

## UNIVERSALISM

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There are no new heresies, just old ones dressed up in new garb. Universalism, the notion that ultimately all men will be saved and enjoy the eternal bliss of heaven, has antecedents that go back to origin, one of the anti-Nicene fathers. Employing an allegorical hermeneutic, Origen theorized that all men and even fallen angels would be redeemed at last. His was a grand "cosmological salvation" in which nothing was excluded either by divine fiat or human or angelic choice. His view received short shrift in the church and was repudiated in the great creeds of the church and in the pronouncements of church councils. Traditionally, the Roman Catholic church, the Orthodox churches, and Protestantism have rejected universalism.

From Origen's time until the nineteenth-century, universalism was virtually dormant. It became a live option in the United States in New England. It was here that Calvinism had been dominant from the early seventeenth century. And it was here that the notion of a limited atonement in which Christ died only for the elect, all others being subject to reprobation, was passing away. Strangely enough, the new universalism of the nineteenth century in New England really preserved the doctrine of eternal predestination simply by enlarging the scope of election to include all men rather than some. The Universalist churches that were formed went far beyond a renunciation of eternal reprobation and of the doctrine of hell. Within a short time they denied many if not most of the major tenets of the orthodox faith including the Trinity, the deity of Jesus Christ, and the infallibility of the Word of God written. Concurrently with the rise of Universalism, New England was plagued with the advent of Unitarianism, another older heresy that in some measure can be traced back to Arianism. In the twentieth century in the United States the Unitarians and the Universalists joined hands to form one denomination that stood outside the stream of historic Protestantism. The new denomination was literally filled with humanists, agnostics, and atheists whose antecedents had their roots in a theological orthodoxy they had then abandoned in commitment and in principle. The Unitarian-Universalist group was, and is, thoroughly apostate.

We need not dwell on the Universalists who have completely departed from biblical norms. Yet we must recognize that they initiated a return to the teaching that all men will be saved, a teaching that is not limited to this apostate group today. Rather, it has spread widely among churches who have not yet, in their creed and confessions, renounced the basic teachings of the Christian faith nor have any of them officially discarded the doctrine of hell and replaced it with salvation for all. In most of the large churches in Christendom there can still be found those who are more or less orthodox in doctrine who adhere to universalism. There are also those who hold to universalism who have also discarded some or all of the basics of the Christian faith. There are still others who hold to all of the major teachings of historic Protestantism and who also sturdily repudiate universalism, and teach

that some men are eternally lost.

Advocates of universalism, or those who refuse to cast a decisive vote against it, are to be found in almost every large denomination and among key leaders from all parts of the world. Universalism is not a Western tenet nor is it limited to the churches of Western Christendom. It is to be found most widely in the modern ecumenical movement and its presence, as we shall see, has altered the concept of mission and wrought extensive damage to the missionary outreach of the church.

D.T. Niles of India was a prominent church leader and very active in the ecumenical movement. He had status as a scholar and was a key speaker at the World Council Assembly at Uppsala in 1968. In his book, *Upon the Earth*, he speaks to the question of universalism. He wrote: "Will all men be reclaimed? That is not our side of the problem. There are those who insist that no genuine and urgent conviction about the mission of the church is possible unless one is able to say positively: some will be saved and others will be damned. It is certainly true that those who are able to state the matter in this way do have a sense of urgency about their evangelistic and missionary responsibility; but the issue must nevertheless be pressed as to whether the whole drift of the teaching of the New Testament allows for so simple and simplified a conviction. Can it be that anyone will reject him even at the last? This is a speculation to which the New Testament does not lend itself." Dr. Niles comes to the conclusion, "The New Testament does not allow us to say either yes or no to the question, 'Will all men be saved?'"

Paul Verghese, a priest of the Syrian Orthodox Church, India, and at the time, Associate General Secretary of the World Council of Churches and Director of its Division of Ecumenical Action, wrote in *The Ecumenical Review* as follows, "Will the unbaptized man be saved? God wills that all men be saved. Christ wills that all men be saved. And he wills as he ought to will. And his will is, 'When the hour of destiny strikes to gather together into one the whole universe in him' (Eph. 1:10). Can that will be thwarted? No, for his will is commensurate with his power. But how is his will to be fulfilled? That is a cosmic question. Our task is to learn the answer slowly, by the tragic method, by laying down our lives for the life of the world."

Bishop James Pike, an Episcopalian now dead, had a word to say about universalism. He wrote, "But as to that which can be saved, it is on this earth broader than any particular historical revelation, even the full revelation in Jesus Christ. But the kind of God I first believed in, who would limit salvation to a select group of people who happen to have heard the news and heard it well, is an impossible God. As to this god I am now an atheist."

