

# Reflections on “The Wide, Wide Circle of Divine Love”

Michael Kruse, GAC Member. August 18, 2005.

## INTRODUCTION

The General Assembly Council (GAC), PCUSA, started something new in 2004. We set aside time at each Council meeting to reflect on issues confronting the church. Each member receives a book to read a month in advance of the meeting. We come prepared to hear the author and participate in discussion. First we talked about church growth. We read [Beyond the Ordinary: Ten Strengths of U.S. Congregations](#). At the next meeting, we talked about leadership and read [To Walk in Integrity: Spiritual Leadership in Times of Crisis](#). Both contributed to helpful reflection on our work.

When the GAC gathers in Sacramento next month, our next topic will be pluralism. Last Saturday, I found a packet arrived containing the book, [The Wide, Wide Circle Of Divine Love: A Biblical Case For Religious Diversity](#), by W. Eugene March. I have read the book and I have much I want to say about it. I know when I get to GAC there will be no forum where I will be able to express all the concerns I have. Furthermore, since the purpose of these events is to foster discussion around critical issues facing the church, I thought I might begin by having a discussion with the broader church. I also think it worthy to discuss whether this material is appropriate for the context.

I have written an overview of the book with extensive quotes. Next, I have provided some quotes from The Confession of 1967 and official statements of the General Assembly over the past four decades. I end with my observations and conclusions. I hope that this will add a different perspective to the dialog.

## THE WIDE, WIDE CIRCLE OF DIVINE LOVE

### Overview

The book has thirteen chapters divided into three parts: Finding the Way, Finding the Truth, and Finding the Life. It opens with a discussion of past abuses of religion and proceeds to suggest a new model. The second section reviews various passages of scripture in light of the new model. The end of the book gets into the challenges and possibilities.

### Part 1: Finding they Way

Here are four excerpts from the first part of the book:

“The diversity within our world is something most of us take for granted. There are in the neighborhood of fifty million species of plants and animal life currently to be found, and it is estimated that perhaps as many as fifty billion have existed at one time

or another across the lifespan of our world. Difference is simply obvious: different flowers different animals, different languages, different people. Wouldn't one kind of butterfly or bird have been sufficient? Apparently not, because variety seems to be the way things are supposed to be.

So why should there not be different religions? Why should we be surprised or troubled by the reality of different ways to express spirituality? Since diversity seems to be the norm in creation, by analogy a pluralism of religious responses among the people of the world is reasonable to expect." p. 18-19

"Christians do have a special calling, but it is not to lord it over others or to deny the validity of the beliefs and experiences of others. We will turn to this important subject later. But for now it is crucial to affirm that other religions have an equally important place in God's world. Sikhs and Taoists are part of God's divine handiwork. Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists offer significant contributions to understanding the diversity of religious experience. These expressions of religion are precious to God and thus should be honored by all who call themselves religious.

Be under no illusion. This alternative view is not the position of most Christians, at least at present. But it is legitimate interpretation based on a significant number of biblical passages." p. 21

"Fewer people who are actively engaged in a faith community [compared to those who are not] tend to adopt the pluralist position. By reason of their involvement in a particular faith they tend to assume that their religion alone is valid (exclusive) or that among all the other possibilities it is the best (inclusive). But a growing number of people who have carefully studied the religions of the world find the pluralist position the most honest in light of the evidence." p. 28.

"Of course, rationally speaking, all cannot be the true religion. Each may witness to the truth, but all three [Judaism, Christianity, Islam] cannot at the same time represent the only way that God and humanity can be related. If each of these religions had one by one replaced the preceding version of the Abrahamic tradition, thereby invalidating its predecessor, then there would not be a difficulty. (And exclusivists in each tradition claim that is exactly the case.) But that is not what has happened historically or theologically. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam continue as vital religions with numerous adherents, each meeting the needs and desires of those who participate in those particular faith communities. A Christian may deem Judaism or Islam as inadequate, but a Jew or Muslim will no doubt make the same judgment about Christianity. This whole question becomes all the more opaque when the wider universe of religions is introduced." pp. 30-31.

Dr. March identifies three positions for Christians with regard to other religions.

Exclusive – Christianity is the only valid religion.

Inclusive – Christianity is the best religion but allows that others could be saved.

Pluralist – Christianity is one valid religion among other more or less equally valid religions.

## **Part 2: Finding the Truth**

Dr. March begins with the story of Noah and works his way through scripture, building a case for the pluralist view. With Noah we learn that God intends to be in relationship with all humanity. We learn the same through the story of Abraham. He notes that both Pharaoh and King Abimelech were presented as god fearing moral rulers. (p. 49) (I might also have added the priest king Melchizedek to this list.) We learn Israel was called to be a witness to the world of God's intentions. We learn of Jonah and the repentance of Nineveh. We learn from stories of Ruth and the Good Samaritan that God uses people outside covenant. We learn that the Golden Rule is present in most cultures.

