

Peter, Paul and the Anonymous Christian:

A Response to The Mission Theology of Rahner and Vatican II

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This paper concerns two questions which are vitally important to the church of Jesus Christ today: What are the maximal limits of natural theology and is it possible for someone to be saved apart from specific knowledge of the gospel?

The traditional evangelical stance, as discussed at the Lausanne Conferences (1966, 1989) and at the Evangelical Affirmations Conference (1989), is that no one can be saved apart from hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ and expressing conscious faith. This position is being challenged today on two fronts.

First, it is under attack from Christians who wish to assert some sort of universality of salvation. The more conservative of these writers try to build a case that this is the biblical position (eg. Barth and Rahner).¹ Second, the traditional position is under attack from liberals and non-Christians who hold that all religions have a common core which is salvific for each religion (eg. Hick).² This approach holds that all religions are pointing to or representing the same god and are thus essentially equal, even if they cannot be reduced to the same position or set of doctrines.

All theologies are interpretations of scripture and life, as Fiorenza points out,³ and arise from the dialogue and criticism of the relevant community of theologians. Thus, for evangelicals our doctrine is based on special and general revelation but is formed by the historic interplay of theologians from Irenaeus to the present. We can interact with any and all who wish to engage in this search, but our primary interest is in dialogue with other orthodox believers.

This paper will approach the first problem by studying Karl Rahner's development of doctrine to support the idea of an "anonymous Christian" and then critique it with Peter's and Paul's statements concerning how God deals with:

A) people who have not heard the gospel, and

B) people who have heard, but have

1) problems because they are culturally diverse hearers, or

2) chosen not to respond.

Although from Trent to the present the Catholic case presents itself based on grace, there are vast differences from Protestants concerning how grace is brought to us.⁴ These differences range from the nature of justification to the infused/imputed battle.⁵ But we have often had much in common with Catholics regarding general revelation, the doctrine of God, and theistic philosophy.

It is usual for evangelicals to study natural theology (based on natural, or general revelation), but often only to find the minimum which is taught in Scripture, in order to find a basis for holding all people accountable. I want *to see where the maximal limits are in terms of what we can expect from general revelation and God's work to save apart from where the gospel is preached.*

I. Rahner's *Anonymous Christian*

1. Rahner and Vatican II

During the pre-Council years, Rahner was continually suppressed (his position was challenged or his teaching restricted) and even in danger of being placed on the Index. Vatican II changed that; Rahner was a chief voice through-out, and his thoughts are "reflected in every document from Vatican II."⁶ In the Council debates, the clinching argument against both the Index and the Holy office was that some of the Church's greatest recent theologians had suffered from its arbitrary rulings. These included "Father Yves Congar and Father Karl Rahner, who had both suffered warnings and suppressions, only to surmount them and become two of the most influential thinkers on the Council."⁷ Rahner is now "the theologian most associated with the post-Vatican II spirit."⁸

Carr reports, "On the question of anonymous Christianity the Council adopted a perspective similar to Rahner's."⁹ This position of an anonymous Christian was accepted by Vatican II in their discussions of separated brethren and those who have never heard. Thereby, it has become the official position of the Roman Catholic Church today. Martin Marty says, "Compared to Karl Rahner, most other contemporary Christian theologians are scrub oak."¹⁰

2. Rahner's Theological Goal

Bernard Lonergan, a longtime teacher at the Vatican universities, has declared that a presupposition of entering into the study of theology is what he called "orientation to transcendental mystery." This orientation is at the heart of Rahner's position.¹¹

For Rahner, the question from real life which imposes itself on all humans is, "Is human existence absurd or does it possess comprehensive ultimate meaning?"¹² Under the influence of a desire to see all men and women saved and within the bounds of scripture and the Roman Catholic church's position, he began to teach a near universalism. He believes that there is a work of God, a form of prevenient grace, which extends the gospel call to all human beings.

This call is not necessarily a verbal or otherwise conscious call to Christ, nor does it come at any particular historical moment. Rather, it comes to each person as that person faces the need to affirm or reject authenticity of living. As a person in faith affirms God, however he understands him, or simply affirms life and loves his neighbor, he is affirming the universal call of God to turn in faith and trust to God. Rahner says that because this call is theoretically apart from historical knowledge or experience and yet will be true for every person, we should call it a transcendental experience of grace.

Rahner was aware of the problems identified at the beginning of this paper. He attempted to reconcile the tension between the two claims that it is only in Christ that men can be saved and that those who have never heard of Christ, before and after the apostolic age, can be saved.¹³ Rahner writes that the question theology enquires into is, "properly speaking, this and nothing else: the salvation of man to the extent that this consists in the self-bestowal of God, and therefore the consummate wholeness which man can achieve."¹⁴ What concerned him most was the inner unity of human experience, a structured unity. Out of it man could "in the same breath philosophize and theologize."¹⁵

The uniqueness of each of us comes from the creation of one's own world view, dependent on different problems faced in one's life-time. The different concepts of ultimate reality and meaning make the differences among ourselves. "Now the activity of affirming the ultimate reality and meaning of our life is not a form of deduction or induction but rather is similar to the inference of discover. It is the most personal and the most universal reality in our life."¹⁶

Christianity's one basic message is that man is that being who inevitably has to do with Holy Mystery, and the gospel consists in the fact that this Mystery has drawn close to us as forgiving love.¹⁷