American theologian Nels Ferre took a strong stand for universal salvation. He wrote, "The first choice is that the Christian faith alone is true and that all other religions are pagan and false . . . . The final resurrection can mean nothing less than the victory of Christ over all his enemies; the final victory of universal love is universal salvation . . . . The logic of the situation is simple. Either God could not or would not save all. If he could not he is not sovereign; then not all things are possible with God. If he would not, again the New Testament is wrong,

for it openly claims that he would have all to be saved. Nor would he be totally good. The total logic of the deepest message of the New Testament, namely that God can and wants to save all, is unanswerable."

Dean Norman Pittenger of the Episcopal General Theological Seminary in New York City said, "I believe that a corollary of the Christian doctrine of God as all all-sovereign love — is that it is God's will, as the New Testament puts it, that all men shall be saved, and that God's will is in the long run bound to accomplish that for which it sets out — that there will be no 'pockets of resistance' left when God has accomplished his final victory over sin, evil, and death. How to hold this 'universalist' doctrine without destroying man's sense of moral responsibility is another question . . . Barth and Robinson have pointed the way — God's loving self-expression is so subtle and so persuasive that all men and the whole creation will be won (not coerced) into a response to the Creator, so that God will be all in all. Anything less seems to me a blasphemous denial of the central reality of the Christian revelation — God is love — and setting up of a heathen idol who ought not to be worshipped but destroyed."

Dr. Woodbridge O. Johnson, Chairman of the Department of Religion and Biblical Literature at Park College (Presbyterian), Parkville, Missouri, wrote an article in which he said that heaven and hell once stood for absolutely discontinuous states, "everlasting rapture on the one hand and everlasting torture on the other — with faith in Christ as the all-determining factor between them. But since such meanings of 'saved' and 'lost' seem both absurd and immoral to the modern mind, they might well be described as Christian nonsense . . . No man can be evil enough to deserve hell." He said finally, "Some of us are following the way of Jesus toward eternal life; others the path of Moses, Krishna, the Buddha, Confucius, and Mohammed. But since God invites all men to the one ultimate destination, they ought to share their travel experience in the camaraderie of the journey. If the Christians find their way good and their guide trustworthy, they ought to share with their companions 'the riches of God's grace in Jesus Christ' (Eph. 2:8). But Christians should also be glad to receive any news of divine grace which the others have found, and which still others may find in Zoroaster and Lao-tzu and Mo-tzu, in Plato and Epictetus and Plotinus, in Nanak and Baha'u'llah and Ramakrishna. Jesus has been called 'the light of the world' and the Buddha 'the light of Asia'; but light is good in whatever lamp it burns."

Whatever may be said about the inroads of universalism in Protestantism, the same observations can be made about the Roman Catholic Church. This church is in theological disarray and its problems are perhaps greater than those in Protestantism. The theological spectrum ranges from the far left to the far right. Higher criticism has left an indelible mark on Roman Catholic scholars. The same effects that follow the advent of this criticism are now to be found in the Roman Catholic Church — a diminution of the authority of Scripture, increased emphasis on an errant Bible, radical demythologization, as well as some other consequences not felt within Protestantism. Whereas the Bible was the last court of authority in Protestantism, an infallible pope

was the final resort in Roman Catholicism. The same criticism that opposes an infallible Bible is now opposed to an infallible pope. Thus Hans Kung could write that infallibility is to be found only in God and Christ, not in the Bible or in the papacy.

Among Roman Catholic theologians there is to be found the same streak of universalism as within Protestantism. It takes a somewhat different form depending for its orientation upon the Roman Catholic doctrine of the necessity of water baptism for salvation. But this has not hindered the advance of universal salvation once it is stated that intention is an adequate substitute for the actual use of water for baptisms. But this Congress should not add to the theological confusion by considering universalism segmentally by special reference to this or that church. The overarching question is universalism regardless of the setting or church in which it is found. Once the biblical position on the subject has been discerned, application should and must be made to all churches. And the apologetic to counter universalism should be developed for each and every church tradition. But Lausanne will have enough to keep it occupied by doing this for Protestantism whose churches need to be put in order before consideration is given to providing a corrective for the Roman Catholic theologians and mis-siologists who hold that all men will at last be redeemed.

It cannot be disputed that many voices among Protestants have been raised in the propagation and defense of universalism. Nor can it be denied that as a result of this neo-universalism there has been a radical shift in the definition of the mission of the church. Nowhere has this been more obvious than in the ecumenical movement and particularly in the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches. In the 1963 Mexico City meetings of the Commission, and more recently in Bangkok in December of 1972, it was quite apparent that the central thrust of the conferences was based upon a commitment to changing the social, economic, and political structures of society. This was based, in turn, upon the underlying assumption that all men are now in Christ and only need to be informed of what is already true. Such being the case there is no reason why the mission of the church should not be redefined, personal evangelism neglected, and improving the temporal conditions of men made the focal point of reference. Both at Mexico City and Bangkok it was clear, however, that there are some within the World Council of Churches who still believe in a heaven and a hell, that men are not in Christ in their unbelief, and that those who do not experience the new birth are forever lost and undone.

