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Editorial

As I take over this my first issue of *Themelios*, I am conscious of the debt that we all owe to Dick France for his work and dedication to the journal. His conviction, which is one that I share, is that all too often student and pastor alike are faced with theology which is avowedly anti-evangelical, and are told that anything else is either obscurantist or untenable intellectually. We believe that *Themelios* is one corrective to this sort of thinking. Dick has also maintained *Themelios* as a forum for the whole spectrum of evangelical theological thought. It is my conviction that this is its proper function and, in that it does it well, it provides positive teaching, stimulates evangelical thinking and acts as a legitimate critic of theological speculation. In this issue, we have concentrated all the articles upon the general theme of 'Universalism'. Dick commissioned most of what appears and I have edited this material—though with no sense of reluctance.

'Universalism' as a theological position is all too often assumed within the context of academic and pulpit theology, and little critical evaluation is either made or listened to. In this issue, we hope to be able to stimulate students to confront the real problems that are involved and to provide a secure foundation from which to face the implications of what we teach. To do this we have four separate Articles—none of them too long—encompassing some of the most important aspects of the problem. In the first, Richard Bauckham traces the history and development of universalistic ideas from Origen and the early church, down to present day advocates such as John Hick. He shows that all universalistic thought involves the ultimate assertion that 'all men will be saved'. He recognizes that most modern theology that shares this emphasis derives its inspiration from Schleiermacher. He reviews much that has been asserted and sets it within its theological context and provides us with a proper perspective in which to see its growth and influence. Tom Wright presents us with a Biblical view of Universalism. In this article he examines the claims that are made, that Paul taught a form of 'universalism' and vindicates the apostle from the charge that for him salvation included 'all men'. He also carefully considers those texts that are frequently adduced in defence of universalism and provides a careful exegesis, which leads to the conclusion that universalism inevitably fails to deal justly with the plainest meaning of scripture. A new contributor to *Themelios* then adds his different perspective on the general theme. Dr Blum has contributed an article considering the whole question of 'universalism' within the framework of a useful apologetic for the church. He shows how the whole concept of 'universalism' involves a denial of the essentially biblical emphasis and is derived from an interpretive principle of 'sovereign love' which is the deciding factor in humanistic thinking, rather than Christian and Biblical thinking. He is also clear in the way in which scripture teaches an inescapable doctrine of Hell and he makes clear the absolute sinfulness of sin. The final article in this symposium has been written by Bruce Nicholls

and looks at the whole issue in relation to the position of other world religions. He examines the variety of theological influences that permeate Eastern Christian thought and produces a positive critique as well as a useful evaluation of the current state of affairs. He places the idea of 'universalism' within the very practical terms of Christian mission and the Christian message and shows the inadequacy and danger of a less than scriptural concept of what we are doing and saying. The idea of 'universalism' is one that in some sense can be seen as the division rod between evangelical and non-evangelical thought. Almost all the important issues that we face today are found to be tied up with this concept. 'Universalism' is not simply another point of theological difference, it involves so many of the teachings of the Bible. Sin, Hell, Redemption, are all interrelated and must be dispensed with if this position is espoused. Indeed we come to the point where we will be worshipping different Gods, for the universalist invariably wants nothing to do with the God of the Bible. In truth, the presupposition held by many teachers and pastors that in the final analysis 'everything and everybody will be alright' colours the thought and understanding of everything that they teach and preach. It leads to radical departure from the Biblical standards of doctrine and to an understanding of the world in terms that are singularly akin to that of the humanists. A concept of 'universalism' determines the emphasis and articulation of almost every other theological truth; it ultimately reduces the mission and effectiveness of the church to impotence and it reduces the God of the Bible to a mere caricature and idol, carefully constructed from basic ideas of man. It is difficult to over emphasise the far reaching effects of his type of thinking, or to over stress the urgency of the need to present a clear, biblical alternative. Often the debate is seen as yet another side-line of the doctrine of the authority of the scriptures, yet it is much more than that, for at essence it involves the uniqueness of Christianity, and the very integrity of the gospel.

Universalism: a historical survey

Richard J Bauckham

Dr Richard Bauckham is Lecturer in the History of Christian Thought at the University of Manchester. His research has concentrated his attention on the development of doctrine, and this article represents one aspect of his study. In it he provides us with a perspective in which to examine universalist ideas.

The history of the doctrine of universal salvation (or *apokastastasis*) is a remarkable one. Until the nineteenth century almost all Christian theologians taught the reality of eternal torment in hell. Here and there, outside the theological mainstream, were some who believed that the wicked would be finally annihilated (in its commonest form this is the doctrine of 'conditional immortality').¹ Even fewer were the advocates of universal salvation, though these few included some major theologians of the early church. Eternal punishment was firmly asserted in official creeds and confessions of the churches.² It must have seemed as indispensable a part of universal Christian belief as the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation. Since 1800 this situation has entirely changed, and no traditional Christian doctrine has been so widely abandoned as that of eternal punishment.³ Its advocates among

¹ For details see L. E. Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of our Fathers* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1965-1966).

² Athanasian Creed; Fourth Lateran Council, Canon I; Augsburg Confession, ch. 17; Second Helvetic Confession, ch. 26; Westminster Confession, ch. 33; Dordrecht Confession, art. 18.

³ Already in 1914 H. R. Mackintosh could write: 'If at this moment a frank and confidential plebiscite of the English-speaking ministry were taken, the likelihood is that a considerable majority would adhere to Universalism. They may no doubt shrink from it as a dogma, but they would cherish it privately as at least a hope': 'Studies in

theologians today must be fewer than ever before. The alternative interpretation of hell as annihilation seems to have prevailed even among many of the more conservative theologians.⁴ Among the less conservative, universal salvation, either as hope or as dogma, is now so widely accepted that many theologians assume it virtually without argument.

The history is a complex one, partly because the issue of hell and universalism is closely interconnected with other difficult and debated theological issues, such as predestination and free will, the validity of retributive punishment, the authority of the Bible, and (most centrally) the nature of God, the meaning of and the relationship between His love and His justice. The issue of universal salvation is not related to these other issues in a straightforward way. Absolute predestination, for example, has been held to be the basis either for a doctrine of hell (Augustine, Calvin) or for a doctrine of universal salvation (Schleiermacher); while, conversely, free will has been held to support a doctrine of hell (C. S. Lewis) or a form of uni-

Christian Eschatology, VII, Universal Restoration', *The Expositor* 8th Series 8 (1914), pp. 130f.

