

Robert Bertram, Carl Braaten and the ELCA on Universal Salvation

Colleagues,

Some time ago Scott Jurgens, ELCA pastor in Idaho, (Seminex graduate, 1980) asked me if I had seen the article on universal salvation in the ELCA's collection of faith statements. No, I hadn't. Carl Braaten, he told me, was the major voice in this statement, and what Carl said didn't coincide with what Bob Bertram had taught him. So I asked him to dig deeper, write it up and send it to me. Last week he did. It's good. Herewith I send it on to you.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

DOES THE ELCA TEACH UNIVERSAL SALVATION?

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For those who, as Luther would say, "have" Christ by faith, there is the joy and promise of a hope beyond all hopes. The peace and joy that we "have" is salvation and righteousness through Jesus Christ. And yet this peace and joy for the Christian also suggests a dilemma: why do not all among the "dear disbelievers" share in the peace and joy of this gift?

This dilemma is also at the forefront of Robert W. Bertram's set of theses entitled "U is for Universality," in his posthumously

published book, *A TIME FOR CONFESSING* (Eerdmans, 2008), 172-184. His very first thesis introduces the problem:

“Probably no feature of the Christian gospel has been so troubling to modern Christians as the way in which that gospel limits salvation to those who believe in Christ.” (172) He goes on to describe how this “limit” is a scandal, an embarrassment to Christians, but also creates a “longing” in us, a longing that might make us say, “if only we could just give this gift to everyone.” These feelings and desires are summed up well in theses 11 through 14 (173).

But the longing that he mentions has made its way into the ELCA in a big way; however, it might go unnoticed. This is because an article that deals with this same question of Christ’s “universality” is buried deeply in the databases of the ELCA’s faith statements. To find it you have to go to the elca.org webpage and then click on the links in this path: Home>>What We Believe>>New or Returning to Church?>>Dig Deeper>>Salvation.

This article on Salvation had its origin in two articles written by Carl E. Braaten published in the December 1980 and June 1981 issues of *LCA PARTNERS*. The first article was entitled “The Universal Meaning of Jesus Christ” and the second was a rejoinder response to a Pastor H. Gerhardt Kugler who took issue with Braaten. These articles were condensed, edited, and redacted in such a way as to bring about the ELCA position on salvation.

I took this condensed article to an ecumenical pastors’ meeting for discussion. One pastor described the article as showing “ambiguity with a universalist wish.” Is he correct? To answer this it might be good to compare and contrast this article with a few of Bertram’s theses and the Lutheran Confessions.

I think both the ELCA and Bertram would agree that there is something universal about salvation in the New Testament. But Bertram would not promote “universalism” or “universal salvation.” I think this is why he uses the term “universality” when presenting his theses. The ELCA salvation article, on the other hand, promotes “universalism” when it says:

“The Christian hope for salvation, whether for the believing few or the unbelieving many, is grounded in the person and meaning of Christ alone . . . There is a universalist thrust in the New Testament, particularly in Paul’s theology. How else can we read passages such as ‘for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ’ (1 Cor. 15:22)?” (5th paragraph) “...If Jesus is the Lord and Savior, he is the universal Lord and Savior, ...not merely my personal Lord and Savior...there is a large hope for salvation. . .for all people whenever or wherever they might have lived and no matter how religious or irreligious they may have proved to be themselves. It is clearly God’s announced will that all people shall be saved and come to the knowledge of truth (1 Timothy 2:4).” (8th paragraph)

In making reference to 1 Timothy 2:4 the Salvation article is pointing out that God shall save all people. But the verse from 1 Timothy really says that God “desires” that everyone be saved, implying that not all actually will be saved.

Bertram comes closer to a proper understanding of the universal aspect of Jesus Christ when he says in thesis 22, “what for [Christians] distinguished Jesus from all other saviors was precisely that he was for everyone, not for some privileged few. He differed from all others exactly by his being for all others.” (174). The agreement between Bertram and the ELCA article is that both say that Christ is “for everyone.” The

difference for Bertram is that salvation is received only by those who believe in Christ (cf. again thesis 1, quoted above).

