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Framing Biblical Inclusive Theology in Acts 10:12-16, 34-36

**Robert Juni Tua Sitio; Nurelmi Limbong* ; Bernhardt Siburian; Ririn Simanjuntak;
Grace Na Anantha Lumbantobing**

Program Studi Teologi Fakultas Ilmu Teologi IAKN Tarutung

*limbongnurelmi01@gmail.com**

Abstract

This article offers a biblical theological for Christians to act inclusively toward other faiths. This biblical inclusive theology frame is a guideline for the church to be used as a consideration in conducting inter-religious and cultural encounters and dialogues. This study used hermeneutical approach on Acts 10:12-16, 34-36. The method used in this study is descriptive qualitative which aims to understand and describe real events based on facts. In the context of this research, the data analyzed is a discourse obtained from relevant data sources. The result of this study showed that inclusivity does not eliminate the belief in the exclusivity of Christ as saviour, but rather the acceptance of different people as part of Christian people.

Keywords: dialogue; faith; inter-religious pluralism; universal

INTRODUCTION

Inclusivity is one of three typologies proposed by Alan Race in the discourse on the theology of religions.¹ Inclusivity is the attitude or view that other religions outside Christianity are also blessed with God's grace and can be saved, but the fulfillment of salvation is only in Jesus Christ. Christ is present and at work also among those who may not know Christ personally. In this view, people of other religions, through the grace or mercy of Christ, are included in God's plan of salvation. Inclusivity is divided into two models, namely the In Spite of model and the By Means of model.²

Not a few people think that the sacred texts of the Bible do not provide biblical points that provide information about the contacts and relationships of believers (Israel, Jews) with people of other faiths, and those people then become inclusive as part of the people who are included in the work of salvation and holiness of God's people. One example of an inclusive event in the Bible that is rarely exegetized is the story of Cornelius in Acts 10:1-48, a pious Roman centurion who received a vision from God. God told Cornelius to fetch the Apostle Peter, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus

Christ. The encounter between the two then is an inclusive biblical experience that is very interesting to be studied exegetically to obtain valid data in compiling an understanding of inclusive theology that can be in compiling ecclesiological dialogue points that are open to all parties both inter-denominational and inter-religious.

Although this story is an inclusive event of the proclamation of the Gospel that the teachings of Jesus Christ are not limited to one ethnic group or nation, some Christians may interpret it with exclusive presuppositions resulting in exclusive subjective opinions and perspectives, that the Gospel and salvation are only for the Jews or certain people only. If the subject of inclusiveness does not receive a solid biblical foundation some of the more traditional or conservative denominations of churches or Christianity may reject inclusive theology. It is perceived as a threat or contradiction to their more exclusive ethnic church beliefs or identities or theological traditions as a result of the subjective and open to varying interpretations of biblical texts. Due to the aforementioned situation, this research was conducted to examine biblical inclusive theology based on Acts 10:12-16, 34-36.

¹ Alan Race, *Christian And Religious Pluralism* (London: SCM Press LTD, 1983), 120.

² Race.

RESEARCH METHOD

The method used in this research is a qualitative method with an expositional-grammatical approach. This research aims to examine the cohesiveness of discourse from a grammatical perspective. The exposition approach is a discourse that aims to tell, explore, describe or explain something. Based on this understanding, it can be seen that the exposition approach is a type of essay or writing that informs something to the reader by describing and explaining it more clearly. Furthermore, research using the hermeneutic method is a way of working through the biblical texts to solve the difficulties and problems of the crux or problematic part, whether in the text, the context of the text, or the current context to produce a statement or theory or proclamation or that relates to the problems contained in the text.³

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After traveling in the rural areas of Palestine and meeting the Samaritans, the Apostle Simon Peter became convinced of the importance of Gentile participation for the future of the Christian church (cf. John 10: 16).⁴ He himself never displayed his conservative and traditional (fanatical, or-

thodox) Judaism like some of the church members living in Jerusalem. The fact that he was willing to preach to the more Hellenized areas of Palestine is evidence of this. He also lived in the house of a man named Simon, a tanner (Acts 9:43).

