

## BIBLICAL UNIVERSALISM: STRUCTURE AND STARTING POINT

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To understand and restate biblical teaching regarding the extent of Christ's atonement, the relation between election and reprobation and between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, has required persevering effort throughout the centuries of Reformed theology. For there is a lot at stake. Ancient and modern formulations of these truths were and are soon left to the frivolity of ivory towers, but their substance emerges time and again in the life and work of the church in the world.

Since 1980, when the Rev. Neal Punt published an incentive to his church, and to the church at large, that these matters be rethought once more (*Unconditional Good News: Toward an Understanding of Biblical Universalism*), his claims of bringing something of a Copernican revolution to Protestant theology have received occasional attention, even rebuttal, but for the most part, silence. It would be too simple to say that this signifies lack of interest in biblical teaching, in church doctrine. Current preoccupation in the church with questions of political and social relevance may seem to leave little room for attention to his thesis; yet its implications for preaching and for missions are too significant to ignore.

While much of his defense of "biblical universalism" rests upon the interpretation of selected Scripture verses pertaining to the universal extent of salvation, to divine judgment upon willful, actual sins, and to life in Christ, the starting point for evaluating the premise that "all persons are elect in Christ except those who the Bible declares will be lost" cannot, in our opinion, be found within those verses. We propose to offer a structural critique of the premise itself, which, while not ignoring the details of texts, will offer what we consider to be the only valid entrance into the texts themselves.

I

Punt's starting point is the "universalistic texts" of Scripture. He writes:

Since there has been and still is widespread agreement that *not* all are saved, a certain protectionist attitude can be found in every evangelical theological tradition, which never permits the Bible to make the simple declaration "All people are saved." Whenever the Bible does speak of the blessing of eternal salvation in terms of "all," "all men," or "the world," believers have felt compelled to dig deeply for a way to interpret these passages restrictively. Is this the only way out of the problem for those who wish to avoid absolute universalism? Does the fact that not all are saved mean that one must approach these passages with the prior understanding that all are lost and look only for "the exceptions" in the Scripture? Is there any sense in which these texts can be accepted as saying that all are saved?<sup>1</sup>

One might be inclined now to expect a new, non-protectionist, non-restrictive interpretation of the "universalistic texts." He continues:

The apparent difficulty, I believe, stems from an assumption common to all mainstream historic theological traditions. This assumption is so basic, so generally held, and so venerable in Christian thought that it seems almost insolent to question. One can glimpse this elusive presupposition by asking which of the following two statements reflects the Bible's teaching: (1) All persons are outside of Christ except those who the Bible declares will be saved; (2) all persons are elect in Christ except those who the Bible declares will be lost.<sup>2</sup>

The book's purpose, then, is to justify, to explicate, and to apply the second presupposition. Every Bible reader approaches the Scripture wearing certain "glasses." Punt challenges us to "exchange glasses," to try wearing *his* presupposition. He concludes the introductory chapter by exhorting that allegiance to the Bible requires us to listen without theological prejudice to all of its message, including the so-called "universalistic" passages. We believe that the premise (that all persons are elect in Christ except those who the Bible declares will be lost, NDK) . . . is the key to the proper understanding of the "all" or "world" texts . . .<sup>3</sup>

Since the new premise is termed "the key" to proper understanding of such texts, we venture to assert this to be the author's *starting point*. But the challenge laid before us to "listen without theological prejudice" to the so-called universalistic texts seems to be disarmed when we witness the mere exchange of presuppositions to exegesis!

Imprecision in the subsequent argument may root in the author's suggestion that everyone but he and Charles Hodge impose a "restrictive interpretation" upon the universalistic texts, one garnered to be sure from the rest of Scripture. The problem seems to be posed as a choice between contextual exegesis or non-contextual exegesis, between "reading into the 'all men' texts restrictive qualifiers" or "reading these texts as they stand." The difficulty with such a choice results from the fact that no *one* text in the Bible teaches *anything*, but always teaches its truth *in context*. Whether the "all" is contextually qualified by "those who believe" or by "those who will be lost," "all" is, finally, *not* "all." The admirable attempt to hold aloft the "all"-texts as really (in some sense) meaning "all" is doomed to be temporary, even for Punt. It is an exegetical sleight of hand to suggest that these texts *as they stand* in some sense teach that all are saved except those who the Bible, *in which these texts stand*, declares will be lost. Contextual interpretation simply ought not to be equated with "restrictive interpretation" arising out of a protectionist attitude.

