

Universalism: Forms and Fallacies

James A. Fowler

At best, universalists view faith as but a static assent and belief in divine truth propositions, still failing to grasp the response-ability of the choosing creature, man, to depeudently choose to be receptive to the divine dynamic of God's Being in action.

Over all, the anthropology of universalism prefers to avoid focusing on individuals as choosing creatures who Call receive or reject God. Instead, they purposefully stress the collective mad corporate aspect of humanity, preferring to view man!rind as an inclusive whole, with all men in socialistic solidarity with one another. Universalists often begin with the universality of God's creation of mankind, which they allege creates a universal solidarity of "the Fatherhood of God, and the brotherhood of man." Likewise, they argue, in the "new creation" of man!dnd in Christ, mankind is organically and relationally connected as "salvation" in!plements the universal reunification of the unity of n!m!ldnd. Although collectivist perspectives of the whole of humanity are not illegitimate, the new covenant demands an individual response to God, with a subsequent corporate involvement in the Body of Christ, the church.

Universalism skews the biblical and Christian understanding of anthropology by adopting humanistic premises of man as an independent object necessitating God's action, or by merging man with God in intrinsic and monistic

deification. Regardless of the starting point, universalists deny that man is a responsible, choosing creature by insisting on a deterministic inclusion of all men, collectively, in God's designs. The tragedy of universalist anthropology is that humanity is depersonalized, and human beings are robbed of the teleological opportunity for participation in a freely chosen faith-love relationship with the divine persons of the Trinity.

Hamartiology (*Doctrine of Sin*)

When God created man with freedom of choice, He took the risk that man might reject the derivative expression of divine character in human behavior. Divine love involves such vulnerability and risk, without demanding a deterministically decreed outcome, as universalism posits. The choice that Adam made as the representative head of the collective human race in rejecting God's design plunged all of mankind into the death consequences of sin (cf. Gen. 2:17). While continuing to function as derivative humanity, man was then

deriving character from the alternative spiritual source of the "evil one." Sin is the presence made expression of evil character, contrary to the character of God.

Universalism seeks to avoid hamartiology, the doctrine of sin. Having established the premise of God's attribute of love, or His decree of destiny, or His covenant arrangement, or His incorporative oneness, or His subsumption of humanity to be the basis of a universal heavenly perfection for all men, sin becomes an incidental impertinence in the prede~ar~ined plan of God. Failing to recognize the primacy of God's holy character as the basis of all legitimate Christian theology, and regarding man's choices of no permanent consequence, universalism is disinterested in, and disinclined to pursue, a study of ham~iology. Desiring to focus on the rosy optimism of the universal perfection of man, sin is, for the most part, an irrelevancy.

"Oneness universalism" identifies sin as an "illusion," only seen and observed by those with a false sin-consciousness who do not see all things in universal oneness with God. In ~ts theoretical certainty of the secttnty of the m~versal elect, Calwmstm umve~sahsm soft-pedals sin as but minor mistakes without real consequences. The sentimental perspective of "God is love' universalism," is more interested in the glory of all men residing in heavenly destiny than the possibility of the glory of God being extinguished by the transgression of God's character in sinful behavior. According to "soteriological universalism," all sin is resolved as the sinful flesh of humanity

was taken into deity. The unconditional covenant blessings advocated by "covenant universalism," also diminish and depreciate the severity of sin. Sin is minimized and trivialized in all universalistic teaching.

