

DEFINING THE ELECT: A REVIEW ARTICLE

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Unconditional Good News: Toward an Understanding of Biblical Universalism.
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The controversy over the nature and extent of God's saving grace, which has raged ever since Augustine and Pelagius came to literary blows, shows no signs of subsiding. Over the past few years a spate of books has perpetuated—often eloquently, at other times not—the question of to whom and on what conditions, if any, God's grace is bestowed. One of the more recent entrants into this field of theological warfare is Neal Punt's *Unconditional Good News*. My analysis of Punt's contribution will proceed according to the chapter divisions of his book.

1. Punt is manifestly dissatisfied with the many attempts to deal with the universalistic texts in Scripture (e.g., John 1:29; 12:32; 1 Cor 15:22). While rejecting Origen's "absolute universalism" (p. 2), according to which "all will find salvation in Christ, either in this life or in a future existence" (p. 2), Punt is equally disinclined to the view of historic, Reformed Protestantism, which teaches that "all are lost except those who believe" (p. 3). He believes that this "protectionist attitude" (p. 3) is due to the failure (or fear) of letting stand the simple declarations of Scripture. Thus he queries: "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 Scripture? Is there any sense in which these texts can be accepted as saying that all are saved" (p. 3)? "Yes," answers Punt, once it is conceded that the true teaching of Scripture is that "all persons are elect in Christ except those who the Bible declares will be lost" (p. 4). The prevailing assumption that all persons are outside of Christ except those who the Bible declares will be saved "distorts" (p. 5) the universalistic spirit of God's Word. Punt does not shy away from emphasizing the destructive effects of this soteriological principle (p. 5):

This unexamined assumption has thus deprived many sincere Christians of the assurance of their salvation and has often placed believers in doubt as to whether they should press the claims of Christ's kingship upon everyone everywhere. It has detracted from the positive, world-embracing, thrilling good news of what God in Christ has done for humanity. It is the positive good news, the universal evangel, that should spur us on to proclaim enthusiastically God's message of salvation worldwide.

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Punt believes he has a superior alternative. It consists in redefining the elect: "The elect are *all persons except* . . . Yes, all persons by God's sovereign grace are united with Christ and will inherit eternal life *except* those who will receive the just judgment of their sins in eternal death" (p. 5). This approach to Scripture, Punt argues, will enable us to appreciate more joyfully the good news of the gospel and respond more obediently to the commands of Scripture. In brief, we should treat all persons "as those for whom Christ died, unless and until they give evidence to the contrary" (p. 7). Let there be no mistake: Punt denies "any natural human ability to exercise faith" (p. 7) and affirms both unconditional election and particular atonement. His thesis is simply that Scripture teaches all will be saved "except" those who are said to be lost. This is "Biblical universalism." He feels it is a superior (and more Biblical) assumption to the negative formulation dominant in traditional Protestant thought (to wit, that all are lost except those who are said to be saved).

2. Having stated his thesis in chap. 1, Punt takes up Rom 5:18 because of its undeniably universalistic thrust. He interacts with three ways in which interpreters have handled the Pauline "all men," each of which he finds deficient. They are: (1) "Justification of life" is something less than salvation; (2) life comes to all men only in the sense that it is "offered" to them; and (3) "all men" means all who are elect in Christ. I concur with Punt that the blessing in v 18b is "full participation in the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection" (p. 11) and that by virtue of the Pauline notion of federal headship both "condemnation" and "justification" are secured to those covenantally united with Adam and Christ. We are then led to believe, however, that Punt likewise rejects the third option, when in fact he does not.

Punt believes it apparent "that the phrases 'condemnation for all men' and 'acquittal and life for all men' are parallel and also identical in the scope of their reference" (p. 13). Why, then, are not all who are condemned in Adam likewise justified in Christ? Because "the analogy of Scripture requires an exception to the basic premise that 'one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men'" (p. 14). Thus (pp. 15-16)

we should recognize that neither the first nor the second "all men" of Romans 5:18 is used as an absolute universal, meaning all persons, head for head, without any exceptions whatever . . . The obvious exception to the first "all men" is, of course, the man Jesus . . . In an identical way, the second "all men" of verse 18 is not an absolute universal. Scripture speaks of certain individuals who will not share in the ultimate benefits of Christ's obedience.

But this is clearly inconsistent with Punt's earlier statement that the two phrases in v 18 are "identical in the scope of their reference" (p. 13). What can this mean but that those very men who are condemned in Adam are justified in Christ? The whole human race minus one (Jesus Christ), and the elect, are not numerically identical, unless one believes in absolute universalism, which Punt says he does not.