If there is any center to Rahner's theology, it is the dynamic mutuality of love between Jesus and God into which we are all invited and towards which the Spirit guides us.¹⁸ *The Foundation of Christian Faith* (1978) suggests this vision. "It seems to be a testamentary vision. The first grand chapters are a restatement of Rahner on Rahner. But vision is here clearer than it was."¹⁹

3. Natural Revelation and Natural Theology

One of the problems Rahner addresses directly is the issue of how to promulgate Christianity in the secular world. Macquarrie, writing on Rahner, says, "If theology aims, as I think it should, at expounding Christian faith in as clear and intelligible a way as the subject matter will allow, then it must take account of the mentality of those to whom it is addressed. The theme of theology is and must

remain God, but in a godless time such as I have described, one cannot put the doctrine of God at the beginning. The approach must be more indirect, or the result will be failure to communicate, misapprehension and incomprehension."²⁰ Rahner does not address the problem this way, but he does advocate what Macquarrie here describes.

There is, of course, an interrelation of truth such that, within Christian theology "it ought to be possible to take any single doctrine as a starting point, and from it to work through the whole corpus of truth. ... Clearly, the beginning establishes a perspective, and gives a certain character to the complete theological enterprise."²¹ Rahner's starting point lies with God, "the indefinable, not considered in isolation but dialectically; our starting point is hence God's free possibility of communicating himself "outwardly".²²

In Rahner's presentation, God's gracious self-communication is presented as the most fundamental concept of Christianity, it is the basic pattern of history rather than simply of individual experiences.²³ In considering the concept of self-communications in his *Foundations*, Rahner again dwells upon the fact that this concept is not to be understood as if in his revelation God were saying something about himself. It is rather the personal ontological communication of God as he is in himself. Even here, Rahner warns against "the danger of considering this in objectivistic, reifying terms. It is the communication, the bestowal of God as he is; in other words, God as God in his mystery. Such a self-communication occurs through self-emptying."²⁴ Hence human history is not just a series of loosely related events and occurrences, but it is a single history willed by God. It is a single history, the binding force of which is the free decision of God to communicate himself.²⁵ This decision to communicate himself and the content of that communication mean that every historical event in the fulfilling of the self-communication is a manifestation of the presence of God, whether in miracles, incarnation or scripture.

This extends to all of creation. Creation is not something that exists independently of a possible self-communication, but rather as "an element in that wider and more radical decision of God's will to impart himself to that which is other than himself and not divine."²⁶ Created reality is the environment or setting established and constituted through the Logos for its act of uttering itself into the non-divine.²⁷

The only way in which man can, in his reflections, successfully penetrate "to the very basis of his own real existence is in practice through that which is called revelation history."²⁸ This occurs in human or experiential history. There is, therefore, both a transcendental and an historical offer of the gospel, which is a genuine offer from a loving God, who is not willing that any should perish. This offer is possible because of the doctrine of natural revelation. Rahner says that such revelation is possible for all people, for all are able to reason to God based on natural revelation. "The first Vatican Council ... declared that it was possible to arrive at a natural knowledge of God through the light of reason alone."²⁹ This natural revelation or self-bestowal is a form of self-communication from God. Lash says,

Karl Rahner's famous maxim that "the Trinity of the economy of salvation is the immanent Trinity and vice versa," should be read as an acknowledgement, a recognition, that we have been enabled to trust God's trustworthiness because what God has spoken to us is not some particular message (behind which

he might have rather different messages up his sleeve), but is his self-statement in the flesh and texture of our history.³⁰

This self-communication is present to each person transcendently (as the background to the actual existence and decisions which make up life) and to some people historically. Rahner uses his fundamental conception of historical transcendence as a scheme for understanding how, "through the twofold mediation of Word and Spirit, God communicates divine life in the economy of salvation."³¹

Concrete human knowledge of God can, at most, extend only to the actual world order and so to all actual realities, past, present and to come.³² Since knowledge is limited to experience, we can know "only the economic Trinity, not the immanent Trinity. We know the immanent only through God's free self-revelation by faith."³³

In the presence of God's general self-revelation we discover that "the Mystery is not only distant but close, that the Mystery is not only silent but speaks, that the Mystery exists, in absolute proximity."³⁴ The initial cause of the human person's knowledge of anything is always other than the self.³⁵ Notice that the effect of grace is not to give human transcendence a new object. Man is still oriented to the same infinite Mystery, but under grace "the infinite Mystery is experienced not as distant but as close."³⁶ God is experienced in the depths of each person's subjectivity (not yet in his historical experience) as grace. And this grace Rahner understands as "uncreated grace or the Holy Spirit."³⁷

For Rahner, the human world is freely called through time towards God's own life, in such a way that eternal value is concretely at issue in all the struggles of life.

Through the passage of time, with its achievements and its losses, we become the persons and societies whom God has created as a body ready for holy anointing. Not rational necessity but the mystery of creative love grounds this process, both in time and eternity, and no understanding of events within it arises without being called to be transformed into love. The love that unifies time transcends all reasons for living in time. But it also engenders new reasons for living and is thus the innermost dynamic of redemptive passage through time.³⁸

This revelatory process is closely related to Rahner's conception of creation and incarnation, similar to Barth. "In Rahner's vision, therefore, creation and incarnation are two phases of the one process of God's self-giving and self-expression."³⁹ In the creation God has revealed Himself transcendently to all men.

