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Election and the Universal Offer of the Gospel

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Introduction

It has been said that words are like eyeglasses for the soul. By means of words we place people into loosely defined groups. We speak of friends, relatives, Muslims, homeless persons, Christians, convicts, etc. The list is nearly endless. These “eyeglasses” affect our attitude toward the people we place in these groups, and how we relate to them.

A. Two Assumptions

In addition to these narrow categories, the Bible speaks of a final division of mankind: the elect, who will surely come to complete salvation in Christ and, those who will be finally lost. As evangelical Christians we have been taught to view the entire human race as those who will be finally lost unless we have reason to think differently

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about some people. This assumption is so basic, so commonly held, so well accepted in evangelical theology that it seems insolent to question it.

How should we view and relate to the individuals we meet every day and to the masses of humanity? The answer to this question depends on which of these two assumptions reflects the teaching of the Scriptures:

Premise A—: All persons will be finally lost except those who the Bible declares will be saved.

Premise B—: All persons will be saved except those who the Bible declares will be finally lost.

How we view and relate to all human beings is a very important consideration for living the truly Christian life. We should view and relate to all persons even including “strangers” (Matt. 25:35) as brothers (vs. 40) and sisters in Christ unless we have sure knowledge to the contrary. “Sure knowledge to the contrary” concerning any particular person or group of persons will not be given to us until the Day of Judgment (Matt. 25: 34-46; Luke 10:25-37; John 12:47, 48; Rom. 2:16).

Viewing and relating to all persons as the Bible prescribes is vital in order to understand the relationship between: “Election and the Universal Offer of the Gospel.”

If we accept the biblical fact that not all persons will be saved, we cannot avoid being influenced by either assumption A or B (above). The choice we make becomes a key assumption that profoundly influences our understanding of the Bible's message as well as our attitude toward our neighbors and the masses of humanity.

The Church Fathers

The apostles turned “the world upside down” with “good news of great joy” that was “for all the people” (Luke 2:10). The early church fathers understood the concept “for all the people” to be an essential part of the “good news.” For centuries following the age of the apostles, the church for the most part, proclaimed that the “good news of great joy” was “for all the people.” Following those early centuries the church has never been as effective in church planting and in any other outreach ministries as it was then.

During the days of Pelagius, (about, AD 350—418), most of the leading church fathers worked with the perspective of assumption B, believing that all persons would be saved with no exceptions, as Origen (AD 185-254) did; or with some exceptions, as Athanasius (AD 293-373) did. Neither of these highly regarded church fathers was charged with heresy by the church of their day.² In a misguided attempt to purify the church, Pelagius, working with assumption A, taught that all persons will be finally lost except those who, by their own strength and determination of will, would live in obedience to the law of God following the example of Christ.

Providentially, Augustine (AD 354—430) recognized and refuted the “works righteousness” implicit in Pelagius’ teaching. Regrettably, he was comfortable with the assumption on which Pelagius’ work was based. Ever since then, most theologians have followed the precedent used by Augustine, doing their theology on the basis of Premise A. We ought to consider very carefully the evidence for Premise B as the perspective enjoined by the Scriptures. Premise B enables us to understand the relationship between the doctrine of “election” and “the universal offer of the gospel.”

B. Assumption “B” Based on Four Facts

Fact No. 1 —

The so-called "universalistic" texts speak of a certain-to-be-realized salvation as Calvinists have consistently maintained, and they do so in terms of all persons as Arminians have always affirmed.

The So-Called “Universalistic” Texts

The Bible clearly teaches that “one sin brought condemnation” to all. All persons have been constituted sinners by the disobedience of the first Adam (Rom. 5:12-19). The Bible reveals an exception to “all” who “were constituted sinners,” — the “Son of man,” Jesus Christ, the sinless one.

So also the Scriptures tell us that there are exceptions to the following universal declarations. We may never interpret the following so-called “universalistic” texts in isolation from the

² For proof of this claim see: “Universalism The Prevailing Doctrine” (on the web).

biblically described exceptions. Only the Bible itself has the right to tell us that there are exceptions to these explicit pronouncements and to describe these exceptions: ³

“The true light gives light to every man” (John 1:9).
The Lamb of God “takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).
The Son was sent “to save the world” (John 3:17).
Jesus “will draw all men” to himself (John 12:32).
Jesus came “to save” the world (John 12:47).
All “are justified freely by his grace” (Rom. 3:23, 24).
“One act of righteousness” brings “life for all men” (Rom. 5:18b).
God “has bound all men...so that he may have mercy on” all of them (Rom. 11:32).
“All will be made alive” (1 Cor. 15:22).
“One died for all, and therefore all died” (2 Cor. 5:14).
God does not count “men’s sins against them” (2 Cor. 5:19).
Every tongue will “confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Phil. 2:10, 11).
Through his Son, God has reconciled “all things” to himself (Col. 1:20).
Christ Jesus “gave himself as a ransom for all men” (1 Tim. 2:6).
God “is the Savior of all men” (1 Tim. 4:10).
God’s grace “has appeared for the salvation of all men” (Titus 2:11, RSV).
Jesus tasted “death for everyone” (Heb. 2:9).
Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for our sins and “for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2).