An orthodox Jew would not have been willing to do such a thing because tanners were considered unclean people. The tanner must have come into contact with the skin of a dead animal which is highly disgraceful according to Judaism (Misyna, Ex. 26:1-9).⁵ But in this case, Apostle Simon Peter followed the example of the Lord Jesus Christ, who was not afraid to associate closely with people who were considered despicable in Jewish society and religion (Luke 15: 1-2).

Meanwhile, in the narrative of Acts 10 narrative Cornelius was a centurion in the Roman imperial government. In the Roman military system, a centurion led a division of one hundred men (one sixtieth of a legion 6000 soldiers). Although a centurion known for his loyalty, courage, and aggression, Cornelius was also a spiritual practitioner. The narrative begins with Cornelius' prayer and almsgiving. It is because of these two points that the angel of the LORD told

³ Gordon Donald Fee, *New Testament Exegesis* (Malang: Literatur Sekolah Alkitab Asia Tenggara, 2011), 2.

⁴ John Drane, *Memahami Perjanjian Baru: Pengantar Historis Teologis* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1996), 265.

⁵ Drane, 266.

Cornelius: “.... All your prayers (to the God of Israel [the God of the Jews]) and your alms (to the Jewish people) have gone up to God, and God has remembered you....” (Acts 10:2).

Listening to God's Intensive Commands

In this narrative, there is no literal use of the word προστεταγμένα ('prostetagma', command or 'a kind of command') by the angel for the Apostle Simon Peter to deliver to Cornelius. The angel's summoning of the Apostle Simon Peter to Cornelius (Acts 7: 5) is more for the act of 'listening' (ἀκοῦσαι, 'akousai'): news, message or information (Acts 7: 33). However, the Apostle Simon Peter welcomes Cornelius' use of the word προστεταγμένα and immediately connects it with the word παρήγγειλεν ('parêggeilen', command) of the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus the message conveyed by Apostle Peter Christ to Cornelius was the command of the Lord Jesus.⁶

The aorist tense on the word παρήγγειλεν⁷ ('parêggeilen', command, Acts 10:42) indicates that the command was (had been, in the past) delivered by the Lord Jesus Christ to the Apostle Simon Peter and His

disciples. However, the indicative mode presents certainty (mode of assertion); the action is as it is and is continuous or intensive (without duration). In this case it can be understood that the Apostle Simon Peter seems to be correcting Cornelius' use of the tense perfect on the word προστεταγμένα ('prostetagma', Acts 10: 33) which is meant only for the past or temporary.⁸

The passive form indicates that Apostle Simon Peter is the recipient (sufferer) of the action, either explicitly or implicitly; that the subject is subjected to the work. This means that the command was equally applicable to Apostle Simon Peter and His other disciples including Cornelius. Now they both received the same command (Acts 10: 34-43), for all the people of Israel. And the participle mode used by Cornelius in the word προστεταγμένα ('prostetagma', Acts 10:33) shows Cornelius' participation and active role in receiving and carrying out the same command and passing it on to others.

Being an Inclusive People of Israel

They both learned that it was the LORD who brought them together through the work of Jesus Christ. By the Apostle

⁶ D. Schmidz, “Παραγγέλλω,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT) Volume V*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), 761-65.

⁷ Geoffrey W. Brimley, “Παραγγέλλω,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT) Abridged*,

ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1985), 777.

⁸ G. Delling, “Προστεταγμένα,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT) Abridged*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), 1159.

Simon Peter's use of the word Ἰσραὴλ ('Yisrael', Israel, Acts 10:36), God had made it explicit that Cornelius had been accepted into the people of Israel, an inclusive fellowship that occurs only and only in Jesus Christ, the Lord of all people; not outside of it. This is so because it was the Lord Himself who gave each of them the vision and the encounter.