Rahner's position on natural revelation is also significant for philosophy. He moves beyond the dualism of Kant to provide a basis for understanding reality as a realistic unity. The universal transcendental awareness of God, or universal being is understood as constitutive for all humans. "His advance beyond Kant is to show that an awareness of being, of which God is the chief exemplification is one of these (a priori) conditions."⁴⁰ This modification is suggested by Joseph Marechal, but is not there as fully developed as it is in Rahner.

4. Responding to the Transcendental Mystery

Since Rahner believes God is the creator of all that is and has created all that is to bring glory to Himself, and since mankind is uniquely created to live in fellowship with God, Rahner thinks of humans as both spiritual and material, within one unified being. And "because man is spirit he has an essential *potentia obedientialis* for surrendering himself totally to the absolute mystery."⁴¹ Because this is the essence of man, he is "dependent upon and open to the freedom of the absolute mystery as such."⁴²

This offer of grace is fundamentally accepted when man accepts his own self as it is offered to him in his free subjectivity which takes place, "in that openness in trusting love to the whole of reality when a person truly loves his neighbor."⁴³ A person who accepts this grace implicitly and subjectively in the radical love of his neighbor (much less if he accepts it explicitly), is understood to be an anonymous Christian, for he has, "in his basic orientation and fundamental decision, accepted the salvific grace of God, through Christ, although he may never have heard of the Christian revelation."⁴⁴ Thus, apart from historic Christianity or the preached gospel, each person may respond to the transcendental grace of God, through the work of the Spirit.

Although the revelation is a transcendental reality, the act of belief is an historical act. Thus, the "anonymous Christian," the person who may intellectually profess disbelief but who "existentially is committed to those values which for the Christian are concretized in God,"⁴⁵ finds an historical way to manifest his spiritual direction. The form of belief may or may not be historic Christianity.

From a philosophic perspective, Rahner follows Descartes, Kant, and Heidegger in focusing upon the subject and his act of self-knowledge as "the key access to knowledge of the real."⁴⁶ This will cause enormous epistemological problems unless Rahner holds to the unified realism to which he alludes.

5. When Transcendence and Immanence Meet

The world may be viewed as called into being by God in time so that it might be invited to communion with God for eternity.⁴⁷ With this fundamental union of history and eternity in God and His plan for humanity, historical revelation is, therefore, an event "within the world that can serve to represent in an explicit way the truth of the graciousness of that horizon that is already known implicitly to encompass the world."⁴⁸ This union is necessary to avoid the dualism into which most theologies fall.

How then does this relate to man? As O'Donnell quips, "Man has enough to do in his day to day life so that he can lose himself in his activities and never ask about God."⁴⁹ It is the function of the word "God" in human language to open up man beyond all his limited questions and finite perspectives and place him before the totality. Without an infinite horizon, "man would be totally immersed in a world of objects. He would forget about himself because of his preoccupation with all the individual details of his

world. He would no longer be able to question. But in ceasing to question, he would also cease to be man."⁵⁰ But man does question, he does pursue the question of ultimate being, he does, implicitly at least, seek God. For Rahner this is the philosophical explanation of Augustine's heart which is restless until it finds its rest in God. Thus, man responds to the transcendental offer and impulse with an historical hunger.

This transcendental universal offer of grace, when accepted by people in the turn to God or to neighbor, results in the saving of that person by God. Thus, there may be people in the world who are saved by God on the basis of the work of Christ through implicit faith in a transcendental gospel. This salvation is only by grace and the reality of the work of Jesus Christ for, "Christian theology has to be the kind of theology that never ceases to have its roots in the revelation of Jesus Christ."⁵¹ But for Rahner this means that, "Christ is present and operative in non-Christian believers and hence in non-Christian religions in and through his Spirit."⁵² They may never have heard the gospel of Jesus Christ or even know the name of Christ, or they may have heard the gospel but not realized what was being offered, but they are responding to the reality of grace made possible by Christ.

These people are anonymous Christians. An anonymous Christian is defined as: someone who has no concrete historical contact with the explicit preaching of Christianity, but nevertheless can be a justified person who lives in the grace of Christ. Since, "the revelation we are speaking of is universal, and though for the most part we do not reflect upon it, we should understand it as a transcendental determination of man, constituted by that which we call grace and self-bestowal on God's part--in other words his Pnuma."⁵³ It is not merely his own theology or his culture's theology that confronts him from the world in a situation leading to salvation or sin, but the Spirit of God.⁵⁴

An individual cannot draw his "life-force solely from some abstract metaphysic, or even from some philosophy of his historical mode of existence. He can only be fully alive in consciously accepting his own history as something which he must endure and act responsibility in."⁵⁵ This acceptance in integrity of his own situation is an act of implicit faith in the creator and is salvific.

But this response to the gospel needs to be taken further. "Only someone who explicitly professes in faith and in baptism that Jesus is the Christ is a Christian in the historical and reflexive dimension of God's transcendental self-communication."⁵⁶ According to Rahner, this historical fullness of faith can only come when the gospel has been preached.

Sometimes the gospel message is borne by a believer to a non-believer. In this case, "the prophet is none other than the believer who can express his transcendental experience of God correctly."⁵⁷ But anyone undertaking to develop a theology of the nature of God to share with non-Christians in our world today must be willing "to proceed very slowly in bringing his hearers to a gradual understanding (capable of being made real in terms of their own concrete lives) of what the very term "God" is intended to signify."⁵⁸ Thus, in offering the gospel I am asking the other person to enter into the same transcendental, and now historical, experience into which I have entered.