Equally confusing is Punt's rejection of John Murray's treatment of the text. He quotes Murray as saying that "there is no possibility of escaping the conclusion that, if the apostle meant the apodosis [the second 'all men'] to be as embrace in its scope as the protasis [the first 'all men'], then the whole human race

must eventually attain to eternal life" (p. 14). Punt insists that "this objection [of Murray's] considers both the first and the second 'all men' in abstraction from Scripture as a whole" (p. 14). But Murray's conclusion is based on the broader context of Scripture. Further on in his comments on this text Murray writes:

When we ask the question: Is it Pauline to posit universal salvation? the answer must be decisively negative (cf. II Thess. 1:8,9). Hence we cannot interpret the apodosis in verse 18 in the sense of inclusive universalism, and it is consistent with sound canons of interpretation to assume a restrictive implication.¹

Is there, then, any substantial difference between Punt's proposal and the traditional Calvinistic interpretation offered by Murray? I think not. Punt submits that the "all men" in the apodosis of v 18 does not include all men without exception, for other texts indicate that some will be lost. Likewise Murray restricts the "all men" of v 18 because of what he knows to be true of at least part of the human race from a passage such as 2 Thess 1:8-9. Punt demands that "we make no other exceptions because the Bible in its broader context excludes no others from the second 'all men' of this text" (p. 16). Murray would heartily agree.

"It is neither legitimate nor necessary," Punt continues, "to add the words 'in Christ' in order to remove the universal extent feature of this analogy as it applies to the second 'all men' of Rom. 5:18" (p. 16). And yet Punt himself removes the "universal extent feature" by taking "all men" as referring to everyone except those who the Bible declares will be lost. All things considered, those excepted from the "all men" of v 18 are, on both views, they and they alone who the Bible says will be lost.

Evidently Punt believes there is a relevant and far-reaching difference between saying, on the one hand, that all are elect except those who the Bible says are not and, on the other, that none are elect except those who the Bible says are. It is this "difference" that Punt thinks distinguishes his view of Rom 5:18 from that of Murray. In point of fact, as we have noted, this is not true. Whether this turn of phrase will prove significant in other respects is the task of this review to determine.

One other point should be noted in conjunction with the preceding. Punt concedes that in Romans 5 the apostle "makes the astonishing claim that the deed of one man had a devastating effect on 'all men'" (p. 10), that "by virtue of union with Adam, we were not merely exposed to the possibility of condemnation: 'all men' were 'made sinners' by the disobedience of Adam" (p. 11), and that "death is universal and reigns even over those who did not have the law and had not sinned after the likeness of Adam" (pp. 14-15). This being the case, why should Punt be surprised that theologians begin with the assumption that all are lost (since that is what Paul, on Punt's own reading of him, says in Romans 5) except those who the Bible says will be saved? Punt may not approve of the "negative" thrust of this assumption, but he can hardly reject it for being non-Pauline.

3. Chapter 3 only repeats the thesis but with added ambiguity. Punt again charges traditional Calvinists with having a "protectionist attitude . . . which prevents them from saying that there is a sense in which the universalistic texts

¹J. Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971 [1959]) 203.

of the Bible make the simple declaration "all persons are saved" (p. 17). But their view does nothing of the sort. Why is it "protectionist" to insist that "all persons" who will be saved are the elect, or "all persons" looked upon as without distinction of race or creed, whereas it is "simple" and Biblical to say that "all persons" means all except those who the Bible says will be lost?

A fundamental problem is the ambiguous and ill-defined (if not undefined) way Punt uses the word "all." For example, he objects to the assumption that "the Bible can never say that 'All persons are saved'" (p. 18). If he means "all persons without any exception, all of the human race distributively," then surely he must withdraw his objection; otherwise, absolute universalism follows as a matter of course. If by "all persons" he means (and he does) all except those who the Bible says will be lost, he likewise has "complicated" the text. Apparently he intends to say that most Calvinistic interpreters take the word "all" as a reference to all the elect, all who are actually and ultimately saved. This, he argues, is to allow logic "to muzzle the biblical text" (p. 18). On his unmuzzled, nonprotectionist view, "all" means "all"! Or does it? Clearly not, for he quickly "muzzles" the text with another extensive and grand exception: all persons except those who the Bible says will be lost. Biblical universalism, he says, understands that "all persons distributively, head for head, are saved in Christ as they perished in Adam *except those—and those only*—of whom we read in Scripture that they shall not inherit the kingdom of heaven" (p. 20). His thesis is that this is substantially and significantly at variance from saying that "all" in such texts refers to the elect and not the nonelect (whom I think most would define as those who Scripture says shall not inherit the kingdom). Punt, in my view, has made a phraseological distinction without a theologically significant difference.

4. Working with his assumption that all persons are elect, Punt seeks to discover whom Scripture excludes from this generalization. He cites some twenty passages that he believes indicate that "God has not chosen 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" (p. 26). Punt again concedes that "all persons are born of sin . . . and under the sentence of condemnation" (p. 23). "All people," he argues, "are liable for and polluted by the imputed sin of Adam" (p. 24). However, Scripture does not explicitly teach, and therefore we should not infer, that anyone suffers eternal wrath solely because of original sin, apart from "actual, personal, conscious sin" (p. 24).

