

Articles

Universalism The Urgency of Christian Witness

Klaus Detlev Schulz

Aside from the theology of predestination, to which we shall turn in a moment, statistics on the world's Christian population place Christianity before an unfinished task of bringing the Gospel to an unbelieving world. This we may gather from David Barrett's overview of the world's population in *World Christian Trends AD 30-AD 2200. Interpreting the annual Christian megacensus.*" In 2000, the Christian population in the world was 1,999,563,838 (33% of the world's population, i.e. 67% are non-Christians), by mid-2025 its adherents will be 2,616,670,052 (33.4%) and by mid 2050, 3,051,564,342. (34.3%) in 238 countries.¹ If these statistics would actually materialize what they predict, then the sobering point is that for the next fifty years until 2050 Christianity will not exceed 33-34% of the world's population. However, they do underscore the universal obligation to preach the Gospel to all nations and the urgency of it.

What does God want? Misunderstandings

What God Himself desires for His world should be evident. Theologically speaking the most compelling case for a concerted effort rests in the right understanding of universalism. God's salvific will is orientated towards saving the entire world's population and the church should see herself in the role serving as God's agent.

When we affirm the universal salvific will of God, we must ensure that we are not misunderstood in our position. For a theology of the universal, salvific will needs to come to grips with the doctrine of predestination and a particularistic election of the children of God to salvation. In this instance, predestination may be argued in such a way that it

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¹ David Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian Trends AD 30-AD 2200 Interpreting the Annual Christian Megacensus*, (William Carey Library, Pasadena, California, 2001), 4. The second largest religious population is Muslim of which there was in mid-2000, 1,188,242,789 (19.6%), mid-2025, it will be 1,784,875,653 (22.8%), and in mid-2050, the Muslim adherents will be 2,229,281,610 (25.0%) in 204 countries.

actually gives Christians reasons not to engage in missions. One of the first Protestant missionaries, William Carey (1761-1834) encountered a form of hyper-Calvinism among the British population that had turned a cold shoulder to missions, having drawn their own conclusions from the doctrine of double predestination. They thought that God had already made up His mind whom He would include in His salvation plan and whom He would not. Thus, the conversion of the heathen needed no one except the Lord Himself, not the church and her mission. If God had made up His mind about the fate of people, then the church had no reason to interfere with missions, or at least it should lie in wait for His guidance. Carey encountered this popular attitude and describes it in his *“An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens”* as follows:

*“It seems as if many thought...that if God intends the salvation of the heathen, he will some way or other bring them to the gospel, or the gospel to them. It is thus that multitudes sit at ease, and give themselves no concern about the far greater part of their fellow-sinners, who to this day, are lost in ignorance and idolatry.”*²

According to Carey, the church should broaden her limited scope for the world at large since the kingdom of Christ and the Gospel is there for all people. Even if the Lord has allotted a specific time for the fulfillment of His own purpose, it does not excuse Christians from proclaiming this kingdom to the world.³

We can see that not all theologians shared the sense of complacency and lack of initiative toward missions. One might easily assume that missions would be a problem especially for the father of dual predestination, John Calvin (1509-1564) who is known for his election with a dual outcome.⁴ But he thought, as also the sixteenth century Dutch Calvinist theologian Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676), that the doctrine of dual election actually spurred missions forward, and that with the following reasoning. Since nobody knows who does and who does not belong to the number of the elect (*numerus praeordinatorum*); it would be fitting for the church to take on the attitude of desiring that all may be saved. And so Christians should diligently assume the task of sharing the salutary Gospel even if it will finally be left to God to decide whether to bring that preaching to fruition among those whom He has chosen and predestined.⁵

This argument for missions takes the doctrine of predestination in such a way that it affirms missions on the basis that we are unable to determine who has and who has not been chosen by God to salvation. If this version, however, is interpreted in a dualistic sense as we know it from Calvin, namely that God chose some to salvation and others not, then it cannot quite erase, I believe, the potential for paralyzing missions. For

² Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (eds.), *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1981), 228.

³ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (London: Penguin Books, 1986), 222.

⁴ *Institutio Christianae Religionis*. Vol. 2/III, 21, 5, edited by A. Tholuck (Berlin: Gustav Eichler, 1834), 133: “Non enim pari conditione creantur omnes; sed aliis vita aeterna, aliis damnatio aeterna praeordinatur.”