There was every opportunity for the World Council of Churches at Uppsala, or for the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism at Mexico City and Bangkok to clarify their position if what has been said here is inaccurate. But nothing has come from these gatherings, nor has the leadership of the World Council of Churches repudiated universalism. All that would be necessary would be for them to state clearly that some men are lost, that there is a hell, and that those who die without having personally made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ are lost. But this has not been done and it is this failure that, in part,

makes the International Congress on World Evangelization necessary, and occasions our discussion about universalism so that some definitive judgment can be rendered for our generation, especially as such a judgment relates to the evangelization of the world.

There are only three possibilities with respect to the question of universalism. They are: (i) nobody is saved; (ii) everybody is saved; (iii) some are saved and some are lost. Option one is obviously false and no further discussion of it is required. That leaves us with but two options: all are saved, or only some are saved. Before we decide which option is biblical and binding we should not overlook some of the important theological questions that underlie such a discussion. These have to do with election, a universal or particular atonement, and free will or the power of contrary choice. Let us see how these relate to universalism.

There can be no doubt that Scripture does teach divine election. The problem connected with it is whether Christ died for all men or only for those who are elect. It is a problem of the particularity or the universality of his death on the Cross. If Christ died only for the elect then those who are non-elect are lost, there is no universalism possible and the doctrine of hell remains intact (that is, the lake of fire as the ultimate destination of those who die without Christ).

If Christ died only for the elect how is it then possible for us to proclaim to any man that Christ died for *him*? Christ did not die for that man unless he was one of the elect. Therefore we would not be able to proclaim a universal call and ask all men to receive Christ as Savior. The best we could do would be to say, "Christ died for sinners such as you." But whether Christ died for him would depend upon whether he was among the elect. This constitutes a problem.

It was Karl Barth who sought a resolution to the problem of election and in the process opened the door wide to universal salvation for all. He combined a belief in the death of Christ for all with a doctrine of election and was left with the choice whether or not this meant that all were elected and all saved. He came perilously close to a full commitment to universalism. It was Berkouwer who commented on Barth's difficulty when he said, "But with Barth, Christ's death touches precisely upon the election of all, which election has become manifest in Christ's death. The universality of the message is no longer at odds with the fact of election, for it is based upon the universality of election." But we must note the conclusions that flow from this standpoint.

If by divine election and universal atonement all are saved, then (i) there is no hell, no lake of fire, and no eternal punishment. (ii) There is no genuine freedom of choice which is no better in principle than any Calvinistic doctrine of election based upon a limited or particular atonement. For if the elect, some or all, must be saved, then it is difficult if not impossible to reconcile this with the power of contrary choice. And if all are saved there is no real power of contrary choice. Thus in universalism the problem of freedom of choice is no less pressing than that problem within the context of a particular atonement efficacious only for the elect. The Arminian does not escape a similar problem.

With great emphasis on freedom of choice, the doctrine of election

loses its force and seems to wither away. Election then becomes a negligible wish without the sovereign power of God behind it to make it come to pass.

There are still other implications involved in the belief in universal atonement and universal election. This has to do with the evangelization of the world. (i) Whatever force is connected with the Great Commission is lost when universalism is adopted. If all men are at last to be saved then the urgency of the Commission is gone, and indeed the need for it is dissipated. All men are already in Christ whether they know it or not. They are going to be saved finally. There is no need for haste since death without the knowledge of Christ will not keep them from heaven. Whether they stay in their own religions or not or whether they have no religion at all ceases to be important. Thus Paul Tillich could aver that the denial of God is in fact an affirmation of him. (ii) Why should the people of God suffer and sacrifice in going to the ends of the earth when the best they can hope for is to bring some people to a knowledge of the salvation they already have just a bit sooner? And what difference does a few years make in that regard in the light of the eternal ages? (iii) Indeed, if universalism is true then to change the mission of the church to the improvement of the temporal conditions of men is logical and compelling. (iv) There is no need for a Congress on World Evangelization; we are wasting time and spending money uselessly. (v) But above all we cannot escape the conviction that God forces men into the kingdom against their wills and he thus becomes a capricious being and man a virtual automaton.

