

Our Story and Our Hope

(Toivo-Hope Conference, Finland 10-10-2020)

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Video and audio versions available online:

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This document was prepared by Heather Eades using Peter's notes of this sermon. If you encounter any significant discrepancies or errors in this document, please let Heather know. Thank you!

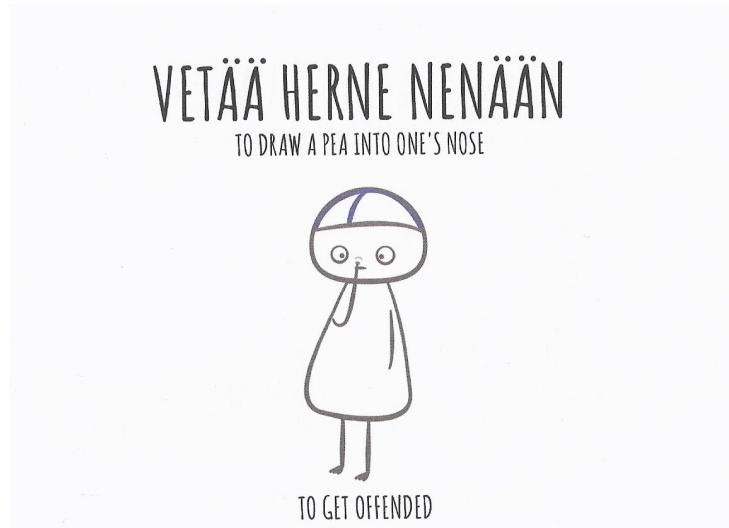
Message

Good Morning! It is such a pleasure to be a part of the “Toivo-Hope Conference,” even if I can’t be with you in person.

Petri asked if I would share some of my story with you, which is hard to do cross-culturally, and hard to do in just a half hour... I’m hoping that what I have to say is not something that is “MENEET YLI HILSEEN” — literally translated into English, that’s something that “*goes over the dandruff*,” which means “*too hard to understand*,” according to this little book of Finnish expressionsⁱ (Peter holds up book) that Petri gave me when he came to our conference in Colorado last year.



So, “MENEET YLI HILSEEN,” and I hope you’re not “VETÄÄ HERNA NENÄÄ”



... I hope you're not offended; I hope you don't suck a pea into your nose, which is exactly what my daughter did years ago at dinner when she was about two. To get it out, you just hold the other nostril and blow.... But now I digress.

My Story:

Thirteen years ago, I pastored one of the fastest growing churches in my state—we'd grown from fifty or so in worship to almost two thousand, and on holidays, closer to four thousand. We had just built a six million-dollar facility, and I had published two books with a major Christian publishing house. But this day, thirteen years ago, I stood on a platform being publicly tried as a heretic by the pastors and elders of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, which was my conservative denomination at the time.

They were unable to identify any Scripture with which I was in disagreement, but they believed that they had isolated two places in which I was in disagreement with the Westminster Confession of Faith. To make a long story short, they told me that I would be defrocked unless I publicly confessed two things:

1. God didn't want to save all, for it was, quote: "God's... choice... to not call some of mankind [but rather] ordain them to dishonor and wrath." —That's Calvinism.

And...

2. God wasn't able to save all, for quote: "some people... will never truly come to Christ and so cannot be saved." —That's rather Arminian.

I don't think most of those pastors and elders were all that concerned with theology; they were more concerned that they did not look "liberal," for they were trying to appeal to the "conservatives"—conservatives leaving the liberal denomination and joining our conservative denomination.

Well, I couldn't confess what they told me to confess, and so they defrocked me.

It tore my world apart, my church apart, and my heart apart, much like the crucifixion tore our Lord's body apart. And yet, I hope that like the crucifixion, the very news that tore the body apart, will bring it back together in grace and glory

That news—that Good News—is that “*God is Salvation*,” which in Hebrew forms a name, and the name is *Yeshua* (from “Yahweh” and “yasha,”) -- *Yeshua*, which in Greek, is pronounced *Iesous*, and in English, *Jesus*.

Well anyway, my story: How did I get to that point and where are we going?

I’m the son of a Presbyterian pastor whom I loved dearly. The idea that my dad would ever have any interest in tormenting me endlessly was utterly foreign to me as a child—Dad would discipline me, make me mow the lawn until I got it right—but endless torture... never.