⁵ *Institutio Religionis*, 1559, Book III, 711.

Christians could complacently leave everything to God since it is impossible to make a difference on that which He has made up His mind already from eternity.⁶ Even if missions is done as Calvin summons us, and even if Calvinism has produced great evangelists, its theology cannot supply the confidence or motivation for evangelism. As one scholar noted, “*If they are consistent with their theology, they cannot say to every person they meet, ‘God loves you’ or ‘Jesus died for you,’ because the person they are talking to may not be one of God’s elect.*”⁷

William Carey contested a mindset that had paralyzed missions. He in particular realized that there is an important link between what we may call God’s eternal decree and the believer’s participation in that divine plan. That combination matched his famous exhortation: “*Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.*” God elects, and the church lets herself be used as an instrument for missions, instead of speculating on who are the elect or when the time will be for God to intervene for His chosen to hear the Gospel. Christians should actively proclaim the Gospel of God, who truly intends to have all come to the knowledge of the truth in Jesus Christ.

One question still demands theological clarification: Why should the church even take on the task of proclamation when the Lord from eternity has already passed His decree of election? Though Lutherans do not accept dual predestination, no one among us would deny that God’s election has already taken place. However, as we affirm that truth, we should avoid two potential errors. On one side, we could look at the proclamation of the Gospel as a mere incidental action that in no way is associated with election since the fate of all humans has already been sealed before creation. Then, obviously, it would be unclear why the church should pursue missions and it would reflect a poor theology of the Word that fails to take the Word as the actual vehicle of grace. On the other side, we could give the divine election a synergistic twist by placing all our confidence in our own ability and think that it somehow influences God’s will. In that case, we would believe that God makes a decision over whom He saves not on the basis of His sovereignty but on what we seek to accomplish.

The doctrine of election is skewed on both counts, whether through a rigid doctrine of election to salvation for some and rejection of others, or through a synergistic mindset. As we shall see below, neither of these positions will do full justice to the true nature of the mission of the church. The answer must surely lie somewhere in the middle.

Bringing Christ into the Equation

The proper course of action is to bring the person and role of Jesus Christ into the equation. God elects from eternity, yes, but through the person Jesus Christ. Lesslie Newbigin, in his essay on *The Logic of Election*, observes:

⁶ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 258.

⁷ Gregory A. Boyd and Paul R. Eddy, *Across the Spectrum: Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 143.

“We surely go far astray if we begin from a doctrine of divine decrees based on an abstract concept of divine omnipotence. We have to take as our starting point, and as the controlling reality for all our thinking on this as on every theological topic, what God has actually done in Jesus Christ.”⁸

To be sure, salvation for the children of God rests very much in His eternal decree before the foundation of the world. But, by bringing in Christ and making Him the one through whom God elects, much light is shed on the very nature of God, who does the electing. *“He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ”* (Eph 1:5; see verses 3-14), Scripture holds. Now we know that the divine election is one of grace and good will through Christ toward all men, not one of divine secrecy and capriciousness to benefit only a few. Thus, it would be foolish on our part to draw egotistical conclusions for ourselves and consider others who are currently in unbelief outside the benefits of the divine election. Scripture testifies throughout that all people should come to Christ and that He will never thrust them away from himself (Jn 6:37). Consequently, the call for missions does in fact make a whole lot of sense. Because of Christ, eternal election gives us all the reason not to speculate on the secret and eternal counsel of God as to whom He has chosen and preordained for eternal life and whom not. We should rather emphasize the love of God in Christ for all people and His desire for their salvation. That should be our principle of orientation in this theologically complex doctrine of election.