This sleight of hand is crucial for the apparent credibility of "biblical universalism." Although Punt insists that the premise "all are elect in Christ" must never be taken without the clear exceptions provided in the rest of Scripture, he asserts in the same breath that "these exceptions do not negate the underlying premise given to us in the universalistic passages, that all persons are elect in Christ."<sup>4</sup> I must confess to being mystified by this explanation.

The significance of the foregoing becomes evident when we take note of the criticisms of "biblical universalism" to date. Critics have alleged that the premise and implications of "biblical universalism" ignore (worse, deny) among other things that the whole human race is dead in sin, under the wrath of God, and worthy of condemnation. Punt has replied by challenging his critics to prove his exegesis of the universalistic texts to be in error.<sup>5</sup> He repeatedly claims, assured by others, that he has taken no wrong exegetical turn.

When the challenge is issued in terms of contextual interpretation of the so-called universalistic texts, the differences between Punt and his critics are put in sharp relief. Punt takes the universalistic

texts as his *starting point*, exegetes the "all men" in the texts-as-they-stand, and moves outside of them into the fuller context of Scripture to allow the rest of Scripture to shed light on and to qualify the "teaching" of the universalistic texts. This exercise yields the conclusion (or premise): all men are saved (taught by the universalistic texts) except those who the Bible says will be lost (taught by the surrounding context of Scripture). His critics, on the other hand, begin with the texts which speak of mankind's fallenness and condemnation, and move outside of them into the fuller context of Scripture which teaches the salvation by sovereign grace of some of fallen mankind. For them the condemnation of all men is modified, if you will, by the gracious salvation of some who by faith receive the benefits of Christ's work, while the rest are passed by according to God's sovereign good pleasure and condemned because of their sin. This "modification," moreover, was decided before creation.

We would argue that a response to "biblical universalism" can neither begin nor suffice with a rebuttal of the proposed exegesis of the universalistic texts-as-they-stand. This is true if only for the reason that neither salvation nor the texts about salvation stand first in the history of redemption or in Scripture. Election, salvation, Christ's work *presuppose* human fallenness and sin. This is not a theoretical or theological presupposition imposed on various Bible texts from the outside. This is a fundamental, structural given coming to us with the Scripture itself. To those who by their sin are deaf, God spoke and is speaking! God's speech sounded in a *cemetery*; God's light pierced the *darkness*. What is here termed a "structural given" demands that, before the first Word is said about salvation and election, the Word must first be spoken about that fallenness and sin.<sup>6</sup>

This methodological choice is confirmed by the *Heidelberg Catechism*. The Catechism's order of Sin, Salvation, Service, or Guilt, Grace, Gratitude was not invented by Ursinus and Oleivianus; they "heard" it in the address of Holy Writ. The *Canons of Dort* too echo this order, heard in Scripture, when they carefully discuss the doctrines of election and reprobation (to pick only these for the moment) *in terms of the fallenness of the human race*. We hasten to add that this was not, on their part, a text-ual choice only, but a *con-text-ual* re-presentation of Biblical truth.

## II

"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," says

Romans 3:23. "The wages of sin," Romans 6:23 says, "is death." We must look carefully at what the Bible teaches about both the universality of and culpability for sin, since this describes the situation of those addressed by the evangel, the Gospel.