The reaction of popular universalistic teaching to the traditional Christian teaching on sin is intensely vituperative. They cannot believe in a God who would "sentence men to death and send them to hell for sin." As noted previously, Christian religion has done a great disservice to the understanding of God's just judgment upon sin by constructing a legal, forensic, and juridical framework of God's punitive consequences for sin in the alleged punishment of death and hell. Sin and its consequences must be understood in the theological framework of Who God is, His Being and character, rather than just in the static legal context of the violation of laws demanding punitive sentencing, or the social categories of transgressing moral standards requiring ethical consequences. The severe consequences of sin are to be understood as dynamic determinations of the Holy God to avoid the thwarting of

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the expression of His all-glorious character, and His intolerance for the misuse and abuse of humanity when diabolic and evil character, contra~3~ to the character of God, is expressed in human behavior. It is His loving concern for mankind that drives His determinative judgments against sin. God does not impose death on man, or sentence man to death, as a consequence of sin, for death is the alternative dynamic deviation from "the one having the power of death, that is the devil" (Heb. 2: 14). God does not punitively send men to hell for their sin, for He is "not willing that any should perish" (II Pet. 3:9), but He respects man's freedom of choice to the extent that He will allow man the continuance of the consequences of his choices.

Some universalist teachers have even gone so far as to "reverse the charges" against God by engaging in the sacrilege of suggesting that if God fails to save all men universally, He would thus "naiss His goal" of universal salvation, and would thereby Himself become a "sinner." This twisted logic is based on an atzogant assumption of their lknowing God's ultimate intention and objective to save all men universally. It is exacerbated by the ignorant misunderstanding of the Greek word for sin, *hamartias*, which refers to "missing the mark" of God's intended character expression in man's behavior, and not to God's "missing the goal" of universal salvation.

Moralistic religion is a frequent target of universalistic teaching, not only because it emphasizes free moral choices

with consequences, but also because it allegedly creates an existential bondage to the decision of the moment concerning behavior and eternal destiny. Christian religion has admittedly often degenerated into such moralism, and there is certainly no freedom in the constant concern that every behavioral choice might have divinely imposed punitive consequences forever. Universalism argues that freedom and spontaneity are to be found in knowing that God has chosen all men universally and that all will be saved, but this is a pseudo-liberty devoid of behavioral standards that soon leads to libertinism, carnality, and anarchy. Genuine Christian freedom is not to be found in moralism or libertinism, but results from the dynamic derivation of God's character in man's behavior, allowing man to be free to be man as God intended man to be, to the glory of God.

Although sin is not the focal point of Christian teaching, it must be addressed to understand God's redemptive action in Jesus Christ. Theodicy, the study of the origin and source of evil in reference to God's righteousness, has always been problematic, and has not

been carefully clarified in Christian theology. This is no doubt attributable to the fact that sin and evil are irrational and illogical, which may have precipitated Paul's phrase, "the mystery of iniquity" (11 Thess. 2:7 - KIV). The inexplicable mystery of evil set up the illogic of the crucified Christ on the cross on Calvary to facilitate the "mystery of godliness" (1 Tim. 3:16), whereby the indwelling Lord Jesus lives His life and manifests the character of God in Christian behavior. Who are we to sit in judgment of the redemptive action of God's Being in His Son, Jesus Christ, claiming, as some universalists do, that "sin is nothing," or implying that there is no relevance or consequence to sin, or even attributing sin and evil to God Himself?

Christology (Doctrine of Jesus Christ)

God the Father obviously considered the consequences of sin to be of sufficient import to send the Son to be the remedial and restorative Savior of mankind. "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). "He (God the Father) made Him (Jesus), who knew no sin, to be sin on our behalf" (11 Cor. 5:21).

All of the Christianized forms of universalism make reference to Jesus Christ, but most fail to understand the full significance of the incarnation whereby the Son of God became the God-man. "'God is love' universalism" views the Person and passion of Jesus Christ as the ultimate love-act of God,

revealing to mankind how much He loves them, and His intent to save all men. For "covenant universalism," Jesus is the testator of the universal covenant, verifying and guaranteeing that all will be included in the eternal covenant. "Calvinistic universalism" regards Jesus as the comprehensive Savior, deterministically applying limitless atonement as God universally draws all men to Himself in Christ. "Oneness universalism" speculates that the Spirit of Christ is the intrinsic spiritual reality in all men, assuring them of their universal oneness with God. "Soteriological universalism" has a definite incarnational Christology, but pushes its significance to the extreme making the incarnation an all-inclusive reconciliation and restoration of humanity within the Being of God.