Closing out the second section, Dr. March addresses John 14:6.

“Jesus said to him [Thomas], ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me.’”

We learn that the Gospel of John was written late in the first century after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. This led to a hardening of lines between Judaism and Christianity. Apart from the persecution by Rome, synagogues began expelling Christians. The stakes were becoming ever higher. It was into this context that John was written. Dr. March writes,

“In the midst of conflict and possibly mistreatment by family and friends, Jesus’ followers were reminded that Jesus did offer them an authentic way of living that was in accord with God’s love. Jesus was the ‘way’ to the Father.” (p. 103)

The statement would encourage the Christians as they faced persecution and rejection. With regard to, “No one comes to the Father except through me.” Dr. March writes:

“At the time when the Gospel of John was written there was no aim to eradicate Judaism. There was no intention to say to the Jews, as contrasted with Christians, had no knowledge or relationship with God. The purpose was to provide a secure place for a minority of Jews, the Christians, within what was itself a minority in the Roman Empire. The purpose of John was not to establish dominance over others but rather to assure authenticity to the beleaguered. Words of comfort for ‘us’ should not be used as words of attack or denunciation of “them.” In our time we need to take this very seriously and resist efforts to exclude others by a narrow reading of the tradition. To ‘come to the Father,’ who is love, is to love as Jesus loved. That is the way the truth and the life.” (p. 106)

### **Part 3: Finding the Life**

Chapter 11 is titled “Tell Me That Old New Story Again.” We are told about the desire of folks wanting to stay with the ‘old time religion.’ People are threatened by pluralism.

“Change is still viewed with great suspicion. Biblical scholarship is deeply mistrusted. ‘Pluralism’ and ‘diversity’ are considered different aspects of a malicious attack against God.” (p. 112)

We must remember “context, context, context.” The old story needs to be retold in light of the context of what we now know about scripture. The Bible is about turning outward and joining with others in a search for God. Dr. March quotes Diana Eck:

“Those who live according to an exclusivist paradigm frankly do not wish to live closely with people of other faiths and would prefer to shut them out – which is increasingly impossible – or to convert others to their own view of the world. Those who appropriate differences, as do the inclusivists, assume the worldview of others looks very much like their own, and the ground rules are presumed to be ‘ours.’ But those who think life together as pluralists recognize the need for radical new forms of living together and communicating with one another.” (p. 132)

Dr. March concludes:

“Yes, God loves those within the church, but God also loves those not in the church. What then, some will ask, is the advantage of being a Christian? None, except having a God-given license to love one another freely and with abandon to talk about it.” (p.138)

My summary: Repent of “Jesus as Lord of all” thinking. View Christianity as a valid option among many that, like the other religions, teaches us to observe universal ethical values like the Golden Rule. All religions were created more or less equal and should be valued as such.

### **RESPONSE**

Below are six excerpts from the Confessions and General Assembly Theological Statements. The italics are added for emphasis.

#### ***The Confession of 1967***

The church in its mission encounters the religions of men and in that encounter becomes conscious of its own human character as a religion. God’s revelation to Israel, expressed within Semitic culture, gave rise to the religion of the Hebrew people. God’s revelation in Jesus Christ called forth the response of Jews and Greeks and came to expression within Judaism and Hellenism as the Christian religion. *The*

*Christian religion, as distinct from God's revelation of himself, has been shaped throughout its history by the cultural forms of its environment.*

The Christian finds parallels between other religions and his own and must approach all religions with openness and respect. Repeatedly God has used the insight of non-Christians to challenge the church to renewal. *But the reconciling word of the gospel is God's judgment upon all forms of religion, including the Christian. The gift of God in Christ is for all men. The church, therefore, is commissioned to carry the gospel to all men whatever their religion may be and even when they profess none.* ([The Confession of 1967](#), II-A-3. Revelation and Religion. Book of Confessions, 9.41-42)

#### ***A Study of Universalism. (1974)***

The weight of Biblical teaching as a whole does not support any view which: (a) does not emphasize the priority and finality of God's grace; (b) assumes that a person's final destiny depends upon his own meritorious works (including faith); (c) *discounts the importance of personal faith in Jesus Christ as savior and personal obedience to him as Lord*; (d) denies the urgency of proclaiming the good news of God's grace in Jesus Christ to all; (e) *places limits upon God's freedom to save persons when, where, and how he will.* ("A Study of Universalism" Received and adopted by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the US, 1974. General Assembly Minutes, p. 142.)