Little space is required to indicate that the Bible's "first" word concerning God's good and perfect creation of all things is followed by the "second" word about Adam's/man's willful disobedience. Adam's/man's sin consisted in violating *both* God's "may" and His "may not": "And the LORD God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.'" (Gen. 2:16,17; notice that the LORD *commanded* that man was free to eat from any tree!) This command was given to Adam, before Eve was created. Very crisply we are told: "and he ate it." (Gen. 3:6)

Later special revelation clarifies for us the awful consequences of Adam's/man's first sin: "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned— . . ." (Rom. 5:12) David confessed, "Surely I have been a sinner from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." (Ps. 51:5)

With design we employ the possessive term "Adam's/man's" to qualify sin, avoiding for the moment the adjectival phrase "original sin." The intention thereby is to highlight the thesis that "in Adam's fall we sinned all." The guilt and corruption of this sin is, by imputation, the guilt and corruption of *all men*. This is not theoretical guilt and corruption, it is actual guilt and corruption. Why did God impute these to all men? Because . . . *all sinned*.

Having assembled Scripture references that speak of the final judgment of men on the basis of their works, Punt concludes that these texts permit us to say only that

God has decided not to carry out judgment against original sin except on those individuals who have followed their own ways, making their own personal decisions against God. Original sin is never punished apart from the committing of actual sin.<sup>7</sup>

But we must inquire whether these texts are the only ones teaching something about God's judgment on human sin; we must inquire also whether there may be texts that teach condemnation of original sin. In Ephesians 2:3 we read, "All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature

objects of wrath." Both the word order and the meaning of the original would seem to fortify our point: *kai eemen tekna phusei orgees hoos kai hoi loipoi* (literally translated, "and we were objects by nature of wrath like also the rest"). The text provides the distinction between a sinful nature and the sins which proceed from that nature; but the concluding phrase tells us that our sinful nature was what qualified us as objects of God's wrath. Another text, only partially quoted in Punt's list of "judgment texts," is John 3:36: "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him." The word "remains" (*menei*) means "keeps on abiding upon him," and pictures the continuing impingement and pressing of God's judgment on one who, for some time already, has been under that judgment. It is confusing to insist that God's just judgment on original sin is merely God's *declaration* that we are *worthy* of death.<sup>8</sup> There is, of course, a difference between being under the sentence of death and the actual implementation of that sentence. But has not this distinction obscured the Bible's view that the sentence is already beginning to be executed? Again, the observation is correct that it is one thing to say that all men are *worthy* of eternal death, and another to say that all of them *will actually suffer* eternal death.<sup>9</sup> But we would not say the latter. Only this: all men *do* actually begin suffering death as God's judgment upon their sin in Adam.

Very early in the argument the *Canons of Dort*, III-IV, 2, are cited to remind us that only Christ did not derive the guilt and corruption from His father Adam.<sup>10</sup> Later, this interpretative expansion is offered:

By reason of original as well as actual sin all persons are constituted sinners and are worthy of divine judgment. Everyone is liable for his or her sinful nature as well as for sinful actions, and therefore by the just judgment of God everyone is declared worthy of eternal death.<sup>11</sup>

The words emphasized clearly refer to the statement in the *Canons*. For the moment, notice in the above formulation the relationship between judgment, being "declared worthy," and eternal death. Additional explanation is offered by suggesting that

all people are liable for and polluted by the imputed sin of Adam. But nowhere in all of Scripture do we read—nor is it implied, nor is it to be inferred—that anyone suffers eternal wrath *because of original sin apart from actual, personal, conscious sin*. Salvation is by grace; damnation is by works—works that persons have done in disobedience to

God's law, which they know but wilfully reject (Rom. 6:23). *The revealed basis for the execution of eternal judgment is always a personal, individualized refusal to walk in obedience to God's law.*<sup>12</sup>

There are no texts that say: God will eventually punish a person only on the basis of original sin. Therefore He will not eternally punish a person only on the basis of original sin.

This argument from the silence of Scripture overlooks the fact that the Bible was addressed to living, acting, sinful men—men who could not escape liability for original sin finding expression in actual sins. The Scripture's appeal to repent and believe is then naturally joined with the warning that judgment would fall upon willful, active disobedience. By omitting from the list of "judgment texts" those verses which speak of God's wrath executed upon all of sinful nature, the scope and basis of divine judgment have become too narrow. The claim that "no one rejected on the judgment day will be able to attribute his or her damnation to . . . the union of all of us with Adam in original sin . . .,"<sup>13</sup> obscures the truth that the original sin of Adam was the first sin of all men, the sin that rendered all men liable to the just judgment of God, which He began executing immediately.

