historically, we see that trinitarian dogma was only formulated as a result of the christological dogma that Jesus Christ is of "one being" (*homoousias*) with the Father. Theologically, it follows from the fact that in Jesus, God becomes manifest and revealed to those who have eyes to see. In later German theology, the notion of "self-revelation" was used. Jesus Christ is not only the revelation of God; he is the *self*-revelation of God, since he is, as the councils affirmed, truly God incarnate. The theological consequence is that our doctrine of the Trinity takes its rise from our doctrine of Christ. To answer the

question, “Who is Jesus?” means that we also answer the question, “Who is God?”

It’s important to note, however, that the church historically resisted any real connection between the being of Jesus and the being of God. God’s being, with all its metaphysical attributes, was presupposed. And for the Reformed scholastics, whether infralapsarian or supralapsarian, the decree to provide a mediator always came after the decree to elect. Therefore they could conceal the divine will of election in the metaphysically defined immanent being of God—and they could do all this apart from attending to the person of Jesus Christ. The being of Jesus Christ was secondary at best in terms of understanding the identity of God.

The problem with this approach to the Trinity is that God is being defined on the basis of sources not found in Scripture. The metaphysical deity is defined according to the Pseudo-Dionysian “three ways” toward knowledge of God. There are three classical forms of metaphysical arguments: (1) *via negativa* (way of negation), in which a human attribute is negated and then applied to divinity (e.g., infinitude, immortality, ungenerateness); (2) *via eminentiae* (way of superiority or projection), in which one begins with human attributes (e.g., knowledge and power), raises them to the level of infinite perfection (omniscience and omnipotence), and then projects these concepts upon the being of God; and (3) *via causalitatis* (way of causation), in which one reasons backwards from cosmological reality to a First Cause or Unmoved Mover. Each of these begins to speak about God only by first speaking about some creaturely reality. But once one adopts a metaphysical method, there is no guarantee that one will ever in fact speak about *God*. The point is that, in metaphysical reasoning, one does not begin with *God’s self-revelation*. Instead, one begins with a reality that is accessible to natural human reasoning apart from faith, whether that reality is the human person or the cosmological order. When we allow metaphysics to control our understanding of God, Jesus becomes secondary; he simply fills in the gaps of our knowledge. In this case, he fills the gap concerning the *means* of salvation, but he tells us nothing of the nature of this salvation or the identity of the God who wills this salvation. This brings us to the problem of an instrumental soteriology.

### **C. Instrumental Soteriology**

By speaking of an “instrumental soteriology,” I mean that Jesus Christ is not himself constitutive of what salvation is or who is saved; he merely fulfills a divine decision regarding salvation that is made apart from him in eternity. Jesus is an instrument to make salvation possible, but he is not the definitive self-revelation of God. The problem of a soteriological instrumentalization of Christ is aptly encapsulated in the debate between infralapsarianism and supralapsarianism. A brief summary of this debate will help clarify matters.

The infralapsarian-supralapsarian debate took place within the academic circles of Reformed orthodoxy and concerned the order of the divine decrees in pre-temporal eternity.<sup>5</sup> Infralapsarians adopted a more “historical” order: (1) creation and fall, (2) election and reprobation, and (3) the provision of a mediator (Christ). Infralapsarianism makes the decree of creation and fall independent of the decree to elect and reject human beings. Predestination is made subordinate to creation, so that the decree of creation and fall is a decree for its own sake. Predestination thus concerns actually created and fallen individuals, and so presupposes a prior created reality. For the infralapsarian, then, God’s defeat of evil is “a later and additional struggle in which God is dealing with a new and to some extent disruptive feature in His original plan.”<sup>6</sup> Creation does not exist, for the infralapsarian, solely for the sake of the revelation of divine mercy and justice in the election of some and the reprobation of others. Evil takes on “a more enigmatical character,” since the permitting of evil is not grounded in the predestinating decree.<sup>7</sup>

Supralapsarians, by contrast, adopted a logical order of decrees: (1) election and reprobation, (2) creation and fall, and (3) the provision of a mediator. For this position, the fall is a necessary corollary of God’s eternal decree of election and reprobation.