There are no significant textual critical or translation problems in the above passages. Anyone who can read this article can understand what they say just as well as the most learned professor of theology.

There are approximately fifty places where the Bible uses such expressions as: "all," "every," "world," “every one,” and "all men" when referring to a limited group or category of persons or things. These cause no confusion because they have well-known or obvious limiting factors in their immediate context. The so-called “universalistic” texts (listed above) differ from these fifty instances because they have no such limiting factors.⁴

More Than Four Hundred Years

Arminian and Calvinistic theologians have *never* permitted the so-called “universalistic” texts to say "all persons will be saved" no matter how explicitly they in fact say so. To accept these texts for

³ Neal Punt, *A Theology of Inclusivism*, (Northland Books, 2008), 115-145.

⁴ Punt, *A Theology of Inclusivism*, 12-19

what they say would contradict the assumption most theologians have worked with ever since the end of the fourth century, namely, “All persons will be finally lost except those who the Bible declares will be saved,” (that is, Premise A).

Therefore Calvinists claim to find a limiting factor (limiting the text to the elect only) in the immediate context of every one of the so-called “universalistic” texts. Those who fail to find such a limiting factor are accused of sloppy workmanship (exegesis) because they must have ignored the immediate context. For the same reason, Arminian theologians claim that every one of the so-called “universalistic” texts must necessarily be speaking only of a possible or potential salvation for all persons. But these passages say nothing about a “potential” or “possible” salvation.

Neither of these two schools of theology has been able to demonstrate that the claim made by the other is in error. For every ten Calvinistic scholars who have shown beyond all reasonable doubt that these texts speak of an actual “certain-to-be-realized” salvation, there are another ten Arminian theologians of equal credibility who have just as convincingly demonstrated that these texts most assuredly speak of “all persons.”

These traditions have empowered their theology to determine what these texts may or may not say. Both Arminians and Calvinists nullify the Word of God as written in order to maintain their theological tradition. These texts must shape our theology; our theology may not shape these texts.

Any theology that cannot accept both the “certain-to-be-realized” salvation and the “all persons” elements that are in the so-called “universalistic” texts, in conjunction with a final division of humankind, is not structured according to the Word of God as written. Either we accept the so-called “universalistic” texts as written, without any exceptions (Absolute Universalism), or we accept them as written with the exceptions that are necessarily imposed on them by the broader context of the Scriptures. We have no right to change the Word of God as written in order to maintain our particular theological tradition.

An Undeniable Fact

The four-hundred-year debate between Arminians and Calvinists, which continues in full force today among theologians, *would not* and

could not have continued for four centuries except for the fact that the so-called "universalistic" texts do in fact speak of a "certain-to-be-realized" salvation in terms of "all persons."⁵

What one does with this fact may be debatable but the fact itself cannot be seriously questioned. The first principle of sound interpretation is that whatever is less clear must be understood in the light of what is clear in any given passage. What is clear is that the so-called "universalistic" texts speak of a "certain-to-be-realized" salvation, as Calvinists have consistently maintained, and they do so in terms of "all persons," as Arminians have always affirmed.

Fact No. 2 —

All persons, except Jesus Christ, are liable for and polluted by the imputed sin of Adam (inherited sin). However, the Scriptures neither teach nor imply that anyone is consigned to eternal death solely on the basis of their sin in Adam *apart from* actual, willful, and persistent sin on the part of the person so consigned.

Who Will Be Finally Lost?

The question is not: "Who deserves to be finally lost?" Every person, due to the sin of our first parents, deserves eternal death and God has placed them under the sentence of death. "The result of one trespass was condemnation for all men" (Rom. 5:18a).

The corruption and blameworthiness depicted in Romans 1:18–3:20 and parallel passages are a portrayal of every person who is not born again and of every child of God before he or she was born again. "All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one" (Rom. 3:12). This seems to lend credence to the view that: "All persons will be finally lost except those who the Bible declares will be saved." (that is, Premise A).