As an aside, it is alleged that the doctrine of original sin has filtered down into our theology and come to mean that all persons are *outside of Christ*.<sup>14</sup> But at this "structural" juncture in the Scripture's presentation and description of the status of all men (remember our earlier discussion of the "structural given" of the Bible, that before any Word can be said about salvation, the Word must first be said about sin), the terms "in Christ" or "outside of Christ" are premature. Christ hasn't yet appeared on the scene, if you will. Only after we have tied down the nature, extent and consequences of our sin—and come to realize our own awful predicament therein—can we begin to cast about for the Mediator who has been given us to save us from that sin. It isn't time yet to say who's "in" or "out" of Christ!

Mention has already been made of the *Canons of Dort*, III-IV, 2; permit us to cite it in full:

Man after the fall begat children in his own likeness. A corrupt stock produced a corrupt offspring. Hence all the posterity of Adam, Christ only excepted, have derived corruption from their original parent, not by imitation, as the Pelagians of old asserted, but by the propagation of a vicious nature, *in consequence of the just judgment of God.*

The point can be sharpened still further by comparing this statement and the added emphasis with the translation of Anthony Hoekema:

This corruption, therefore, has been derived from Adam by all his descendants, Christ alone excepted, not by imitation, as the Pelagians formerly maintained, but by the propagation of a depraved nature, *according to God's righteous judgment.*<sup>15</sup>

We restate our contention, now under the light of the *Canons*: the derived guilty and corrupt nature of all men is the execution of God's just judgment upon Adam's/man's first sin! It is not the *whole* judgment, nor the *final* judgment of God upon our sin, but it is judgment!

The discussions at the Synod of Dort involved a misunderstanding of precisely this point. One delegation to the synod responded to the Remonstrants by identifying as one element in their "new theology"

that no one is condemned except on the basis of sins committed against the Gospel. The culpability which is sufficient and also powerful (*krachtig*) unto condemnation, due to original sin, is thus denied, against which the Apostle says, I Cor. 15:22, They all die in Adam; Eph. 2:3, We were by nature children of wrath.<sup>16</sup>

Significantly, this delegation responded to this new doctrine in part by saying, "The reason (*oorzaak*) for condemnation is sin, original sin as well as actual sins, committed against the law and the gospel."<sup>17</sup>

Yet another delegation, that from Emden, took issue with the assertion of Episcopius and Arminius that God decided to condemn no one on account of original sin. To the contrary, they insisted, God did decide to condemn on the basis of original sin,

for death is the wages of all sin, Rom. 6. But original sin is real (*waarlijk*) sin, and it is the inherited depravity of our nature as such that makes us liable (*schuldig*) to the wrath of God, Eph. 2; We were by nature children of wrath, like others also. For this reason David calls original sin real (*waarlijk*) sin, and confesses that he was liable (*schuldig*) to the wrath and punishment of God for the same reason, Ps. 51.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, the *Canons of Dort*, III-IV, Rejection of Errors, Paragraph 1, rejects the doctrine of those who teach that "it cannot properly be said that original sin in itself suffices to condemn the whole human race or to deserve temporal and eternal punishment."

In his well-known work *The Imputation of Adam's Sin*, John Murray treated the subject of imputation, both of Adam's sin and Christ's obedience, with painstaking detail. At one point in the study, he argued that although all men did not exist when Adam sinned, they were nevertheless contemplated by God as destined to exist. Thus contemplated, they were seen by God

no otherwise than as members of the race in solidaric union with Adam and therefore as having sinned in him. In other words, they are not conceived of in the mind and purpose of God except as one with Adam; they are not contemplated as potentially but as actually one with Adam in his sin. And this proposition is basic to all further thought on the question.<sup>19</sup>