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<sup>5</sup> My comments on this debate are taken from Barth’s small-print discussion in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, 13 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956-75), II/2, 127-45.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

Creation and fall are subordinate to the decision to reveal God's mercy and justice in election and reprobation. In other words, all creaturely reality exists for the sake of God's predestinating decision. Creation has no independent status apart from the covenant. Sin and evil are not disruptions to God's plan but integral to the plan itself, controlled by God for the sake of realizing God's one eternal will. The infralapsarians thus charged the supralapsarians with making God the author of sin and evil (*auctor peccati*); the supralapsarians responded by charging the infralapsarians with creating an arbitrary deity who creates the world and permits the fall for unknowable reasons. Supralapsarianism rejects such arbitrariness by making both election and reprobation solely dependent upon God's eternal decision; nothing occurs outside of God's eternal will, according to supralapsarianism. According to supralapsarianism, "God does not will and affirm evil and the fall . . . but for the sake of the fulness of His glory, for the sake of the completeness of His covenant with man, for the sake of the perfection of His love, He wills and affirms this man as sinful man" as the one ordained to reveal God's mercy and justice, God's Yes and No.<sup>8</sup> Infralapsarianism posits a hidden divine rationality higher and prior to the divine will of predestination because of the apparent precedence of creation over election. But as Barth argues, these "logico-empirical objections" are "not the arguments of faith,"<sup>9</sup> since faith begins and ends with the revelation of God's glory, mercy, and justice, and thus supralapsarianism is the better of the two because of its strict adherence to the biblical testimony on this point.

From Barth's perspective, both positions have their problems: infralapsarianism divides the God of creation from the God of reconciliation, while within supralapsarianism "God threatens to take on the appearance of a demon" due to the abstract nature of the *decretum absolutum* regarding who is elect and who is damned.<sup>10</sup> Barth addresses these criticisms in his own radical revision of the supralapsarian position. Barth's central critique of both

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 140.



supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism is that they separate election from the provision of a mediator. Jesus Christ is an afterthought, a mere instrument for the sake of accomplishing the redemption of the elect. Jesus Christ does not constitute the nature of election. He only fulfills the instrumental need for a mediator.

In contrast to both classical positions, Barth's new order of decrees is: (1) the provision of the elected one, Jesus Christ, in whom all others are elect, and (2) creation and fall. Election and reprobation are located in the decision to become incarnate in Jesus. There are no longer two distinct groups of people—elect and reprobate—but instead there is one person, Jesus of Nazareth, who actualizes the reprobation and election of all humanity in his particular history. Here, as in supralapsarianism, creation and fall are wholly subordinate to the decision of election, but against the quasi-demonic god of the *decretum absolutum*, election is God's clear and unequivocal Yes to humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. Election refers not to individual human beings as either humanity already created and fallen (infralapsarianism) or humanity to be created and allowed to fall (supralapsarianism), but rather to Jesus Christ and him alone, the electing and elected Son of God.<sup>11</sup> Election is not equally Yes and No, but wholly and finally Yes: "The Yes cannot be heard unless the No is also heard. But the No is said for the sake of the Yes and not for its own sake. In substance, therefore, the first and last word is Yes and not No."<sup>12</sup> With this, the groundwork for a doctrine of universal salvation has been laid.

#### **D. Toward a Christocentric-Missional Conception of Christian Universalism**

Thus far in this paper I have explored the problems with free-will Arminianism and double-predestination Calvinism. The former fails to take the *salvation-event of Jesus Christ* with full seriousness, lapsing into a kind of semi-Pelagianism. The latter fails to take the *revelation-event of Jesus Christ* with full seriousness, lapsing into a

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<sup>11</sup> See *ibid.*, 43: "In the strict sense only He [Jesus Christ] can be understood and described as 'elected' (and 'rejected'). All others are so in Him, and not as individuals."

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

kind of doctrine of God which posits a will and being of God behind the God we encounter in Jesus. Both positions, I am suggesting, fail to make Jesus Christ the central and final criterion of our theology. Both fail, at the critical moment, to be *truly christocentric*. The result is that their soteriologies are not conditioned from beginning to end by the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. My proposal here is that we attend to the Christ-event as constitutive of what it means to be God (Trinity and revelation) and what it means to be saved (soteriology).<sup>13</sup>

