

The Gospel of Inclusion: A Technical and Theological Analysis of Bishop Carlton Pearson's Universalist Paradigm

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The theological landscape of the late 20th and early 21st centuries underwent a seismic shift with the emergence of the **Gospel of Inclusion**, a paradigm shift championed by **Bishop Carlton Pearson**. Once a celebrated figure within the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, Pearson's transition from a fundamentalist soteriology to a universalist framework represents one of the most significant case studies in modern religious evolution. This article provides an in-depth technical analysis of the Gospel of Inclusion, examining its core mechanics, scriptural interpretations, and the resulting institutional repercussions.

The Genesis of the Inclusion Doctrine

Bishop Carlton Pearson's journey toward the Gospel of Inclusion began not as a premeditated theological rebellion, but as a crisis of conscience. For decades, Pearson was a prominent leader in the **International Communion of Charismatic Churches** and the founder of the Higher Dimensions Evangelistic Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma. His traditional fundamentalist background emphasized **Exclusivism**: the belief that salvation is attainable only through an explicit, conscious confession of faith in Jesus Christ, without which an individual is destined for eternal conscious torment.

The catalyst for change occurred during a period of deep reflection on the global human condition, particularly the suffering of non-Christians in conflict zones. Pearson began to question the **mechanical requirements** of traditional salvation models. This questioning led to what he termed an "awakening," wherein he concluded that the finished work of Christ on the cross was sufficient for the redemption of all humanity, regardless of their religious affiliation or conscious acknowledgement of that work. This shifted his theology from *conditional grace* to *unconditional reconciliation*.

Theoretical Framework: Universal Reconciliation vs. Orthodox Soteriology

To understand the Gospel of Inclusion, one must examine the **Soteriological Mechanics**—the study of religious doctrines of salvation. The debate hinges on the scope and application of the Atonement. Traditional orthodoxy utilizes a **Limited or Conditional Scope**, whereas Inclusion utilizes a **Universal Scope**.

The Mechanical Principles of Atonement

In traditional fundamentalism, the Atonement is viewed as a **Provisional Offer**. The mathematical model of this belief can be simplified as follows:

- Salvation = (Work of Christ) + (Human Response/Faith)

Conversely, the Gospel of Inclusion proposes that the Atonement is a **Completed Universal Fact**. The model shifts to:

- Salvation = (Work of Christ) x (All Humanity)

Under this framework, faith is not the *cause* of salvation but rather the *awareness* of an already established reality.

This distinction is the core technical divergence between Pearson and his contemporaries.

Technical Analysis of Key Theological Components

The Gospel of Inclusion relies on specific re-interpretations of ancient texts and linguistic nuances. Below is a breakdown of the primary technical components utilized in Pearson's framework.

1. The Concept of Apokatastasis

Derived from the Greek term *apokatastasis*, meaning "restoration to an original state." This concept suggests that all created beings will eventually be reconciled to God. Pearson argued that if God is truly omnipotent and omnibenevolent, the permanent loss of any soul would represent a failure of the divine will. Therefore, the "Success" of the Cross is measured by its total efficacy.

2. Semantic Shift: Hell, Sheol, and Gehenna

Pearson's technical deconstruction of "Hell" involved a linguistic analysis of the original Hebrew and Greek terms often translated as such in the King James Version of the Bible. He posited that the traditional concept of Hell was a mistranslation or a cultural misunderstanding of:

- Sheol (Hebrew): The common grave or the place of the dead, devoid of moral distinction.
- Gehenna (Greek): A physical location (the Valley of Hinnom) used as a burning trash dump outside Jerusalem, used metaphorically rather than as a literal eternal furnace.
- Hades (Greek): The underworld, which Pearson argued was a temporary state rather than a permanent destination.

3. The Redefinition of Grace

Inclusion defines **Grace** as an absolute. If grace requires a human action (confession) to become effective, it is technically **Legalism** masquerading as grace. True grace, in the Inclusivist view, is unconditional and unilateral. This perspective removes the "transactional" nature of salvation common in evangelical circles.

Comparison of Soteriological Frameworks

The following table illustrates the divergence between traditional fundamentalist doctrines and the Gospel of Inclusion across several key metrics.

Feature/Doctrine	Fundamentalist/Exclusivist	Gospel of Inclusion (Universalist)
Source of Salvation	The Cross + Individual Acceptance	The Cross (Finished Work for All)
Scope of Redemption	The Elect or Believers Only	The Entire Human Race
Nature of Hell	Literal, Eternal Conscious Torment	Metaphorical, Temporary, or Non-Existent
Function of Faith	The 'Key' that unlocks salvation	The realization of current salvation
God's Sovereignty	Limited by Human Free Will	Absolute; Overrides Human Resistance
Missionary Motivation	Saving souls from damnation	Informing souls of their reconciliation

The Institutional Response: The 2004 Heresy Trial

The practical implementation of the Gospel of Inclusion led to a formal technical review by the **Joint College of African-American Pentecostal Bishops**. This event serves as a critical case study in how religious institutions manage **doctrinal drift**.