Now the Apostle Simon Peter also learned that the LORD has the absolute right and power to sanctify the Gentiles who please Him (δεκτὸς αὐτοῦ, 'dektos auto', Acts 10:35), according to His will, not according to the thoughts and or feelings of men. God has made the permitted person inclusive in the fellowship of the saints just as God had sanctified the unclean food in the vision of the Apostle Simon Peter (Acts 10:15). Thus it was not the Apostle Simon Peter who declared Cornelius to be the people of Israel as well as inclusive in the fellowship of believers but God Himself who did so. It was God who acted in all these events.

Considerations of Being Inclusive

It is true that forgiveness of sins (ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν, 'aphesin hamartiôn', Acts 10:43) and salvation (σωτηρία, 'soteria', Acts 15:11) are not the result of human effort and or hard work. Cornelius' efforts and labor in the form of prayer (προσευχάι, 'proseukhai'),

and almsgiving (ἐλεημοσύναι, 'elenmosunai') had gone up to God and God remembered Cornelius (Acts 10:2, 4).

The Apostle Simon Peter could not resist the Lord's command about slaughtering and eating things that were not clean. The context of this verse reflects the strict separation in Jewish culture between the holy and the unclean, and highlights Peter's internal conflict between the law he had learned and the new commandment he received from the Lord (Acts 10:13-15). Which means, that what man thinks is not the same as what God thinks. As in verse 15 it says "what God has declared lawful, let no man declare unlawful."

Since the vision event came from the Lord Himself, and the occurrence of the event three times (Acts 10:16), indicates the assertion of God's authority. The context of this verse emphasizes that God has the authority to determine what is holy and what is unholy, not human tradition or custom, while also emphasizing a very important point that cannot be ignored. Apostle Simon Peter really only understood the vision after he arrived at Cornelius' house in Caesarea. And by Cornelius' vision of the angel of the Lord indicates the validity of considering Cornelius' situation to be inclusive of the fellowship of believers. Thus, the inclusiveness of Cornelius' position itself is not with-

out its own conditions as expressed by Apostle Simon Peter in Acts. 10: 34, that God is no respecter of persons, gets the association of the clause “... who fears Him (God) and practices righteousness,” emphasizing the meaning of the quality of attitudes and actions of everyone from any nation that is pleasing to God. It is this point that is taken into consideration for anyone from any nation to be accepted into the inclusive fellowship of believers.

This consideration does not state that salvation is automatically granted to all people, but rather asserts that salvation can only be received through true faith in Jesus Christ. As such, this view firmly rejects the teaching of universality which claims that all people, regardless of their religion or faith, can attain salvation. In addition, this view also opposes the thinking of pluralist theologians who argue that the grace of salvation can be received by adherents of other religions without having to accept and believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior. In this understanding, although God opens salvation to all nations, it can only be obtained through a right relationship with Jesus Christ, as the only way of salvation taught in the Bible. Salvation comes only to those who fear God and faithfully do His will (Acts

10:35), as also expressed by John MacArthur.⁹ The fear of the Lord alone is not enough; it must be accompanied by actions or deeds that reflect a quality of life and character that is honest and sincere before God, in accordance with the meaning of ἐργαζόμενος δικαιοσύνην (*ergazomenos dikaiosūnēn*, Acts 10:35). The righteousness in question is the special righteousness of God, which is related to the notion of φοβούμενος (*phoboumenos*, the act of reverence and obedience, Acts 10:35) to God. This word gives a more intensive description of actual righteousness, not just general righteousness. This point reminds believers of the teaching in the Old Testament that obedience to God and living righteously are of primary importance (Mi. 6:8) Thus, the grace of salvation given by God is understood as the grace given to those who accept and believe in Jesus Christ, in accordance with His calling and plan.