So, as a child, when I heard people talk about “Hell”—this idea that our Father in heaven (who is supposedly better than my dad) would choose to endlessly torture some of his own children—it seemed utterly bizarre to me. When I would ask my father about this idea, he would say, “*Peter, you can trust God—he’s good.*” And at the time, that was enough.

But as I got older, began to read the word “Hell” in my Bible, and continued to hear the definitions that people gave to that word, I needed more help. At that time, my father was a pastor in the Mainline Liberal Presbyterian Church USA. And I began to realize that the liberals usually dealt with the problem of “Hell” by casually suggesting that Scripture just wasn’t all that true.

The liberals loved to market themselves as those who believe “*God is Love*,” but explain this fact by subtly suggesting that Scripture just isn’t all that true. Yet, it’s Scripture that testifies: “*God is Love*.” And so, it seemed to me, that liberals kind of liked to just make stuff up.

And so in highschool, I began to hang out with the Evangelicals—the conservatives.

You can think of the liberals here—on your left (Peter stands to the right of the stage): Big on Love, not so much on Truth, but of course, love without truth really isn’t love.

And...

You can think of the conservatives here—on your right (Peter stands to the left of the stage): Big on Truth, not so much on Love, but of course truth without love really isn’t true.



The conservatives argued that the Scriptures were true, and yet they didn't seem to think some Scriptures were very true, like 1 John 4:7, "*God is Love*." They thought it couldn't be *very true*, for all the "hell verses" were *very true*. And they defined "Hell" as endless conscious torment and seemed to really like those verses, for they made us special and inspired folks to do *evangelism*.

I loved the evangelical conservatives for several reasons, but mostly because they seemed to be serious about Jesus; He really is the Good News... *But*, the idea that someone's eternal destiny might be dependent on my ability to present that Good News did not seem like very good news to me. The thought that I could screw up someone's salvation was utterly terrifying.

And that's when I fell in love with *Calvinism*—for I figured if any were going to hell, at least it wouldn't be my fault, but God's fault. Of course, that takes care of one problem: "*me and my failure*," but creates an even bigger problem: "*God and his failure*"—his failure to save.

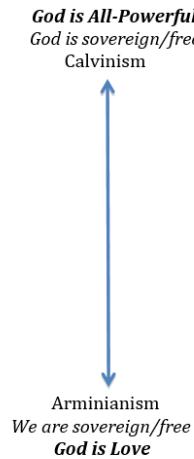
So, you understand the problem—you've been talking about it at this conference. Because I thought that there had to be this place of endless conscious torment, I had to deal with God's supposed failure to save.

It appeared to be that one of two things had to be true:

1. God is all love, but not powerful enough to save those who don't want to be saved; in other words, our will is free, but God's will is not entirely free. And so, he is therefore forced to endlessly torture some people—that's usually called *Arminianism*. Think of it right here. (Peter stands at the front of the stage.)

I thought I had to believe that God is *all loving, but not all powerful*. Or:

2. God is all powerful but not all loving, for if some aren't saved, it's because God obviously doesn't want to save some, but instead, he predestines some to endless torture—that's usually called *Calvinism*. Think of it up here. (Peter stand at the back of the stage and up one step.)ⁱⁱ



Understand? Because I'd been told that the word "hell" which I read in my Bible meant endless conscious torment, I was torn between Calvinism and Arminianism—torn between believing God is all powerful or believing God is all Love. And I was torn between "liberalism" and "conservatism," believing God is Love, but it's not really true, or God is true, but it's not really love... (Portraying these two axis on the stage forms the shape of a cross.)

And off course, all this inner tension just reflected thousands of years of ecclesiastical tension, theological tension, and every other type of tension.

Well, back to my story:

During my sophomore year of college, studying geology at the University of Colorado, some people complained to the liberal Presbyterian Church USA about my dad... that he was too *conservative*. They wanted Dad to speak *less* from Scripture, and *more* from philosophy, psychology, and sociology... But Dad was in love with the Jesus he met in Scripture.

They publicly tried my dad in a big church in downtown Denver. They talked Love but were not loving, and they told hundreds of lies about my dad; they were entirely untruthful... I don't think I've ever been so angry. I almost punched an elder at that trial in that church...

They removed my father, and I was effectively excommunicated from the left. Ironically, it was about this time that I felt "*called*" into the ministry... called by something.

Well, having been kicked out from the left, my father helped start a new denomination on the right—the conservative Evangelical Presbyterian Church.