The point of this seems to be that whereas original sin merits eternal wrath it does not actually incur it. In respect of eternal condemnation, the guilt of original sin is a necessary but not sufficient condition. It is necessary because apart from original sin no one would commit personal or conscious sin. It is not sufficient, however, because Scripture forecasts judgment only upon those who commit conscious sin. Punt has here committed a fundamental logical fallacy. The texts he cites say nothing more than that they who commit actual sin, in addition to original sin, are lost. Such texts do not say that they alone are lost, nor that they who only are in original sin are saved. Granted, the absence of Scripture that asserts that those who only are in original sin are lost creates a presumption that they are saved. But presumption is not proof. In fact, statements that they

are worthy of eternal judgment for original sin (which Punt concedes) might create the counter-presumption for their eventual condemnation—i.e., that they will ultimately suffer eternal wrath, having not committed conscious sin. Nevertheless Punt concludes that only those who consciously reject God's revelation (either in Christ or in nature) will ultimately be lost.

Concerning pagans who have never heard the gospel, Punt says that "we cannot rule out every possibility of their being saved" (p. 29). God may well work extraordinarily and apart from means to save some, although Punt cites no text to support this assumption. In consequence, note this strange inconsistency: Punt is quick to assert that only those who personally disbelieve will be lost (because no text says any are actually lost because of original sin alone). But he denies that only those who personally do believe will be saved (although there is no text that supports this notion). He allows no exceptions to the former (possibly because of an emotional objection to infant damnation), but many to the latter (again, possibly because of an emotional uneasiness at condemning all pagans). Evidently the silence of Scripture is allowed to "speak" only on those occasions when such would substantiate Punt's view.

Of course neither case is logically airtight. The absence of Scripture asserting that some who never hear the gospel are saved does not necessarily mean that none will be. Likewise the absence of Scripture asserting the condemnation of those who only are in original sin does not demand that none will ultimately suffer. Both propositions are subject to inference.

5/6. Chapters 5 and 6 are devoted to expounding what Punt calls the "universalistic texts" of Scripture. In chap. 5 he prefaces these texts with five observations designed to serve as theological controls. I will not comment on the first two because they will resurface at various stages in Punt's exegesis. Furthermore, they do not significantly advance the thesis he has already set forth. The final three, however, take up the words "all," "world" and "every."

Punt's discussion of these terms is not always clear. On the one hand, he concedes that they may on occasion reflect the extension of God's grace beyond Jewish borders to the Gentiles. But on the other, such terms are "a very indirect way of making reference to two categories or classes of people" (p. 34). The validity of this latter conclusion regarding such universal terms must be determined by a careful analysis of their usage in Scripture.

As far as *kosmos* is concerned, it clearly was employed by the Holy Spirit to communicate that the narrow bounds of the OT have been abolished. God's revelation and salvific blessing were at that time largely restricted to one nation, his peculiar people, whereas the "world" was left in darkness. "You only have I known of all the families of the earth" (Amos 3:2). Note also Ps 147:19-20; Jer 10:25. "But now" (Eph 2:13), the cross-work of Jesus has "universalized" God's redemptive grace. The Church is composed of Jew and Gentile. God is calling to himself a people who were not his people: the Gentiles (Rom 9:24-26; 1 Pet 2:10). He is found by them who sought him not (Rom 10:20). Now, as opposed to then, repentance and remission of sins are to be preached to all nations (Luke 24:47). Disciples are to be made of all nations (Matt 28:19-20). The gospel is the power of God to all who believe, both to Jew and Gentile (Rom 1:16). God is pouring out his Spirit on all flesh (Acts 2:17). They who once were without Christ, strangers,

aliens, and without God or hope, have now been drawn near by the blood of Christ (Eph 2:11-13). The radical nature of this glorious truth is witnessed in the Jewish response to Gentile salvation. According to Paul, they were "filled with envy" (Acts 13:42-50). The Jews, he tells us, "please not God, and are contrary to all men; forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they might be saved" (1 Thess 2:15-16). Yet salvation has come to the Gentiles "to provoke them to jealousy" (Rom 11:11; Acts 22:21-22). It required a heavenly vision to convince Peter (Acts 10-11). And note the response: "Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18). This truth is part of the mystery kept secret in ages past: "that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ by the gospel" (Eph 3:5-6).