Universalism, in general, regards Jesus as a utilitarian tool utilized by God the Father to facilitate His decreed objective to save all men universally. Most universalistic teaching sees Jesus as but a means to an end, a mechanical and instrumental Savior employed to exhibit God's love, guarantee God's covenant, or facilitate God's decree. The deficiency of an orthodox understanding of the Trinitarian function of the Godhead should be evident to all, for the Persons of the Godhead do not utilize or employ one another, but always function together perichoretically as One.

The Person and work of Jesus Christ can only be properly understood in a dynamic incarnational Christology that recognizes that when "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14), God was revealing Himself in the Person of Jesus Christ. God's veldt Being was (and is) intrinsic in every act of the person of Jesus Christ. The life of Jesus was not a static historical phenomenon to be analyzed theologically in order to ascertain any permanent and universal effects or benefits for mankind. "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself" (II Cor. 5:19), but this does not necessarily imply a universal reconciliation that fails to account for a freely chosen relationship of "union with Christ." Christ Jesus was "made in the likeness of men" (Phil. 2:7), in order that the man Chi-ist Jesus might be "the one mediator between God and man" (I Tim. 2:5), for only as man could He take upon Himself the death consequences of sin, but only as God could He restore divine life to men. As the God-man, Jesus was never less than God,

and never more than man.

In His redemptive mission, Jesus "came to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28; I Tim. 2:6), and "was obedient unto the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8). The cross was not merely an example of self-giving love and sacrifice, as some forms of universalism seem to interpret the crucifixion. "The word of the cross" (I Cor. 1:18), "Christ crucified" (I Cor. 2:2), was a legal stumbling block to the Jews, and a logical absurdity to the Gentiles, but to Christians the "crucified Savior" is "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (I Cor. 1:23,24). We must never settle for a static interpretation of Christ's crucifixion as an exemplary sacrifice or misguided martyrdom. The dynamic implications of redemption and restoration are evident in the exclamation of the dying Christ on the cross, when He shouted, "It is finished!" (John 19:30). That was no cry of defeat, "mission aborted," but a shout of triumphant victory announcing "mission accomplished," for in taking the death consequences of sin upon Himself, Jesus was well aware that He was setting in motion the

dynamic restoration of God's life to man. "Death could not hold Him in its power" (Acts 2:24), and by His resurrection the risen Lord who is "the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25), now functions as the dynamic of resurrection-life whereby all men willing to receive Him can be "born again to a living hope" (I Pet. 1:3) and "be saved by his life" (Rom. 5:10).

If, as universalism purports, all men are to be saved by the necessity of God's love, covenant, decree, or oneness, then the question must be asked: "What was the purpose of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ?" The answer and conclusion might be drawn, in similitude to Paul's statement of Galatians 2:21, "If all are destined to be saved, then Christ died needlessly." Universalism can legitimately be charged with robbing the death of Christ of its atoning and redemptive significance, and with gutting the resurrection of Christ of its singularly unique dynamic to restore God's life to receptive individuals. We must never allow the life and work of Jesus Christ to become a superfluous irrelevancy, a meaningless blip on the radar screen of history, but ever espouse an incarnational Christology that recognizes the dynamic implications of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Soteriology (Doctrine of Salvation)

The purposed objective of Christ's incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection was to take the death consequences of men's sins remedially, and to save men by the restoration of God's life. "Christ Jesus came into the world

to save sinners (I Tim. 1:15), Paul explained. Jesus, Himself, announced His mission as, "I came that you might have life, and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10), explicitly declaring, "I am the...life" (John 14:6). The person and work of Jesus Christ facilitates a spiritual regeneration (cf. John 3:1-6), which involves the receipt of the very life of the risen and living Savior. The "salvation" we obtain through our Lord, Jesus Christ (cf. I Thess. 5:9) is the dynamic "saving life" (cf. Rom. 5:10) of the living Savior.