That complexity surfaces when it comes to the notion of particularism. It is true that God’s will is one of sheer grace by which He desires to save all, but He has decided to elect before time in Christ His chosen people. That is to say, God did not merely prepare His salvation plan in general, but He did graciously consider His elect before all time to be saved through Jesus Christ, and their names are written in the book of life (Rev 20:15). This means, then, that there is indeed a particularism in the doctrine of election; there are those He has elected. However, the question is how we should treat that principle. Often theologians and Christians do what they should not do: they engage in a long speculation as to who or who not may be counted as the elect, a question which culminates in the popular query: *“Why some and not others?”* (*cur alii, non alii*). With that approach they will just end up in theosophistic speculation about the unknown or hidden mind of God which humans will never be able to unravel. To do so has indeed led to numerous theories that in fact try to go beyond what Christians and humanity can answer about God. Our Lutheran Confessions’ clarification in this regard is worth noting:

“Therefore, if people wish to be saved, they should not concern themselves with thoughts about the secret counsel of God—whether they are chosen and preordained for eternal life—Rather, they should listen to Christ...For he testifies to all people without distinction that

⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, *“The Logic of Election,” The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans and Geneva: WCC Publications, 1989), 86. One may also see the Confessions, FC Epitome (Ep) XI, 13 (TBC, 518); SD XI, 87 (TBC, 654).

God wills all people who are burdened and weighed down with sins to come to him, so that they may be given rest and be saved [Mt 11: 28].”⁹

Turning to God’s Call through the Gospel

We are told not to engage in abstract speculation but to find assurance of our salvation by turning to the revealed Word of God, to our baptism and the visible means of grace, so we may find and receive through them the assurance that we have been called. In this regard, the preached and sacramental Word of God do not only assure us, but they actually bring the grace and our own election from eternity into time. God’s Word does the electing. This matters a great deal for every Christian. Every Christian, yes, every human being in this world is invited to listen to the words of Christ and take comfort and pleasure in the shepherd’s voice calling him. What a glorious affirmation of mission this is. We have here a universal motive for mission. The church may declare the love of God to all so that every human being will hear these inviting words and thus trust in them.

The argument for missions here is that *all* people in this world must hear the Gospel so that everyone may equally believe that this call is meant for them. It is true that Christians may see themselves as the *beati possidentes*, the blessed possessors, but not as those who selfishly guard that right by denying the world the right to hear Gospel.¹⁰

This universal and salvific will, as revealed in the proclamation of the Gospel (Eph 1:9-10; Ro 8:29-30), thus embraces the Dominical command to proclaim repentance and the promise of the Gospel as an invitation to all people to take comfort in the Gospel (Lk 24:47).¹¹

The Universal Call, not “Universalism”

By now it should be evident that the doctrine of election connects the thought of an eternal adoption of God’s children in Christ before time with the universal salvific will that is made manifest in time through a conscious proclamation of the Gospel. Although God “knows and has determined for every believer the time and hour of his calling and conversion,” Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions lay out the divine salvation plan within history (Eze 33:11; Jn 3:16; and 1 Co 1:21).¹²

⁹ SD XI, 65 (TBC, 650), SD XI, 66 (TBC, 651), SD XI, 33-37 (TBC, 646)

¹⁰ To quote Lesslie Newbigin again “To be chosen, to be elect in Christ Jesus, and there is no other election, means to be incorporated into his mission to the world, to be the bearer of God’s saving purpose for this whole world, to the sign and the agent and the first fruit of his blessed kingdom which is for all,” 87

¹¹ SD XI, 28 70 (TBC, 645 651)

¹² This is beautifully laid out in the Formula of Concord “*It is not God’s will that any are damned but that all turn to him and be saved . . . Therefore, in his immeasurable goodness and mercy God provides for the public proclamation of his divine, eternal law and the wondrous counsel of our redemption, the holy gospel of his eternal Son, our only Savior Jesus Christ, which alone can save. By means of this proclamation he gathers an everlasting church from humankind, and he effects in human hearts true repentance and knowledge of sin and true faith in the Son of God, Jesus Christ. God wants to convert them, to give them new birth, and to sanctify them through these means, and in no other way than through his holy Word (which people hear proclaimed or read) and through the sacraments*” SD II, 49-50 (TBC, 553), SD XI, 23 56 (TBC, 644 649)

In this regard, however, we must avoid one dangerous fallacy that has repeatedly plagued the church. We could conclude that if God wills all to be saved, then all will in the end be infallibly saved. In this way, the universal and salvific will of God is made a *fait accompli* for all mankind that dismisses the thought that there will actually be a negative outcome for those who reject God's Word. Instead, it claims that all will be reunited in Christ for eternity. Obviously, that implies a boycott for missions, at least the activity of proclaiming the Gospel to all.