The word *kosmos*, it would appear, was an especially appropriate term to utilize in order to express this idea that the saving grace of God had extended into every country, to all peoples, viewed not in terms of individualistic universality, an "all without exception," but "all without distinction"—that is, without regard for ethnic or geographical criteria.²

Against this background it should not be unexpected that the word "all," notwithstanding Punt's objections, could likewise carry the same force. Consider John 12:32, where it is evident that

the "all" whom Jesus will draw, and the drawing itself, cannot both be taken absolutely, because in the succeeding verses it becomes clear that not *all* are saved (12.35-41). In the context of the arrival of the Greeks (12.20-22), to whose request for an audience Jesus has not so far responded, the "all" appears to mean "all" as opposed to Jews only: Jesus does not talk to the Greeks because that which will draw *all* men is the climactic event of his own death/exaltation.³

The scope of the word "all" must be contextually determined. For example, in some texts "all" is inclusive of everyone/everything without exception (Acts 10:36; Col 1:17,20; Eph 1:11); in others it refers to all things within a restricted sphere—i.e., all of a specified sort (1 Cor 1:5; 6:12; 10:23; Rom 14:2; Phil 4:13); while yet in others it has in view all kinds or all sorts—i.e., all without distinction (Matt 9:35; 10:1; Luke 11:42; Acts 10:12; 1 Tim 6:10).

Punt objects because "the expression 'classes of men' denotes an abstraction which can exist only in one's mind . . . Such abstractions do not need nor are they capable of receiving 'salvation' as it is mentioned in these texts" (p. 35). But the point of such references is not to delineate or specify individually, as if by name, those to whom salvation has come. Rather, the declaration is that salvation is available to all who will receive it regardless of race, creed or color. There is neither tribe nor tongue that, on those grounds alone, is excluded from God's saving work in Christ (an "abstraction" that must have evoked no little rejoicing among Gentiles in the first century). To which or how many of these individuals the saving work of Christ is ultimately to be applied through faith was not the concern of the NT authors (nor a knowledge they possessed). And for Punt to

²See esp. John 4:22, 42; 11:51-52; Acts 1:8, as well as the discussion by D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981) 173-175.

³*Ibid.*, p. 174.

admit (p. 36) that Scripture does speak redemptively of "some persons of all classes" (see esp. Rev 5:9; 7:9) only serves to confirm what has been stated: that elsewhere such terms as "all" and "world" can convey a sense of universality (without distinction) apart from concluding that all without exception will ultimately be saved.

A few texts call for closer scrutiny.

(1) 1 Cor 15:22 ("For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive"). Punt insists, and I agree, that the phrase "shall be made alive" implies newness of life as well as resurrection of the body. However, Punt goes on to say that "being made alive in Christ is a benefit which the text applies to all persons distributively (each person head for head)" (p. 39). Once again Punt's language is utterly ambiguous. He admits that the first "all" (in Adam) refers to "all persons universally" (p. 39). Furthermore, he insists that the second "all" (in Christ) has the same denotation. Are we to conclude, then, that each and every person who died in Adam will be made alive in Christ? No, says Punt, because the broader context of Scripture excludes from eternal life those who do not believe. How, then, can the two occurrences of "all" in v 22 be denotatively equivalent? Of course they cannot. Why then does Punt maintain that they are equally universal (as he did in Rom 5:18) when by his own admission the "all" in Christ are numerically fewer than the "all" in Adam? And again, what substantive difference is there between Punt's interpretation of "all in Christ" as meaning all persons except those who the Bible says are not in Christ, and my interpretation of "all in Christ" as meaning the elect—i.e., those only who the Bible says are in Christ?

(2) 1 Tim 2:6 ("who gave himself as a ransom for all, the testimony borne at the proper time"). Punt rejects those interpretations that restrict either the efficacy and application of the atonement or the extent of the word "all." Biblical universalism understands and applies the text as follows; "He gave himself a substitute-ransom for all [by which he means all persons who ultimately will be saved], therefore *all persons are saved except those who the Bible declares will be lost*" (p. 46). This is but to say, is it not, that he did not give himself for all (universally without exception), but only for the elect? If these two statements are synonymous, as I think they are, we again see that Punt's turn of phrase is theologically inconsequential.

(3) 1 Tim 4:10 ("the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers"). I mention this text not to take issue with Punt but simply to make known the novelty of his view. He rejects the interpretation according to which "Savior of all men" means "'benefactor and sustainer of earthly life for all men,' and the phrase 'especially of those who believe' is . . . understood to indicate that God is the Savior from sin for those who believe" (p. 48). His view calls for "Savior" to be taken soteriologically and not providentially (or some such notion). Furthermore, "especially" speaks of more of the same: "It does not ever change the essence or the effect of the action to which it refers; it only connotes an intensity or concentration of that action" (p. 48). Thus the text is saying that God is the Savior from sin of all the elect (some of whom may not yet be born or who have temporarily rejected the gospel but will ultimately respond), especially of those who are already believers. "'Especially of those who believe' means that believers concentrate on, are aware of, are alert to, are cognizant of the fact that

God is their Savior from sin" (p. 49). Thus those of whom God is Savior are alike delivered from their sin, but some are yet in unbelief while others have trusted Christ. The word "especially" is designed to point out that of the elect—i.e., of those whom God saves—some now enjoy and are aware of such deliverance whereas the rest do not (yet).