Rahner defines the meaning of the gospel for himself, which is what he hopes to offer to all people:

My Christianity is ... the act of letting myself go into the inconceivable mystery ... and is consequently anything but an "explanation" of the world and my existence.⁵⁹

Thus, for Rahner there is no question of mixing apologetics (explanations) with evangelism. It is not that the two are incompatible, but that they are different parts of life.

Rahner stresses the possible validity of the non-Christian religion only up to the real moment of a person's existential and historical encounter with Christianity. This would mean that if the non-Christian begins to properly understand "in the depths of his heart and mind the Christian message, if he recognizes the truth about his own being and its orientation to the mystery of God correctly expressed in Christianity, then his acceptance of this would necessarily lead to his conversion."⁶⁰ If someone hears and understands an offer of the gospel and rejects it, then they are lost. In the same manner, if they hear and understand the message that the Roman Catholic church is the true representative of Jesus Christ on earth and reject this message, then they are lost.

If someone responds to the light they have received, and that light is mediated through their existing (non-Christian) religion, then the religion itself has become salvific. "When a non-Christian attains salvation through faith, hope and love, non-Christian religions cannot be understood in such a way that they do not play a role, or play only a negative role in the attainment of justification and salvation."⁶¹ This does not mean the non-Christian religion plays a role comparable to the preaching of the gospel or of the formal offer of the gospel as in Christianity, but it none the less becomes a bearer of grace.

Rahner believes this doctrine will lead to changes in the constitution of the Roman church in the future. "The community Church will be transformed into a Church made up of those who believe as a matter of personal conviction and individual decision."⁶² This means a shift away from identifying a public Roman church in an area based on the parish or sacramental approaches and a move to identity based on personal faith. In order to maintain the Roman identity vis a vis the Protestant churches the Catholic churches will have to heighten the sense of being Roman Catholic. Thus, while a greater sense of faith is engendered within the Roman Catholic church, a greater sense of the purity of the church will have to be strengthened.

This sense of faith as a personal issue is not new for Rahner. He insisted "frequently that our personal relationship to Jesus could be described in terms of the most intimate friendship."⁶³

Christian spirituality, as Rahner sees it, always involves a paradox. On the one hand Christian existence is surrender to the Mystery beyond all things (Ignatian "indifference") but on the other hand it is also finding God in all things. ... In the striking Ignatian phrase, he must be contemplative in action. "Only the lived integration of this tension adequately expresses the paradox of Christian existence."⁶⁴

6. Is Saving Faith the Universal Response of the Human Spirit?

Rahner came to speak of a "universal pneumatology" that might precede Christology in the full development of a historical theology. "It is promising to consider the world's search for communion with God initiated through the Spirit and coming only gradually to acknowledge the historical ground of its hope in the figure of Jesus."⁶⁵ If such a desire stirs everywhere in time, then it is legitimate to speak of a universal pneumatology.

As a consequence of this universal work of the Spirit, everyone will have a chance for salvation, because "every man is preconditioned for salvation; he has an internal orientation toward faith."⁶⁶ This is the supernatural "existential."

Rahner's personal hope is that such an implicit faith is universal. He continues to ground this faith in Christ as created in persons by the work of the Spirit. "If there can be a faith which is creative of salvation among non-Christians, and if it may be hoped that in fact it is found on a large scale, then it is to be taken for granted [based on the gracious nature of God] that this faith is made possible and is based upon the supernatural grace of the Spirit."⁶⁷ That this comes remarkably close to a Protestant position on the means of salvation has been noted in reviews. But this position has been stated in very similar terms by the present pope, John Paul II.⁶⁸

Rahner does not say directly that all men will be saved, because, "It is forbidden to teach that everyone will be saved. If I hope to be saved, it is necessary to hope that for all men as well."⁶⁹ Thus, Rahner does not concede a true pluralism in that he always affirms that all salvation is Christian salvation, implicitly or explicitly, through the grace of God in Christ. Pluralism only exists within this one plan of providential grace.⁷⁰ For a Roman Catholic the pluralism has to do with whether one knows the gospel message and is identified with the true manifestation of the church on earth. But all people who have true faith are considered saved. This solidifies the Catholic faith as open to a near universalism.

7. Theology and Philosophy

Rahner often puts his theological convictions into philosophical language. From a philosophical perspective we begin the study of life with the existential situation of each human being. This means we begin with man as an historical being. Note that this is very different from where he begins his theology.

According to Rahner, materiality is the basis for both human spatiality and temporality.⁷¹ Materiality is seen as a necessary means for the human spirit "to go into the world in order to become conscious of the self as a subject, i.e., in order to become spirit."⁷² Geist in Welt (Spirit in the World) is Rahner's attempt to answer the question as to how metaphysics is possible if human knowledge is sense experience or sensible intuition. In this way, seeing man as fundamentally a spirit whose proper context is the world, mankind is kept from being conceived as a dualism and maintains a unified reality.

Knowing, in its essence, "is the being-present-to-itself of the knowing subject."⁷³ God, in Rahner's analysis of human knowing, is not a concept at all. Concepts are limited and finite. "God is rather the term of human transcendence. God and human transcendence are correlatives. Human transcendence cannot exist at all without God as its condition of possibility."⁷⁴ This defines the fundamentally spiritual nature of mankind.

This movement away from static ontic categories into dialectical ones provides for Rahner an insight into the reality of the incarnation.