A Vast Difference

However, there is a vast difference between being corrupt and worthy of death and the implementation of the sentence imposed on this corruption and blameworthiness. It is one thing to say that all persons—elect and non-elect, infants and adults, Gentiles and Jews,

⁵ Wittmore's "100 Scriptural Proofs" (on the Web) provides further evidence for this claim. Regrettably he accepted generalizations as true universals (See Fact No. 2.).

those under the law and those not under the law, believers and unbelievers—are conceived and born in sin and worthy of death. It is something all together different to say that all of them *will suffer* eternal death.

Fact No. 2 tells us something very important about every one of the “exceptions” that is alluded to in Premise B. It tells us that not one of these exceptions is ever consigned to eternal death *solely* on the basis of their union with Adam *apart from* what they have willfully and persistently and what they have finally done, or left undone, during their lifetime.

God’s Discriminations

“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 3:23). Salvation is obtained by grace (“the gift of God”); condemnation is carried out (implemented) on the basis of works (“the wages of sin”). This discrimination is impossible to understand. Our sin-tainted reasoning almost forces us to conclude that the destiny of both the finally saved and the lost must have been determined “before the creation of the world” (Eph. 1:4). The Bible neither speaks of nor implies such a double predestination and neither may we.

Those who will be finally lost are those who, in addition to their inherited (original) sin, willfully, persistently, and finally reject God's truth, kindness, and company, as God has made these known to them in nature and conscience (Rom. 1 & 2) or in gospel proclamation. Those who will be finally saved would have followed the same path as those who will be finally lost, if it were not for the sovereign grace of God which gives them the gifts of repentance, faith, and a willingness to walk in God's ways.

How can that be? The answer to this question is not given to us, and we may not put God on trial. “How unsearchable his judgments” (Rom. 11:33). Believers have no obligation to resolve this perceived problem. One merely traces the lines laid out in God's inspired Word and does not dispute them.

The Judgment Scenes

The basis for final judgment as well as every judgment scene depicted in the Scriptures use phrases such as: “evil doers,” “what he has done,” “those who have done evil,” “whatsoever you did not,” etc.

(See—Matt. 7:23; 16:27; 25:42, 45; John 3:36; 5:29; Rom. 1:20, 24, 26, 28; 2:1- 2, 5-8; 1 Cor. 6:9, 10; 2 Cor. 5:10; Gal. 6:7; Eph. 5:5, 6; Col. 3:25; 2 Thess. 2:12; Rev. 20:12b, 13 and 22:15.)

By such deeds sinners willfully and finally separate themselves from God (Rom. 1:20, 25) and consequently come under God's final judgment — eternal (unending) death. The Scriptures do not tell us why anyone would want to disobey God's will or, for that matter, how anyone can do so. The Bible speaks of this lifelong, self-destructive unbelief and sin as "the secret power of lawlessness" (2 Thess. 2:7). The issue of God's sovereignty (in granting grace to whom he will) in relationship to man's responsibility (obstinately, persistently rejecting God's will) remains a mystery.

Until "The Last Day"

Precisely who will be finally lost will not be known until "the Day of Judgment." The lines of demarcation are not visible in this present age. If we had known Paul when he did "all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus" (Acts 26:9–11), we would have certainly judged that he was among those who would be finally lost. There will be many surprises on that day (Matt. 25:31–46; John 12:48; Rom. 2:16).

We may never interpret the so-called "universalistic" texts in isolation from the rest of the Bible, of which they are an integral part. These texts are like fish out of water, having no sustainable life of their own, when they are isolated from the exceptions to them that are spelled out elsewhere in the Scriptures.

Fact No. 3—

We must accept the so-called "universalistic" texts as written. We may allow only those exceptions that are necessarily imposed on these passages by the broader context of the Scriptures.

Fact No. 1 acknowledges that the so-called "universalistic" passages speak of final salvation in terms of all persons. Fact No. 2 affirms that some persons will be finally lost. These two facts appear to contradict each other. Of the salvation of sinners the Bible says both "all are" and "some are not." Fact No. 3 presents the biblical resolution to this perceived contradiction.

Universal Statements

We see a contradiction here because the three main branches of Christian theology (Arminianism, Calvinism, and Universalism) have failed to consistently distinguish “universal statements” from “generalizations.” These are often confused, but there is a major difference between them.

This study refers to the texts printed above as the *so-called* “universalistic” texts (see Fact No. 1). It does so because these texts are not true universals; rather, they are generalizations. True universal declarations allow no exceptions. Generalizations are universal declarations with known exceptions.

