

Bishop Pearson's Gospel of Inclusion

By Bob Waldrep



A few months ago the news media focused on the passing of two individuals: one due to her condition, Terri Schiavo; and the other due to his position, Pope John Paul II. Unfortunately, as it became apparent that Pope John Paul II was going to die, the media quickly abandoned their coverage of Schiavo's death, with its tremendous implications on right-to-life issues, to focus on the Pope. (A poll taken during that time by NBC/*Wall Street Journal* found 47% of Americans thought the Schiavo story was the most interesting news—rising gasoline prices was second at 28%.¹)

Whenever the media choose to make an event the sole focus of their coverage, it does more than generate interest among their viewers: it also creates programming challenges as the news shows scramble to book knowledgeable guests who can share their opinions about the event in question. As the media present their interesting lineup of characters, inevitably a few will cause us to wonder, "Why could they possibly have scheduled this person to talk about this event?"

That's what I was asking when Fox News scheduled Bishop Carlton Pearson as one of their "experts" for *Fox and Friends* (he was also booked for *At Large* with Geraldo Rivera but was bumped). Their reason for casting him as an expert can't be because he's Roman Catholic, because he isn't: he was raised in the Church of God in Christ and ordained a Pentecostal bishop in 1997. Perhaps they just wanted the reflections of a high profile African-American church leader.

Regardless of Fox News' reasons for choosing him, Pearson had much more in mind than merely discussing the Pope. He saw this as an opportunity to raise his public profile and on his website encouraged his followers to try and influence Fox to use him for future appearances:

Tune in to FOX News tonight ... and FOX & Friends tomorrow morning ... as Bishop Pearson continues dialogue regarding the life and legacy of Pope John Paul II. In response to Bishop Pearson's appearances, please take a moment to send your comments to comments@foxnews.com and friends@foxnews.com. Be sure to say how much you enjoyed Bishop Pearson ... and that you would like to see more of him discussing current events and issues in our nation and around the world.²

A press release Pearson issued about the Pope's death reveals why he desires this high media profile—to promote his heretical and controversial view of the gospel, known as inclusivism:

Pope John Paul II was a great inclusionist [sic] ... The Pope taught us as Christians and people of all faiths, that we could mind the same things without necessarily having the same mind about everything.³

On *Fox and Friends*, he again emphasized what he called Pope John Paul's "religious inclusivism." And while the Pope's views on inclusivism may be open to debate, as a self-proclaimed inclusivist, Pearson's are not. But what does he mean by this? Here is how he describes it in an online pamphlet:

Inclusion is just a religious doctrine held by some Christians. The term comes from the idea that the love of God includes everyone ... Inclusion believes that all people will eventually be reunited with God.⁴

Pearson recognizes and readily admits this view is not compatible with what he refers to as "other Christian religions or denominations," stating,

*This one core point [that everyone will go to heaven] sets it apart from other Christian religions or denominations which believe that **some** [his emphasis] people will be reunited [sic] with God (saved, redeemed, go to heaven) and **everyone else** will forever be separated from God (lost, unredeemed, go to Hell).⁵*

He doesn't deny the existence of Hell; he simply reinterprets it to fit his view. For him, Hell is merely the punishment one receives on earth for a life badly lived:

For some people Hell is simply the consequences of their actions here on earth. If a person spends every day getting drunk, they will ruin their health, marriage, family and career; they will make their lives a living Hell.⁶

Certainly this would not hold water in every case since some obviously wicked people actually prosper according to the world's standards; others, such as a Hitler, have committed atrocities so great that it would seem a lifetime of suffering could never be sufficient punishment. To respond to such an objection, Pearson adds a second layer to his view of Hell—a type of purgatory:

For those people perhaps there will be some kind of punishment after death, but we believe that it will be remedial and corrective rather than just punishment for punishment's sake. Exactly what that will be and how long it will last we don't know. Will Hell for some people last 10 minutes or 10 million years ... we don't know. But this we do know; Hell will not last for eternity; it will not be endless.⁷

This is a departure from the view he expressed as late as April 2003 when he told *Charisma* magazine,

I believe some will go to hell but since the gates of hell will not prevail, the only people who will spend eternity there are those whom Jesus failed to redeem—those whom His blood was too weak to reach and wash.⁸

In July of 2004, Pearson appeared on Birmingham, AL radio station WAGG, and affirmed these views:

*The gospel of inclusion is the doctrine that ... Jesus Christ through Calvary saved the entire world, redeeming it unto God ... I believe that the accurate gospel is that in the finished work of the cross Jesus Christ reconciled all of humanity, the whole human race, which was guilty of Adamic sin—Adam committed sin, everybody became a sinner, according to the Scripture—the last Adam is Jesus Christ, who through an act of righteousness made **everybody** right. That's the good news. (emphasis added)*

During this discussion, the program host challenged Pearson's view:

You know that belief [inclusion] has caused a stir in the body of Christ ... we've always been taught and we believe that not everyone is going to heaven: there are sinners and there are people who are Christians ... those who did just as it says in Romans 10:9 ... they are saved and they are part of the many who will be made righteous from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and this belief of inclusion is incorrect as not everyone is going to be included in this.