Universalism of this kind speculates with eschatology, the last things related to the final outcome of Christ's Second Coming. One of these speculations may allow for a restoration of all things (known as *apokatastasis panton*) with God.¹³ Known supporters of this position have been the Alexandrian theologian Origen and the twentieth century theologian from Basel, Karl Barth. To a degree, though, the idea of a general pardon is not entirely alien to Scripture—at first glance, that is. Its supporters will point to Scripture and cite numerous places where the word “all” is mentioned. In Romans 5, Paul states that Adam's trespass led to the condemnation of all, but the act of Jesus Christ brings acquittal and life to *all* men. The eleventh chapter of Romans (Ro 11:32) ends clearly with the universal claim that “*God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all.*” In the second chapter of Ephesians, we read of the richness of God's mercy. Because of it, Christ was sacrificed on the cross to reconcile the world to Himself and restore peace between God and the world. Finally, in the first letter to Timothy, God's desire is that “*all men are saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*” (1 Ti 2:5).

Supporters of universal restoration will use this Scriptural evidence to conclude that whatever God desires, He will also seek to accomplish. All pain and suffering will come to an end through the person of Jesus Christ. To say anything contrary would limit His almighty power and the universal implication of Christ's death and resurrection. Obviously, this position, as Karl Barth holds it, completely restructures the traditional Reformed doctrine of election. What had been an “either/or” has now become “both/and.” Christ returned to His Father, but one day He will unite all humanity in His person. That includes all—not only those who have come to true faith, but also those who have no knowledge of the truth or have rejected it because of their sinfulness. The final triumph will be the general pardon all of humanity, regardless of who they are. In a way, it seems as if universalism of this kind is more logical in that it takes the consequences of Christ's work to its fullest potential. But this version of universalism troubled Lutheran theologians. In fact, it concerned Adolf Köberle so much that he and others decided to visit the aging Karl Barth at his home in Basel to confront him with their concern over his doctrine. They rightly argued that it was a denial of conversion and rebirth brought about by the mission of the church. Unfortunately, the outcome of that discussion has not been

¹³ The term “*apokatastasis panton*” surfaces only once in Scripture in Acts 3:21. But whether Peter is actually including in his statement the restoration of all things in God as a general pardon for all people is questionable. Those theologians who think it does have added this meaning to the text. The Augsburg Confession, however, explicitly rejects this position. AC XVII, 4 (TBC, 51).

disclosed.¹⁴ In his *Dogmatics*, however, Karl Barth answers the question by making mission merely an activity that announces or affirms one's pre-Christian state rather than actually calling one out of it through the acts of repentance and conversion.¹⁵

There is also a further rendering of universalism that may be considered more radical than the one just discussed, since it omits Christ entirely in the argument. Its end result, however, is not much different from the previous version. It takes a theocentric or theistic approach and emphasizes the universal salvific will that entirely ignores the cross of Christ. These scholars assert the salvific will of God as universal, but they reject the thought that the effects of this divine will can be certified only through Jesus Christ. Paul Knitter, a Roman Catholic, has pushed the statements of Vatican II to their extreme.¹⁶ He represents a plethora of scholars who have abandoned the uniqueness of Christ in the scheme of divine salvation. This is evident in his contemplation over the issue:

*“Can we be so certain that God’s salvific will, as expressed in Jesus Christ, will never make use of such pre-Christian forms of mediation? And if we do deny this, are we not only denying what, humanly speaking, seems to be a ‘logical’ expression of this will but also the freedom and omnipotence of God? To avoid misunderstanding: by this we are not arguing that the religions must be or always are ‘ways of salvation’ but only that we cannot exclude the possibility—or the probability—of them being instruments of God’s salvific will.”*¹⁷

Those who speculate about the final destiny of the evangelized, debate the probability or possibility of salvation outside Christ. In many circles these speculations over the destiny of the unevangelized have led to a full *carte blanche* endorsement of their salvation outside Christ and a complete equation of all belief systems with that of

¹⁴ Adolf Koberle, *Universalismus der Christlichen Botschaft. Gesammelte Aufsätze und Vorträge* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1978), 81.