The Gospel is a message of human reconciliation with God that can be attained not only through ritual purity or observance of the law but also through the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ, the Messiah and Lamb of God. According to Arnold, this point is the fulfillment of Isaiah 57:19 which envisions a day when it will be declared, “Peace, peace, to those far and near,” in accordance

⁹ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary Acts 1-12* (Chicago: Moody Publisher, 1994), 412.

with the special task that God gave to the people of Israel, which is to proclaim salvation that can only be obtained through Jesus Christ.¹⁰ That is why Apostle Simon Peter declared that Jesus Christ is the Lord of Cornelius and all his relatives.¹¹

The Story of Cornelius as the Frame of Biblical Inclusive Theology

In the context of inclusive theology reflected in the story of Cornelius, the main difference between inclusivity and pluralism lies in the understanding of salvation and truth. Inclusive theology, as taught through the encounter of Apostle Simon Peter and Cornelius, recognises that God's salvation is open to all nations, but with one clear path, namely through faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. This means that although God accepts various nations and backgrounds, there remains one absolute truth, namely Christ as the way of salvation (John 14:6). In this sense, inclusivity does not eliminate the belief in the exclusivity of Christ as sa-

viour, but rather the acceptance of different people as part of God's greater plan.¹²

In contrast, pluralism tends to assume that all religions or paths to God are valid and true, promoting equality between religions without affirming one particular path of truth.¹³ Pluralism can lead to the view that every religion has equal value and truth, which is contrary to the teachings of inclusive theology that affirms Christ as the only way of salvation.¹⁴ In a more open and inclusive ecclesiological dialogue, such as that of Peter and Cornelius, the focus is on accepting differences in faith within the unity of the body of Christ, while respecting the truth contained in the Gospel, rather than obscuring those differences with a broader pluralistic view. Inclusivity, in this case, opens up space for cooperation and dialogue without reducing the truth taught in the Gospel, while pluralism tends to dilute the lines of religious truth to create equality between them.¹⁵

¹⁰ Clinton E. Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary Vol. 2* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1931), 703.

¹¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 579.

¹² Dylfard Edward Pandey and Lasino Lasino, "Soteriologi Alkitab Di Tengah Eksklusivisme, Inklusivisme, Dan Pluralisme," *EULOGIA: Jurnal Teologi Dan Pendidikan Kristiani* 2, no. 2 (2022): 104–17, <https://doi.org/10.62738/ej.v2i2.41>.

¹³ Hendrik Yufengkri Sanda, "Kajian Terhadap Kisah Para Rasul 10:34-36: Untuk Menjawab Pandangan Pluralis Mengenai Yesus Tuhan Semua Orang,"

BONAFIDE: Jurnal Teologi Dan Pendidikan Kristen 4, no. 1 (June 29, 2023): 43–64, <https://doi.org/10.46558/BONAFIDE.V4I1.168>.

¹⁴ Hendrik Yufengkri Sanda, "Yesus Kristus Tuhan Dari Semua Orang Menurut Kisah Para Rasul 10: 34-36 Refleksi Teologis Dan Respons Iman Kristen Atas Interpretasi Para Teolog Pluralis Dan Inklusifis Agama-Agama (Suatu Studi Eksegesis)" (Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Injili Arastamar (SETIA) Jakarta, 2015).

¹⁵ Ahmad Zamakhsari, "Teologi Agama-Agama Tipologi Tripolar: Eksklusivisme, Inklusivisme Dan Kajian Pluralisme," *Tsaqofah J. Agama Dan Budaya* 18, no. 1 (2020): 35–51.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of the above thoughts is that God is no respecter of persons, but accepts all nations regardless of background or tradition. Through this understanding, the church is encouraged to build harmonious relationships, and open dialogue between faith communities. God's salvation and love are universal, encompassing all people without exception, and removing the social and ethnic boundaries that previously separated humanity.

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