

³ Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, KD II/1, pg. 636: the religions of the heathen people are false religions; KD IV/1, pg. 537: “religion” is a deed of sinful man, *passim*

⁴ KD III/4, pg.549: dull tolerance only reduces certainties to some unsatisfactory relativistic quality.

⁵ Paul Wess, *Sind alle Religionen gleich wahr? Eine Antwort auf die Pluralistische Religionstheologie*, in “Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft”, EOS Verlag St.Ottilien, 1996, Heft 1, pg.26-43.

⁶ H.Halfas, *Fundamental Katechetik*, Grünewald/Patmos Publishers, 1973, 236 pages.

⁷ All Bible quotations are taken from the NEB (New English Bible) 1972.

⁸ Lecture by Prof. Elias Voulgarakis (University of Athens) in the Greek Orthodox Academy at Moni Gonia in Crete on 29.06.1983 which I happened to attend.

⁹ Chr. Dietzfelbinger, *Was ist Irrlehre?*, Series “Theologische Existenz Heute” No.143, Chr. Kaiser Verlag München, 1967, 64 pages.

The Rev. Dr. Hartmut Beck, now living in Karlsruhe, Germany, is a retired pastor of the Moravian Church with service in the Moravian Church in East Africa. He is also the European editor of the periodical, “Transatlantic Moravian Dialogue Correspondence”, which is now called “ITD” (International Theological Dialogue—in the Moravian Church).

Worth Green

The Rev. Dr. Frank Crouch has given us a powerful demonstration of scholarship in the service of the church. I am particularly thankful that he has taken care to root his own method of interpreting the Scriptures in the method he sees in the New Testament itself.

More importantly, the Dean of Moravian Seminary has successfully identified the theological presuppositions underlying our current debate. When Frank says that one side fears “a disregard for Scripture” and the other side fears “a lack of openness to God’s ongoing revelation”, it is easy to think not just in terms of individuals who might fall into one camp or another, but in terms of our two North American provinces.

I found Frank’s hermeneutic, exegesis, and conclusions in dealing with this question quite satisfying. I would differ in one primary point. I would not assign to the debate over “salvation through Christ alone,” the same level of conflict as I would assign to other issues we are debating, especially the issue of homosexuality. I am aware of many Christians, living and dead, who have gladly professed their allegiance to *Sola Scriptura*, while handily agreeing with Frank. These persons would insist on two mutually inclusive truths: 1) “Jesus died for the sins of the world” and “all who saved will be saved through him,” and 2) God is a just and merciful God who may, “acting in sovereign freedom,” save whomsoever God wills. “There is wideness in God’s mercy,” they say.

Frank argues along similar lines, making a distinction between “salvation through Christ,” and “salvation through Christianity.” The position that Frank puts before us is not only

good exegesis, it is thoroughly Moravian. Leading Moravian theologians have always argued for the essential harmony between “salvation through Christ alone,” and “the wideness in God’s mercy,” while at the same time, avoiding sweeping statements about universalism that cannot be backed up by a balanced reading of the Scriptures. Frank’s position is in harmony with that expressed by Spangenberg in his *Idea Fidei Fratrum*,¹ and that taken by Augustus Schultze in his 1914 book entitled, *Christian Doctrine*. (*Christian Doctrine*, Bethlehem, Pa., 1914, p. 248f.)

I am grateful for Frank’s wisdom, as I believe it is imperative that we have clear thinking on this subject. Let me illustrate. Not long ago I had a woman in my congregation approach me with a difficult question. She said, “Pastor, Hitler killed all those Jewish children in the ovens. Did God just let them continue to burn?” How would you, dear reader, answer that question? Does one forfeit one’s Evangelical credentials when one admits that one trusts that God is more merciful than one of the most heinous dictators of modern times? I think that Frank would say not.