Most theologians insist that the so-called “universalistic” passages are universal declarations that can allow no exceptions. Arminians insist that these passages speak of a potential salvation for all persons *without exception*. Calvinists contend that these same texts refer exclusively to all elect persons *without exception*. Universalists claim that these texts proclaim actual salvation for all persons *without exception*.

Generalizations

Consider Romans 5:18: “Just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men.” Arminians, Calvinists, and Universalists all recognize that Rom. 5:18a is a generalization because it has a known exception, the “Son of man,” Jesus Christ, the sinless one. Yet, each insists that Romans 5:18b is a true universal, allowing no exceptions. They contend this even though there is no grammatical or structural difference between 18a and 18b. Both should be recognized as generalizations because both have exceptions described elsewhere in the Bible.

Biblical Examples of Generalizations

True universals are rarely found in the Scriptures or in other literature. Generalizations are common. “There is no one righteous, not even one” (Rom. 3:10) is a theme found throughout the Bible (Ps. 14:3; Eccles. 7:20; Rom. 3:9, 10, 12, 23; Rom. 5:12 and 5:18a, etc.). All of these texts appear to be true universals, but all are generalizations because Jesus is the exception.

Generalizations are written as universal declarations. We can begin with Gen. 6:13: "I am going to put an end to all people." Noah and his family proved to be an exception. Luke 1:37 is written as a true universal: "Nothing is impossible with God." But we know "it is impossible for God to lie" (Heb. 6:8) or to "disown himself" (2 Tim. 2:13).

Psalms 8:6 and Heb. 2:8 are written as if they are true universals having no exceptions: "You put everything under his feet." Hebrews adds: "In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him." First Corinthians 15:27 alerts us to the fact that, contrary to their appearance as true universals, these texts are in fact generalizations: "Now when it [the Bible] says that 'everything' has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ."

We can legitimately construct this paraphrase of 1 Cor. 15:27: "Now when it [the Bible] says that 'all persons will be saved in Christ' [in the so-called 'universalistic' texts], it is clear that these texts do not include those persons who are described elsewhere in the Bible as those who will not be saved."

The exceptions do not negate the truth proclaimed in the universal declaration. They merely set a boundary for the extension of the claim. As long as we know that exceptions are found elsewhere in the Scriptures, we can accept all the so-called "universal" declarations as written.

Focused and Peripheral Vision

Paul says, "Everything is permissible for me" (1 Cor. 6:12). If we use our focused vision exclusively (seeing nothing but the text and its immediate context), we would have to conclude that theft and murder were "permissible" for Paul. Our peripheral vision tells us that those things explicitly forbidden by God "are not permissible" for Paul. The so-called "universalistic" passages say "all persons will be saved" while we know that the Scriptures teach that some will be finally lost. We make a serious error if either we do not accept the truth proclaimed in the "universal" declarations, or overlook the exceptions that are found elsewhere in the Bible.

What Purpose Do Generalizations Serve?

Generalizations are not contraries. Generalizations reveal the mindset with which the author is working. They express the perspective from which the subject matter is to be viewed.

In 1 Cor. 6:12 Paul celebrates the new mindset of Christian liberty. Paul has a new perspective, a new freedom in Christ. "Everything is permissible" for Paul, except those things specifically forbidden by God. Not having been nurtured under the Levitical law as Paul was, we do not appreciate how radical and liberating this change was for Paul.

Another mind-boggling change has taken place through the work of Christ. "And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves." (2 Cor. 5:15). "Those who live" is not a smaller but constituent part of those who died with Christ. Those for whom Christ died and those who live in him are the same persons: "If we have been united with him in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection" (Rom. 6:5-8; See also 2 Tim. 2:11.).

Second Corinthians 5:16 continues: "So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view." Earthly standards (friend or foe, male or female, Gentile or Jew, rich or poor, believer or unbeliever, black or white, etc.) for "regarding" people become far less important. Christ "died for all" therefore we must "regard" every person as a person for whom Christ died and rose again, unless we have knowledge to the contrary. Such sure knowledge to the contrary regarding specific persons is not given to us in this present age.

There is No "Because" in John 3:16

The preceding paragraph claims that we must "regard" all persons, including "unbelievers," as those for whom Christ died. This astonishing claim appears to be contradicted by those passages in the Bible that seem to say that sinners are required to *do something* in order to earn the right to be "regarded" as persons for whom Christ died and rose again.

One such passage is John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." This declaration does not say, and the Bible never says, they "have eternal life" *because* they believe in him.

There is no "because" in John 3:16. It is not a prescription or condition that must be met before sinners can be reconciled to God.

