

# The New York Times

## Christian Split: Can Nonbelievers Be Saved?

By GUSTAV NIEBUHR  
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**SPRING LAKE, Mich.** — After 25 years in the pulpit, at the head of a congregation of nearly 1,000 people, the Rev. Richard A. Rhem would seem fitted more for a role as a denominational leader than as a denominational lightning rod.

But instead a storm is raging around him. Some here call him a heretic. The regional church authority censured him in July, holding him "in disrepute before Christ, the church and the world." His congregation, loyal to him, has voted to secede from its parent church.

The reason for the dispute is that Mr. Rhem says he no longer believes that faith in Jesus is the sole way to salvation. Jews, Muslims and others, he says, may be as likely to enter heaven.

In departing from traditional Christian doctrine that proclaims Jesus alone as Saviour, Mr. Rhem has shaken the Reformed Church in America, a denomination of about 200,000 members that has roots in the Netherlands of the 16th century and its modern headquarters in New York.

But the controversy illuminates a far broader division emerging among Christians over how to regard other faiths.

Over the centuries, church teachings on salvation have been varied and nuanced, but at their core is the conviction that only through Christ has God made salvation possible.

In recent decades, however, some prominent theologians like the late German Jesuit priest Karl Rahner have wrestled with the question whether non-Christians can be saved through their own religions. And Roman Catholicism's Second Vatican Council, in the early 1960's, and subsequent Protestant efforts encouraged substantial interfaith dialogue, especially between Christians and Jews.

But none of those initiatives changed the core teaching of salvation only through Christ, a tenet that for some Christians, particularly conservative evangelicals, means nonbelievers face hellfire.

Now, in a widening rift among Christians, some urge greater missionary zeal, as the Southern Baptists did recently in resolving to convert Jews, while others argue for dialogue and seeking understanding with non-Christians, not proselytizing. And some, prominent Protestants and Catholics among them, have said God's covenant with the Jews was not superseded by the coming of Christ.

In an often cited biblical verse (John 14:6), Jesus declares: "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me." That essential teaching of the Christian faith, Mr. Rhem's critics say, is now at stake here in western Michigan.

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"We think this is a debate of mountainous proportions," said the Rev. Rick Veenstra, administrator of the Classis of Muskegon, the regional body that censured Mr. Rhem as a heretic. "It isn't Mohammed, it isn't Joseph Smith, it isn't David Koresh, it isn't Buddha -- it's through Jesus that God has revealed Himself."

But at Mr. Rhem's church, many argue for a broader view. "We do not know the limits of God's grace," said one congregant, Marcia Van Ostenberg, a corporate financial officer. "And not knowing that, how can we possibly say we know these people are going to heaven, and these are not?"

Theological pluralism like Mr. Rhem's, said Rosemary Keller, academic dean and professor of church history at the Union Theological Seminary in Manhattan, "is very much the effect of our global village." His view of salvation, which is similar to her own, is gaining ground, Professor Keller said. But she added, "There's no question it's a controversial position."

The controversy surrounding Mr. Rhem began when a local newspaper reported that his congregation, Christ Community Church, had allowed a small congregation of homosexuals to worship in its chapel. Called before a classis meeting in October, Mr. Rhem was asked to explain whether he shared the governing body's view that homosexual activity is sinful. One minister there also questioned his broader views on Scripture and salvation.

"Dick took a deep breath," recalled the Rev. Steven Smallegan, a member of the classis executive committee, "and said, 'This is

what I've thought about.' "

After Mr. Rhem had finished describing his view of pluralistic salvation, Mr. Smallegan added, "the meeting ran amok." Order collapsed as other ministers charged into the debate.

The classis began an inquiry into Mr. Rhem's beliefs and soon asked him to recant. He refused. In drawing up its censure of him in July, the classis raised the possibility of a church trial, action that could have led to his being defrocked. The body later decided against that step.