After graduating from college, I married my high school sweetheart and moved to California, where I enrolled in seminary and worked at two evangelical conservative mega-churches. There was a lot of talk about truth but a remarkable lack of truthfulness—that is, honesty.

After four years in Northern California, I took a position at a little independent church on the west side of Denver. I led them into an affiliation with the Evangelical Presbyterian denomination that my father helped start. And the church began to grow really fast.

In 1995, one of the holy-roller ladies came up at the end of a service and said, “*God wants me to send you to the Toronto Laughing Revival.*” It was a rather charismatic sort of movement in Canada at the time.

So I said, “Umm....OK...if Susan can come with me, and we can visit Niagara Falls.”

The conference was amazing... People all around me had these amazing encounters with God, including my wife. But I experienced nothing... I used to pray: “*God, if I’m out of your will, please break my arms because I can’t seem to hear you.*” By the end of the week, it seemed that God was dead set on *not* speaking to me, so I told him that I was leaving the ministry because he didn’t talk to me.

That last day, I went to a seminar led by a Presbyterian pastor. He had us hold hands with the people next to us and pray. On one side of me was a little old Roman Catholic lady and on the other side, a huge, fat, Native American, Pentecostal man—now I see that they represented the spectrum of the Church. As soon as we had closed our eyes, out loud in my head, I heard the Lord say audibly, “*Peter you don’t love my bride very much do you?*”

...And all at once, I knew that I had gone into ministry because I hated the Church, largely because of what I’d seen the Church do to my dad that night that he was publicly tried in the big church downtown... I saw that, in my heart, I had taken a vow—to show the Church what was what, and to never let what happened to my dad happen to me...

“*You don’t love my bride very much do you?*” said the Lord. (That’s quite a revelation for a pastor trying to do a good job!) But I need to tell you: There was not an ounce of condemnation in God’s voice, just boundless compassion... as if he was so sorry for me...

I sobbed uncontrollably, but it didn’t feel like they were my tears, but Jesus’s tears. I must’ve wept for about an hour. When I opened my eyes, the hotel staff had set up chairs all around me preparing for the next session.

I thought maybe I had lost my mind... But that night, I found the Roman Catholic lady and said, “*Look, I don’t fall down like other folks, so I’m just gonna lie down, and would you pray for me?*”

To make a long story short, I began to feel something like electricity shooting through my body. I was lying on my back with my hands in the air, and I began to realize that I couldn’t move them... God had pinned me to the floor, and I thought he was going to literally break my arms! [Later, I remembered that I used to always pray, “*Look, I don’t hear your voice, so if I’m out of your will just break my arms*”—and this was the day I had told him I’d stop preaching.]

Well, as he held me down, it was like he removed a veil from my mind, and I just couldn’t help but thank him for absolutely everything—I saw that he was absolutely everywhere, loving me... all the time.

At one point, to the little Roman Catholic lady who was praying for me, I said, “*Jesus just called me a ‘dork.’*” [If Jesus spoke Finnish—which I’m sure he does—he might have said don’t be a ‘JÄRKI JÄÄSÄ...’ I think he meant something like don’t be a numbskull—a “frozen brain”]



I said to this lady, Jesus called me a “*dork*.”

She said, “*Oh, he wouldn’t do that...*”

But I knew that he did just that; he was speaking my language, and I knew what he meant: “*Peter stop being a numbskull and doubting my love for you.*” I was so happy, I thought I would die—die from sheer joy. Maybe I did.

In the morning, we flew back home to Denver, and for about three weeks, I found it literally impossible to worry—for I knew God is all-powerful, and He is relentless love—and it set me free.

But after three weeks, it seemed to kind of wear off; I felt like God was saying, “*Peter this is where you are all headed—an ocean of absolute love... and I want you to believe this is true.*”

I preached, and the church grew for the next twelve years... it grew a lot. And I watched Jesus set some people free from the evil one in truly miraculous sorts of ways.

And during that time, I kept asking this question: *God if you did that for me, and you did that for my friends afflicted by evil, and you did that for a guy like Paul—“the Chief of Sinners,” why couldn’t you do that for everyone?*

And it seemed as if he kept whispering in my heart, “*Yeah, good question: You tell me—why couldn’t I do that with everyone?*”

As we preached our way through the Gospels, Ephesians, Genesis and particularly, The Revelation, I kept encountering biblical texts that seemed to say that he *would* do that with everyone... And I read theologians, like Karl Barth, who argued that the biblical text meant what it said. So, I just began preaching what it said and what I read... in Scripture.