When the "gospel of salvation" (cf. Eph. 1:13) is cast in static categories of thought that fail to recognize that "the gospel is the power (Greek *dunamis*) of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16), then the biblical and Christian understanding of salvation has been cut loose from its moorings in the living Lord Jesus. Universalism is guilty of identifying and interpreting "salvation" in static disconnect from the living Savior.

The gospel is often viewed as a corpus of information to be proclaimed, informing men of God's decree, covenant, love, and oneness, and of the inclusion of all men, without exception, in the benefits of God. But the "good news" is not the message of a deterministic deliverance of divine "benefits," but of the availability of the very "Being" of God in Christ to dwell within man through any one willing to freely receive Him in faith. The gospel is not merely information to be assented to, but the living Word, Jesus Christ, coming to dwell within the spirit of man as the ontological dynamic of God's life in man. Universalism often ends up being a modernized form of Gnosticism that seeks to find knowledge in the assurance of spiritual oneness with God and a certain security in a promised universal destiny with God. Our security and assurance must be "in Christ" alone, and as we participate in the divine life of Christ we can leave our destiny in God's hands, for such will be but the continuance of His life and our participation in Him.

In universalistic thought "salvation" is often viewed as a static condition conferred upon all men, a beneficent reward, or an assured destiny. Salvation becomes a commodity - a "heavenly entrance pass" or an "eternal life package." For "God is love" universalism, salvation is awareness of being loved without end. For "Calvinistic universalism," salvation is the security of being "elect." For "Covenant universalism," salvation is the guarantee of covenant privileges. For "Oneness universalism," salvation is consciousness of oneness with God.

For "Soteriological universalism," salvation is absorption into deity. Every form of universalism fails to recognize that the living Lord Jesus is the personal content of salvation, that salvation is Jesus the Savior dynamically manifesting His "saving life" in a faithfully receptive Chi'istian individual, now (cf. Eph. 2:8) and forever (cf. i Pet. 1:5).

When we fail to understand and experience salvation as the dynamic life of the living Savior, Jesus becomes a *Dues ex machine*, a problem-solving, fix-it savior who is the "dispenser of salvation." As noted previously, to view Jesus in such a mechanical and instrumental way does violence to the Trinitarian revelation of God, and transforms the gospel into a self-aggrandizing acquisitional endeavor.

A biblical understanding of "salvation" must take into account that the Greek word for "salvation," *sozo*, has the meaning, "to make safe." Christian salvation is not to be regarded as merely being "made safe"fi'om erroneous thinking in order to develop a correct epistemological belief-system. Neither is Christian salvation an escapist incentive of being

"made safe" from going to hell (which many universalists deny the existence of). It might be legitimate to indicate that salvation is being "made *safe*" from the dysfunctional humanity that is diabolically misused and abused as an individual derives evil character from the wrong spirit (cf. Eph. 2:2) who expresses such in self-orientation and self-sufficiency, but this negative interpretation still views salvation from an escapist perspective. Salvation must be given its positive content in the person and work of the living Lord Jesus. Though universalists might explain that salvation is being "made safe" to participate universally in the universal presence of God, this is little more than a static abstraction. Christian salvation is the positive dynamic process of the living Savior at work in people of faith. It is of utmost importance to emphasize that "salvation" is being "made safe" to function as God intends by deriving character from the dynamic grace of God's enabling. When the very Being of the living Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, is enacting His life in the Christian, we are "made safe" to fulfill the dynamic purpose of our creation in glorifying God (cf. Isa. 43:7).