He carried the argument still further by reminding that

all the members of the race come to exist actually by the act or process of generation; this is the divinely constituted means whereby God's foreordained design comes to effect in the course of history. It is a capital mistake to interpose the question: when does each member of the race *become* actually sinful? For the truth is that each person never exists as other than sinful. He is eternally contemplated by God as sinful by reason of the solidarity with Adam, and, whenever the person comes to be *actually*, he comes to be as sinful.<sup>20</sup>

But, for what is each person liable before God? What is imputed to each person by virtue of his union with Adam in Paradise? Is the guilt of original sin real guilt? If so, in what sense? To the insistence of Princeton theologian Charles Hodge that what was imputed was neither the guilt nor the demerit of Adam's sin, but simply the obligation to satisfy justice, Murray offers an interpretation of Romans 5:12-19 that is worth citing at length:

There is, of course, no question but the imputation of sin carries with it the *reatus*, the obligation to satisfy justice. But we may not overlook the fact that Paul in Romans 5:12-19 uses not only expressions which imply the penal consequence of sin but also the expressions which imply involvement in sin itself . . . Paul not only takes account of *death* as penetrating to all and as reigning over all by means of the one trespass (vss. 12, 14, 15, 17) and not only of *condemnation* as coming upon all through the one trespass, but also of the fact that all were constituted *sinner*s. That is to say, not only does the wages of sin come upon all, not only does the judgment of condemnation pass upon all, but all are indicted with the sin which is the basis of condemnatory judgment and of which death is the wages. If the imputation

referred to in verse 13 meant merely the obligation to satisfy justice, the *reatus poenae*, then it would have sufficed for Paul to speak of death and condemnation. In reality he is not content with the thought of penal consequence; he lays the foundation for all predication in terms of consequence in the propositions, "all sinned," "the many were constituted sinners" (vss. 12, 19), and, by implication, "sin was imputed to all" (vs. 13). It is this distinct progression of thought that prevents us from taking for granted that propositions to the effect that "all sinned" or were "constituted sinners" may be interpreted to mean simply, "were placed under the sentence of condemnation" or "were made judicially liable to the sanctions of justice."<sup>21</sup>

All sin is rebellion against God. Distinctions between original sin and actual sins must not become blurred, which appears to have occurred in the declaration that "original sin is never punished apart from the committing of actual sin."<sup>22</sup> This assertion, presumably based upon Scriptural evidence assembled to show that only actual, personal, individual, willful sins against God form the basis for God's judgment, is confronted with the nuanced formulation of Question and Answer 10 in the *Heidelberg Catechism*:

Q. Will God permit such disobedience and rebellion to go unpunished?

A. Certainly not. He is terribly angry about the sin we are born with as well as the sins we personally commit. As a just judge he punishes them now and in eternity . . . .

Notice that the sins punished now and in eternity include both "the sin" all men are born with and "the sins" all men personally commit. The issue becomes, then, as Abraham Kuyper correctly saw, the confession of divine righteousness in condemning on no other basis than personal guilt for one's original sin.<sup>23</sup> How else can we enjoy the benefit of Christ's holy conception and birth, than by acknowledging that

He is our mediator, and with his innocence and perfect holiness he removes from God's sight my sin—mine since I was conceived? (*Heidelberg Catechism, Answer 36*)

This very crucial point distinguishes the manner of imputation of Adam's sin from that of Christ's obedience. The *Catechism* explains the Scriptural truth of justification when it confesses that

God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner, as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me. (Lord's Day 23, Answer

60; emphasis added)

But the *Catechism* nowhere suggests, for the Bible nowhere teaches, that Adam's sin was credited to all men *as if* they had sinned—for all men *are really* sinners from conception on. (Lord's Day 3, Answer 7). Put another way, the significance of justification is that those who are "non-doers" are seen as the "doers" (of obedience). But we cannot say, with regard to man's first sin, that all men who were "non-doers" of sin are seen by imputation now as if they were "doers" of sin—for there are simply no "non-doers" of sin! All men are sinners, and a sinner is one who does sin. We are culpable to God for our sinful nature, which we have derived from our first parent *as (part of) God's just judgment upon our sin.*

### III

In contrast to "biblical universalism," we have taken our starting point in the Bible's doctrine of the sin of all men: "in Adam's fall we sinned all." "Biblical universalism" begins with the doctrine of grace: "all men are elect in Christ." Again, the difference is not simply one of choosing texts from different parts of the Bible; it is more the choice of a different vantage point within the contextual teaching of all of Scripture.