⁴ The following are almost random examples of 20th-century English theologians who favour annihilation: C. Gore, *The Religion of the Church* (Oxford: Mowbray, 1916), pp. 91f.; W. Temple, *Christus Veritas* (London: Macmillan, 1924), p. 209; O. C. Quick, *Doctrines of the Creed* (London: Nisbet, 1938), pp. 257f.; U. Simon, *The End is Not Yet* (Welwyn: Nisbet, 1964), pp. 206f.; G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St John the Divine* (London: A. and C. Black, 1966), pp. 186f., 260; cf. J. W. Wenham, *The Goodness of God* (London: IVP, 1974, ch. 2 (leaves the issue open between everlasting punishment and annihilation). The Lausanne Covenant (ch. 3) speaks of 'eternal separation from God'. Annihilation is strictly not a possible option for Roman Catholic theologians, since it was formally condemned by the Fifth Lateran Council (1513).

versalism (Origen). Nineteenth-century advocates of universalism frequently emphasized the role of retributive punishment in their scheme, but more modern universalists often reject hell as a result of rejecting the idea of retributive punishment. Thus the problem of universalism cannot be reduced to a simple choice of alternatives. Only the belief that ultimately all men will be saved is common to all universalists. The rationale for that belief and the total theological context in which it belongs vary considerably.

Origen and the Early Church

The most famous and influential advocate of universalism in the early church was Origen, whose teaching on this point was partly anticipated by his predecessor Clement of Alexandria.⁵ Origen's universalism⁶ belongs to the logic of his whole theological system, which was decisively influenced by his Platonism and depended on his hermeneutical method of discerning the allegorical sense of Scripture behind the literal sense. According to Origen all intelligent beings (men, angels, devils) were created good and equal, but with absolute free will. Some, through the misuse of free will, turned from God and fell into varying degrees of sin. Those who fell furthest became the devils, those whose fall was less disastrous became the souls of men. These are to be restored to God through a process of discipline and chastisement, for which purpose this material world has been created and the preexisting souls incarnated in human bodies. The process of purification is not complete at death but continues after this life. Nor is it an inevitably upward path: the soul remains free to choose good or evil, and so even after this life may fall again as well as rise. Within this scheme punishment is always, in God's intention, remedial: God is wholly good and His justice serves no other purpose than His good purpose of bringing all souls back to Himself. Thus the torments of hell cannot be endless, though they may last for aeons; the soul in hell remains always free to repent and be restored.

Logically it might seem that Origen's conviction of the inalienable freedom of the soul ought to prevent him from teaching both universalism (for any soul is free to remain obstinate for ever) and the final secure happiness of the saved (who remain

free to fall again at any time).⁷ In fact Origen seems to have drawn neither conclusion. Given unlimited time, God's purpose will eventually prevail and all souls will be finally united to Him, never to sin again. The final restoration includes even Satan and the devils.

Origen's scheme conforms to a Platonic pattern of understanding the world as part of a great cycle of the emanation of all things from God and the return of all things to God. Despite the appeal to such texts as 1 Cor. 15: 28 ('God shall be all in all': this has always been a favourite universalist text) the final unity of all things with God is more Platonic than biblical in inspiration. The Platonic pattern of emanation and return was widely influential in Greek theology and provided the same kind of general world-view favouring universalism as Darwinian evolution was to provide for some nineteenth-century universalists. In both cases universalism is achieved by seeing both this earthly life and hell as only *stages* in the soul's long upward progress towards God, whereas mainstream Christian orthodoxy has always regarded this life as decisive for a man's fate⁸ and hell as the *final* destiny of the wicked.

The doctrine of the final restoration of all souls seems to have been not uncommon in the East during the fourth and fifth centuries. It was clearly taught by Gregory of Nyssa⁹ and is attributed to Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia,¹⁰ and some Nestorian theologians.¹¹ Others, such as Gregory of Nazianzus, regarded it as an open question.¹² Augustine took the trouble to refute several current versions of universalism, as well as views on the extent of salvation which stopped short of universalism but were more generous than his own.¹³

Origen's universalism was involved in the group of doctrines known as 'Origenism', about which there were long controversies in the East. A Council at Constantinople in 543 condemned a list of Origenist errors including *Apokatastasis*, but whether this condemnation was endorsed by the

⁷ Later critics of Origen accused him of denying the final security of the blessed: e.g. Augustine, *De Civ. Dei* 21: 17.

⁸ Despite the general resemblance between Origen's understanding of hell and the medieval and Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory (both concern purgatorial suffering after death), they differ very significantly in that the latter regards a man's fate as decided at death. Purgatory does not offer fresh opportunities of repentance and faith after death; it purifies those who repented and believed during their earthly life.

⁹ E. H. Plumptre, *The Spirits in Prison* (London: Isbister, 2nd ed., 1893), pp. 138-140; Bigg, *op. cit.*, p. 344.

¹⁰ Bigg, *op. cit.*, p. 343; Plumptre, *op. cit.*, pp. 140f.

¹¹ Plumptre, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

¹² Bigg, *op. cit.*, p. 344, n. 1.

¹³ *De Civ. Dei* 21: 17-27.

⁵ Clement's universalism is less clear than Origen's: see C. Bigg, *The Christian Platonists of Alexandria* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2nd ed., 1913), pp. 147f.; W. E. G. Ford, *Clement of Alexandria's Treatment of the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: OUP, 1971), p. 40, n. 9, pp. 72f.

⁶ See Bigg, *op. cit.*, pp. 273-280, 343-351. According to H. Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), p. 119, universal salvation was 'more his hope than his assured certitude'.

Fifth Ecumenical Council (553) seems in doubt. At any rate the condemnation of Origenism discredited universalism in the theological tradition of the East. In the West, not only Origen's heretical reputation but also Augustine's enormous influence ensured that the Augustinian version of the doctrine of hell prevailed almost without question for many centuries. During the Middle Ages universalism is found only in the strongly Platonic system of John Scotus Erigena (dc 877) and in a few of the more pantheistic thinkers in the mystical tradition, for whom the divine spark in every man must return to its source in God.¹⁴

16th-18th Centuries

The intellectual and religious upheaval of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries produced some examples of almost every possible religious opinion, and so it is not surprising to find some universalists. A few sixteenth-century Anabaptists and Spiritualists, notably John Denck,¹⁵ and a few of the most radical religious thinkers of the English Interregnum, notably Gerrard Winstanley and Richard Coppin,¹⁶ were universalists.