People from the denomination came and said, “Stop saying that stuff.”

And I'd say, "What stuff?"

And they'd say, "You know the stuff."

And I did know the stuff; they just couldn't say *what* stuff, because it was all Bible stuff—what I call: *The Bible Verses Banned by Bible-Believing Believers*.

By now, our little church had become a flagship church in our denomination... The church board had even taken out a multi-million dollar "key man" life insurance policy on me. But, in the fall of 2007, 13 years ago, I found myself on trial, just as my dad had been on trial. It was rather eerie, because I had been at that church just the same amount of time my dad had been at his church, and my son was exactly the same age that I had been when my dad was tried, and I vowed it would never happen to me.

Just a few weeks before the trial, I had sat down next to my wife in the front of the church as people were coming forward for communion. All at once, she grabbed me and said, "Peter! I just saw your dad." (That was definitely strange, for my dad had been dead for three years.)

She grabbed my arm and said, "Peter, I saw your dad. He was standing right in front of us. He was so young, and his eyes were on fire. He leaned forward with a bowl in his hands and said, 'Susan and Peter, do not be afraid to drink from the cup that the Lord has for you.' And then he vanished."

I thought, "How wonderful." And then "Oh Skeida." ...Do you understand? Poop.

Over the next few weeks, I watched everything that had happened to my dad, happen to me... But now, instead of being kicked out from the left for preaching Scripture, I was being kicked out from the right for preaching Scripture...ⁱⁱⁱ

And because I would not confess that:

1. *"It pleased God"* to not save some, but damn some—Calvinism...
2. And that there was a group of people that "*could not be saved, because they would not be saved.*"—Arminianism... ^{iv}

...I was defrocked, and the church was blown to pieces.

Some people said, "We should start a new church in downtown Denver." (That's about 50 kilometers from our former location.) So I said, "OK... I guess."

Soon, my associate and I were downtown looking for a place to meet. I said, "There's a big Liberal Mainline Presbyterian Church near the capital, and I used to be with those guys." So, we met and set things up.

I called my mom and said, "Guess what, Mom—we're gonna have services at Central Presbyterian on Saturday nights."

Immediately, she said, "Peter, don't you know what that place is?"

I said, "No, what are you talking about?"

She said, "That's the room in which you watched your father tried on the floor of the Denver Presbytery..." And all at once I remembered everything—the carpet, the funky cross, the pews...

And so, God had me stand on the very spot I watched my father tried, and preach the Gospel to His Church for a year.

Then after that year, we—The Sanctuary Denver--moved to a new location, but we've kept preaching the Gospel to the Church... because God loves his Church, and he's putting it back together but with a new heart... and not just my little church, the whole Church.

You see, I think Jesus made me "*Love his bride*" like he loves his bride. Even though it's his Bride that nails him to a tree. Jesus cries, "Father, forgive them," and then unites us as his very body—his Bride.

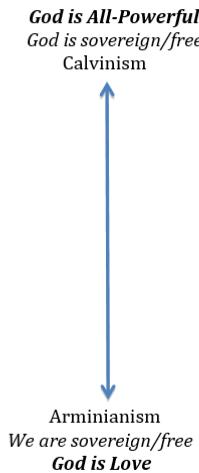
And of course, I am that Bride; I'm one of those who pounds the nails. You and I, the Church, the Israel of God, we *are* our Lord's Bride and Body. And ultimately, I believe that will include all of humanity... for all people will finally hear the Good News, bend the knee, and worship.

I realize that my stories are hard to believe for some, but whether or not you believe them doesn't really matter. What I hope you do believe is the Good News that:

God is all powerful, and so we are *predestined*.

And...

God is all Love, and so we are *predestined* for *freedom*—his freedom.



And I hope you see that:

Scripture testifies that God is Love. (God is more liberal than any liberal. He liberates us from all evil, death, hell, and even ourselves.)

And...