Having considered the universalistic texts, Punt turns next to "biblical particularism," to the related doctrines of particular atonement and predestination from eternity. The conclusion "all are elect in Christ" becomes now the premise in understanding God's decree of predestination. Double predestination falls, since the premise cannot allow for "two camps" whose division and destinies are decided before creation. Scripture teaches no divine, sovereign non-election; "two camp" predestination ascribes to God a double purpose in eternity, to save and to reject, and assumes the equal ultimacy of election and reprobation. Logic may require us to say that if there was an election to salvation before the foundation of the world, there must have been a corresponding rejection or at least a "passing by" of the non-elect. "Scripture, however, draws no such conclusion. The Bible speaks of an eternal election; it does not reveal a corresponding eternal rejection."<sup>24</sup>

These remarks were published in 1980 during a period of open discussion of the Boer gravamen to which "biblical universalism" here lends support. The focus of the discussion back then was the *Canons of Dort* I, 6 and 15, especially these statements:

That some receive the gift of faith from God, and others do

not receive it, proceeds from God's eternal decree . . . .What peculiarly tends to illustrate and recommend to us the eternal and unmerited grace of election is the express testimony of sacred Scripture that not all, but some only, are elected, while others are passed by in the eternal decree; . . . .

Punt had joined Boer in questioning the biblical validity of these claims. These claims were nevertheless judged by the 1980 synod of the Christian Reformed Church to be biblical, and that adjudication also found the gravamen to have been based on serious misunderstandings of the *Canons*, including the "equal ultimacy" correspondence between election and reprobation imagined by both Boer and Punt.<sup>25</sup>

Yet, Punt has published since then the astonishing claim that in this 1980 response, the CRC adopted his premise that all persons are elect in Christ except those who ultimately reject God's revelation of Himself in creation or in Christ! Support for this claim is sought in the last part of the first ground justifying the synodical rejection of Boer's gravamen:

The *Canons of Dort* do not teach what the gravamen erroneously understands the doctrine of reprobation to be: namely, a decree by means of which God is the cause of man's unbelief, and *by means of which God has from eternity consigned certain human beings to damnation apart from any merit or demerit on their part.*<sup>26</sup>

Before we assess Punt's appeal to the *study committee* report for the definition of "merit or demerit on their part," we should note that in the analysis of the gravamen, the *advisory committee* observed two senses of the word "reprobation" in the *Canons*, one meaning simply preterition (in I, 6), the other meaning preterition and condemnation (in I, 15). According to neither of these senses "does God cause or author the sinful unbelief of the reprobate. In the latter case God does condemn, but only on the basis of real demerit."<sup>27</sup> Ground for this observation can be found in the report of the study committee, where the historical background of the *Canons* is related, including this clarification found in the reports of many delegations to the Synod of Dort:

Preterition (or the passing by of some in God's election) is based solely on the Father's good pleasure. Condemnation, however, is based on the sins, *both original and actual*, of those who have not been chosen . . . .<sup>28</sup>

Against this Punt argues that if "merit or demerit on their part" can refer to the reprobate's original sin, then the *Canons* do teach

that some are consigned to everlasting damnation before they ever come into being. He would say instead that

God carries out the ultimate judgment against the sin committed in Adam only on those whom he *also* permits "to follow their own ways" (Canons of Dort I, 15), to make their personal decisions against God.<sup>29</sup>

But Punt has omitted from his reference to the *Canons* something crucial! The full phrase is (in the translation of A. Hoekema),

These, further, having been left in their own ways and under His just judgment, God has decreed finally to condemn and punish eternally, not only on account of their unbelief but also on account of all their other sins, as a declaration of His justice.<sup>30</sup>

This divine abandonment is itself judgment; it anticipates already the final judgment. It is these ones abandoned under judgment whom God decrees to condemn.