The Logos and the humanity of the Logos are not to be interpreted as being in opposition and competition. The Logos is both the ground by which the humanity is established as diverse, and it is the original ground of the unity with the humanity. The Logos itself is the constituting ground of unity and diversity.⁷⁵

While he remains himself, God can so empty himself, that, "in that self-emptying he posits the existence of the other. He gives himself away without losing himself. He establishes the existence of the other, and retains it as his own. In retaining it as his own, he establishes it in its own genuine reality."⁷⁶ God is the ground of being, not in Tillich's terms of ultimate mystery, but as the Creator and as the fundamental person(s). This is clearly manifested in the incarnation of the Logos.

Rahner argues against Kant and Heidegger that man as "spirit" is able to apprehend not only the data of "sensible intuition" but also metaphysical being. "Judgment does not grasp the horizon as an object; rather, in its act of grasping objects it pre-apprehends being-itself."⁷⁷ A seldom reported fact is that Kant was prepared to admit that with the knowledge of my own freedom "the fact that a being (I myself) belonging to the world of sense, belongs also to the supersensible world, this is also positively known, and thus the reality of the supersensible world is established, and in practical respects definitely given."⁷⁸

The philosophical sense of this is brought out in the study of philosophy: "Transcendental philosophy answers the question of *how we know* by postulating a priori conditions of knowledge, which precede all experience of objects, and which are the primary constituents of all objects and make knowledge possible."⁷⁹ Rahner is very much in the Kantian frame of reference here. He wants to establish a philosophical transcendental anthropology as the foundation of all knowledge and to show that within the bounds of this anthropology the basic facts of mankind's search for God the very real possibility of finding God are already present and are certain as points of knowledge.

But this has implications for how we understand what it means to be a person, created in God's image. Robertson sheds some light on this:

Man is a creature who must constitute himself, through the exercise of his rational freedom, in making judgments. Judgments can occur only with reference to an infinite horizon. This is what it means for man to be "spirit." ... Inasmuch as man discovers this horizon to be filled with God's gracious presence,

and not simply the empty horizon of God's silence, then one experiences unthematic revelation.⁸⁰

I do not think Rahner would use the terminology "constitute himself," for he believes that God constitutes the person. But in philosophical terms the concept of an infinite horizon in which God manifests His presence is very close to Rahner's position. The ontological constitution of the knowing subject, in itself, is analogous to the structure of its relations with the world, precisely because "the human spirit is constituted as spirit by going outside itself and can gain knowledge of itself only through its knowledge of external objects."⁸¹

Rahner's central philosophical insight continued to be the personal relatedness of all reality, as his central theological insight the self-gift of God to a world history whose very existence is also gift.

These integrating perspectives ground the relativity of our ethical judgments and spiritual practice in two absolutes: first, the epistemological absolute of imaginative experience to which we must continually turn if we are to understand and act responsibly; second, the religious absolute of a God transcending time who calls us towards eternity.⁸²

This transcendental determination of man as a receiver of grace is a factor present in virtue of the self-bestowal of God, and, moreover, present always and everywhere (at least in the sense of being offered).⁸³ Thus, there is definitely a universal (transcendental, not historical) offer of grace through Christ.

In the last years of his life it became clear that his fundamental correlation is not simply between God and humanity but rather between God as "the world's most inner entelechy and the whole history of humanity."⁸⁴ In this way Rahner moved to ground history and eternity in much the same way he had unified the duality of materiality and spirit.

8. Did Rahner Change?

In a masterful review of Rahner O'Donovan writes, "In maturity we may hope to regard ourselves not as become more perfect but rather as having been guided by the providence of God through the adventure of a whole life we could never have calculated in advance."⁸⁵ This typifies the spirit of Rahner. He did not seem to change in any radical sense. But the pursuit of God, through both theology and philosophy as well as in his daily faith, led Rahner to ongoing development.

One area of change later in his writing had to do with the starting point for Christology. Several late essays recommended that Christology begin with the historical Jesus.⁸⁶ This does not contradict his earlier work on Theology Proper where he begins with the Thomistic arguments, but it is a change from his earlier Christology.

Other passages emphasize the need for a more unified correlation between fundamental and dogmatic

theology. Fundamental theology is more known to Protestants as philosophical theology. Because Rahner made vast changes in his philosophical method, contrasted with a traditional Catholic approach, he did not always carry the implications of the changes over into his dogmatic, or doctrinal, theology. Of special note is his use of Heidegger's sense of phenomenology coupled with Hegel's dialectic epistemology. The implications of this for theology have not been worked out clearly.

Rahner insisted increasingly on Christianity's "justified hope for universal redemption."⁸⁷ The basis for this justification was never made clear. But the movement Rahner made seemed to be in the direction of Barth, who grounded his hope for universalism in God's love for humanity. The correlation between love and justice and the grounding of these in the New Testament needs to be worked out. Rahner says, "the New Testament as a whole will always remain the norm by which theology is judged."⁸⁸ Barth grounded his theological hope in Romans 5. Rahner's biblical grounds are not so clearly given.