It appears that we are led by Scripture and logic, with some element of mystery, to conclude that Christ did die for all, but all are not saved at last. There are abundant evidences in Scripture for this just as there are sufficient evidences to believe in the lake of fire (the doctrine of hell and everlasting punishment): I John 2:2; John 3:16; Rom. 5:6; Rev. 20:10, 11-14; Matt. 25:46, 16:26. Christ's death on the cross was potentially efficacious for all men; it was actually efficacious only for those who believe. But all do not believe and so all are not saved. But those who never hear are lost and unless they hear they will never have a chance of being saved. To believe thus is to make possible the proclamation of a universal Gospel, stating that Christ died for all men, and to follow it with an invitation for men to receive Christ as Savior. In this view the evangelization of the world takes on concrete significance and the church must assume its rightful role in the plan of God to finish the evangelization mandate.

Against the backdrop of the Canons of Dort, G.C. Berkouwer helps us see that freedom of the will and divine election can be reconciled. Speaking of the Canons of Dort he says, "On the one hand we find reference to a universal preaching of the Gospel to all without exception and, on the other, we are confronted with an unmistakable particularity." "The Canons," he says, "speak of the death of Christ as a sufficient sacrifice. If the call of the Gospel is not accepted and many do not repent, this is not owing to any defect or insufficiency in Christ's sacrifice, but to man himself (CD, II, 6, Rejection of Errors). Christ's death is the only and most perfect sacrifice which is of 'infinite

worth and value, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world' (CD, II, 3). On the basis of this confession it is possible to assure all men 'that in this sacrifice lies an infinite power and worthiness, so that in all the world no person could be sunk so deep that Christ's sacrifice would not be abundantly sufficient for the expiation of his sins. In this way we reject the dilemma which says that there is either no general offer of salvation or universal election.'" It is true, says Berkauer, that "he who studies the history of doctrine repeatedly discovers the power of the dilemma between universalism and the denial of a general offer of salvation."

It is here that some word must be expressed about the eternal destiny of those who have never heard the Gospel. This is a difficult and perplexing question that cannot be avoided even if our conclusions are somewhat tentative and an element of mystery remains. We must start with the biblical datum of Paul that every man must personally believe in Christ himself before he can be saved. Paul then asks the question, "How are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?" (Rom. 10:14).

Scripture in Romans makes it abundantly clear that there are three lights that provide guidance for men. One is the light of nature, the second the light of the law, and the third the light of the Gospel. (See here Romans 1-3.) There are people who have rejected the Savior who have heard the Gospel, are familiar with the Ten Commandments (the law) and who have the light of nature or of human conscience. Yet they are lost. They have rejected the Light. But what about those who know neither the law of God nor the Gospel? First, let it be said that anyone who really wants to know God even though he has no particular knowledge of the law or the Gospel will be given the opportunity to hear of Christ and to receive him as Savior. It is God's responsibility to make certain that whoever really wants the knowledge of God will receive it. This has been demonstrated many times in the missionary situation. Unserved people have welcomed the advent of missionaries with the Gospel message and indicated that they have been looking for them to come. One way or another God in his mercy will make known what the unserved need to know if they really wish to know God.

Let us suppose for a moment that there are those who never received any knowledge of the Gospel or of the law of God. And they die this way. Are they then lost forever? It is here that we must aver that the least that anyone ever has by way of the knowledge of God is the light of nature or the law of conscience written in the hearts of all men. This indeed may be the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world. In Romans I, Paul argues that, "What can be known about God is plain to them (Gentiles, i.e., people without the law) because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse." "All who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law. . . . When Gentiles who have not the law do by

nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them. . . . both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin . . . none is righteous, no, not one" (from Romans 2 and 3). Whatever may be the human situation, however great our compassion, and however strongly we might wish that things were different, it appears clear that Scripture teaches that even men whose knowledge is limited to the light of nature or of conscience are forever lost if they die without the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Based upon the conviction that some are saved and some are lost, we must conclude:

- (i) Universalism cannot be supported from Scripture and is a heresy.
- (ii) The Scriptures do make a universal offer of salvation to all men.
- (iii) There is a doctrine of election and perhaps election follows atonement in the order of the divine decrees so that those who spurn the offer of salvation because they have not been elected are passed over. But they are responsible and exercise freedom of choice.
- (iv) God has ordained that men shall be saved through the proclamation of the Gospel. And they will not be saved if the Gospel is not preached. Therefore it behooves the Church of Jesus Christ to preach the Gospel to all men everywhere so that they may have the opportunity to accept Christ.
- (v) Those who die without Christ are lost even if they do not know of the law or hear the Gospel.
- (vi) We urge those who believe in universalism to re-examine their position and the evidences, change their opinions, and join us in the global task of reaching all men everywhere with the Good News of salvation.
- (vii) Although we reject universalism categorically and say fearlessly that we believe in both heaven and hell, we do not pass judgment upon the eternal destiny of those who may cling to a belief in universalism. It is possible for some universalists to have saving faith in Christ and to have experienced the new birth. But God alone is the judge of the living and the dead.