Pearson responded strongly:

God will have compassion and mercy on whomever He wants to. Your religion, your dogma, the doctrines, cannot dictate to God who He will love and redeem. He made us all, why would He not redeem us all? Unless, we think God is prejudiced and bigoted like we are. God is not.

Pressing the issue the host asked, "Are you saying that everyone is going to heaven?"

Pearson responded: "Yes."

When the host asked if Pearson considers himself a universalist, he answered that he is and offered this defense:

Now I would not have said that before because I did not know what a Universalist was, but when people started calling me a Universalist I looked it up. Uni-verse, that means one version or verse of God on the planet. There is one God and one mediator between God and man. That is the man Christ Jesus. Most Christians worship the mediator, they don't really worship God ... Jesus never pointed to himself, he pointed to the Father ... He never said confess me or accept me [to receive

eternal life] ... because he knew that everybody one day would confess him anyway. The Bible says at the mention of the name Jesus every knee will bow, every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. And the Scripture also says that no one can confess Jesus as Lord except by the Holy Ghost.

To further clarify, the host asked, "It is your belief that murders, fornicators, liars will spend their eternity with our Lord?"

Pearson responded, "Murders and fornicators, yes-everybody ... now let me tell you what the Scripture says ... 'Where sin abounds, and sinners abound, grace doth much more abound.'"

Pearson's view is that all make it to heaven, no matter what their religion, or what view they hold regarding the gospel, God, and Jesus. He illustrates this in a story he told of a Hindu friend who was hesitant to become a Christian. The Hindu was reluctant to convert because that meant he must admit his deceased Hindu father was in hell:

*My Hindu friend wasn't sure he wanted to become a Christian because he and his family had been Hindu for generations and he didn't want to believe that his father-a good, devout Hindu-was in hell ... [Pearson told him] 'I think your father is in heaven; don't you think so? Your dad is as reconciled to God as I am, according to the Scriptures.'*⁹

Pearson explains this view in his position paper "Jesus, Savior of the World: Gospel of Inclusion," where he states:

*The theory of Universal Reconciliation (the Gospel of Inclusion) maintains that Christ's death accomplished its purpose of reconciling all mankind to God ... The substitutional death of Christ not only made it possible for God to accept mankind as totally clean before Him but, more importantly, it demonstrated or proved God's unconditional love for His own creative handiwork. As a result, whatever separation now exists between man and the benefits of God's grace is subjective in nature; it is illusionary, existing only in man's unregenerated mind, his unenlightened or unformed way of thinking. The message (Good News or Gospel) people need to hear, is not that they simply have an opportunity for Salvation, but that they, through Christ, in fact, have already been redeemed, reconciled and saved, and that this information, (Good News) frees them to enjoy the blessings that are already theirs in Him.*¹⁰

These words are similar to those of the Hindu or New Age concept that the physical world is simply an illusion, or the Word Faith teaching that a person diagnosed with an illness is already healed and simply needs to accept it. In fact, Pearson drew just this analogy:

*A guest made the statement, "The whole world is saved; they just don't know it" ... And I said: "Say it again. Are you listening, Higher D [his church]? It's just like when [Word Faith preacher] Kenneth Hagin Sr. says, 'You're healed-you just don't know it.'"*¹¹

However, these are not the words of some professing Hindu, New Ager, or Word Faith teacher, but those of one who continues to identify himself as part of the Christian Church. As such, some of his former ministry associates now categorize him as teaching heresy. This includes the Joint College of African-American Pentecostal Bishops' Congress, led by Bishop J. Delano Ellis, who in March of 2004 stated, "[we] will no longer offer to Bishop Pearson our hand of fellowship. We will strongly urge all of our fellows to refuse Bishop Carlton Pearson access to their pulpits."¹²

In his papal press release, Pearson indicates his awareness not only of such detractors, but of his continuing impact among some in the Christian community:

*With over 30 years of celebrated mass media experience, Pearson is blazing a new trail of leadership on a global scale. While sometimes controversial, the man known as a bishop, pastor, televangelist, national speaker, musical performer and author is also a devoted husband and father. With the upcoming release of his controversial book, entitled **God Is Not a Christian**, no other individual in recent history is poised to become a media centerpiece like Carlton Pearson. All though his opinions*

*are sometimes at odds with organized religion, Pearson's enlightened views on the social, economic, and spiritual climate in America has taken the Christian community by storm.*¹³

It is this continued popularity that in part demanded a response from the Joint College. As Bishop Ellis affirmed

*We felt that it was important for us to say something in light of the fact that this young man is of tremendous influence in the Pentecostal-charismatic community. We felt that if we were to keep quiet it would be like tacit approval of his error. And since so many of our people have been subscribers of his ministry, as good stewards of God's mysteries and shepherds of the flock, we felt to say nothing would be like turning our people over to error.*¹⁴

Pearson takes the objections of his critics in stride, cloaking himself in the mantle of a prophet and maintaining he is neither the first to teach this doctrine nor the first to be proclaimed a heretic:

*Nothing is new under the sun. Not only is what I am preaching not new, but the controversy around it is also common to all new views or presentations of Truth. The difference between a heretic and a prophet is often time.*¹⁵

In fact, Pearson places himself in good company, including the Apostle Paul, as being both a misunderstood heretic and a Universalist:

*Paul believed that in Jesus Christ the whole world was redeemed, not just Jews. Before that he killed Christians or persecuted them because he thought they were heretics, as well ... I'm not the first or only person who believes this, I'm just the first Pentecostal/Charismatic, well-known person who preaches it. What I am preaching, the first five hundred years of church history, the church fathers, Origin, Gregory of Nyssa, Clement of Alexandria ... if you [read] Christian history you will find out what I am saying about universal redemption was the basic doctrinal position of all of the early church fathers, or most of them, for the first five hundred years of Christianity.*¹⁶

In making these statements, Pearson not only misrepresents the teachings of Paul in Scripture but also shows a complete lack of knowledge of Church history, despite his protestations to the contrary. The Apostle Paul and the early Church Fathers not only did not endorse the heresy of universalism but emphatically taught against it. In his *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus (A.D. 120-202) wrote,

*For to whomsoever the Lord shall say, 'Depart from me, ye cursed into everlasting fire,' these shall be damned for ever; and to whomsoever He shall say, 'Come ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you for eternity,' these do receive the kingdom for ever and make constant advance in it.*¹⁷

This certainly does not support Pearson's claims of universalism, nor does Paul's words in 2 Thessalonians 1:7-8:

The Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.
(NAS)

Regarding accusations of heresy, Pearson states,

*Paul was accused of being a heretic. He's the only person in the New Testament that was accused of being a heretic. And he was accused of being a heretic by Jews, by religious people, because he was one of them. The only people who call me a heretic are Christians; Buddhists, Hindus, Moslems, [and] the Jews don't call me a heretic. The people who are not part of our exclusive religious club are not calling Carlton Pearson a heretic.*¹⁸

This is an absurd argument. Naturally, it would be those who are in the group a person claims to be part of that would determine if their doctrine is sound. We would not expect a Muslim to come to the Christian or Jewish communities to determine if a Muslim teacher was orthodox in his Islamic beliefs; nor should we expect that

those in other religions should decide whether one who claims to be a Christian is orthodox in the beliefs they hold. Pearson recognizes as much when he acknowledges that it was the Jews, whom "he was one of," that accused Paul of being a heretic, not those in his new-found faith.

Ultimately Pearson asks to just be left alone, stating, "The Church folk are having a fit [over the message I preach] and I say why don't ya'll just leave me alone? I'm not hurting nobody, I'm harmless."¹⁹

The problem, as with all who offer a different gospel, is that it *isn't* a harmless message. By denying the true gospel, it leads people from the truth; it becomes a barrier to their responding to the real gospel of Jesus. As such, it places them in great danger, as Paul wrote to the Thessalonians in the passage quoted above. But Paul wrote that not only are those who respond to a false gospel in danger, but so is the one who presents such a gospel:

But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed. For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ. For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. (Galatians 1:8-11; NAS)

One of the false gospels that gain the favor of men today is Carlton Pearson's gospel: a gospel in which everyone will be saved even if they do not believe in Jesus. This is not the gospel Paul preached, nor is it the gospel Jesus declared when He said, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes *in Me* shall live even if he dies." (John 11:25; NAS)

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