In the final analysis it is not God who exists for us, but we who exist for God. "Love of God for God's own sake is woven through all Rahner's final appeals for a more human world."⁸⁹ Rahner maintained this spiritual orientation in both his life and writings. As his last published book of prayers shows, his thought also became ever more clearly "centered in love and adoration, bowing before the God whose grace in Jesus Christ offers us the courage to reach out to our neighbor in need."⁹⁰

II. Peter and Paul on *Salvation Apart from*

Conscious Commitment to Christ

As we turn to look at the Scriptures I choose to focus on Peter and Paul, the apostles to the Gentiles, and to begin with Peter. To him were entrusted the keys of the kingdom (the preaching of the Gospel to the Gentiles) and, in Roman Catholic eyes, he is the first Pope of Rome. Any study of Peter's theology must begin with his own tremendous confession: "Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God" (Mt 16:16). Peter recognized that Jesus, not any other person alive or dead or yet to come, was the Christ - the anointed one who would die for the people and rule over them. For Peter all other religions are ultimately false unless they bring one to this same Jesus. But what is the role of religions and what is the status of faith apart from Jesus? Did Peter later change his position?

In Acts we have recorded the messages and preaching of Peter from the early church era. Just after Pentecost, in Jerusalem, Peter proclaims to the assembled Jews: "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself." (Acts 2:39) This content is preached to Jews, believing and unbelieving, who were present. "The promise" is a summary phrase to represent the gospel message that if you will turn to God in faith then you will inherit the kingdom and will be blessed with the presence of God, beginning now with the Spirit and continuing into eternity.⁹¹ This offer of the gospel to unbelievers is part of the universal offer which Christians are commissioned to make to all people (Matthew 28:18-20).

Peter makes a bold statement in Acts 4:12 "There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved." This seems, on the surface, to make the point that there is no salvation outside Christ, an interpretation which is of long standing. But Rahner and others take the statement to mean there is salvation in no one else, i.e. there is no means to salvation but Christ; but Christ is operating in some cases through non-Christian religions. Thus, the interpretation would be that there is no other salvation; but what there is, is available without knowing or calling on the name of Christ. I do not believe that Peter, in his day, age and circumstance, would be making this philosophically subtle point. I think Peter thought there was no other way to be saved but by personal faith in Jesus. But the distinction is allowable based on the words of the passage.

The openness of the gospel was brought to Peter in a vision on a rooftop. In Acts 10:15 Peter is told "... what God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy." As he began to preach to Cornelius, Peter says, "God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean." (Acts 10:28) Cornelius says that a few days before a man appeared to him in a dream and said, "your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God." (Acts 10:31) If Cornelius is no longer unclean, and if his alms are "remembered" before God, Peter concludes, "God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right, is welcome to Him." (Acts 10:34-35) Peter here broadens the term "alms" to include doing what is "right" and couples this activity with the fear of the Lord. But what do "remembered" and "accepted" mean? Is this the same as being saved, i.e. justified? Does it qualify Cornelius for a special means of the revelation of the Gospel? He certainly received this in Peter's unique calling to come preach! One possible link here would be to take this passage together with John's statements that every person is enlightened and every person is drawn to Christ. Cornelius would be a case of someone who is responding to the light which he has by natural revelation (and through the work of the Spirit) and is given more. Peter only concludes, "through His name every one who believes in Him has received forgiveness of sins." (Acts 10:43) Peter moves ahead to the good event in which one has heard and believed. This person has forgiveness.

When Peter went to Jerusalem, just after the events of Acts 10, the Jewish brethren challenged him because of going to a Gentile's house. Peter tells the story of God's message to him and the conversion of the Gentiles, and the brothers responded, "God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance which leads to life." (Acts 11:18) Repentance here should be taken with faith as two sides of one activity: turning from whatever empty god one has believed in and turning to the living and true God.

The only other reference in Peter's messages or books which pertains to our topic is found in II Peter 3:9 - "The Lord is ... not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance." Here Peter clearly states that it is God's wish that no one would perish. Rahner seems on safe grounds to wish that salvation were universal. But the gospels, epistles and Revelation all indicate that there will be people in an eternal hell. Thus, in this case, God's wish does not change God's will, which is to save people based on the work of Christ and the people's reception of faith in Christ through the work of the Spirit.

In summary of these six passages, Peter believes that Jesus is the Christ, that in Him alone is found the promise of salvation in its fulness, that all men are clean and based on their good works can be

"remembered" and "accepted," that those who repent and believe are saved, and that God wishes all to be saved. The only passage which could be taken to leave room for salvation outside personal knowledge of Christ is Acts 10 - the Cornelius situation. But Peter does not clarify the point and in the absence of any other teaching to the contrary of his call for faith it is doubtful that Peter would agree with Rahner's "anonymous Christian."

The other great messenger of the gospel to the Gentiles is Paul. At his conversion Paul was told by Jesus that he was, "... to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, in order that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in me." (Acts 26:18) Jesus says that Gentiles are in darkness, in Satan's dominion or they are in light, in God's kingdom. The distinguishing character of the two positions is that the ones in God's kingdom have "turned." Paul is sent to preach so that they may turn. It is only after they hear and turn that they receive forgiveness and the inheritance of being in the body of Christ. Nothing is said of them being saved or being part of the true body before they hear and turn. It is true that Paul was to preach "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 13:47). But there is no indication that they were saved prior to his preaching.

Paul's preaching message touches on our topic of interest three times in Acts. In Acts 14:16-17 Paul says that God, "permitted all the nations to go their own ways; and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." Permitting them to go their own ways is surely not the same as saving them. Rather, it is a gracious act of withholding destruction from those who deserve it.

In Acts 17:27 Paul comments that the Athenians had been drawn by God, "that they should seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us;" God wants non-believers to seek Him and works to that end. But it does not indicate that any find Him or are saved apart from the gospel.