This text is notoriously difficult for every theological system. Although I am not convinced Punt's interpretation is correct, it would not greatly affect his "Biblical universalism" were it to be shown false. Indeed, one could adopt his understanding of this passage while rejecting the major thesis of his book.

(4) Heb 2:9 ("that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one"). The way in which Punt handles this text is similar to his treatment of 1 Cor 15:22—and no less ambiguous. He rejects (a) the Arminian view, which understands "for every one" to mean that Christ died in the stead of all universally.⁴ He cannot accept the idea that some of those for whom Christ paid the price of sin are not ultimately saved. But he also rejects (b) the interpretation of "every one" that links it with those "sons," "brethren of Christ," and the "sanctified" mentioned in the context—i.e., the elect. He wants us to believe that his view is different from (b). His interpretation is this: "He tasted death 'for every one' and therefore all persons are elect in Christ except those who the Bible declares will be lost (biblical universalism)" (p. 51). But again, on Punt's view, who is included in the "every one" for whom Christ tasted death? Obviously the elect only (notwithstanding his insistence that we read "every one" universally), for Punt refuses to believe that Christ could taste death for some who ultimately will not be saved—i.e., the nonelect. Why, then, does he object to (b), according to which those for whom Christ tasted death are they who ultimately will be saved—i.e., the many "sons" who are brought to glory (v 10), "those who are sanctified" (v 11a), Christ's "brethren" (v 11b), "the children" whom God has given to Christ (v 13), the "people" for whose sins propitiation is made (v 17) and on whose behalf he renders help in time of temptation (v 18)—i.e., the elect? The answer to that question is the mystery of his book.

(5) John 3:17; 12:47 ("For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world; but that the world should be saved through him . . . For I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world"). Punt treats these two passages together and maintains that the term "world" is "an undifferentiated totality. As such, whatever is said about it applies to each of its components" (p. 52). He wants us to believe that this way of defining the "world" that Christ loved and came to save is more generous and true to the plain thrust of the Scriptures than any view that would restrict the scope of the term to the elect. But Punt does not believe in an unlimited atonement (as traditionally defined). Therefore that "world" of people that will be saved in consequence of Christ's love and death is for Punt as restricted as—indeed, numerically equivalent with—the "world" as interpreted by traditional Calvinist exegetes.⁵

⁴I think it only fair to point out that many who are not "Arminian" on other soteriological issues adopt interpretation (a). Punt does not allow for those who would classify themselves as "Amyrldian"—i.e., four-point Calvinists.

⁵The best treatment of these texts is by B. B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1952) 505-522.

(6) 1 John 2:2 (“and he himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world”). Punt is to be commended for pointing out that “if it is true that Christ is the cause for turning away wrath for all persons without any exception, then there is no more condemnation for anyone. Any future punishment for sin would be capricious, since God’s just wrath would have been satisfied by Christ’s sacrifice” (p. 55). However, as we have seen before, he insists on taking the “whole world” as a distributive universal subject only to the exceptions found in the broader context of Scripture. In other words, the “whole world” encompasses every person in the world except those who the Bible says will be lost. Who are these persons? They are the elect. Who are those that are excepted? They are the nonelect. Again, then, why should Punt protest those interpretations placed on 1 John 2:2 by Reformed scholars that yield the same conclusions?

7. In chap. 7 Punt addresses himself to the doctrine of particular or limited atonement. He begins, however, with a spirited defense of Berkouwer’s denial of reprobation. The decrees of election and damnation are not equally ultimate, as if to say that belief and unbelief are alike the effect of the pre-temporal and unconditional causal will of God. “The Bible speaks of an eternal election; it does not reveal a corresponding eternal rejection. God’s judgment of never-ending exclusion from his presence must be viewed as a response to actual sin committed by those that are rejected” (p. 59).⁶

Punt’s affirmation of particular atonement is unequivocal (p. 65):

Biblical universalism confesses that the atonement is particular in the sense of being effectively applied to all those for whom Christ made his sacrifice. In other words, it accepts as biblical the doctrine that Christ died for and sovereignly brings to salvation all those and only those given him by the Father in the eternal counsel of redemption.