Universalism in the seventeenth century should be seen partly as reaction to the particularism of high Calvinism, which with its doctrine of limited atonement excluded any kind of divine will for the salvation of all men. Revulsion against the apparent cruelty of the God who cheated the reprobate for no other purpose than to damn him, led firstly to Arminianism, in which the Gospel genuinely offers salvation to all men; a further step leads to the Quaker doctrine that saving grace is given to all men, but may be resisted; the extreme position is that all men will actually be saved. A further factor promoting universalism was the Platonic tradition, revived during the Renaissance, along with an interest in Origen and the early Greek Fathers, who could plausibly be thought to represent a form of Christian doctrine earlier, and therefore purer, than Augustine, to whom the Calvinists appealed.¹⁷

So it is no surprise to find that some of the Cambridge Platonists in seventeenth-century England were universalists. Peter Sterry and Jeremiah White held the Platonic scheme of

emanation and return, the preexistence of souls, and the remedial character of all punishment. The love of God is His supreme attribute. His wrath is an aspect of His love, directed not against the sinner but against the sin. So the sinner's torment in hell will be the agony of enduring God's holy burning love until his sins are burned up and he himself is pure.¹⁸

Universalism also appears at the end of the seventeenth century among some of the German Pietists,¹⁹ and was again popularized in eighteenth-century England especially by the devotional writer William Law.²⁰

One very strong objection to universalism in these centuries was the deep-rooted belief that the threat of eternal torment was a necessary deterrent from immorality during this life. So weighty was this objection felt to be, that some who believed in universal salvation (or even in annihilation) held that this belief must remain an esoteric, secret doctrine for the few, while hell must continue to be preached as a deterrent for the masses.²¹ Even in the nineteenth century, when such esotericism was seen to be indefensible, universalists found it necessary to meet the objection by emphasizing as much as possible the severity and length of the torments which the wicked must endure before their eventual salvation.

The Nineteenth Century

F. D. E. Schleiermacher was the first great theologian of modern times to teach universalism.²² He taught a predestination as absolute as that of Augustine and Calvin, but he rejected any form of *double* predestination. All men are elected to salvation in Christ, and this purpose of divine omnipotence cannot fail. In this respect Schleiermacher represents a 'Reformed' universalism, founded on the all-determining will of God. Only a Pelagian, on this view, could argue from human

¹⁸ On Sterry and White, see Walker, *op. cit.*, ch. 7; for other 17th-century universalists in the Platonic tradition, chs. 8 and 10.

¹⁹ Notably J. W. Petersen and F. C. Oetinger. Petersen learned his universalism from the English visionary Mrs Jane Lead. On Petersen, see Walker, *op. cit.*, ch. 14; on Mrs Lead and the Philadelphia Society, ch. 13.

²⁰ Leckie, *op. cit.*, pp. 267f. Another 18th-century English universalist was bishop Thomas Newton; Plumtre *op. cit.*, pp. 203-205. Many forgotten universalist writers of the 17th and 18th centuries are listed in Ezra Abbot's bibliography appended to W. R. Alger, *A Critical History of the Doctrine of a Future Life* (New York: W. J. Widdleton, 3rd ed., 1878). For Joseph Priestley and Unitarian universalism, see G. Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), ch. 3.

²¹ Walker, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-7. The idea goes back to Origen, *C. Cels.* 6: 26.

²² *The Christian Faith* (ET, Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1928), paras. 117-120, 163.

¹⁴ J. H. Leckie, *The World to Come and Final Destiny* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 2nd ed., 1922), pp. 260-263.

¹⁵ G. H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1962), pp. 202, 246, 252, 843; on Denck, pp. 155, 157. This Anabaptist universalism was condemned in ch. 17 of the Augsburg Confession and in the 42nd of the English Articles of 1553.

¹⁶ C. Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (London: Temple Smith, 1972), pp. 140-143; on Coppin, pp. 177f.

¹⁷ D. P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), pp. 11-18.

free will to the possibility of hell. But Schleiermacher rejects what he sees as the capriciousness of the Calvinist God who arbitrarily elects only some men to salvation. For Schleiermacher a sense of the unity of the human race is a high virtue in men and cannot be thus disregarded by God.

Most interesting of Schleiermacher's arguments against hell is his deeply felt conviction that the blessedness of the redeemed would be severely marred by their sympathy for the damned. This is precisely the opposite of the conviction of many earlier theologians that the blessedness of the redeemed would be actually enhanced by their contemplation of the torments of the damned.²³ The latter view has a kind of reason on its side: Those who are wholly at one with God's will should rejoice to see His justice done. But it has largely disappeared from the doctrine of hell since the seventeenth century,²⁴ and the modern Christian's instinctive sympathy with Schleiermacher's contrary view places him on Schleiermacher's side of a great transition in the history of attitudes to suffering. With Schleiermacher we now feel that even the justly inflicted suffering of other men must be pitied, not enjoyed.²⁵ Schleiermacher's argument is typically modern in its appeal and is one element in the increasing popularity of universalism since his day.

Schleiermacher's universalism had surprisingly few successors in nineteenth-century Germany,²⁶ but in nineteenth-century England the problem of hell and universal salvation (with other aspects of the future life) became a matter of widespread concern.²⁷ This can be gauged from the attention given to three cases, all notorious in their day. In 1853 F. D. Maurice was dismissed from his professional chair at King's College, London, for what was little more than a cautious modification of the traditional doctrine of hell: a storm of controversy broke over this 'proto-martyr of the wider hope'.²⁸ Then in 1862, for his very tentative

assertion of universalism in *Essays and Reviews* (1860), H. B. Wilson was condemned in the Court of Arches, guilty of contradicting the Athanasian Creed, though the judgment was subsequently reversed on appeal by the Lord Chancellor.²⁹ Thirdly, F. W. Farrar denied eternal punishment in a famous series of sermons in Westminster Abbey in 1877 (published as *Eternal Hope*, 1878), though he remained agnostic as to the alternatives. But he was commonly understood to be teaching universalism, and his sermons provoked a learned defence of the traditional hell from E. B. Pusey.³⁰

Dogmatic universalism was in fact much less common in nineteenth-century England than a general uneasiness with the traditional doctrine of hell. This led to arguments for conditional immortality³¹; to undogmatic hopes for universal salvation³²; and to the idea that a man's fate is not sealed at death, but that the intermediate state offers fresh opportunities for attaining salvation.³³ The two leading dogmatic universalists were Andrew Jukes (*The Second Death and the Restitution of all things*, 1867) and Samuel Cox (*Salvator Mundi*, 1877).³⁴

Common to almost all versions of the 'wider hope' was the belief that death was not the decisive break which traditional orthodoxy had taught. Repentance, conversion, moral progress are still possible after death. This widespread belief was certainly influenced by the common nineteenth-century faith in evolutionary progress. Hell—or a modified version of purgatory—could be understood in this context as the pain and suffering necessary to moral growth. In this way evolutionary progress provides the new context for nineteenth-century universalism, replacing the Platonic cycle of emanation and return which influenced the universalists of earlier centuries.

²³ Rowell, *op. cit.*, pp. 116-123.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 138-147.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, ch. 9.

²⁶ E.g. S. T. Coleridge believed universal salvation to be a possibility which, in view of 'the exceeding sinfulness of sin', might not be presumed on: *ibid.*, pp. 67f.