Reconciliation is a work that God accomplished through Christ some 2,000 years ago (see "Objective Salvation" below). This is a completed work that was done "through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Heb. 10:8—14). "The message of reconciliation" is a proclamation of what Jesus Christ has already accomplished for all the elect (2 Cor. 5:14 – 21). This is the good news. "News" necessarily refers to an event that has already happened and as such it may not be presented conditionally or as something that must still occur.

John 3:16 and similar texts are not *prescriptions*, they are *descriptions* of the actual situation that pertains to everyone who believes in Jesus Christ. Their faith gives them the firm, life-changing assurance that they are numbered among those who "shall not perish but have eternal life."

John 3:18 does have a "because" in it: "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son." This verse confirms what we have said about John 3:16. Verse 18a, just like John 3:16, is a factual description of all who believe—they are "not condemned." Verse 18b is a prescription or condition and therefore has a "because" in it. Those who will be condemned will be so "because" they have "not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."

What we have said about John 3:16 applies equally well to Romans 10:9—17. Those who "confess," "believe," "trust" or "call on" him are among those who "will be saved." Because these, and similar passages, do not tell sinners what they must do to complete their reconciliation to God, they cannot be used as an argument against Assumption B, namely: "All persons will be saved except those who the Bible declares will be finally lost."

Contrary to popular opinion, the gospel is not: "If you do something, God will forgive your sins." The gospel is: "God has forgiven your sins, therefore you must do something." Let the Church say to all who pass by:

You are not a nobody. You are a child of God.

Therefore you must live like one.

Repent, believe the gospel, and live in joyful obedience to him.

Premise B is the biblical warrant we have for assuming that all persons are elect in Christ unless we have knowledge to the contrary. Apart from an already accomplished reconciliation in Christ there is no gospel (good news) for sinners. The following analogy demonstrates the need for this assumption in witnessing to sinners:

To say to the slave who has not been emancipated, “Do not behave as a slave” is to mock his enslavement. But to say the same to the slave who has been set free is the necessary appeal to put into effect the privileges and rights of his liberation ⁶

The New Testament presumes that those who read or hear its message are no longer slaves of sin. Therefore they are commanded to put into effect the privileges and rights of those who belong to Christ. “Christ’s ambassadors” must willingly identify themselves with the one or the group to whom they bring the good news and say to them: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us [you and me], so that in him we [you and I] might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21).

Fact No. 4—

Jesus “saved” sinners, once for all, by making the supreme sacrifice 2,000 years ago. We speak of this as “objective” salvation. The Bible means something *altogether different* when it says that Paul set out to “save some” (1 Cor. 9:22). The Holy Spirit “saves” sinners by using human agents to bring the gospel to them. We refer to this as “subjective” salvation.

If we overlook the biblical distinction between “objective” and “subjective” salvation, many misunderstandings will ensue. Second Corinthians 5:19: refers to this distinction: “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them [objective salvation.] And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation” [subjective salvation.]

The apostle Paul became “all things to all men” so that he “might save some” (1 Cor. 9:22). Of course Paul could not do what Jesus did

⁶ John Murray, *Epistle to the Romans*, (Eerdmans, 1959), I, 227.

to “save” sinners. The Bible uses the concept “to save” in at least two fundamentally different ways.

Objective Salvation

Objective salvation is the historical and unrepeatable work fully accomplished by Jesus Christ. This is referred to in Hebrews 10:10:— “We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” and in these passages that speak of reconciliation as a completed work: Luke 1:68; Rom. 3:25; 2 Cor. 5:18, 19; Gal. 3:13; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:22; 2 Tim. 1:9, 10; Titus 2:11 (RSV); Heb. 1:3b; 7:27; 9:12, 26; 10:14; 1 Peter 2:24; 1 John 2:2; Rev. 5:5, 9. Paul later realized that he had been objectively saved before he set out for Damascus (Gal. 1:15, 16). Sinners are objectively saved before they have a conversion experience or are identified as Christians.

Because objective salvation is a completed work, the Bible occasionally refers to “the gospel [the good news] *of* your salvation” (Eph. 1:13). The command “Be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20) cannot be a requirement to do something to add to or complete the work of reconciliation. Such a “conditional” reconciliation or salvation would demean the work that Jesus Christ accomplished in behalf of sinners. The command in essence is: “Be what you are.” Sinners must believe that God in Christ has reconciled them to himself.

The willingness and ability to “believe” (faith) is a gift of grace and is in no sense meritorious “so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8, 9). However, not to believe this good news is evidence against those who refuse to believe. This is the paradox of divine sovereignty and human responsibility that God’s Word does not resolve for us.