¹⁵ “We must first maintain that even mission to the heathen, and they particularly, can be pursued meaningfully only on the presupposition of the clear promise and firm belief that everything which was needed for the salvation of all already taken place. Thus the task of mission can consist only in announcing this to them,” *Church Dogmatics* (CD) IV, 3/2, p. 874. See also Waldron Scott, *Karl Barth’s Theology of Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press and Exeter, England: The Paternoster Press, 1978), 30.

¹⁶ The contentious statements in *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostrae Aetate* of Vatican II argue that there is a spark of knowledge among people in the world that attains truth and salvation outside Christ. It seems that this version has been somewhat corrected if not partially withdrawn by the papal encyclical *Dominus Jesus* (2000). The statements of Vatican II, going back to the influence of Karl Rahner’s concept of an anonymous Christianity, have perhaps been maltreated by universalists since Roman Catholicism as *Dominus Jesus* claims never wanted to omit the central position of the church and its close connection to Christ as Lord. But it is doubtful whether the Roman Catholic theology can close its doors entirely for the possibility of salvation outside the church particular in view of its moral theology. One may see here Klaus Detlev Schulz “A Lutheran Response to the Christology and Natural Theology of the Papal Encyclical *Dominus Jesus*,” *Logia X*, 4 (Reformation 2001), 5-8.

¹⁷ Paul Knitter, *Towards a Protestant Theology of Religions* (Marburg: N.G. Elwert Verlag, 1974), 222.

Christianity.¹⁸ Aside from their lack of support for mission, these assertions have abandoned Scriptural evidence. The stark silence of Scripture is certainly noticeable in this regard unless one attempts to break open the otherwise indivisible connection between the doctrine of election, Christology and justification (Jn 14:6; Mk 1:15; Jn 6:40; Jn 3:16). For according to the doctrine of election it must be stated that God, the Father, has decreed “*in his eternal counsel that he would save no one except those who acknowledge his Son and truly believe in him*” (Ro 11:32; 1 Ti 2:4; Eze 33:11; 18:23).¹⁹ And justification is the mode of our salvation such that the natural intentions of man to save himself outside Christ by his own merits are entirely dismissed. God’s election is an act of grace through Christ, and God in Christ alone is given full credit for it. For nineteenth century Lutheranism in America, the dismissal of synergism in election also included faith itself insofar as an individual’s faith is not part of the basis upon which God elects (known as the so-called “*intuitu fidei*,” in view of faith). Rather, faith is the result, not the basis of election. So much did Lutherans fear that faith itself could otherwise be argued as a “work”—as was and is indeed the case in the context of American Arminianism.²⁰

Affirming Mission

Mission is thus the activity by which God puts His salvific intentions into practice. That is, God intentionally uses His Word and sacraments as signs and testimonies of His will towards man, “*intended to awaken and confirm faith in those who use them.*”²¹ Thus, God does not forego these means but needs them to bring through His salvific intentions.

As a result, we affirm mission as a kerygmatic activity of the church. For God effects faith through the Gospel, not beyond or apart from it (Ro 10:14). Here again scholars contemplate the issue, taunting the theology of God with the question of whether God can and will also save those who have not yet encountered Christ through the means of grace in their lives. To substantiate their question, they commonly give a list of figures from Scripture such as Job or Cornelius, with whom God apparently worked outside of His normal ways.²² Admittedly, such examples are rare and they truly are a testimony to God’s direct special revelation on man. Lutheran theology thus insists on the normal arrangement by which God calls believers, and it dismisses circumstances outside of such normal arrangements. For to postulate otherwise would mean that God would contradict

¹⁸ A perfect survey of this theocentric universalism is provided by John Sanders, *No Other name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

¹⁹ Epitome XI, 13 (TBC, 518).

²⁰ One may verify the above with the statements in SD XI, 5.23.23.43 (TBC, 644.648).

²¹ AC XIII, 1 (TBC, 47); Apology (Ap.) XIII, 1 (TBC, 219). “*God permits His will to be carried out through the sacraments. They are not human acts of confession, or symbols of something that once took place; they are faith-creating divine means.*” Holsten Fagerberg, *A New Look at the Lutheran Confessions (1529-1537)*. Translated by Gene J. Lund (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), 170. See also SD XI, 27 (and 29) (TBC, 645).