²⁷ The classic statement of this idea of 'extended probation' was E. H. Plumptre, *The Spirits in Prison*: the sermon from which this work grew was preached in 1871. Evidence was found in 1 Peter 3: 18-20 (hence Plumptre's title) and the traditional doctrine of Christ's descent into hell; but 1 Peter 3: 18-20 cannot really be interpreted in this way: see the extensive study (including history of exegesis) in W. J. Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits: A Study of 1 Peter 3: 18-4: 6* (Analecta Biblica 23; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965). For the popularity of the idea of 'extended probation' in the 19th century, see J. Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World* (Edinburgh: A. Elliot, 2nd ed., 1893), p. 394.

²⁸ Rowell, *op. cit.*, pp. 129-133.

²³ This was taught, e.g., by Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine, Peter Lombard, Thomas Aquinas, Robert Bellarmine: references in Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

²⁴ See Walker, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-32.

²⁵ Note that C. S. Lewis, a competent modern apologist for hell, answers this argument of Schleiermacher's by denying that heaven and hell co-exist 'in unilinear time': *The Problem of Pain* (London: Bles, 1940), pp. 114f. He does not argue, as earlier theologians would have done, that pity for the justly punished would be misplaced.

²⁶ Mackintosh, *art. cit.*, p. 134, n. 1, can name only Schleiermacher's disciple Alexander Schweizer.

²⁷ A perceptive and informative study is G. Rowell, *op. cit.*

²⁸ Plumptre, *op. cit.*, p. viii. For Maurice's views and the controversy, see Rowell, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-89. In his *Lectures on the Apocalypse* (1861) Maurice appears to reach a more definite universalism (cf. pp. 400-405).

Into the Twentieth Century

The transition from Victorian to more modern forms of universalism is marked by some changes, of which the most important concerns exegesis. Almost all universalists before this century thought it necessary to argue for a universalist interpretation of those texts of the NT which seem to teach eternal punishment or final condemnation, and the standard approach to such texts was to deny the everlasting or final character of the punishment. Texts such as Matthew 25: 46 or even Revelation 14: 10f. were held to refer to a very long but limited period of torment in hell, from which the sinner will eventually emerge to salvation. The nineteenth-century debates always included extensive exegetical discussions, especially over the meaning of *aionios*. In this century, however, exegesis has turned decisively against the universalist case.³⁵ Few would now doubt that many NT texts clearly teach a *final* division of mankind into saved and lost, and the most that universalists now commonly claim is that alongside these texts there are others which hold out a universal hope (e.g. Eph. 1: 10; Col. 1: 20).

There are two ways of dealing with this situation. One is a new form of exegesis of the texts about final condemnation, which acknowledges the note of finality but sees these texts as threats rather than predictions. A threat need not be carried out. This, as we shall see, is the approach adopted by the most persuasive of modern universalists.

The second approach to the exegetical problem is simply to disagree with the NT writers' teaching about a final division of mankind, which can be said to be merely taken over from their contemporary Jewish environment, while the texts which could be held to support universalism represent a deeper insight into the meaning of God's revelation in Christ. Here the doctrinal authority of the Bible is understood much more flexibly than by most nineteenth-century universalists. C. W. Emmet's essay, 'The Bible and Hell' (1917), is something of a landmark.³⁶ After a survey of the NT material, showing that final division and judgment are clearly taught and hesitating to find full universalism even in Ephesians and Colossians, Emmet declares: 'It is best in fact to admit quite frankly that any view of the future destiny of [unbelievers] which is to be tolerable to us today must go beyond the

explicit teaching of the New Testament. . . . [This] does not really give us all we want, and it only leads to insincerity if we try to satisfy ourselves by artificial explanations of its language. And we are in the end on surer ground when as Christians we claim the right to go beyond the letter, since we do so under the irresistible leading of the moral principles of the New Testament and of Christ Himself.'³⁷

Thus the modern universalist is no longer bound to the letter of the NT; he can base his doctrine on the spirit of NT teaching about the love of God. The same principle can even be extended to the teaching of the historical Jesus, though some have been able to persuade themselves that the Gospel texts about final judgment are not in any case authentic words of Jesus.³⁸ This more liberal approach to Scripture has probably played quite a large part in the general spread of universalism in this century.

Barth and Brunner

Neither Karl Barth nor Emil Brunner was strictly a universalist, but both regarded the final salvation of all mankind as a *possibility* which cannot be denied (though it cannot be dogmatically asserted either). This is a significant step beyond traditional theology, which always asserted not only that final condemnation is a real possibility but also that some men will actually be lost. It is also a position which has probably had more appeal to conservative Christians (including Roman Catholic theologians) than dogmatic universalism; it allows us to *hope* for the salvation of all men without presuming to know something which God has not revealed.

Barth refashioned the Reformed doctrine of predestination by making it fully Christological. It is Jesus Christ who is both rejected and elected. The rejection which sinful man deserves, God has taken upon Himself in Jesus Christ, and in Jesus Christ all men are elected to salvation. He is therefore in the true sense the only rejected one. Predestination thus becomes not an equivocal doctrine of God's Yes and No, but a fully evangelical doctrine of God's unqualified Yes to man. The reality of man—of all men—is that in Jesus Christ the reconciliation of all men has taken place. The Gospel brings to men the knowledge of what is already true of them:

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

³⁵ Attempts to show that the NT texts refer to a temporary hell to be followed by ultimate salvation are still sometimes found: cf. W. Michaelis, *Versöhnung des Alls* (Berlin: Siloah-Verlag, 1950); M. Rissi, *The Future of the World* (London: SCM Press, 1972). But they no longer carry conviction.

³⁶ In B. H. Streeter ed., *Immortality* (London: Macmillan, 1917), ch. 5.

³⁸ Cf. J. Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (London: Collins, 1976), pp. 243-247. Hick's case is unconvincing because it does not take full account of all Synoptic sayings about final judgment. While it can plausibly be argued that much of the imagery of hell belongs to Matthew's redaction, the warning of final judgment cannot be eliminated from Jesus' authentic words even by stringent use of the generally accepted criteria of authenticity.

that in Jesus Christ they are already elect, justified, reconciled.

It might be thought that this line of thought logically entails universalism, much as Schleiermacher's doctrine of universal election did, but Barth refuses to follow this logic. There remains an irresolvable tension between the election of all men in Jesus Christ and the phenomenon of unbelief. The unbeliever's true reality is that he is elect, but he denies that reality and attempts to change it, to be instead the rejected man. In this perverse attempt (it is no more than an attempt) he lives under the *threat* of final condemnation, which would be God's acquiescence in his refusal to be the reconciled man he really is.