Subjective Salvation

The Holy Spirit often uses the gospel to transform the heart, soul, and mind of those for whom Christ died. By hearing this good news sinners begin to appreciate the vastness of God’s grace and are moved to repentance, faith, and joyful obedience. This is subjective salvation.

In this way sinners are equipped for good works and enabled to live and die in the joy of their salvation. It is in this subjective sense that Paul had, and we have, the task of proclaiming this good news and thereby “saving” sinners. Therefore the gospel is not only spoken

of as “the gospel of salvation” (Eph. 1:13); it is also “the power of God for salvation” (Rom. 1:16).

In other words Premise B does not rule out the fact that the gospel must be proclaimed for subjective salvation to occur. Mature (responsible) adults must hear and believe the gospel message in order to rejoice in and know the comfort that their salvation affords them.

Subjective salvation is a repeatable event which will continue to occur whenever and wherever the gospel is proclaimed: “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” (I Cor. 1:18; see also: John 3:18; Acts 2:40-41, 47; Acts 16:14; Rom. 1:13; 1 Cor, 9: 22; 2 Tim. 2:10; etc.)

Edward Fudge explains what this means In practical terms:

Just as President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation and, by the stroke of a pen, objectively freed every Black American slave, so Jesus Christ, by his obedience in life and unto death, objectively saved every human being who finally will be saved. And just as no American slave personally enjoyed the benefits of Lincoln’s act until he or she heard and believed the good news of emancipation, so no redeemed sinner subjectively enjoys Christ’s redemption now except through the preaching and belief of the gospel. In this sense, we are presently ‘being saved’ (1 Cor. 1:18; Acts 16:31; Rom. 10:9).

Until men and women learn the good news of their salvation, they continue to live as if nothing had happened. They remain as they had been – without hope, unaware of God’s forgiveness and favor. The gospel ministry is for the sake of such men and women – that they may obtain salvation, subjectively as well as objectively (2 Tim. 2:8b–10). Like Paul at ancient Corinth, we also need to declare the gospel fearlessly and without ceasing, for God still has many people who have not yet heard the good news of what he has done for them in Jesus (Acts 18:9–10; 2 Cor. 5:18–19; 2 Peter 3:9).⁷

C. Assumption “B” Relates Election to the Universal Offer of the Gospel

Election is often thought of an act of God in eternity whereby he, as an expression of his sovereign love, selected certain persons to salvation in Christ and passed the others by. Such a scenario is nowhere depicted in the Scriptures, and makes it nearly impossible to

⁷ Edward Fudge in Punt, *A Theology of Inclusivism*, 46

understand the relationship between election and the universal offer of the gospel.

Premise B—: “All persons will be saved (are elect) except those who the Bible declares will be finally lost” reflects the fact that Christ “died for all.” This and the other so-called “universalistic” texts give us the right to assume that everyone is a person for whom Christ died and rose again. Unless we are miraculously given insight to the contrary in regard to some persons, we may assume every person we meet to be one of God’s elect. There is therefore a complementary relationship between the doctrine of election and the universal offer of the gospel.

D. Remaining Questions

To recognize that Premise B is enjoined by the Scriptures prompts many questions. A few of the more significant of these questions are posed and briefly answered below.

Question One: Isn’t faith necessary?

If only those who willfully and persistently defy God’s will are finally lost, as Premise B claims, it seems that all the others will be saved whether or not they believe. Hence the question: “Isn’t faith necessary?”

A credible faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior is absolutely necessary and unbelief is damnable for everyone to whom the gospel is presented in a meaningful way. They must: “repent,” “believe,” “obey,” “come to Christ,” “follow him” and so on. Jesus does not voice idle threats: “I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins” (John 8:24).

But we must ask, “Why is such a faith necessary for these persons?” It is not because these are conditions or requirements that they must fulfill in order to come to salvation. Such a conditional salvation would give saved sinners a reason to boast and would limit God’s sovereign ability to save “whom he wants” (Rom. 9:18). Furthermore sinners are “dead in transgressions” (John 3:3-8; Eph. 2:1-9) before they are born again and consequently are unable to fulfill any such requirement. Repentance, faith, and joyful obedience are required of all who hear the gospel because to refuse to do these things would be an act of willful disobedience against the known will

of God. Such disregard of God's known will constitutes a just cause for condemnation.

Question Two: Might it be better for some persons to remain ignorant of the gospel so they will not reject it?