²² See for example, Gordon T. Smith, “*Religions and the Bible: An Agenda for Evangelicals*,” *Christianity and the Religions: A Biblical Theology of World Religions* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1995), 9-29.

Himself and would undermine and destroy the assurance and promise He has given with His word.²³

The Negative Outcome

We should include one additional aspect in our treatment of election since it still remains unresolved. In view of God's unrestricted salvific intentions with mankind, how should we then categorize the traditional concept of eternal damnation and punishment? In the event that we should attribute it to God, would that not contradict our understanding of Him as being the loving and gracious God?

The answer to that question lies not so much with God but with anthropology. At the beginning of this chapter, we explained how Lutheran orthodoxy dismissed any plea of innocence for the nations outside Christ. They argued that they had all equally become guilty before God for having hardened themselves to the promises of Christ. Indeed, the harmatological motive places all people alike under the curse of sin. We cannot abandon it for Scriptural reasons and it is clear that Scripture places on all people of this world a personal guilt for despising or rejecting the saving intentions of the Lord (Ro 3:24).

Scripture illustrates this in the following ways. Christ's coming into this world results in an invitation from God extended to all people as is shown in the parable of the Great banquet (Lk 14:15-24): "*Come for all is now ready.*" Sadly, many guests turn down the king's invitation. Each one gives a different excuse for not coming. It is thus not surprising that the parable ends with these harsh words: "*For I tell you, none of those men who are invited shall taste my banquet*" (verse 24).

A similar message is made in the parable of the Ten Maidens (Mt 25:1-14). While all ten maidens plan to participate at a wedding feast, not all are permitted to enter with the bridegroom. Remaining behind closed doors, they beg in vain for admission. In the same chapter, the Son of man at His return is described as sitting on a glorious throne with all nations gathered before him (Mt 25:31-46). Just as a shepherd would separate sheep from the goats, so also all people are placed to the left and right hand of Christ, the almighty ruler. To those on his right he will say: "*Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world*" (verse 34) and to those on the left he will pass the crushing sentence: "*Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels!*" (verse 41).

²³ SD XI, 39 (TBC, 647). The passage in SD IX, 76 (TBC, 652) observes that this is the "normal arrangement": "*But the Father does not intend to draw us apart from means. Instead, he has preordained his Word and sacraments as the regular means and the instruments for drawing people to himself. It is not the will of either the Father or the Son that people not hear the proclamation of his Word or have contempt for it, nor should they expect to be drawn by the Father apart from Word and sacrament. According to his normal arrangement, the Father draws people by the power of His Holy Spirit through the hearing of his holy, divine Word.*" The text does not specify the situation that would fall outside of the "normal arrangement." It could most likely be the thought of a direct calling from God - the Triune God, nonetheless - apart from the means, as Scripture would at times illustrate. The eventuality of such an extraordinary arrangement is rare, however, and give no cause to abandon the "normal arrangement" for any kind of universalism. Any other opinion on this matter would be an accusation against God for contradicting Himself: "*For this would be to ascribe to God contradictory wills.*" SD XI, 35 (TBC, 646).

The rich man described in Luke 16 eventually ends up in the place of torment. He does not find himself in that place because he was wealthy; he had wasted his life away forgetting to take time to love and help the poor man who lay in front of the door of his house. Now, the wealthy man suffers great pain in the flame and he begs that he may cool his tongue. Unfortunately, he cannot cross the rift that separates him from the water of life.

The above attitudes of the characters whose outcome was negative are a result of what we are told in Matthew 12:31 that “*every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.*” The sin against the Holy Spirit is not a moral transgression, but it entails a conscious decision on the part of man not to have anything to do with the salvation found in Jesus Christ. It is the rejection of the Gospel, the persistent objection to the Holy Spirit is wanting to claim a place in our hearts.