Will this threat be carried out? Barth does not here appeal to man's freedom to continue in unbelief: he is committed to the sovereignty of God's grace. The reason why universal salvation cannot be dogmatically expected lies in God's freedom: 'To the man who persistently tries to change the truth into untruth, God does not owe eternal patience and therefore deliverance. . . . We should be denying or disarming that evil attempt and our own participation in it if, in relation to ourselves or others or all men, we were to permit ourselves to postulate a withdrawal of that threat and in this sense expect or maintain an *apokatastasis* or universal reconciliation as the goal and end of all things. . . . Even though theological consistency might seem to lead our thoughts and utterances most clearly in this direction, we must not arrogate to ourselves that which can be given and received only as a free gift.'³⁹ But universal salvation remains an open possibility for which we may hope.⁴⁰

That universal salvation must remain an open question is also the conclusion that Brunner reaches by a different route.⁴¹ He stresses that we must take quite seriously the two categories of NT texts: those which speak of a final decisive division of men at the Last Judgment, and those which speak of God's single unqualified will for the salvation of all men. The two are logically incompatible and are

not to be artificially reconciled by attributing to God a dual will (double predestination) or by eliminating the finality of judgment. The texts are logically incompatible because they are not intended to give theoretical information. To the question 'Is there such a thing as final loss or is there a universal salvation?' there is no answer, because the Word of God 'is a Word of challenge, not of doctrine'.⁴² It addresses us and involves us. Its truth is not the objective truth available to the neutral observer, but the subjective truth of existential encounter. The message of judgment, then, is not a prediction that some will be lost; it is a challenge to me to come out of perdition to salvation. The message of universal salvation is not a prediction that all men will be saved; it is an invitation to me to make the decision of faith which accepts God's will to save me. The Gospel holds the two together in proclamation. Theology may not objectify either.

Two modern universalists

Two of the most persuasive of recent arguments for dogmatic universalism are those of J. A. T. Robinson and John Hick. We shall conclude this survey with a brief account of their positions.

Robinson⁴³ approaches the texts in a way rather similar to Brunner's. The NT contains two eschatological 'myths': universal restoration and final division into saved and lost. But whereas Brunner gives both the same status, Robinson maintains that they represent 'the two sides of the truth which is in Jesus. . . . Though both are the truth, one [universal restoration] is the truth as it is for God and as it is for faith the further side of decision; the other [heaven and hell] is the truth as it must be to the subject facing decision.'⁴⁴ Hell is a reality in the existential situation of the man facing the challenge of the Gospel: the seriousness of his decision must not be weakened by universalism. But universal salvation is the reality which God wills and which therefore must come about. For all that Robinson tries to give proper weight to the myth of heaven and hell, it is clear that universalism has the last word. As God's viewpoint it has a final validity denied to the viewpoint of man in decision.

This is because, for Robinson, only universal salvation is consistent with God's nature as omnipotent love. Final judgment would be a frustration of His purpose. But what of man's

³⁹ *Eternal Hope*, p. 183.

³⁹ *Church Dogmatics* IV/3 (ET, Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1961), p. 477.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 478; II/2 (ET, Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1957), p. 418. For criticism of Barth's position on election and universalism, from two different standpoints, see J. Hick, *op. cit.*, pp. 259-261; G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (London: Paternoster 1956), ch. 10. But note that Berkouwer wrote before the publication of the important passage CDIV/3, pp. 461-478.

⁴¹ *Eternal Hope* (ET, Edinburgh: Lutterworth, 1954), ch. 17; *Dogmatics* III (ET, London: Lutterworth, 1962), ch. 10. For a similar approach to the problem, see G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 390-419.

⁴² *In the End God* (London: Collins, 2nd ed., 1968), chs. 10 and 11. Robinson's case for universalism as a necessity of divine love was earlier argued in 'Universalism—Is it Heretical?', *SJT* 2 (1949), pp. 139-155; to which T. F. Torrance replied in 'Universalism or Election?', *SJT* 2 (1949), pp. 310-318.

⁴³ *In the End God*, p. 130.

freedom to resist God's love? Omnipotent love must in the end force every man to yield to it—not as an infringement of freedom, but as free choice elicited by love. Man's freedom is compatible with the victory of omnipotent love.

Robinson's is an eloquent expression of the case for universalism as a necessity of God's nature as omnipotent love. Hick's argument is parallel at some points. He too regards the two categories of NT texts as different kinds of statement. The warnings of hell are existential preaching, warning men that they will be damned *if* they permanently refuse to repent. Paul's statements about universal salvation, on the other hand, are detached theological conclusions. The two types of text are compatible because no-one will in fact permanently refuse to repent.⁴⁵

Hick feels the strength of the objection that universalism is incompatible with human freedom. His answer essentially is that human nature has a created bias towards God, which means that we naturally tend towards Him of our own free will. Therefore, given time, His love must in the end evoke a response from all men.⁴⁶

Hick's distinctive approach to universalism, however, lies in his concern for theodicy, which colours a great deal of his theology. The suffering and evil of this world can only be justified if God is going to bring to a good end every individual

personal life He has created. If there is either eternal punishment or annihilation for some, then either God is not perfectly good—since He does not desire the salvation of all His creatures—or He is not omnipotent—since His purpose has finally failed in the case of some. Only universal salvation can vindicate the omnipotent good God in whom Christians believe.⁴⁷

More than most other modern forms of universalism, Hick's bears a striking resemblance to both the Origenist and Victorian types, in that he envisages this life as merely the first stage in a long—in many cases, unimaginably long—post-mortem progress towards final salvation. Within this process hellish or (more properly) purgatorial experiences take their place. In his most recent work, Hick (drawing eclectically on Eastern, rather more than Christian, ideas of the future life) sketches a highly speculative account of the many subsequent lives through which men will pass in their gradual approximation to the divine purpose.⁴⁸ It is typical of this variety of universalism that our ultimate salvation becomes a prospect so distant as to be hardly capable of concerning us at all in this first of our many lives.⁴⁹ This is a far cry from Jesus' message of present salvation to be apprehended or lost in immediate response to His preaching.

⁴⁷ *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Macmillan, 2nd ed., 1977), pp. 341-345; *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London: Collins, 2nd ed., 1977), pp. 70-74.

⁴⁸ *Death and Eternal Life*, ch. 20.

⁴⁹ Hick admits this: *ibid.*, p. 420.

⁴⁵ *Death and Eternal Life*, pp. 247-250.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 250-259.

Towards a biblical view of universalism

N T Wright

Rev. N. T. Wright has recently been appointed as Chaplain of Downing College, Cambridge. Previously he spent many years at Merton College, Oxford, where he was especially concerned with the history of biblical interpretation, and specialized in a study of Romans.

‘There are two Biblical ways of looking at salvation. One says that only Christian believers will be saved: the other says that all men will be saved. Since the

latter is more loving, it must be true, because God is love.’ This argument (though the words are mine) is regularly used by university teachers of my acquaintance to persuade undergraduates to accept ‘universalism’ in its most common form—the belief, that is, that God will save all men individually. It explicitly plays off passages of scripture which appear to support it (Romans 5: 12–21, 11: 32, 1 Tim. 2: 4, 4: 10, John 12: 32, etc.) against those which quite clearly do not (Romans 2: 6–16, Matt.