In the light of this, one can only guess why he would object to Packer’s statement that “Christ died to save a certain company of helpless sinners upon whom God had set His free saving love” (p. 68). He admits the formal accuracy of the statement but laments that it leaves “the impression that God has chosen some fortunate souls to salvation and the rest of humanity is bypassed, through no fault of its own” (p. 69). How it is that Punt extracts from Packer’s statement the teaching that many are bypassed “through no fault” of their own is beyond me. Punt believes it a significant improvement to say that “‘Christ died for all persons except certain specified sinners.’ Those sinners are specified in the Bible as all who wilfully and ultimately refuse to acknowledge God” (p. 69). This repeated demand that traditional Reformed expressions be rephrased is possibly due to Punt’s belief that more will be saved than will be lost (pp. 28-29). If such be his reasoning, he must establish two points: first, that in fact the elect do numerically exceed the nonelect, an admittedly speculative if not unanswerable question;⁷ and second, assuming the first point is proven, that “Biblical universalism”

⁶Cf. A. Baker, *Berkouwer’s Doctrine of Election: Balance or Imbalance* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1981) esp. 115-161.

⁷Although see Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies* 334-350.

follows therefrom as a matter of theological necessity.

8. Additional support for "Biblical universalism," affirms Punt, is to be found in the fact that Scripture with its commands and promises is addressed to all men indiscriminately: "The New Testament writers make no distinction between what is required of believers and what is required of all others" (p. 81). This would be difficult to ascertain, however, from reading such texts as Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1b; Eph 1:1b; Phil 1:1b; and Col 1:1b, just to mention a few. The epistles are quite specifically addressed to those who have come to faith in Christ, the "saints." That the ethical requirements in each epistle may be legitimately pressed on unbelievers for which they are ultimately accountable is quite another matter.

Punt reasons that Paul, for example, writes on the assumption that his readers are in Christ. This is true, of course, but not because of some theological assumption to the effect that all are saved except those who the Bible says are lost. He addresses his letters to Christians because he has become convinced, either through his own ministry or on the testimony of trusted friends (e.g., Col 1:4, 7-8), that they have placed their faith in Christ and are living in obedience to his commands. "Biblical universalism" as defined and defended by Punt is simply irrelevant to the issue of to whom and on what basis the NT epistles are addressed.

9. Faith, maintains Punt, is, on the one hand, without value as a causal factor in justification and, on the other, an absolute necessity if the sinner is to be saved. Faith is not man's one contribution to justification, but neither is it dispensable. This is but to say that although we are not saved on the basis of faith, we are saved through faith. It is not an element of human merit, but simply a means by which we receive Christ's merit. With this I have no quarrel. Indeed, Punt's affirmation of human inability, of "human passivity in the new birth" (p. 91), is uplifting. Notwithstanding this Biblical emphasis, Punt proceeds to make several questionable assertions.

First, in the course of rebuffing Berkouwer for making faith "essential" if the miracle of grace is to occur (pp. 99-110), he writes (p. 103) that

the tendency to equate Calvinism with a fatalistic determinism is largely due to the historic tradition of doing theology on the supposition that all persons are outside of Christ except . . . This formula encourages speculation about an arbitrary, mechanistically causalistic, or even capricious divine selection. The premise which we have argued is established by the universalistic texts, that "all persons are elect in Christ except . . ." This premise reveals God's gracious nature, with rejection being wholly attributable to the recalcitrant nature of the one who continues in sin.

I beg to differ. This historic formulation does not in itself encourage such speculation. God's "divine selection" of some to eternal life is not arbitrary, if by that one means "arising out of caprice; selected at random and without reason; motiveless." Paul says we were chosen in Christ and predestined to adoption as sons "according to the kind intention of his will" (Eph 1:5b), and "according to his own purpose and grace that was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity" (2 Tim 1:9b). The ground of election may well be unfathomable, but it is grounded and purposive, not arbitrary or capricious. Furthermore, one need not hold Punt's version of "Biblical universalism" to affirm with him that those not di-

vinely selected are rejected because of their recalcitrant nature and continuance in sin. Punt seems to identify (falsely, I believe) historic Calvinism with that variety of supralapsarianism according to which God is the author of sin and reprobation in the same way he is the author of righteousness and election.

Second, Punt's discussion of the role of faith in establishing us in the state of grace could use some clarification. He writes: "There is . . . no human act or attitude of faith which is *essential* for the miracle of grace to occur" (p. 106). Why, then, is faith urged upon all men? Not because it is *essential*, says Punt, but because of the disastrous consequences of unbelief. But is it not then the case that one must believe in order to escape this condemnation? Evidently, yes. Why, then, should anyone object to faith's being described as "essential" for eternal life? He should not, if the obligatory nature of faith is seen in the light of God's grace: Faith is a gift. All are required to believe, but none are able (a moral inability, I might add, for which they are wholly responsible). Faith is man's act as acted upon by God. The grace of regeneration precedes and effects that act of faith that is essential to justification. Punt does finally clarify his argument ("nothing human—including faith—can be an *essential* element in producing God's mercy for sinners," p. 110), but only at the end of the chapter.