To fortify his argument, Punt collects phrases from the study report to show that it defined "demerit" as willful, conscious, active, persistent unbelief. While we might differ with his interpretation of these phrases in the light of the context in which they appear, we find in the report enough ambiguity about the basis or ground of condemnation to refrain from adopting its formulations as our own. It has been suggested that this ambiguity may be due in large part to the report's failure to distinguish between the ground of condemnation, and the ground of the decree to condemn.<sup>31</sup> In spite of this, although the ground adopted by the 1980 synod may leave open the question of whether the *Canons* teach condemnation from eternity, it cuts off any denial that the *Canons* teach an eternal decree to condemn those abandoned because of their sin under divine, righteous judgment.

The doctrine of election underlying "biblical universalism" is illustrated by the analogy of one camp (the elect) surrounded by a no-man's land, an area inhabited by those who are outside of Christ by their own choosing, unbelief and disobedience.<sup>32</sup> Why there should be a no-man's land, and why it should have inhabitants, the Bible nowhere tells us, according to Punt. God certainly didn't stake out its boundaries, nor did He intend to populate it. Those who come to inhabit the no-man's land are not those reprobate from eternity, since "they" were not anywhere ever in God's eternal design. The parameters of God's vision, if you will, extended only to the elect, all the elect. Outside *that* circle, and thus beyond God's active awareness, was . . . nobody.

It is this theological construction that presumes to solve the logical dilemma of saying at one and the same time, "All are . . . some are not." God knew beforehand from eternity about the "all," but didn't know about the "some," in the sense now of active awareness implicit in preterition and reprobation. In fact, God doesn't know who the inhabitants of the no-man's land will be *until they refuse to acknowledge Him as He has revealed Himself in creation or in the gospel*. Then for the first time God becomes active in relation to the reprobate, in executing judgment upon them for their willful unbelief. Only in this manner can it be argued both that God intended to save all men, since He knew only of the elect, and that some are not saved, a result never foreseen in eternity.

But what if we take as our starting point that God *first* saw all men (now including both the elect and the reprobate) *in Adam* before He saw "all men" in Christ?

Such a position would seem to warrant consideration if we can find but one reprobate of whom the Bible states that his willful disobedience was envisioned in God's antecedent, purposeful design. The Bible names two: Esau and Pharaoh. Of Esau it is said in Romans 9:10-13,

Not only that, but Rebecca's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—she was told, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

And concerning God's intention with Pharaoh, we read in the subsequent verses 16-18,

It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.

What we have discovered to be true of two is said of more; Jesus Christ was set in Zion by the Father as

"A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall. They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for." (I Peter 2:8)

If God had first seen these reprobate *in Adam*, as those to whom Adam's/man's first sin was imputed, which included the sentence and its initial execution in original sin, then God was actively

aware of them when His vision narrowed to the elect "in Christ." To say that election presupposed man's fallenness is to confess that the union of all men with Adam preceded the union of some men with Christ. Recall the words of John Murray quoted earlier: each person "is eternally contemplated by God as sinful by reason of the solidarity with Adam, and, whenever the person comes to be *actually*, he comes to be as sinful." A further consequence of this must be that the "all men" in Adam is *not* coextensive with the "all men" in Christ!

#### IV

Some additional implications to be drawn from this structural critique of "biblical universalism" can now be summarized. The first involves its view of original sin. Does not the imputation of Adam's sin to all men by virtue of their union with him necessarily entail the premise that mankind's evil nature is (part of) the active, divine judgment upon sin? Are not all men born under God's wrath, by nature objects of wrath, an efficient wrath lifted from some by Christ upon whom it was transferred and executed on the cross, but continuing to rest upon those whom God has decreed to condemn, having left them in their own ways and under His just judgment? The answer can only be negative if God's just judgment consists merely of the *declaration* that all men are worthy of condemnation.