Mr. Smallegan, pastor of the Westwood Reformed Church in Muskegon, said all these proceedings had been carried out with humility on the part of Mr. Rhem's accusers and had proved painful to them.

"It's no fun to look at someone you've ministered with side by side and say, 'You're a heretic, Dick,' " Mr. Smallegan said. "But if I have to offend Christ or offend Dick, it's a clear issue, because Christ permits no equals."

The 61-year-old Mr. Rhem, tall, baldish and gregarious, calls himself a committed Christian, and extols Jesus to his congregation without reference to other faiths. But "I believe the scope of God's grace extends beyond the Christian community," he said in an interview.

Mr. Rhem said it had taken him years to come to believe that God grants salvation to non-Christians. Reared in a household

rooted in traditional Dutch Protestantism, he began his ministry as a theological conservative.

But his outlook shifted after he studied during the late 1960's at the University of Leyden in the Netherlands, where he became a disciple of Hendrikus Berkhof, a Dutch Reformed theologian. Professor Berkhof, Mr. Rhem recalled, said Jesus led people to the heart of God much as a slice of pie touches its center. The implication, as Mr. Rhem understood it, was that "there is a lot of God beyond that slice."

Mr. Rhem returned to Michigan in December 1970, in the midst of a bitter divorce. A decade earlier, he had been pastor of Christ Community, which, despite his troubles, now welcomed him back.

"I tasted of God's grace in concrete fashion," said Mr. Rhem, who has since remarried. In a socially conservative area, his church became known for welcoming divorced people, and grew rapidly.

By the late 1980's, Mr. Rhem's evolving beliefs were being described by him in church journals. In 1990, he joined an interfaith round table, the West Shore Jewish-Christian Dialogue Committee. The next year the organization was host to Rabbi David Hartman, a well-known modern Orthodox philosopher in Israel.

In a speech in Muskegon, Rabbi Hartman asked why a person had to deny another's religious tradition to affirm his own.

"That," said the chairwoman of the committee, Sylvia Kaufman,

"was what really moved Dick."

This January, Mr. Rhem put his views in writing for his critics in the classis. He declared that he believed Jesus to be God's revelation. But he posed two questions: Is God known to others "through any other manifestation" than Jesus? And can God grant salvation "through any other revelation"?

Mr. Rhem said the answer to both questions was yes.

To illustrate his thoughts, he invoked the image of a cathedral with stained-glass windows. Inside stand groups of Jews, Christians and Muslims. Each group reads the story of its faith in a particular window. All the windows, he wrote, are illuminated by the light of God.

In stating this, Mr. Rhem put himself "outside the mainstream of Reformed Church thinking," pushing beyond a certain flexibility in the church's beliefs, said the Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary of the denomination, who has tried to play a moderating role in the conflict.

Reformed theology, a major stream of Protestant thought deeply influenced by John Calvin, holds that God's grace is beyond thorough human understanding: no one can know who are the elect that will enter heaven. "We can't declare with certainty what finally is God's prerogative," Mr. Granberg-Michaelson said. "That's the mystery that's part of what we call God's sovereign grace."

But among the faithful, he added, there can be no doubt that Christ is unique as sinful humanity's Saviour.

Within Mr. Rhem's congregation, some members talk about the controversy with references to personal experiences. Last year Mary Jane Dykema, vice chairman of the local hospital board, visited Auschwitz. Gazing at photographs of Jews murdered there, she said she could not believe that God had damned them "after the hell they lived through."

Another congregant, Jay Bylsma, noted that two highways lead from Spring Lake to nearby Grand Rapids. "My road is a different road than yours," he said. "But we are both going to the same place."

Mr. Rhem's critics say they know that such beliefs exist at Christ Community, and elsewhere.

"It's not politically correct to say Christ is the only way to eternal life," said the Rev. David Jansen, pastor of the Unity Reformed Church in Muskegon. But he added:

"I do believe those who have not responded to God's grace in faith would be left outside the kingdom of heaven. That's not something I like to say or even consider. But it makes my job all the more urgent."