Third, and related to the above, is the following statement: "There is a triumph of grace in Christ Jesus which is to be *announced* to all people, and all share in this victory *except those* who 'by their wickedness suppress the truth'" (p. 109). There is truth to this assertion. But I cannot bring myself to believe, notwithstanding Punt's arguments, that it accurately reflects the gospel proclamation of the NT. It matters little, anticipating Punt's response, that my perspective appears "negative"—only that it is Biblical: There is a triumph of grace in Christ Jesus that is to be announced to all people, and only those will share in it who by their repentance and faith embrace the truth.

10. One chapter of Punt's book takes up the nature of covenant and Church. It does not bear directly on those issues of concern in this review, and my only response to it would be that of any Baptist to the application of the ordinance to infants.

11. His chapter on infant salvation, on the other hand, calls for considerable attention. "Biblical universalism," Punt submits, "provides a basis for believing that all who die in infancy as well as all who are mentally incapable are saved" (p. 120). He grounds this belief on the "fact" that "the Bible invariably describes those who will be eternally separated from the presence of God as those, and those only, who wilfully and ultimately refuse to have God in their knowledge" (p. 120). Since those who die in infancy do not reject the revelation of God "given in nature, nor . . . refuse to believe the revelation God has given in Christ" (p. 121), they are saved. It should be noted, however, that Punt does not say infants are not worthy of condemnation. He rejects the Pelagian view that all are born innocent, as well as sentimentalism, "the idea that if we who have been created in the image of God cannot bring ourselves to condemn an infant to eternal punishment, then we need not think that God could or would do so" (p. 121). Therefore his insistence that infants need to be saved is unqualified. For example, he says that "Adam's sin was imputed to all his posterity" (p. 121), and that "all persons are guilty of the sin he [Adam] committed" (p. 122). He cites with

approve the Belgic Confession (Article 15) to the effect that "through the disobedience of Adam original sin is extended to all mankind; which is a corruption of the whole nature and a hereditary disease, wherewith infants in their mother's womb are infected—and is so vile and abominable in the sight of God that it is sufficient to condemn all mankind" (p. 122). Furthermore (p. 123),

the sentence of eternal condemnation must be carried out unless something intervenes to remove both the guilt and the corruption of this original sin. The only remedy is the atonement suffered by Christ. The benefits of Christ's sacrifice must be applied to those who die in infancy if they are to be saved (Acts 4:12). To be saved, these infants must be joined to Christ.

His view, then, is this: (a) Only those who consciously reject God's revelation are ultimately lost; (b) those dying in infancy were incapable of conscious response; (c) therefore, those who die in infancy are not ultimately lost. This reasoning, however, were it true (and I am not denying that it is), would only prove that those dying in infancy are not ultimately lost. It does not demonstrate that they are ultimately saved. It is entirely possible that some would insist that these infants are consigned to a state of limbo in which they neither suffer the pains of eternal condemnation nor enjoy the bliss of the beatific vision. Punt seems to be aware of this, for he says that "to be saved, . . . infants must be joined to Christ" (p. 123), and again, "the application of the redemption purchased by Christ must take place prior to their death" (p. 123).

Punt then makes this astounding statement: "Any theology established on the premise that all persons are outside of Christ except those who the Bible declares will be saved will find it difficult to construct a doctrine of salvation for those who die in infancy" (p. 123). It is astounding because Punt has himself affirmed that all infants are born outside of Christ, worthy of eternal condemnation, in need of the redemptive benefits of Christ, in a condition such that before their death they must be joined to Christ. But this is precisely the soteriological premise that Punt wants us to believe he rejects—namely, that all are outside of Christ (lost) except those who the Bible says will be saved. His thesis, as I understand it, is that the only viable interpretation of certain universalistic texts is that all are elect in Christ except those who the Bible says will be lost. Since those dying in infancy are not included in the latter, they must be included in the former. And yet the fact that we should be discussing the need for those dying in infancy to be saved at all is intelligible only on that very assumption that Punt insists is wholly unbiblical—namely, that all are lost except those who the Bible says will be saved. In other words, Punt uses his doctrine of "Biblical universalism" to prove the salvation of dying infants, whose need for salvation is an explicit denial of his premise.

My criticism here is not of Punt's affirmation concerning the salvation of those dying in infancy (indeed, I am inclined to agree with him—on other grounds, of course). Rather, it is the fact that his own premises on which he concludes that infants need salvation argue incisively (and ironically) for the very assumption that it is the purpose of his book to refute.

12. At this stage in his argument Punt proceeds to apply his notion of "Biblical universalism" to four topics of immediate interest, only two of which call for comment.