The Procedural Workflow of the Hearing

1. Formal Complaint: Concerns were raised regarding Pearson's public teachings and the content of his sermons at Higher Dimensions.
2. Doctrinal Audit: A committee of theologians and bishops reviewed Pearson's scriptural justifications, focusing specifically on his interpretation of the "Finished Work of Christ."
3. The Defense: Pearson argued that his view was not a denial of Christ but an exaltation of the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice.
4. The Verdict: In March 2004, the College officially declared Pearson's teachings as heresy. This declaration was based on the technicality that his doctrine contradicted the established articles of faith regarding the necessity of personal repentance and the reality of eternal damnation.

The result of this institutional friction was the loss of Pearson's membership in the College, a significant decline in his church attendance (dropping from over 6,000 to a few hundred), and the eventual foreclosure of the Higher Dimensions facility. This demonstrates the high **operational risk** associated with radical doctrinal shifts within established religious hierarchies.

CrossWinds Church and the Practical Application of Inclusivity

Following his departure from the Pentecostal mainstream, Pearson transitioned his ministry to **CrossWinds Church** (later affiliated with the United Church of Christ). Here, the Gospel of Inclusion was translated into a practical, field-level guide for community building.

Implementation Strategies for Inclusive Communities

To foster an inclusive environment, several structural changes were made to the traditional church model:

- De-emphasizing Dogma: Worship services shifted focus from doctrinal purity to spiritual development and social justice.

- Radical Hospitality: The "Inclusion" metric was expanded beyond theology to include LGBTQ+ individuals, members of other faiths, and the irreligious.
- Pluralistic Dialogue: The church promoted the idea that while Christ is the "way" for some, the underlying truth of God's love is accessible through various cultural and religious lenses.

Technical Challenges and Analytical Critiques

From a technical standpoint, the Gospel of Inclusion faces several internal and external challenges. Critics and analysts often point to the following issues:

The Problem of Moral Agency

If salvation is universal and unconditional, what is the technical motivation for moral behavior? Critics argue that Inclusion removes the "judicial deterrent" of Hell. Pearson's counter-argument was that love and gratitude are more powerful motivators for morality than fear. However, in a sociological context, the removal of binary rewards and punishments often leads to a decrease in institutional cohesion.

Scriptural Conflict Resolution

Traditionalists point to numerous passages (e.g., Matthew 25:46, John 3:18) that explicitly mention separation and judgment. The Gospel of Inclusion requires a complex **hermeneutical strategy** to reconcile these verses. This involves viewing such passages as "parabolic warnings" or "temporal judgments" rather than eternal decrees. The technical difficulty lies in maintaining a consistent hermeneutic across the entire biblical canon.

Institutional Sustainability

The data suggests that churches adopting a Universalist or Inclusivist stance often struggle with long-term growth compared to their Exclusivist counterparts. This may be due to the loss of "urgency" in the evangelistic message. When the "danger" of non-belief is removed, the technical drive for recruitment often diminishes.

Step-by-Step Evolution of Pearson's Theological Model

For researchers and theologians tracking doctrinal evolution, the following stages outline Pearson's transition:

Phase 1: Strict Fundamentalism (1970s - 1990s)

Focus on evangelism, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and the literal reality of Hell. Membership in the Pentecostal elite.

Phase 2: Cognitive Dissonance (Mid-1990s)

Observation of global suffering leads to a conflict between the concept of a Loving God and Eternal Damnation. Preliminary study of 1 John 2:2 ("He is the propitiation... for the whole world").

Phase 3: The Gospel of Inclusion (Late 1990s - 2004)

Public declaration of Universal Reconciliation. Systematic re-interpretation of the Atonement. Rejection of the traditional "Sinner's Prayer" requirement.

Phase 4: Radical Inclusivity and Pluralism (2005 - 2023)

Expansion of Inclusion to encompass civil rights, interfaith dialogue, and the rejection of all religious barriers. Shift toward a more metaphysical and philosophical approach to spirituality.

Summary and Broader Implications

The Gospel of Inclusion, as articulated by Bishop Carlton Pearson, remains one of the most controversial and intellectually stimulating developments in modern theology. By moving the goalposts of salvation from **Human Performance to Divine Sovereignty**, Pearson challenged the foundational structures of the Evangelical and Pentecostal movements. While the institutional response was one of rejection, the underlying questions Pearson raised continue to resonate within the broader "Ex-vangelical" and progressive Christian movements.

The legacy of this doctrine is not found in the survival of a specific organization, but in the shift in conversation regarding the nature of God, the meaning of grace, and the boundaries of religious community. For technical writers and theologians alike, the case of Carlton Pearson provides a robust dataset for analyzing the tension between **Tradition** and **Evolution**. As society moves toward greater inclusivity in secular spheres, the pressure on religious institutions to adapt their soteriological frameworks will likely increase, making the Gospel of Inclusion a foundational reference point for future doctrinal developments.

Ultimately, the Gospel of Inclusion serves as a reminder that theology is not static. It is a living, breathing field of study that reacts to the human experience, linguistic discovery, and the evolving moral compass of society. Whether viewed as a courageous return to the heart of the Christian message or a dangerous departure from historical truth, Pearson's work demands a thorough technical understanding of the mechanisms of faith, the power of language, and the enduring human quest for a reconciliation that excludes no one.

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