The Scriptures do not teach or imply that only those who reject the gospel will be finally lost. Those finally lost are those who, in addition to their inherited (original) sin, have willfully, persistently, and finally rejected God's will no matter how it was made known to them, whether in gospel proclamation or in nature/conscience (Rom. 1 & 2). God's truth is one. "The true light gives light to every man" (John 1:9).

Those who have said "yes" to the lesser light of conscience and nature can not and will not say "no" to the same, yet far more glorious light, that engulfs them in the proclamation of the gospel. Nowhere are the hideousness of sin and the marvel of grace more clearly seen than in the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Question Three: Doesn't Premise B negate mission motivation? If there is a biblical basis for Premise B, we must do our theology and live our life in accordance with it whether we think it will increase mission motivation or not. To do otherwise would be to value our opinion more highly than the teaching of the Scriptures.

Premise A has been revered as a strong motivation for outreach ministry because saving sinners from the torment of hell was thought to be its primary goal. This was not a major motivation for proclaiming the good news during the first centuries of the Christian era.

Interestingly, the fear of punishment is not the driving force behind most scriptural exhortations to godliness or abstinence from evil. Love for God, and gratitude for what he has accomplished for sinners in Jesus Christ, are far greater incentives to good than fear of hell.... The Acts of the Apostles reports the gospel as originally preached during the first generation following Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost. And the fact is that, aside from two general statements about a coming judgment (Acts 17:30-31; 24:25), this book of apostolic preaching never mentions hell and speaks of final punishment only once (Acts 3:23). Instead, almost every discourse recorded in Acts focuses on the reality of eternal life in Christ for those who believe in him. ⁸

⁸ Edward Fudge in Punt, *A Theology of Inclusivism*, 190-191.

Those who pray that they may elicit a response of faith and joyful obedience from those to whom they proclaim the good news must do so with the assumption that those who hear are elect in Christ. Apart from such a relationship to Christ there is no "good news" and there can be no spiritual harvest.

The Scriptures reveal many motives for engaging in the mission enterprise. Among these Premise B points to the scriptural warrant for viewing all sinners everywhere as those for whom Christ died and rose again unless we have knowledge to the contrary.

Question Four: Can the promises and the demands of the gospel be based on an assumption?

Instead of an assumption it seems we would need verifiable proof that a person, or group of persons, are among those for whom Christ died and rose again before telling them "Christ died for you" and insisting that they "should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them" (2 Cor. 5:15). Is this kind of proof available to us?

If the so-called "universalistic" passages were true "universals," allowing no exceptions, they would furnish this kind of proof. However, on the basis of the Scriptures we rule out universalism (See Fact No. 2.).

Evangelical Christians (both Arminian and Calvinistic) have been willing to accept as proof of "election" a profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior together with a lifestyle consistent with that profession. This is the concept of "credible profession." Because we are unable to judge the heart, we can only assume that their profession is a truthful, genuine, "credible profession" of faith.

Verifiable proof is never available to us. It is only on the basis of an assumption that we can ever proclaim good news to sinners. Premise B expresses the biblically warranted assumption implicit in "the universal offer of the gospel." We should not replace this biblically warranted assumption with our personal opinion regarding the genuineness of someone's profession of faith.

That we are not limited to verifiable proof for declaring "Christ died for you" is evident from such passages as 1 Cor. 15:3: "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance; that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures." Paul "passed on to" the members of the church in Corinth "the message of reconciliation"

("Christ died for our sins") that he had "received" long before he met them. (2 Cor. 5:19).

What must be required of those to whom we offer the gospel is that they respond positively to the good news of what God has already done for them. Such a response is required for sinners to be identified as Christians or to become members of a local congregation.

Question Five: What does "be reconciled to God" mean? (2 Cor. 5:20)?

The people of the world are entreated to accept the truth and "be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:18–20). They are not told "reconcile yourselves to God." The command is passive because, according to verses 18 and 19, there is no human contribution to this reconciliation. "*All this* is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ...God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them" (2 Cor. 5:18, 19).

The "message of reconciliation" is a declaration of something that God did through Christ two thousand years ago. It is not a promise of something God will do if and when someone believes.

There is nothing sinners can do in order to move God to "not count their sins against them." That would be righteousness gained, at least partially, by obedience to the law. To "be reconciled to God" sinners must not be indifferent to or reject the good news that God does not count their sins against them.

On the one hand, the demand to "be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20) can be made only of those who are presumed to have been reconciled to God. On the other hand, this demand is to be made of every person in every nation.