The second involves the view of predestination underlying "biblical universalism." The God of "biblical universalism" is a God who, as time goes on, is surprised by the reprobate; He never expected to be rejected, since His eternal counsel never envisioned the reprobate, only the elect. This God's knowledge of and response to the reprobate is always after the fact of their personal, persistent disobedience. History is the teacher, God is the student.

Grace presupposes sin; divine predestination presupposes human fallenness. Scripture reveals this structural given and is part of it; the Confessions echo it, and Reformed theology has been formed by it. All of which, in the final analysis, constitutes the most powerful contradiction of the premise of "biblical universalism."

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Neal Punt, *Unconditional Good News: Toward an Understanding of Biblical Universalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 3; hereafter, *Unconditional*.

<sup>2</sup>Punt, *Unconditional*, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup>Punt, *Unconditional*, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup>Punt, *Unconditional*, p. 21.

<sup>5</sup>"Letters to the Editor," *Outlook* 31 (April, 1981): 22; see also Punt's response to Jelle Tuininga, "Is the Gospel a Mere 'Announcement'?", *Outlook* 31 (July, 1981): 15.

<sup>6</sup>An excellent explanation of the implications of this "structural given" for hermeneutics can be found in Henry Vander Goot, *Interpreting the Bible in Theology and the Church* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1984).

<sup>7</sup>Punt, *Unconditional*, p. 26.

<sup>8</sup>Punt, *Unconditional*, p. 23.

<sup>9</sup>Punt, *Unconditional*, p. 23-24.

<sup>10</sup>Punt, *Unconditional*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>11</sup>Punt, *Unconditional*, p. 23; emphasis added.

<sup>12</sup>Punt, *Unconditional*, p. 24; emphasis added.

<sup>13</sup>Punt, *Unconditional*, p. 30.

<sup>14</sup>Punt, *Unconditional*, p. 23.

<sup>15</sup>Anthony A. Hoekema, *A New English Translation of the Canons of Dort* (reprinted from *Calvin Theological Journal* 3 (1968): 133-161), p. 26; emphasis added.

<sup>16</sup>J.H. Donner and S.A. Van Den Hoorn, eds., *Acta der National Synode te Dorrecht ten jare 1618-19* (Leiden, n.d.), p. 359.

<sup>17</sup>Donner and Van Den Hoorn, *Acta*, p. 359.

<sup>18</sup>Donner and Van Den Hoorn, *Acta*, p. 419.

<sup>19</sup>John Murray, *The Imputation of Adam's Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), p. 90.

<sup>20</sup>Murray, *Imputation*, p. 90.

<sup>21</sup>Murray, *Imputation*, pp. 74-75.

<sup>22</sup>Punt, *Unconditional*, p. 26.

<sup>23</sup>A. Kuyper, *Dictaten Dogmatiek*, 2nd ed., Vol. 3, *Locus de Peccato* (Kampen: Kok, n.d.), p. 61; see also H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 4th ed., Vol. 3 (Kampen: Kok, 1929), pp. 85ff.

<sup>24</sup>Punt, *Unconditional*, p. 59.

<sup>25</sup>Boer's attack on the *Canons*, repeated again in a 1983 publication, is reviewed by Fred H. Klooster, "Harry Boer's Battle Against Reprobation: A Review Article," *Calvin Theological Journal* 19 (1984): 50-68.

## BIBLICAL UNIVERSALISM: STRUCTURE AND STARTING POINT

<sup>26</sup>1980 *Acts of Synod* (Grand Rapids: Board of Publications of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, 1980), p. 76; emphasis added.

<sup>27</sup>1980 *Acts of Synod*, pp. 74-75; emphasis added.

<sup>28</sup>1980 *Acts of Synod*, p. 515; emphasis added.

<sup>29</sup>Neal Punt, "Who Reject Him," *The Banner* 119 (April 2, 1984), p. 14.

<sup>30</sup>Anthony A. Hoekema, *A New Translation of the Canons of Dort*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>31</sup>This was recently suggested by Donald Sinnema in a paper entitled "The Reprobation Issue in the CRC," presented in Sioux Center, Iowa, in December, 1984.

<sup>32</sup>Punt, *Unconditional*, pp. 57-64.