#### ***The Nature of Revelation in the Christian Tradition from a Reformed Perspective. (1987)***

There are at least three ways in which our allegiance to Christ must not be compromised in interreligious dialogue. (a) *We must not bend or trim our faith in God's revelation in Jesus Christ in order to achieve an artificial agreement with the doctrines of other religions.* We must therefore be prepared to acknowledge clearly that as Christians we have doctrinal disagreements with other religions, though this should not deter us from seeking common ground for service to humanity. (b) We may learn from non-Christian religions insofar as what we learn can be incorporated into, and enrich our personal and corporate relationship *with the God of Israel who is revealed in Jesus Christ and who demands an exclusive allegiance.* The criterion to be applied here is Jesus Christ as center of revelation (see Section IV, above). (c) Entering into interfaith dialogue in no way diminishes our calling to share the good news of Jesus Christ with all people, with all due respect for every good thing that God has given them in their religions. Indeed, expressing one's faith is a necessary condition of interreligious dialogue. ("The Nature of Revelation in the Christian Tradition from a Reformed Perspective." Received and adopted by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), 1987. General Assembly Minutes, p. 453.)

***Presbyterian Principles for Interfaith Dialogue. (1999)***

[Part4] In our pluralistic world, we confess that Jesus is the truth and the way; through him God gives life. Jesus does not point to truth but is the truth, in his person. (Presbyterian Principles for Interfaith Dialogue adopted by 211th General Assembly (1999) of the Presbyterian Church (USA) as presented at [Presbyterian Principles for Interfaith Dialogue](#).)

***Resolution of the 213<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2001)***

As a witness to what we believe, we affirm the following statement: We confess the unique authority of Jesus Christ as Lord. *Every other authority is finally subject to Christ.*

Jesus Christ is the also uniquely Savior. It is “his life, death, resurrection, ascension and final return that restores creation, providing salvation for all those whom God has chosen to redeem.” *Although we do not know the limits of God’s grace and pray for the salvation of those who may never come to know Christ, for us the assurance of salvation is found only in confessing Christ and trusting in him alone.* (Minutes of the 213<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2001) of the Presbyterian Church (USA). p. 37. Quote comes from: “The Crucified One is Lord,” p. 4, Published by the Reformed Church in America)

***Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ (2002)***

It pleased God to come to us in Jesus Christ, God with us. *God did not simply show us a path to follow, but lived among us as the Way, the Truth, and the life.* (p. 525)

*Jesus Christ is the only Savior and Lord, and all people everywhere are called to place their faith, hope, and love in him.* No one is saved by virtue of inherent goodness of admirable living. “for by grace you have been saved through faith, and this in not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8) *No one is saved apart from God’s gracious redemption in Jesus Christ. Yet we do not presume to limit the sovereign freedom of “God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:3-4). Thus, we neither restrict the grace of God to those who profess explicit faith in Christ nor assume that all people are saved regardless of faith, Grace, love, and communion belong to God, and are not ours to determine.* (p. 526)

(“[Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ](#).” Affirmed and commended by the 214<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2002) of the Presbyterian Church (USA). General Assembly Minutes, p. 525-526.)

## Observations

Dr. March's advocacy of pluralism is a substantial departure from our Reformed, not to mention Christian, heritage. There are not many ways to God. There isn't even one way to God. *There is one way from God to us, through Jesus Christ.* This is the central distinctive of the Christian message. No one, including the Christian, has ever been saved by religion. We are saved by Christ. "No one is saved apart from God's gracious redemption in Jesus Christ." (Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ, 526) We will be judged according to our works but will be saved by grace through Jesus Christ.

Saving grace is made possible by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is not for us to say how God has chosen to exercise his grace. As Dr. March shows quite clearly, God has worked in the lives of people beyond the covenant. God is not limited to a means of grace, but we are! What the Presbyterian Church (USA) has repeatedly affirmed, contrary to Dr March's writing, is that others who may ultimately be saved will be saved through Christ.

Religion is a human effort toward transformation that will make us acceptable to God, make us godlike ourselves, or negate our personhood so we can become one with cosmic forces. Dr. March asks, "Why should there not be a diversity of religions?" The reason is that religion is about human striving to achieve and create purpose apart from the grace of God through Jesus Christ. The distinctive nature of Christianity is that grace comes through Christ alone, even despite our best efforts to make it otherwise. *God doesn't want any religions! God wants a wide wide diversity of people with varieties of languages and cultures all accepting grace, to be free from striving, and living in relationship with God.* How will they know saving grace if they are not told of Jesus? Grace isn't just meant for the afterlife. It is meant for the here and now so that we may see the presence of God's justice and mercy "on earth, just as it is in heaven."

I am astounded at the reasoning that because Judaism, Christianity and Islam are "meeting the needs and desires of those who participate" that they are valid religions (p. 30). Are we to believe that worshipers of Ra, worshipers of Baal, and worshipers of Nike did not believe their God's to be meeting their needs and desires? *"Meeting our needs and desires" is not the determinate of valid religion!* Our worship is about answering an invitation to die and come alive as new creatures in God through Christ. It is about extending that invitation to others and seeking God's justice in the world. It is about having the mind of Christ:

Phil 2:3-11 NRSV

3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

6 who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,  
7 but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
8 he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death --  
even death on a cross.