In terms of the doctrine of God, we acknowledge that there is no being or will of God behind or separate from what occurs in Jesus Christ. The immanent Trinity must never be used in a way that suggests there is a Trinity or essence of God that remains undisclosed and unknown. If that were the case, then we would have no way of knowing that the God we encounter in Jesus Christ is in fact actually God. We could have no guarantee that the God we worship is really and truly *God*. Moreover, it would be a violation of God's self-communicative love as attested in Holy Scripture. In what sense could Jesus Christ be the incarnation of God's love if the triune God withholds a key part of Godself from us? Such a view also raises serious questions about trinitarian heresies. The notion of a "secret will of God" implies a kind of divine essence behind the divine economy, and this comes close to turning the Trinity into a Quaternity, on the one hand, or advocating a kind of modalism, on the other hand, in which the "three persons" only appear in the economy while a single divine essence is what actually exists in the immanent being of God. Certainly Reformers like Calvin refused to speak about the *being* of God and would thus find theological talk of the divine essence to be speculative and perhaps even meaningless. But those who came after Calvin made such God-talk central, and in modernity, it is the doctrine of God that concerns us most of all, so we have to address these issues head-on. It is not sufficient to cite apparent

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<sup>13</sup> I would, of course, extend this to other *loci*. The Christ-event constitutes what it means to be human (anthropology), what it means to have faith (pisteology), what it means to love others (ethics), what it means to love and serve God (ecclesiology), etc.

biblical support for one's position while avoiding the ontological questions implied in these passages.

In terms of our soteriology, we must affirm that what occurs in Jesus Christ *is* the reconciliation of the world. According to Paul, God “reconciled us to himself through Christ” and, again, “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them” (2 Cor. 5:18, 19). Colossians puts it even more strongly when the author states that “in [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:19-20). And in Romans, Paul expressly declares that “just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous” (Rom. 5:18-19). Paul is at pains in this passage to emphasize that the “free gift” of righteousness accomplished in Jesus Christ's obedience to the Father is “much more” effective and powerful than the sin of Adam (cf. Rom. 5:15, 17). Christ is not merely the equal of Adam; rather, Jesus Christ is far greater. He is qualitatively more significant than any other human person. Jesus Christ is not simply a response to sin and death; he is the victor! What occurs in the history of Christ is *infinitely more significant* than the sin that affects human existence. The consequence of this view is clear: to say that some will finally remain outside the scope of Christ's reconciling death and resurrection is to make the sin of Adam more significant and more universal than the obedience of Jesus. The result is, again, a failure to take Jesus Christ with full seriousness.

To retrace the ground covered thus far, I have argued that, against Arminianism, grace is irresistible. But I have also argued, against classical Calvinism, that the atonement is not limited but universal in scope. Of course, this means that against both strands in Protestant theology, I have distinguished between human faith and divine salvation. Arminianism makes our individual faith constitutive of our salvation, while Calvinism makes our individual faith a reflection or consequence of a salvation secured in God's hidden decree of

election. That is, for Calvinism (and the Christian tradition more generally), the doctrine of election is an answer to the question: why do some believe and others do not?<sup>14</sup> Either way, faith is directly related to our eternal destiny, whether as cause or as confirmation. I am suggesting here that we need to rethink this correlation between faith and salvation: not to dispense with it, but to reconceive it along a strictly christocentric, missional line. To do so, I will suggest that we need to distinguish, as Paul does in Romans, between reconciliation and salvation in a way that protects the soteriological axiom of *sola gratia* and the ecclesiological emphasis on the mission of the church.

The letter of Paul to the Romans is a complex and rich treatise. And while it cannot be read in isolation from its cultural context or Paul's other texts, we are justified in turning to it for Paul's most mature theological thinking, since it is the last of his letters. Without a complete exegetical analysis of this text, I wish to highlight a key passage in Romans 5:

But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved (σωθησόμεθα) through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled (κατηλλάγημεν) to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled (καταλλαγέντες), will we be saved (σωθησόμεθα) by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation (καταλλαγήν). (Rom. 5:8-11)

In this passage, Paul makes a clear distinction between *καταλλάσσω* (to reconcile) and *σώζω* (to save). Reconciliation—and justification, I would argue, in light of Rom. 5:9—occurred in the death of Jesus Christ, while salvation will occur in the *eschaton*. Reconciliation is past-tense in nature, while salvation is in the future tense. Both, however, are grounded in the one mediator between God and humanity, Jesus Christ: his death reconciles us to God, while his new life in the resurrection ensures our salvation.

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<sup>14</sup> I will certainly grant that it is precisely this question which historically gave rise to the doctrine of election, but we cannot remain satisfied with allowing this question to determine our theological thinking about election. Even if, historically speaking, this question is the starting-point for reflection on this difficult issue, our theological thinking must begin elsewhere: viz. in the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ as witnessed to in Holy Scripture.