In Acts 17:30 Paul says, "having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all every-where should repent." That God wants all to repent is not new to us. What does the phrase "having overlooked the times of ignorance," mean? Does this mean that all unbelievers before the gospel era were saved? It does not seem so based on Jesus' teaching and stories in the gospel, nor from Peter's statements in I Peter 3. It seems again that this should be taken as a pointer to the graciousness of God in not destroying those who were in sin and already condemned.

Paul does teach that salvation belongs to the Gentiles in five passages. But each of the five specifically says that their salvation is through faith, not apart from it (Romans 3:29-30; 4:16; 9:30; Galatians 3:8, 14).

While Peter and John point to a universal salvific will of God and to universal historical acts to lead to the conclusion of people coming to Christ, nowhere do Peter or Paul, the apostles to the Gentiles, offer hope that men are saved from condemnation apart from personal knowledge of Christ. We may conclude

that:

- (1) there are conscious God-fearers and seekers who have rejected the false gods and who (not just whose actions) are acceptable to God so far as a non-believer can be acceptable,
- (2) God will get the gospel message to these God-fearers (normally by means of the preached gospel),
- (3) God wishes all people to be saved and works to that end through His Spirit (without sovereignly causing it to be so), and
- (4) there is no explicit biblical support for the idea of an "anonymous Christian."

III. The Fine Edge of Salvation

1. What then can we conclude concerning the questions with which we began? What of:

A) people who have not heard the gospel, and

B) people who have heard, but have

1) problems because they are culturally diverse hearers, or

2) have chosen not to respond.

The Bible seems clear that people who have not heard the gospel are separate from Christ, strangers to the covenants of promise, have no hope and are without God here in the world (Eph. 2). In a biblical summary, they are facing eternal condemnation. This is a terrible tragedy. It is possible that God may indeed work through natural revelation and the work of the Spirit to save apart from the preached gospel. But we have no scripture to justify this and much that leads us to believe in the necessity of the preached gospel. Many of us sympathize with the heart of Barth and Rahner, seeing in their desire, as in our own, a part of the Lord's heart for people. While we do not condone the sin nor the results of sin in the cultural structures and religions of mankind, and while we do see good attitudes and behavior on the part of many non-Christians, the point for us as Christians is not to condemn or to praise but to preach the good news of Jesus Christ.

People who have heard the gospel through one vehicle or another, but have problems understanding it or receiving it, are more difficult to place. Scripture seems not to address this case directly, except in cases such as the eunuch's where Philip was present to interpret. Clearly the message needs to be made as accessible as we can make it to all who want to know more. That is the calling of the Great Commission. Of course, the gospel is actualized in people's hearts by the Holy Spirit through faith.

People who have chosen not to respond seem to be in the same situation as those who have never heard, they are apart from Christ, they are already condemned because they have not believed. For some this means we may be able to reach them in some other way, as the Spirit leads. For others it means that they are now and forever separate from Christ. We do not know who is who.

This means doctrinally that the fine edge of salvation rests on the knowledge of the gospel. God wishes all to be saved, and He works to save them through natural revelation, the work of the Spirit and the preaching of the gospel. But each person must deal with the knowledge of God which is available to her or him under the leading of the Holy Spirit.

For someone to be led by the Spirit to trust in God through Jesus Christ it is, so far as we know, necessary that the gospel be preached. We, all of us who are Christians alive here on earth, have the privilege and responsibility to proclaim the gospel. None of the biblical words or phrases used to describe the spiritual state of those who have never heard the gospel indicates that they are saved. Whether God in some supernatural way communicates the gospel to people apart from preaching is not known and is not addressed in the Bible.

2. What then are the implications for theology?

Evangelicals have responded to the idea of universalism before. In a recent article on "Universalism and the Logic of Revelation," Nigel Cameron comments, "Universalism is an attack on the nexus of doctrines which lie at the heart of the faith: questions of revelation, redemption, mission, the doctrine of the church, and the last things themselves."⁹² This criticism applies to the wish Rahner articulates. Because of the freedoms God gives us and because of our sinfulness, not all will be in heaven. The hope of people being brought into a full personal relationship with the living God is exciting and fully biblical. But the hope that this will be true for all people is not biblical.

However, Rahner never taught universalism, per se. He continued to hold that the purity of faith is found in Christianity alone. For that position Kung has criticized him. "Rahner's "anonymous Christian" theory is dependent on a standpoint of superiority, and is seen as arrogant."⁹³

Is this charge of arrogance true of Rahner? Arrogance is an attitude with which some people do preach the gospel. Others come in humility to bring the true good news of a real salvation to lost, blind humanity; the same group from which we Christians have just come. I believe, from what I can read, that Rahner's attitude was humility and that Kung's condemnation is misplaced. But Kung does evidence that Rahner never embraced true pluralism or relativism.

Rahner's own conclusion was that, "Theology must itself be far more missionary and mystagogic in outlook than it has formerly had to be. ...The theology of the future will be less homogeneous, more a theology of a world church."⁹⁴ The attitude with which the church needs to do this missionary work is to maintain separation from the world philosophies and see itself as a commissioned body in a foreign land. "The church will have to see itself as a diaspora church, one which will have to maintain itself in a

neutralist and secularist world."⁹⁵ This reminds us of Paul's admonition to be ambassadors for Christ.