Such salvation "in Christ" is universally available to all men (cf. Titus 2:11), but is not universally imposed upon all men as universalism asserts. Orthodox Christianity has always maintained that the salvific action of Christ's Being as Savior must be individually received by faith. Jesus clearly indicated, "Whoever believes in the Son shall have eternal life" (John 3:16,36). To the Ephesians, Paul explained, "For by grace you have been saved through faith" (Eph. 2:8). Such believing faith

is not merely static assent to the historical facts and theological formulations about Jesus, but is a dynamic personal receptivity of the divine activity of Jesus Himself. Faith is "our receptivity of His activity." Universalism often denies that faith is necessary for salvation, or defines faith as simply acknowledging the fact that all are saved. In their pluralistic orientation, they do not want to impose historical knowledge of Jesus, or epistemAc assent to Christ, on the non-Christian world, but they are quite willing to impose salvation upon all men. Knowledge and acceptance of Jesus Christ as Savior are not necessary for salvation according to universalists. One does not need to know Who Jesus is, or what He did, for human existence in itself qualifies one for inclusion in God's deterministic plan of salvation. Universalists react to the religious misstatement that sinful men are "doomed to be damned," but apparently subscribe to the thesis that all men, universally and without exception, are "doomed (destined) to be saved."

Eschatology (*Doctrine of Last Things*)

Without doubt, the primary concern and thrust of universalistic teaching is the final destiny of mankind. The focus of their teaching is not on the contemporary living Christ, but on the humanistic eschatological consideration of where men will "end up." In particular, they have what might seem to be an admirable sentimental concern for the unbeliever, and they react strongly to what they regard as an intolerant and exclusivistic repudiation of non-Christians and adherents of other religions by those involved with Christian religion. Their solution is to propose the universal inclusion of all men, without exception, in God's heavenly presence. Exclaiming, "Damnationism is but dust from the Dark Ages," they posit the impossibility of ultimate damnation, regarding it to be incompatible with the love of God.

All men should find the thought of eternal punishment to be abhorrent. What kind of person would find perverse pleasure in any one having to suffer the indignity of hell? God certainly does not desire that any person should experience such (cf. II Pet. 3:9). This does not mean, however, that we are allowed to arbitrarily deny that there are ultimate consequences to man's choices, and that a permanent place of separation does not exist.

In reaction to some radically false religious concepts of God's vindictive and vengeful judgment that allegedly consigns some men to hell even before they are born, universalism often rejects any sense of divine judgment and denies the

existence of hell. We noted previously that Christian religion has certainly advocated some ill-conceived concepts of God serving as a Judge in a juridical and forensic context, meting out punitive consequences to those who do not obey His laws, and sentencing violators to Dante-inspired exaggerations of hell. Perhaps universalism would not react so vehemently if they understood that God's judgment is His "determination" that only His own all-glorious character is worthy of perpetuation. On the other hand, God's intolerance of all that does not represent His character allows for the possibility of alienation and separation.

It should be noted that annihilationism (the belief that all who are not in Christ will be destroyed rather than suffer eternally) and the outright denial of the existence of hell, though often found in correlation with universalism, are not necessarily essential to universalist thought. Some universalists retain a view of hell as a temporary enclave experienced both in this life and beyond this life, wherein by a painful, purgatorial process persons will come to

their senses, respond to God's grace, and be conformed to the divine likeness. Hell can then be viewed as a "means of God's grace," a place of correction wherein people have a "second chance" (even beyond this life) to change and accept God's salvation. In the end, though, hell will be empty and untenanted, for universalism by definition implies that all men, without exception, will be in the presence of God.

Universalism denies the possibility of a final separation and segregation of mankind into eternally fixed categories of saved and lost. It employs a framework of reasoning that seeks to unify everything in one box, a one-track thinking of singularism or monism that disdains the both/and of dialectic, and disallows the either/or alternatives of opposites. All dichotomy and distinction is denounced as "dualism," for they cannot accommodate the separation of good and evil, God and Satan, heaven and hell.

Man's freedom of choice necessitates that the consequences of man's choices can go in both directions. Scripture is abundantly clear that the ultimate destiny of man is in either heaven or hell. It is not that God consigns anyone to hell, though. Hell is actually a result of God's loving respect for man's freedom of choice. God loves men enough to respect their freedom of choice, even the choice of unbelief and rejection of Himself and what He has done for man in His Son, Jesus Christ. Even so, as C.S. Lewis points out, "God does not send people to hell; people choose to go there by their own unbelief." God's heart is grieved, but He is respectfully willing

to let them go to hell if they insist on rejecting the life He offers in Himself.