From Scripture the church has thus held the fact of eternal damnation against a belief in universal reconciliation or a general pardon. The church theologian Augustine, the Athanasian Creed, and the Augsburg Confession in both articles 2 and 17 affirm an eternal punishment, the eternal wrath of God, that will pass over all “who are not born again through baptism and the Holy Spirit.”²⁴ But that negative outcome does not result from a dual understanding of election, that is with a theocentric perspective, namely that God decreed their eternal damnation. The blame for it rests squarely on the shoulders of man for his decision against God.²⁵ In a way, the doctrine of election is structured asymmetrically: God elects to salvation only, whereas man assumes responsibility for damnation. It is thus evident that the Lutheran doctrine of election does not follow the concept of dual predestination, for that would turn God into an unpredictable and capricious being. Instead, it affirms the Scriptural statements on universal grace, and God’s true nature being love.²⁶

What this means is that man can reject Christ’s offer to be reconciled in Him out of his free will. Nobody is irresistibly coaxed into turning against God. On the other hand, nobody can earn his salvation; he can only lose it. The latter explains the Lord’s tears over Jerusalem: “*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!*” (Lk 13:34). Even the hardening of the heart of Pharaoh is not attributed to God as it may seem. For the actions of God to leave His Word at one place and to remove it from another and harden someone are explicable only

²⁴ AC II, 3 (TBC, 39).

²⁵ Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, translated by Paul F. Koehnke and Herbert J. A. Bouman (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 290: “Not God’s election but the sin of men is the cause of their damnation.” Thereby the Confessions do not follow the strong deterministic tones of Luther’s “On the Bondage of the Will” (see e.g. Luther’s Works, *American Edition*, Volume 33, page 140), as Mildener claims, 157.

²⁶ SD XI, 67 (TBC, 651). In maintaining this asymmetry and infralapsarian aspect of the doctrine of predestination the Confessions reject in content but not by name Calvin’s dual predestination, e.g. Ep. 19 (TBC, 519). The example in AC XIX (TBC, 52-53) shows that the phrase: “*non adiuvante Deo*” (German: “As soon as God withdrew his hand...;” Latin: “Since it was not assisted by God...”), was omitted by Melancthon in the Apology XIX, 1 (TBC, 235) to avoid a possible misinterpretation that this phrase could create, namely of making God responsible for the cause of sin. See Schlink, 290.

in light of man's refusal to hear His Word. This anthropocentric perspective explains God's withdrawal of His saving intentions.²⁷

In this discussion on election, we have maintained an eschatological orientation for missions. We do not preach a final pardon of all nor do we speak of life only in inner-worldly terms as today's society is inclined to do. We are to raise the perspective of those caught in everyday life to a higher level, that is, to the inevitable event of being gathered before the throne of the Lord. Missions calls all to repentance with the appeal: "We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (1 Co 5:21). This eschatological perspective bears a mission motive and it endows Christians in mission with an evangelistic zeal. Billy Graham's famous question, "Will Uppsala betray the two billion (unbelievers)?" This question he asked at the meeting of World Council of Churches in Uppsala (1968) reflects his concern that the motive and with it the evangelistic cutting edge has been abandoned by a major part of Christianity.²⁸

Universal Motive

It should be clear that the doctrine of election tests our own intellectual abilities. Together with the statistic of Christianity's making up 34% of the world's population, we see before us an enormous task of bringing the Gospel to all parts of the world. In the end, we may hope and trust in the one true God for whom everything is possible. In practical terms, this means that despite the theological complexities of the doctrine of election, our response is, and should be, to obediently bow to His authority by engaging in missions. For it is *the* activity of the church that best affirms God's universal and salvific will.²⁹ All missionary endeavor, therefore, is not merely an extended arm of the church but an instrument of God's saving and loving intention. As God's positive will for fellowship and union with man motivated Him to send His Son to the cross, so too this very will motivates Him to take the church into His service. Through the activities of His preached and sacramental Word, God wishes to realize His salvific will for the entire world. But the negative or anthropological side of election also serves to motivate the mission of the church; because of it we all sense the need and urgency for the task.

²⁷ SD XI, 57 (TBC, 649); Ep XI, 12 (TBC, 516). In this connection, we may point out that God does not only base his rejection on original sin in general, but to the actual offenses against the Gospel which they hear and against the Holy Spirit's working through the Gospel, e.g. SD XI, 40-42 58-62 (TBC, 647. 649-650).

²⁸ Timothy Yates, *Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 197.

²⁹ Martin Kahler, "Evangelisation der Welt - Gottes Wille," in *Schriften zu Christologie und Mission* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1971), 101.