9 Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name,  
10 so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
11 and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

This is the mindset we are sent into the world to exhibit as we go “like sheep to the slaughter,” giving witness to Jesus Christ.

Dr. March seems to see a progressive movement from exclusivity, to inclusivity, to pluralism, the most enlightened perspective of all. I respectfully disagree. I believe the exclusive and pluralist positions are really the same.

A story not discussed in the book was the story of Babel. God instructed Noah to “fill the earth” just as God had instructed Adam. “Filling the earth” meant exalting God’s glory by covering the earth with God’s beloved humanity, living in genuine relationship to God.

The first story we encounter after the story of Noah is the story of Babel. Rather than spreading and filling the earth, the people of Babel entrenched in one place. They unified around a mission of elevating themselves to God. God sowed confusion and dispersed them. It was not unity that God opposed. *It was unity grounded in opposition to the truth of who God is.*

The exclusivists place themselves as judge and jury over the fate of other human beings. They deny the Lordship of Christ by dictating how it is that Christ will exercise grace. They usurp Christ’s role as judge of all. The pluralists also place themselves as judge and jury over the fate of other human beings. Despite the witness of scripture and the Church throughout the ages, the pluralist decides Jesus really isn’t necessary. Jesus is just our lord and not Lord of all. So who defines what is ethically moral and proper? The pluralists do. They usurp Christ role as judge of all. Both are attempts to unify around a vision contrary to God’s vision. It is the spirit of Babel.

Dr. March tells us the context of John 14:6 precludes an understanding that an exclusive claim was made. He writes, "The purpose of John was not to establish dominance over others..." True. But how does acknowledging that the only one who can give true grace is Jesus, become the "establishment of dominance?" Establishing dominance would be a betrayal of the very one who offers the grace. I do not follow the reasoning here.

I don't doubt in the least that John's words were given as encouragement. But if Jesus was just a way among many, why not tell the Christians to just go along with Jews? Would that not have been more practical? How would the Jews have understood "No one comes to the Father except through me?" Why did John go out of his way to be so controversial?

It was at Caesarea Philippi that Jesus asked the question, "Who do you say that I am? Caesarea Philippi was the center of worship for the god Pan. There were temples and monuments to the Caesars. Roman soldiers carried banners bearing images of the goddess Nike, the goddess of victory. She was stamped on their coins as well. Peter responded to Jesus' question, "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God." Was there any significance to this context?

I have already mentioned Philippians 2:10-11 "...so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

In Ephesians we find:

God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. (Eph 1:20-21, NRSV)

In 1 Corinthians:

For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Cor. 1:22-24, NRSV)

Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "All things are put in subjection," it is plain that this does not include the one who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all. (1 Cor. 15:24-28, NRSV)

In 1 Timothy:

For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all -- this was attested at the right time. (1 Tim. 2:5-6, NRSV)

In Revelation:

Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever." (Rev. 11:15, NRSV)

What about context here? Ephesus and Corinth were among two of the most pluralistic cities of there day. Was Paul's message that Jesus was just a way to the truth? John wrote Revelation just as emperor worship emerged. How would the Christians and the Romans have understood Revelation 11:15?

## **CONCLUSION**

The General Assembly of the PCUSA meets every other year as the policy setting body for the denomination. The General Assembly Council is the corporate board. It is the responsibility of the GAC elected body to give oversight to the on-going ministry of the denomination in light of policies set by the General Assembly and to make corporate decisions on behalf of the denomination.

It is my understanding that the discussion topics at the GAC meetings are intended to aid us as we think about priorities and decisions before us. The General Assembly has spoken consistently and repeatedly over the past half century on the issue of Christ among other religions. *So why are we not focusing on the policy that has been entrusted to us and instead having a conversation about how we might undermine that very policy?*

Dr. March has every right to write a book articulating his positions. His work would make for a lively discussion in any number of settings. I would enjoy such interaction. But let us be clear. This is not a theology class or a group of academicians conversing at the coffee shop. This is the board of the Denomination. The consideration of this material for an official gathering will appear, to many, as an endorsement of the positions taken in the book; positions which are unmistakably outside the positions taken by the General Assembly. This event is going to simply throw one more log on to the fires of discontent burning in our denomination.

I hope in the future, our discussions and reflection can be focused on the mission placed before us. I am going to advocate toward that end. I also want to make it clear that I do not endorse the thesis of the book. I affirm with the denomination that Jesus Christ is the Lord of all, working out his purposes in ways that are known only to him. Our mission is to give witness of his grace and justice to the whole world, inviting them into relationship with Jesus.