The focus of Christian thought, however, should not be on final destiny and destination. Even futuristic concerns about our destiny in heaven can become an idolatrous concern. Our primary desire should not be for a future place of destination, but our desire should be to "fix our eyes on Jesus" (cf. Heb. 12:2), to "know Him, and the power of His resurrection" (Phil. 3:10). In the ontological dynamic of union with and participation in the life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we have the assurance of participating in the continuity and perpetuity of God's eternal life. Those who reject God's life in Christ also have the opportunity for continuity and perpetuity of their identification and union with the Evil One in that place "prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41). The "last things" of the eschatological destinies of heaven and hell are not just terminal locations; rather they

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should be understood as the dynamic continuity and perpetuity

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of the spiritual union each person has accepted.

The foregoing explanations of the fallacies of universalistic thought in general evidence how such thought violates every major doctrine of the core foundational truths of orthodox Christianity. This is indeed the reason why "universalism" - the teaching that all men, without exception, will be included among the saved in the presence of God in heaven forever- was deemed heretical by the early church and throughout church history. In particular we have noted the philosophical fallacy that approaches God and Christian theology from a mechanical-logical paradigm of thought encasing divine action in necessity, rather than from the revelatory perspective of God's Self-revelation of the living dynamic of His own Being in the action of His Son, Jesus Christ. Though our critical evaluation of universalism has been primarily philosophical and theological, it can be thoroughly documented that legitimate scriptural exegesis supports the theological perspective we have taken. The proof-texts utilized by universalistic teachers are exegetically unsupportable, for their interpretations fail to take into account the immediate context of the verses they cite, as well as the greater context of

the whole of scripture, and the entire tenor of the gospel of grace.

Why, then, is universalistic thought becoming so prevalent and popular among those who call themselves "Christians" today?

First, there are a number of contemporary cultural factors that are conducive to the acceptance of universalism. Western culture has become increasingly liberal in its tolerance and desire to be non-judgmental of every idea, person, and religion. The pluralism of multi-culturalism demands that we accept every opinion as having equal truth-value. The worldview that some have called "post-modernism," encourages a subjective orientation that is inclusively accepting and unwilling to identify anything as true or false, right or wrong. Such humanistic thinking promotes an irresponsibility that refuses to believe that people should be held accountable and responsible for their choices, identifying persons as "victims" when they have to face the consequences of their choices. Add to this the unitive emphasis that

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advocates the globalism of a one-world government, economy, and religion, and it is not difficult to see the cultural drift toward universalistic thought.

A second explanation for the propensity of Christians today to accept universalism is to be found in the inadequate teaching of the modern church. Discerning readers will no doubt have recognized that certain features of contemporary evangelical teaching have been indicted by some of the critiques of universalism made in the foregoing discussion of Christian doctrines. Christian theology has too long allowed the Christian gospel to be cast in a logical-mechanical context of static categories of an ideological and epistemological belief-system. God is boxed-in by logical necessity, the Son of God is viewed as an instrumental tool, man is regarded as an unrelational pawn, and salvation becomes a separated "benefit" conferred in an idolatrous concern for personal well-being. Is it any wonder that universalism presents itself to some as a more compassionate explanation of Christianity? It is imperative that Christian teachers restore a Christocentric understanding of theology that recognizes and maintains the dynamic of revelation, salvation, and life in the risen and living, Lord Jesus.

So, what is God's attitude in the midst of this entire situation? "God is not willing that any should perish" (II Pet. 3:9). "God desires all men to be saved" (I Tim. 2:4). If we are to participate in the heart of God, and "have the attitude in

ourselves which was in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:4), we, too, must desire that all men might be saved, ever recognizing that "Christ Jesus is our hope" (I Tim. 1:1). We should never take an "elder brother" attitude (cf. Lk. 15:25-32) that feels cheated, disappointed or angry when God saves those who have rejected Him, and then have repented and come to the Father through the Son, Jesus Christ.

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