O'Donovan concludes his review with these words regarding Rahner's definition of faith:

Faith in the self-bestowing God of radical communion and forgiveness occurs with certitude and is possible for all men and women only through encounter with Jesus of Nazareth, who is the historical appearance of the full promise of God to which the Spirit awakens every time and culture. Of Jesus alone, with the Spirit's guidance, can we say that he is the concretely absolute evidence of God's eternal love for the world.⁹⁶

The centrality of Jesus Christ and the necessity, ultimately, of personal faith in Christ are unmistakable in Rahner. Jesus is the fulness of the self-revelation of God and life in Him is the experience of faith which Rahner, and we, hope for. We live in grace, by anticipating God's revelation and gift of Himself, "in the one long conversation that is meant to draw all the world home."⁹⁷

This grace is the topic of the Christian message and should be part of our communication on all levels. This is so despite the unpredictability of the future and the mortality of all human achievement. Rahner insisted that Christians,

have not less but all the more reason to prepare a strategy for promoting a new faith consciousness, to develop more creative relations between particular churches and the Church as a whole, to leave behind the consumer mentality of a bourgeois church and turn to renewed responsibility for the world in which Christianity will likely be present in an increasingly diaspora situation.⁹⁸

Every genuine believer in Jesus Christ, whether Roman Catholic or Protestant, needs to recognize that we have a world-wide calling and therefore a world-wide responsibility.

In 1972 Stanley Gundry asserted that we evangelicals could learn from Rahner.⁹⁹ His topic then was on the development of dogma. I believe it is clear that we may also learn from Rahner regarding the heart of God to save men and women, and regarding some philosophical under-pinnings of how to phrase our task in this age.

We also see more on Rahner's side, than is usually expected by Protestant evangelicals, in terms of the need of each individual for a personal relationship with Christ through conscious faith. But we will not be able to stay with Rahner on the issues of a desire for universalism and a belief in anonymous Christians. While these are great ideas from the perspective of love and grace and human hope, Rahner does not reflect the balancing of the scriptural emphases of grace, righteousness and justice nor the preaching of the necessity of personal faith. We will have to stand opposed to these universalist and anonymous Christian positions, where ever they occur, and insist on the necessity of personal faith in Jesus Christ for salvation. Peter and Paul require us to do so.

Endnotes

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¹⁶O'Donnell, John. "The Mystery of Faith in the Theology of Karl Rahner," Heythrop Journal 25 (1984), p. 301.

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²⁰Macquarrie, p. 275.

²¹Macquarrie, p. 272.

²²Cawte, John. "Karl Rahner's Conception of God's Self-Communication to Man," Heythrop Journal 25 (1984), p. 262.

²³O'Donovan, p. 626.

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⁴⁴D'Costa, p. 132.

⁴⁵Macquarrie, p. 274.

⁴⁶Robertson, p. 380.

⁴⁷O'Donovan, p. 626.

⁴⁸Robertson, p. 385.

⁴⁹p. 302.

⁵⁰O'Donnell, p. 303.

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⁵¹Rahner, Karl. Foundations of Christian Faith, (NY: Seabury, 1978), p. 316.

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⁵⁴Rahner, TI, VII, p. 65

⁵⁵Rahner, Karl. TI, XIII, p. 45-46

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⁵⁸Rahner, Karl. TI, XIII, p. 43

⁵⁹Rahner, Crossroads, p. 23.

⁶⁰D'Costa, p. 138.

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⁶²Rahner, TI, XIII, p. 40.

⁶³O'Donovan, p. 627.

⁶⁴O'Donnell, p. 318.

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⁶⁶Carroll, p. 8.

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⁶⁸Wojtyla, Karol. Sources of Renewal (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979). See esp. pp. 43-99.

⁶⁹Kennedy, p. 65.

⁷⁰D'Costa, p. 139.

⁷¹Allik, p. 372.

⁷²Allik, p. 381. cf. also Robertson, p. 381.

⁷³Allik, p. 368.

⁷⁴O'Donnell, p. 304.

⁷⁵Cawte, p. 262.

⁷⁶Cawte, p. 268.

⁷⁷Robertson, p. 391.

⁷⁸Kant, Immanuel. Critique of Practical Reason (London: np, 1927) p. 200.

⁷⁹Rahner, Karl, ed. Encyclopedia of Theology (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p. 1743. Pannenberg agrees with Rahner that historical revelation occurs and is the basis for all our theology. But he disagrees that we can posit a transcendental basis for human experience of the transcendent. Pannenberg prefers the transcendental approach of Ebling. Pannenberg, The Idea of God, pp. 90, 120

⁸⁰Robertson, p. 384.

⁸¹Allik, p. 371-72.

⁸²O'Donovan, p. 644.

⁸³Rahner, TI, VII, p. 63

⁸⁴O'Donovan, p. 624.

⁸⁵O'Donovan, p. 632.

⁸⁶O'Donovan, p. 627.

⁸⁷O'Donovan, p. 631.

⁸⁸Rahner, TI, XIII, p. 50

⁸⁹O'Donovan, p. 643.

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⁹⁵Rahner, Karl. TI, XIII, Possible Courses for the Theology of the Future, 36

⁹⁶O'Donovan, p. 626.

⁹⁷O'Donovan, p. 632.

⁹⁸O'Donovan, p. 640.

⁹⁹Gundry, Stanley. "Rahner on the Development of Dogma," JETS 15:4 (Fall, 1972) 207-213.