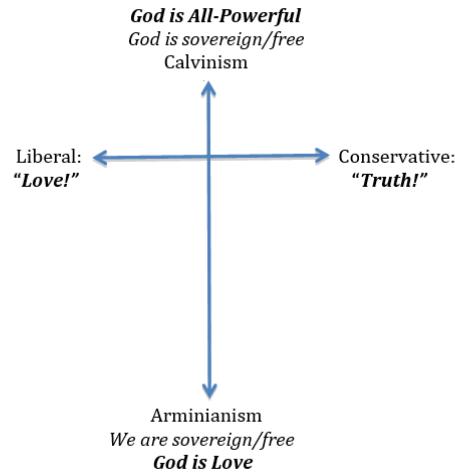
Scripture is true; actually, Jesus is "the Truth." (God is more conservative than any conservative; He makes all things—all old things—new, and even eternal.)



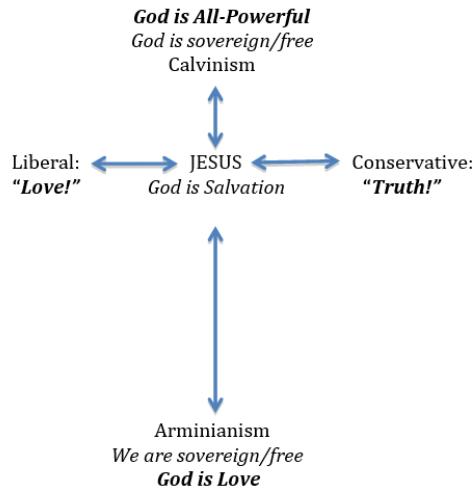
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So, Let's Review:

- In Christ we are predestined to freedom. [Image on screen: Vertical arrow slide from above]]
- He is Truth in Love, and Love in Truth. [Image on screen: Horizontal arrow slide from above]
- And when we put all of this together, we see why it scares us.



In this world, testifying to Truth in Love and Love in Truth...and testifying that God is free to make us in his own image...well, that looks like the cross—the cross that reveals the heart of our Father. It looks like Jesus.



The name “Jesus” literally means, “God is Salvation.”

To truly believe that God is Salvation...

To truly believe that He has predestined us... for freedom,

To truly believe that his Word is Truth and his Word is Love (Truth and Love),

...We have to sacrifice something—a theological concept *and* something much more existential and personal.

The theological concept is the highly unbiblical concept that God endlessly tortures his own creation in a place we call “Hell.”

The existential concept is your own ego—the arrogant idea that you create yourself, justify yourself, and sanctify yourself.



- Faith that “God is Salvation” destroys the notion that “I am my own salvation.” And even that—that Faith—is the gift of God’s Grace.

- Faith in Jesus is *a death*—it's the death of my old self. And it brings division, just as Jesus said it would.
- But, Faith in Jesus is also *a resurrection*—it's the life of Christ rising within me and bringing all things together in absolute love.

And so, this is my hope: the revelation of *Yeshua*, “God is Salvation,” Jesus. It’s the hope that in the very place I felt the body torn apart—which is the very place it’s been torn apart for at least 1500 hundred years, or 2000 years, (or even better, since the fall of Adam). In the very place it’s been torn apart—at the cross—in that very place, we will see it come back together.

But when it comes back together...

- It will no longer be dead but alive.
- It will no longer be institutions, lifeless laws, and empty theologies.
- It will no longer be selfish individuals pretending to love... but a living body and a loving bride rejoicing in her bridegroom.

I believe it’s already happening, here and now, when we worship. And it will keep happening as more and more people see Jesus. And it’s *already happened*, for John saw the slaughtered lamb on the throne of God, and he heard “*every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is within them, praising God and saying, ‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and praise and glory and might forever and ever!’*”^v Amen.

That’s our Hope, and that Hope is assured. In Jesus, God saves every creature, and all things come together. And by preaching that Word, we are used by God to make it happen.

Sometimes it’s easy to think that this hope will amount to nothing...that it will disappear without a trace... a KATOAA KUIN PERU SAHARAAN. (I apologize; I couldn’t resist and I’m learning to love Finnish expressions.) But sometimes it really is easy to think this Hope is actually nothing...^{vi}



Hope in you, is Christ in you... "The hope of Glory" as Paul says.^{viii} It's an eternal Seed and the Foundation of all things; it's Jesus, rising from the dead in you.

So, I thank God for the Hope that is in you, that is in us. "For in this Hope, we are saved," writes Paul. And "If God has given us his son... will he not also, with him, give us all things?"^{ix}

That's quite a hope.

And thanks for listening to our Story.

If you'd like to learn more from me or from the Sanctuary, I'd invite you to visit our website at: <https://relentless-love.org/> or the church website at <https://www.thesanctuarydenver.org/>.