25: 31–46, John 3: 18, 36, 5: 29, etc.). I have argued against this view elsewhere, at a more systematic level.¹ Here I want to look in more detail at the biblical evidence.

The proponents of universalism admit very readily that their doctrine conflicts with much biblical teaching. What they are attempting, however, is *Sachkritik*, the criticism (and rejection) of one part of scripture on the basis of another. We leave aside the implications of this for a doctrine of scripture itself. More important for our purpose is the fact that the great majority of the 'hard sayings', the passages which warn most clearly and unmistakably of eternal punishment, are found on the lips of Jesus Himself. This is the point at which the usual argument comes dangerously close to cutting off the branch it sits on. It says 'God is love': but we know that principally (since it is not self-evidently true) through the life and death of Jesus Christ. We cannot use that life and death as an appeal against itself—which is precisely what happens if we say that, because God is love, the nature of salvation is *not* as it is revealed in the teaching of Jesus and in the cross itself, the place where God has provided the one way of salvation. (If there were other 'ways of salvation', the cross would have been unnecessary.) I begin here because we need to be reminded of the uncompromising warnings which the evangelists place on the lips of Jesus Himself (and if they were creations of the early church, they are quite unlike anything else that the early church created). Nor is there any tension between statements of God's love and warnings of God's judgment. If this is a problem for us, it certainly was not for them: compare John 3: 16–21. Perhaps this is why many advocates of universalism abandon the attempt to argue their case from the Bible at all.

The attempt is still made by some, however, usually on the basis of certain passages in the Pauline corpus (an odd inversion, this, of the old liberal position where Jesus was the teacher of heavenly truths and Paul the cross-grained dogmatic bigot). But at the same time most exegetes would agree that one of Paul's foundation doctrines is justification by faith, which has its dark side in the implication: no faith, no justification. There are no problems of salvation (leaving aside for a

moment the few passages in dispute) for those outside the believing community.

We will return to Paul in a moment, but before that we must look at a passage which has sometimes been used to get universalists round the awkward corner thus created—namely, 1 Peter 3: 18–22, which has sometimes been interpreted as offering a 'second chance' to people who do not have faith in this life. But, as has been argued at length by commentators of various outlooks, the writer is most probably referring simply to Christ's proclamation to evil spirits that their power had been broken.² In any case, the next chapter (1 Peter 4, especially vv. 17–18) rules out any possibility that 'those who do not obey God's gospel' will be saved. The 'second chance' theory must look outside the Bible for support: though there, too, it is open to attack.³ We might note at this point that, though many profess to believe in a 'second-chance' universalism, they do not usually enjoy 'assurance' in the old-fashioned sense. Hence the revival of interest in praying for the dead (which does not, except in rare cases, spring from a return to the classical doctrine of purgatory, but rather from a vague general uncertainty about the way of salvation itself). Universalism of this kind, therefore, has the worst of both worlds: no clear doctrine of justification by faith, and hence no assurance of salvation. It neither has its cake nor eats it.

What then of the texts which are cited as positive evidence for universalism? The most popular occur in Romans (5: 12–21, 11: 32) and 1 Timothy (2: 4, 4: 10). We must take them in order. As always, the context must be the main factor in determining the meaning. And the context of Romans is the Gentile mission of which Paul speaks continually: the gospel is for all, Jew and Gentile alike, who believe (Rom. 1: 16–17). Jewish particularism is Paul's chief enemy, and the one way of salvation (eg Rom. 4: 9–17, 10: 12–13) one of his main emphases. It is in this context that the two Romans passages in question occur.

If we were to maintain, on the basis of the word 'all' in Romans 5 and 11, that Paul was a universalist, we would do so in the teeth of (eg) Romans 2: 6–16, 14: 11–12 and such other passages as 2 Thessalonians 2: 7–10.⁴ Nor will it do to say that Paul had not thought through the implications of Romans 5: the epistle is far too tight-knit for that.

¹ See my 'Universalism and the World-Wide Community', in *The Churchman*, vol 89, no. 3, July–September 1975, pp. 197–212, and (with Michael Sadgrove) 'Jesus Christ the Only Saviour', in *Obeying Christ in a Changing World*, vol. 1 (*The Lord Christ*), ed. J. R. W. Stott, Fountain Books, London, 1977, pp. 61–89. I refer below to these as 'UWWC' and 'JCOS' respectively. References will be found in both to articles and books presupposed here.

² See, e.g. J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude* (Black's NT Commentaries), London, 1969, pp. 152–158.

³ Cf. 'UWWC', p. 204f.

⁴ This is now increasingly being recognized by Pauline scholars; cf., e.g., E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, SCM, London, 1977, pp. 472–474.

Chapter 5 as it stands is flanked by the long section on justification by faith (3: 21—4: 25) and the presentation of 'being in Christ', of baptismal participation in His death and resurrection, and its results (chapters 6–8). On the one side, faith as the *sine qua non* of justification: on the other, membership of the professing community as the assurance of salvation. Nor can Romans 5 be detached from this context, as though it (or at any rate vv. 12–21) were a separate *excursus* put in here but unrelated to the context. It is a careful bridge-passage, taking up and making more precise the themes of chapters 1–4 (universal sin: the law: grace: the righteousness of God seen in the obedient life and death of Jesus Christ: the resultant justification and life which, in chapters 1–4, are for *believers*) and so arranging these themes that they can be used again throughout chapters 6–8, in the anthropology which leads from man-in-the-flesh to man-in-the-Christ, man-in-the-Spirit. Man-in-Christ enters the sphere of Christ delineated precisely by 5: 12–21: indeed, 6: 15–18, with its personifications of 'obedience' and 'righteousness', can *only* be understood if 5: 12–21 is presupposed. Whatever 5: 12–21 is asserting, it simply cannot contradict chapters 1–4 and 6–8.

But if that is so, 'all' in this passage simply cannot mean 'all individual human beings without exception'. If Paul had meant that, he should have torn up the letter and begun again from scratch. We can, however, find an alternative explanation without either forced exegesis or special pleading. Again the context is the clue. The point Paul has been making all along since 1: 5 (see particularly 1: 16–17, 2: 9–11, 3: 21—4: 25) is that all men, Jew and Gentile alike, stand on a level before God. All alike are in sin; all alike can only be justified through faith. Chapter 4 in particular stresses that Abraham's true family are not just Jews according to the flesh, the possessors of circumcision and the law, but the worldwide community of the faithful. That point being established, Paul can move on in 5: 12 ff. to show how Christ's faithful people enjoy the blessings that flow from Jesus' undoing of the sin of Adam. But his eye is still on the difference between Jew and Gentile—or rather, on the fact that this distinction has been done away in Christ. That is the significance of the references to the law in 5: 13–14, 20. Within this context, the correct gloss to put on 'all men' in vv. 12, 18 is not 'all men individually' but 'Jews and Gentiles alike'. If further definition is required, it appears in v. 17: 'those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness through the one man Jesus Christ'.