Yet the subject of belief in Christ, or faith, does not go unmentioned in the ELCA article. Paragraph 7 begins, "But what of faith? Isn't faith necessary for salvation?" The rest of the paragraph really does not give a clear answer to this question but rather gives a definition of faith and salvation through faith alone:

"To say we are saved by faith alone means we let God-in-Christ do all the saving that needs to be done, apart from any works we can perform. . . .If I confess that God has saved me, a lost and condemned sinner, whom else can he not save? Faith is precisely awareness that God's accepting love reaches out to all sinners, even to me. Faith is the opening of heart and mind to the universal grace and goodness of God." (7th paragraph)

This section, although emphasizing the importance of God's grace and love being offered to all, tends to dilute faith into an "awareness of what God has done." I almost liken it to the knowledge of history (*fides historica*) mentioned in Apology IV which apparently is how the papists were defining faith at the time:

"But the faith that justifies is not only a knowledge of history; it is to assent to the promise of God, in which forgiveness of sins and justification are bestowed freely on account of Christ. To avoid the suspicion that it is merely knowledge, we will add further that to have faith is to desire and to receive the offered promise of the forgiveness of sins and justification." (Kolb & Wengert, 128.48)"But faith signifies not merely a knowledge of history but the faith which assents to the promise, as Paul clearly testifies when he says [Rom. 4:16] righteousness 'depends on faith, in order that the

promise may...be guaranteed.' For he says that only faith can accept the promise." (128.50)

Here there are clear differences between the ELCA article and Apology IV. Faith is more than an "awareness of what God has done," more than an "opening of the mind and heart to God's universal grace and goodness." The faith that the Apology talks about is trust in the promise, an assent, or as Tappert's translation renders it, an acceptance of the promise – a grasping of the promise. And what promise is that? Not the promise that God is universal with God's love, although God is, but the promise that our sins are forgiven and that we are justified because of Christ. (Ap. IV.43) The question is whether the ELCA gives Luther's *glaubst du, hast du* ("what you believe, you have") enough emphasis.

But even if we were to accept the ELCA's definition of faith, and since it does refer to salvation by faith alone, you would then think that the article would be saying that we are saved by our awareness of God reaching out to all sinners or saved by an open heart and mind to the universal grace and goodness of God. But surprisingly the article leaves this question open ended. For the article ends this way:

"Will, then, all people be saved in the end? We must say with Braaten, 'We do not...know the answer. (That) is stored up in the mystery of God's own future. All (God) has let us know in advance is that he will judge the world according to the measure of his grace and love made known in Jesus Christ, which is ultimately greater than the fierceness of his wrath or the hideousness of our sin.'" (11th paragraph)

So, according to the ELCA article all we are left with is uncertainty as to who is going to be saved. The only thing we

can be certain about, through our awareness and open hearts and minds, is that God's accepting love reaches out to all sinners.

Fortunately, though, we have other writings that proclaim the gospel clearly. We have the letters of St. Paul and the Augsburg Confession Art. IV, which clearly states that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our works but we become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith, "when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness in his sight as St. Paul says in Romans 3 and 4."

So, both the ELCA article and Bertram agree that the gift of God's grace is offered to all. Universality, yes; but universal salvation, probably not. For faith (trust in the promise, trust in Christ) must be present to receive the gift and guarantee it.

It might be better to put it this way, as Michael Hoy, the editor of A TIME FOR CONFESSING helped me to understand: The ELCA statement might be OK as far as it goes, but Bertram does that which the ELCA statement does not. He affirms the universality of Jesus but also recognizes that not everyone wants it. It is kind of like the Pharisees at the door complaining about the company Christ keeps. Bertram explains this especially in theses 35-43. In thesis 42 Bertram says that those who label themselves the "righteous ones" exclude themselves due to their own scandalized reaction to the gospel's universal invitation. It may not be true that all disbelievers are outright rejectful but pondering the promise-as did the men at Athens (and Nicodemus in John 3?) who said, "We want to hear more about this." (Acts 17:32) But it is true that Jesus is still universal in promise, even if not all care to share it.

And so the scandal, the embarrassment, and the dilemma of the limits of salvation continue. Which means that our Christian longing for the whole world to be saved continues. Yet Bertram reminds us that the believer does not stand idly by. His concluding sections on Intercession, Vicarious Repentance, and Vicarious Doxology give us clues as to how we serve the “dear disbeliever.” My favorite theses are these:

*“99. In the very midst of these dear disbelievers, not off to the side or above them, are Christ’s believers, the world’s cheering section.”*100. *And the believers cheer and compliment and approve, not deceitfully but for good reason. And their praise is not only in the dear disbelievers’ stead but is directed to the disbelievers themselves, dears that they are.*

“101. ‘For from now on,’ as one Christian said for the rest of them, ‘we regard no one from a human point of view.’

“102. Neither are believers above being surprised, least of all about their own fate, let alone the fate of others.”

So we trust God. We pray and hope that the gift of faith may take hold of those who do not believe. And may we be surprised. Come, Lord Jesus. Come, Holy Spirit; for us and for them. Amen