Endnotes

ⁱ Karolina Korhonen, *Matti in the Walle: "Matti Kukkarossa" and Other Adventures in Finnish Language Nightmares* (Otavan Kirjapaino OY, Keuruu 2019)

ⁱⁱ Professor Thomas Talbott has done a wonderful job of pointing to the fact that there are three propositions that cannot be meaningfully held all at once. They are:

1. God is all Powerful.
2. God is all Love.
3. There is a reality in which some people are tormented forever without end.

He points out that Calvinists hold to propositions #1 and #3 but invalidate #2.

Followers of Aminius (Arminians) hold to propositions #2 and #3 but invalidate #1.

Christian Universalists hold to propositions #1 and #2 and invalidate #3.

Ironically Calvinist and Arminians have come to tolerate each other, but both reject universalists who claim that Calvinists and Arminians are both correct in their essential and defining tenant.

ⁱⁱⁱ Neither the conservatives on the right, or the liberals on the left, seemed to like the idea that God saves sinners—real sinners like Hitler and St. Paul.

^{iv} Stated Reasons for the Dismissal of Peter Hiett from the Evangelical Presbyterian Church 11-17-2007
[Exceptions to the Westminster Confession of Faith, presented to the Presbytery of the West, EPC, by Rev. Peter Hiett are below in standard type. In *italics* are the **stated demands** of the Presbytery of the West, EPC, in response to Peter's exceptions.]

1. Chapter 3.7 states, "...it **pleased** God not to call the rest of mankind and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin..." I am unclear as to who "the rest of mankind" are, but whoever they are, Scripture states that "he (The Lord) does not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men" (Lam. 3:33). Ezekiel 18:23, "Have I any **pleasure** in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?" Chapter 35.2 of our confession states that God desires "that all men should be saved." I realize that there are great mysteries here and that the English language has changed since the seventeenth century, but it seems misguided to use the word "pleased" in a confessional document in reference to God's internal state regarding the act of damning the wicked.

Therefore, your brothers and sisters of the Presbytery ask that you renounce your exception to WCF 3.7 AND affirm WCF 3.7 in its entirety, confirming that it is appropriately God's will and choice as Creator and King Eternal that he not call some of mankind and that he ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin to the praise of his glorious justice. (Min. Comm. 10-16-07)

2. Chapter 10.4 reads, "Others, not elect, may be called by the ministry of the word, and the Spirit may work in them in some of the same ways He works in the elect. However, they never truly come to Christ and therefore **cannot** be saved."

IF the statement above means that only those elect for salvation can be saved, I wholeheartedly agree.

IF the statement above means that there is a group of people that "cannot be saved," as some have argued, I would have to object. If there is a group of people that "cannot be saved," it means that God "cannot save them," for He is the only one who saves. In Matthew 19:25-26, the disciples ask Jesus "Who then, **can** be saved?" Jesus replies, "With man this is impossible, but with God **all things are possible.**" I do not see how one could affirm that there is a group of people that God "cannot save" without denying Christ's meaning in Matthew 19:26.

Furthermore, if 10.4 of the Westminster Confession means that there is a group of people that "cannot be saved" and I am to subscribe to chapter 35 of the same confession, it appears to me that I must affirm that God desires the "impossible." Chapter 35 reads, "God in infinite and perfect love, having provided in the covenant of grace, through the mediation and sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ, a way of life and salvation, sufficient for and adapted to the **whole lost race of man**, doth freely offer this salvation to **all men** in the gospel. In the gospel God declares his love for the world and his **desire that all men should be saved**; reveals fully and clearly the only way of salvation; promises eternal life to all who truly repent and believe in Christ; invites and **commands all to embrace the offered mercy**; and by his Spirit accompanying the word pleads with men to accept his gracious invitation" (35.1-2). I affirm chapter 35 of the Confession and therefore must object to a reading of Chapter 10.4 that would necessitate postulating a group of people that God cannot save.

Therefore, your brothers and sisters of the Presbytery ask that you renounce your exception to WCF 10.4 AND affirm WCF 10.4 in its entirety, acknowledging that there are some people who are or will be "not elect," and who will never truly come to Christ and so cannot be saved. (Min. Com. 10-16-07)

^v Revelation 5:13

^{vi} It's easy to think that it's so good it can't be true, but it's so Good because it is the Truth.

^{viii} Colossians 1:27

^{ix} Romans 8:21-24,32