Closely related to Romans 5 is 1 Corinthians 15: 20–28, which is sometimes also quoted in this

connection. Much of what has been said above applies here too, with the following additional points being necessary. First, the 'all' of v. 22 clearly has the same general sense as in Romans 5, as can be seen from v. 23: those who will share Christ's resurrection are οἱ τοῦ χριστοῦ, those who are Christ's. Second, in view of such other passages in the letter as 6: 9, the triumphant eschatology of vv. 24–28 cannot be seen as implying universalism. God will be all in all, yes, and every knee will bow at the name of Jesus (Phil. 2: 10): but Romans 14: 10–12, which like Philippians 2 quotes Isaiah 45: 23 at this point, makes it clear that this will take place before the judgment seat, where (2 Cor. 5: 10) each one will receive those things done in the body, whether good or bad. So-called 'sovereign grace universalism', whether Barthian or otherwise, fails because it lacks a biblical theology of judgment.

Romans 11: 32 occurs, like 5: 12–21, within the wider context of Paul's discussion of God's dealings with Jews and Gentiles. God's purpose is being worked out through the hardening of the majority of Jews, which is designed (9: 19–24, 11: 11–15, 25, 30) to spread the gospel worldwide. But, Paul argues, this cannot be used by Gentile Christians as a reason for a theological inverted snobbery in which Jews would be regarded as unconvertible, as undoubtedly excluded from God's salvation in Christ. This is the whole thrust of chapter 11: Paul is not looking forward to a distant future in which there will be a final and unprecedented large-scale conversion of Jews, but to the present continuous effects of his own ministry (cf. 11: 14 and 11: 31; they have now been disobedient, so that because of the mercy shown to you they may also *now* receive mercy⁵). Jews, he is arguing, are still firmly within God's saving purposes, and a Gentile-dominated church cannot afford to ignore the fact. And within that context comes the summary in 11: 32: God has shut up all men in the prison of disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. Once again the context demands the gloss 'Jews and Gentiles alike' beside both occurrences of 'all men': that is what the argument is all about. If any doubt remains, it is dispelled by 11: 23: Jews can be grafted back into the olive tree *if they do not remain in unbelief*. There is no thought of salvation apart from faith. And Paul knew, as 11: 14 indicates ('that I may save *some* of them'), that faith would

⁵ $\nu\upsilon\nu$ is absent from a few MSS, and replaced by $\upsilon\sigma\tau\epsilon\rho\nu$ in others. But it should certainly be retained, with Nestle and Kilpatrick. As B. M. Metzger argues (*A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*. UBS, London and New York, 1971, p. 527), it is easier to envisage the deletion or replacement of $\nu\upsilon\nu$ than its insertion *de novo*. Compare RV, RSV mg., against AV, RSV, NEB.

not extend to all without exception. Romans 11 is no more a promise of universalism than Romans 5.

What then of 1 Timothy 2: 4 and 4: 10? Again the context is important: the 'proof-text-without-context' method, for which evangelicals are so often criticized, is the regular ploy of the universalist at this point. 1 Timothy 2: 1-7 is about prayer, and the need in particular to pray for all men, especially those in authority. Lest readers should think this is a counsel of folly, advising them to pray for people who are hardened and reprobate persecutors of the church, vv. 3 and 4 emphasize that God's grace knows no human barriers. Universal prayer must be made because man cannot tell whom God will save, and must realise that human and fleshly categories of who may be eligible for grace are just the sort of thing that the gospel shatters. This is further supported by reference to the Pauline Gentile mission and the universal gospel preached therein (2: 5-7), based on the fact that there is one way of salvation for all men (see below). And again the wider context reveals a doctrine of final judgment quite irreconcilable with 'universalism': compare 1 Timothy 1: 6-11, 4: 1-2, 5: 24, 6: 9-10. This also sets the scene for the other problematic verse in this letter (4: 10): though some have seen this as universalistic, it is in fact best taken as a cautious statement aimed against those who thought that salvation was the prerogative of one small racial or doctrinal group.⁶ This, too, is a note to be struck firmly when writing on this subject: it is no part of Christian duty to set bounds to God's grace, to dictate whom God may bring to faith and whom He may not. All we can do is observe what scripture teaches clearly and consistently: that there will be no salvation (in the fullest sense) without faith.

The same is true, finally, of the various Johannine passages (John 10: 16, 12: 32, 1 John 2: 2, etc.) sometimes quoted as universalistic. In many the context indicates that the meaning is similar to Paul's: the gospel is not for Jews only, but for Gentiles also (cf., e.g., 12: 32 in the context of 12: 20 ff.). In addition, some of the starkest of the Johannine judgment-sayings are found, as we saw earlier, right beside the richest promises of salvation for those who believe (John 3: 14-17, 18-21).

⁶ See J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (Black's NT Commentaries), London, 1963, p. 102. For the other possible interpretations of the verse, cf., e.g., W. Hendriksen, *Commentary on I and II Timothy and Titus*, Banner of Truth, London, 1957, pp. 153-156, and D. Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale Commentaries), Tyndale Press, London, 1957, p. 96 ('saviour' used in a double sense). We should also remember that, unlike Romans 5 and 11, 1 Timothy 4: 10 is not part of a doctrinal argument.

Again the position is quite clear: God in His great love has made one way of salvation for all men without exception. Those who refuse this way have no alternative left to them. And accepting the way of salvation, for John as for Paul, is bound up with faith in Jesus Christ.

Before moving on to a positive conclusion, we need a short excursus. There are some passages in the New Testament—I think particularly of Acts 10: 2, 4, 27, 30-35 and (on some interpretations) Romans 2: 12-16—which seem to allow for the fact that some people are saved without actually hearing and confessing the name of Jesus Christ, since in this life they had, as it were, possessed a Christ-shaped faith. They had been genuinely dissatisfied with their surrounding religion and humbly seeking to serve God in prayer and good works as best they knew how. As I have argued elsewhere,⁷ I believe that Scripture leaves this possibility open while giving us no encouragement to think that the category of people involved will be large. There are no promises of salvation for those who neither believe nor are baptized.

I want now to conclude by pointing up another, and more biblical, 'universalism'. This is the doctrine, which is in fact totally opposed to the usual 'universalism', that there is one God and one way of salvation for all, Jesus Christ. This is, of course, assumed and referred to all through the NT. Acts 4: 12 ('no other name . . . in which we must be saved') is perhaps its classic expression: compare John 10: 10, 14: 6, Romans 10: 12-13, and many other passages. We may trace the different biblical elements of this 'universalism' as follows.