First, Punt makes several questionable assertions in connection with the content of the gospel message: (a) He contends that we must not preach the wrath and judgment of God until our hearers openly reject the good news. It is not until they rebel against the revealed will of God that they should be told they are subject to his wrath. This, however, is contrary to what we know of man's condition from Eph 2:3 ("by nature children of wrath").⁸ The wrath of God abides on all who have not been joined to Christ. It hardly seems inappropriate, then, to declare to unbelievers the peril of their condition. (b) Related to the above is his statement that "whoever brings the Word of God must *assume* that those who are being addressed are 'elect in Christ'" (p. 135). But if I am justified in assuming that all who hear the message are elect in Christ, why should I bother preaching to them? If the answer is, "Because some, in fact, are not saved," then my initial assumption was not justified; indeed, it was false. Furthermore why must we preach with assumptions about the condition of any in our audience? It may be that all to whom we speak are already saved. It may be that all are lost. But why should we preach with any assumption concerning either possibility?

The second point of application that concerns me is Punt's treatment of "union with Christ" in conjunction with his comments on the assurance of salvation. It is not so much the latter that is disturbing as it is certain statements indirectly related thereto. For example, Punt writes: "Faith is a fruit of our union with Christ" (p. 136), and again: "Union with Christ is in no way accomplished by or contingent on the personal choice of the individual involved. Only in being joined to Christ does one become willing to receive redemption in his name" (p. 138). If by "union with Christ" Punt means that aspect of being united to him in consequence of eternal election, as stated for example by Paul in Eph 1:4, he is surely correct. But as Murray has noted:

We do not become *actual* partakers of Christ until redemption is effectually applied. Paul in writing to the believers at Ephesus reminded them that they were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, but he also reminded them that there was a time when *they* were "without Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12) and that they were "by nature children of wrath even as others" (Eph. 2:3). Although they had been chosen in Christ before times eternal, yet they were Christless until they were called effectually into the fellowship of God's Son (I Cor. 1:9). Hence it is by the effectual call of God the Father that men are made partakers of Christ and enter into the enjoyment of the blessings of redemption. Only then do they know the fellowship of Christ.⁹

Thus, while not objecting to Punt's proposition *per se*, I think it would have been better had he specified what aspect of our union with Christ is the root, and what aspect is the fruit, of our faith in him.

13. In his final chapter Punt takes up what is, in my view, the thorniest practical issue in Calvinistic theology (notwithstanding the problem of evil). If, as all five-point Calvinists affirm, Christ died only for the elect—i.e., only for those on

⁸Cf. D. L. Turner, "Ephesians 2:3c and *Peccatum Originale*," *GTL* 1 (1980) 195-219.

⁹J. Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 165.

whom God will ultimately confer eternal life—is it legitimate to say to an unbeliever, “Christ died for you”? This question has far-reaching implications, which cannot be resolved in an article of this length. The reader is referred to the works by J. I. Packer¹⁰ and John Murray.¹¹ Although I cannot agree with each of his arguments, Punt’s treatment of the debate and his perception of what is at stake are commendable.

The point that is of immediate relevance to this review is Punt’s belief that “Biblical universalism” provides an adequate basis on which he who believes in “limited atonement” may, with sincerity and zeal, say to the unbeliever, “God loves you” and “Christ died for you.” It is objected, Punt notes (p. 154),

that statements such as “God loves you” and “Christ died for you” are valid only for those who are “in Christ,” that is, for the elect. So they are. And since there is no way to distinguish between the elect and non-elect in bringing the good news, one can effectively, meaningfully, and forcefully proclaim the gospel to everyone only by assuming that all persons are elect in Christ except those who the Bible declares will be lost.

The validity of this proposed solution to the Calvinist’s dilemma is dependent on whether the Scriptures do, in fact, provide justification for the working assumption that all are elect in Christ except those who the Bible says will be lost. My analysis of Punt’s book has yielded the conclusion that his proposition of “Biblical universalism” is not warranted by Scripture. Nor is it theologically superior to or more accurate than the historic Reformed view. This is not to say that I have at this time a better solution to the problem that this chapter explores. It is to say that the difficulty does not appear to be resolved by approaching the world on the assumption that all are elect except those who the Bible says are not.

Unconditional Good News is not easy reading. The arguments and the manner in which they are expressed demand careful attention. There is always the possibility of the reader’s conceding to the apparent plausibility of a proposal due more to intellectual exhaustion than to the actual validity of the arguments on which it is based. This is not to say that Punt’s book is entirely misguided. He constructs and defends his thesis within the framework of historic Reformed theology and seeks to be faithful to those creeds that his denomination recognizes as accurate expositions of Holy Scripture. Although this reviewer is not convinced that Punt’s “Biblical universalism” is an improvement on the way Calvinists have for so long interpreted the Scriptures, his book deserves our attention if for no other reason than it will stimulate all of us to intensify our reflection on a number of issues of immense practical importance.

¹⁰J. I. Packer, “Introductory Essay,” in J. Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1963) 1-25.

¹¹J. Murray, “The Atonement and the Free Offers of the Gospel,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 1. 59-85.