Frank has called upon us to exercise the twin-virtues of *confidence* and *humility*. I agree. We need *confidence* that the *special revelation* that God gave in Christ is the apex of God’s self-revelation, period. This does not mean that we have God in a box. It does mean we believe that all future revelations of God will be Christ-like. We need not fear that new knowledge of other world religions and more frequent contact with people of other faith orientations, including agnosticism and atheism, will change the *special revelation* God gave in Christ. If there is a *revelation in nature*, as the Scriptures insist, then people of the

other faiths must of necessity have at least some access to religious truth. Yet, because this truth stops short of God’s special revelation in Christ, we are still compelled to “preach the gospel.” Surely, many of the world’s best, brightest, and most devout, still hunger for the Word of grace and hope that is ours in Christ!

The Great Commission has not been revoked. We can no longer afford to act as if we were somehow culturally superior, but we can certainly continue to share our faith, “...like beggars who have found bread with other beggars who are hungry still.” At the same time, it may behoove us to defer questions about the salvation of those who have not heard, etc. to “the hopes” of the New Testament.

The “hopes” of the New Testament? Yes, as Br. Frank has so ably pointed out, the New Testament has a measure of hope, even for those who have not heard. A number of New Testament authors explore the wideness in God’s mercy. Frank has mentioned Romans 2:13f. I would mention 1st Corinthians 15 where Paul permits baptism for the dead. Why baptize for the dead? Quite possibly because Christians were concerned for beloved parents, grandparents and friends who died before they heard the message of the Gospel. I would also mention Karl Barth’s exegesis of Romans 5, and the “*how much more of grace*.” (*Christ and Adam: Man and Humanity in Romans 5*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956.) One need not draw the same conclusion as Barth to see how he reaches it.

So, too, I would mention passages like 1st Timothy 2:4 where we read that God, “...*would have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*,” and 1st Timothy 4:10

where we read that God “*is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe.*” Finally, I would mention 1st Peter 3:19 where we read that the crucified Christ is said to have “*preached to the spirits in prison.*” All these passages hold out at least some hope of salvation for those who have never heard the gospel, or perhaps, never heard it *adequately*.

In dealing with the hopes of the New Testament, we must, none the less, practice *humility*. We must remind ourselves that we are not God, and we are not called upon to be the judges of the earth. We do not possess God’s sovereign freedom to have mercy on whomsoever we will and harden our hearts against whomsoever we will. In the final analysis, both those who preach Christian universal-ism (as opposed to an unlimited atonement) and those who preach Christian exclusive-ism (as opposed to Christ being the ultimate revelation of God) have fallen into the same trap, a lack of humility.

E. Stanley Jones had the kind of humility to which we might aspire. A well known Methodist missionary and evangelist, Jones once called Gandhi “a deeply Christianized Hindu, more Christianized than most Christians.” (*A Song of Ascents*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968, p. 132). He was referring not to Gandhi’s doctrine, but to his character. When Gandhi was martyred, some Christians of South India asked Jones if he had gone to heaven. Jones replied:

“I am glad I don’t have to decide the destiny of men. I am not the judge of all the earth. It is my business to preach the gospel and leave judgment to God. He is wise enough and good enough for that responsibility—I am not. All I can say is that, if Mahatma Gandhi didn’t go to

heaven, then heaven would be poorer without him, as it will be poorer without you.” (Ibid., p. 135,136)

I find Jones’s answer to a difficult question to be a marvelous balance between confidence in the gospel and humility before the world. I find the same kind of balance in Br. Frank’s paper. I can see Christ in both. I only hope that the world can see Christ just as clearly in me. In the final analysis, it will not be just what we believe and preach that conveys the gospel to a lost and dying world; it will be the quality of the lives we live, as Ambassadors of Christ. God is, after all, *making his appeal through us* (II Cor. 5:20).

(Footnotes)

¹ See especially pages 63, 64-65, 57, 60, 85, 86 and 471. Many thanks to our Archivist, the Rev. Dr. C. Daniel Crews, for these references.

The Rev. Dr. Worth Green is the pastor of New Philadelphia Moravian Church in Winston-Salem.