Three things are worth highlighting in light of this text. First, Paul does not make our reconciliation with God dependent upon our faith in Jesus Christ. We are reconciled to God in Jesus Christ “while we were enemies” of God. This is the heart of what it means to say that salvation is *sola gratia*, by grace alone—it comes to us freely out of God’s loving self-donation in Christ in spite of our own enmity with God. Second, who is reconciled to God? The answer, it seems to me, is given in Rom. 5:12-21, where Paul employs the Adam-Christ typology: “just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.” Third, the distinction between reconciliation and salvation opens the door for a missional-eschatological conception of salvation. If we take a look at other uses of σωζω in Paul’s letters, we see the emphasis on the future-tense. In Rom. 10, Paul says that if we confess that “Jesus is Lord,” or call on “the name of the Lord,” we *will be saved*. In the notoriously difficult passage of Rom. 11:26, Paul says that “all Israel *will be saved*.” In 1 Corinthians, we find the interesting statement that the cross is the power of God “to us who are *being saved*” (1 Cor. 1:18). Similarly, Paul says in the second letter to the Corinthians that “we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are *being saved* and those who are perishing” (2 Cor. 2:15). Other texts could be marshaled to further substantiate this distinction between reconciliation and salvation, but the idea is clear: for Paul, our salvation is an existential and eschatological actuality. It is existential in that it concerns our lived existence before God; but it is eschatological in that God alone confirms our salvation when we encounter God “face to face.” Salvation, as Paul defines it, is both present-tense and future-tense. We both “work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12) and await our salvation in the final *parousia* of God. But—and here is the key point—salvation only has existential and eschatological significance because it first has its ontic foundation in the past-tense assurance of our reconciliation with God in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

All humanity is reconciled to God in the cross and resurrection of Christ. This is our starting-point, the basis for our faith. Now that we are, in fact, reconciled to God, the task of the church is to make this reconciliation known to the world through the proclamation of the

gospel. As Paul puts it, “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:19). Salvation, as Paul uses the term, has to do with the mission of the church in proclaiming the message of reconciliation. We are “saved,” so to speak, in our personal, existential decisions of faith, but these decisions are not constitutive of our reconciliation with God; our reconciliation has already been accomplished in Christ. In fact, it is only *because* we have been reconciled to God that we can *then* be saved through our faithful and obedient participation in the mission of God. Our salvation presupposes our reconciliation. We receive salvation only insofar as we obediently acknowledge and proclaim the reconciliation of the world in Jesus Christ.

This reading of Paul’s letters allows one to simultaneously affirm that salvation is by faith alone *and* that all people are reconciled to God apart from their faith. Faith is necessary for our participation in the mission of God through the ecclesial community, but faith is not necessary—in fact, it would antithetical to the gospel of God’s grace if it were—for our reconciliation with God, which comes to us as alien righteousness, as divine gift, in Jesus Christ. No human work—no confession of sin or affirmation of personal faith—brings about this reconciliation with God. We must continually remember that God reconciled us to Godself *while we were sinners*. And yet only those who acknowledge this reality and follow Christ in humble obedience are able to existentially participate in the fullness of life promised us. The kingdom of God remains future for those who are reconciled but not saved; but for those who do confess that Jesus is Lord here and now, God’s reign becomes an existential reality and calling—it becomes our vocation, our mission as faithful disciples of Jesus.

The form of Christian universalism offered here is certainly not pluralistic (“all religions lead to God”). It is rather strictly christocentric in nature: Jesus Christ alone is “the way, the truth, and the life.” No one may come to God except through him. The difference from traditional evangelicalism is that everyone *will* come to God through him, because everyone *has* come to God *in him*. At the same time, I am proposing a universalism that does not diminish

the importance of the church's mission of proclamation in the least. In fact, it seeks to make such activity truly meaningful within the Reformational emphasis on *sola gratia*. Here there is no compulsion to "get as many saved as possible," as if we have the responsibility to "get people into heaven." There is no need to scare people into salvation. Instead, when our reconciliation to God is our starting-point, we are able to go forth in *joy and gratitude* for what God has done for us already. We are able to preach truly "good news." We are able to say with a straight-face, "God loves you precisely as you are"—not "God loves you" insofar as you repent of your sins or say this prayer or join this church. There is no soteriological instrumentalization, either of Jesus or of the church's mission. Instead, we are able to proclaim the glorious news that sin and evil will not and cannot have the last word, because the powers and principalities have already been conquered by Jesus Christ. Death has been defeated, evil destroyed, and hell emptied. There is nothing left to do but acknowledge this fact with grateful hearts, giving thanks to God by going forth with this word on our lips as we proclaim what God has done.

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