Although God entrusted his written Word to the church, to preserve and proclaim that Word, its message is to be "preached among the nations, and believed on in the world" (1 Tim. 3:16; Col. 1:23b). God calls out, "Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God and there is no other" (Isa. 45:22). The assignment given us is to "make disciples [students] of all nations...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19, 20). This necessarily includes all the appeals to ethical conduct found in the New Testament.

What we is true about reconciliation is also true of all the appeals to ethical conduct found in the New Testament. Each appeal assumes

that the person addressed has a new standing with God in Christ. Apart from such a new standing the sinner has neither the will nor the ability to respond positively to what the Bible requires of them.

There is an indispensable connection between the imperative (to do) and the indicative (presumed to be). What the Bible requires of everyone (believers and unbelievers alike) to whom its message is proclaimed is based on what the hearers are presumed to be. "Let not sin reign in your mortal body" (to do) because "you are not under law but under grace" (presumed to be) (Rom. 6:12, 14). No one may "live according to the sinful nature" (to do) because "you received the Spirit of sonship" (presumed to be) (Rom. 8:15). Every one must "put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor" (to do) because "we are all members of one body" (presumed to be) (Phil. 4:25). "Set your minds on things above" (to do) because "your life is now hidden with Christ in God" (presumed to be) (Col. 3:2, 3).

Believers and unbelievers to whom we bring the gospel are mandated to so live and for the very same reason—"assumed to be."

These appeals to ethical conduct are summed up in the familiar trio—repent, believe, and obey. These responses are required of every one who hears the gospel. They also assume that those who hear are new creatures in Christ. Apart from such a relationship the sinner can do nothing. Premise B points to the biblical basis for making this needed assumption.

Question Six: Will all who die in infancy be saved?

Evangelicals are reluctant to say "no" in response to this question. Premise A, "All persons will be finally lost except those who the Bible declares will be saved," places them in a quandary. Because the Bible does not specifically say, "All who die in infancy will be saved," they have no explicit biblical basis for believing that all who die in infancy will be saved.

Premise B presents no such dilemma. If only those who, in addition to their inherited sin, willfully, persistently, and finally defy God's will as it was made known to them, are lost—then we know that God's mercy and grace are operative in every infant who dies in infancy.

Question Seven: What about Romans 9:13, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated"?

When we read Romans 9:11—13 it appears to say that in the Genesis account (Gen. 25: 21—23) “before the twins were born” Rebekah was told both that “the older will serve the younger” and that “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” The conclusion drawn from this two-fold announcement is that before the twins were born God had determined the eternal destiny of both of them.

If God determines every person’s eternal destiny before he or she is born then Premise B is invalid. However, the words “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated” were not spoken until 1,300 years after Rebekah had died. They are found only in the prophecy of Malachi and are quoted by Paul from Malachi. Therefore they do not say or imply that before birth God determines every person’s eternal destiny.

Malachi 1:1—5 uses the names Jacob and Esau as symbols for the two nations Israel (Jacob) and Edom (Esau) that were in Rebekah’s womb. This is commonly done in the Old Testament.

God, through Malachi, expressed his displeasure with the nation of Edom (Esau) because the nation of Edom (Esau) had sorely oppressed the nation of Israel (Jacob), God’s covenant nation. Therefore it is said, “Jacob I loved but Esau I hated.” This becomes apparent when one compares the Genesis account with Malachi’s prophecy.

Question Eight: What if?

From deep within our heart and mind the objection rises: “What if the person to whom we offer the gospel (the good news) is not one of God’s elect?” Because we have biblical warrant for viewing and relating to all persons as those for whom Christ died and rose again, unless we have sure knowledge to the contrary, this concern ought not to make us hesitate.

In the early church there were false brethren, false prophets, false teachers and even false apostles (John 6:66, 70; Gal. 2:4; 1 Tim. 6:21; 1 John 2:9). Nevertheless, Paul addressed all the members of the church with words of “grace and peace...from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins” (Gal. 1:3).

Paul, it is said, was addressing those who professed to be members of the body of Christ. If Paul addressed the words of “grace and peace” to those who falsely professed faith in Christ, the onus for this misapplication is on them. However, the point is that Paul

addressed all of them as though they were among God’s elect when in fact some of them may not have been elect.

If we hesitate to speak to anyone about Jesus Christ “who gave himself for our sins” unless we have verifiable proof of their election, then we can not say “Christ gave himself for your sins” to anyone. Who among us can judge another person’s heart? We must “make our calling and election sure” (2 Peter 1:10). We have not been given the insight to make anyone else’s “calling and election sure.”⁹

See more

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⁹ Verlyn D. Verbrugge, “Making Your Calling and Election Sure,” *Testamentum Imperium* Volume 1.