It begins with God's promise to Abraham, that in him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. God has chosen to save the world through Abraham's family, and supremely (of course) in the true seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ (see Galatians 3 and Romans 4). For Paul, the cardinal sin of the Jews was that national pride and 'boasting' which turned the vocation of being a light to the Gentiles into a racial privilege. This universal promise is based on the fact that God is one, as was (and is) confessed daily by the pious Jew in the 'Shema' (Rom. 3: 29-30; cf. Deut. 6: 4 ff.). Thus, any suggestion that there is more than one way of salvation is not merely an attack on the uniqueness of Jesus Christ (as we see, for example, in the work of John

⁷ Cf., more fully, 'JCOS', pp. 77-79, 'UWWC', p. 208. Perhaps the best known and most appealing presentation of this view is that of C. S. Lewis in *The Last Battle* (Penguin Books edn., Harmondsworth, 1964), pp. 102-104, 144-150.

Hick), but also contains the implication that there is more than one God.⁸

The universal promise is fulfilled, not in Israel according to the flesh (because of her national pride and consequent failure to accept her suffering Messiah) but in her anointed representative, Jesus. In His death and resurrection He put to death 'fleshly' Israel and brought her to life again as a worldwide community. This is why the resurrection and the Gentile mission are so intimately connected.⁹ Over against the Jewish exclusivism attacked in Romans 2: 17 ff, stands the Christian assurance of Romans 5: 1-11: *we* (the worldwide, believing, missionary church) boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have received the reconciliation.

Biblical 'universalism', therefore, consists in this, that in Christ God has revealed the one way of

⁸ See my review of two books by Hick in *Third Way* vol. 1, no. 25, December 1977, p. 21; and Lewis, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-36, 92-106, 117.

⁹ See W. Pannenberg, *Faith and Reality*, Search Press, London, 1977, pp. 58-62; and my lecture (forthcoming in *Tyndale Bulletin*) entitled 'The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith'.

salvation for all men alike, irrespective of race, sex, colour or status. This biblical 'universalism' (unlike the other sort) gives the strongest motives for evangelism, namely, the love of God and of men. (This itself is evidence that we are thinking biblically here.) This view specifically excludes the other sort of 'universalism', because scripture and experience alike tell us that many do miss the one way of salvation which God has provided. This is a sad fact, and the present writer in no ways enjoys recording it, any more than Paul in Romans 9-11 looked with pleasure on his kinsmen's fate. Yet it cannot be ignored if we wish either to remain true to scripture or really to love our fellow men. If the house is on fire, the most loving thing to do is to raise the alarm.

I frequently meet people who tell me that they are 'universalists' in the usual sense while in no way thinking the Bible supports their view. This position is perfectly clear: I simply disagree with its view of scripture, of God and of Christ. What is not even clear is the position of the person who maintains that universalism finds support in the Bible. It might be more comfortable if it did: but we are in this business to discover truth.

'Shall you not surely die?'

E A Blum

Dr. Edwin A. Blum is a new contributor to Themelios; he is Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology at Dallas Theological Seminary, Texas. In this article he focuses attention on what is at stake in the universalism debate. At the same time he provides some striking criticisms of the whole position.

In the book of Genesis, the penalty for sin is stated as death. God Himself announces, 'you shall surely die' (2: 17). But the serpent tells the woman, 'You shall *not* surely die' (3: 4). In the progressive revelation in the Bible, there has been widespread agreement that the death involved in the penalty for sin is both physical and spiritual. The spiritual death is the separation and alienation from God which sin causes. The physical death is not immediate, but it is the inevitable result of sin. The

physical death is not nearly so significant as the spiritual death, but it is an important objective, visible divine object lesson for men. It teaches men in the physical realm what happens in the corresponding and connecting spiritual realm.

Jesus in His revelation of the Father's will warns men of the consequences of sin and announces that He is the solution to the great problem of human sin. He has come to bring life and union with the Father. The message of the gospel is that by His Death, Burial and Resurrection, He provides forgiveness of sin, justification before the divine law, propitiation of the wrath of God, and reconciliation with the Father. Yet the benefits of His work are not automatically conferred on all men, for the great stress of the New Testament is that men must hear the gospel and must believe it.

The last book of the Bible warns that the rejection of the way to life leads to a 'second death' (Rev. 2: 11, 20: 11-15, 21: 5-8). The terrible destiny of those who rebel against God or the unbelievers is the 'second death' or 'the lake of fire' (20: 14). In popular language, it is often called 'going to hell'. Dante in his *Divine Comedy*, reports a sign at the top of the gate at the entrance to hell: 'Leave every hope, ye who enter'.¹ In some circles, it is becoming increasingly popular to deny the teaching of eternal punishment of sin and to adopt some form of universalism.

This article will argue that the God of love will punish the unbeliever with eternal separation from Himself. The other articles in this issue must do the work necessary to show that the teaching of the church has been consistent in affirming the eternal lostness of the ungodly. They must also carry the weight to demonstrate that all compromise solutions (purgatory, limbo, annihilationism, conditional immortality, second chance views, ultimate restorationism, agnosticism, etc.) are wrong exegetically and theologically. The assignment for this article is to deal with the problem of universalism from the viewpoint of apologetics.

Apologetics deals with the defense of Christianity. However there is considerable difference among Christians on the task and method of the discipline. For some it is a philosophical skill and practice. For others it is a kind of Systematic Theology. Barth once said, 'Apologetics takes unbelief too seriously and it does not take faith seriously enough.' Along the same line, Ned Stonehouse remarked that an exposition of the truth cannot fail to be a defense of the truth at the same time. The relevance of this position to the current set of articles needs to be explored a bit. If the exegetical, historical and systematic articles demonstrate clearly that Christ taught eternal punishment of some and that the teaching of the Scriptures is plainly against universalism, then what is the need of apologetics? But what if the Scriptures are not clear on this issue? (a position which I do not hold). Could apologetics make clear what the Scripture does not? Should Christians take a position on so crucial an issue if the text is not specific? I think that the proper answer is no in both cases.

Perhaps apologetics could provide additional support for the doctrines of the Bible. But if the Scriptures are clear, do we need any other support? Is not the very seeking of additional support a betrayal of the Christian's confidence in the sufficiency of Scripture? Some Christians would so argue. For myself, apologetics, among other

things, seeks to engage in argumentation with issues and questions which the Scripture does not explicitly cover. Yet, apologetics should not remove itself too far from Scripture. The Christian is called to give a defense of his faith which is ultimately grounded in Jesus Christ and His Word and not primarily in a philosophical discourse removed from Scripture. So with these presuppositions, we proceed to examine some of the issues often raised by universalists.

How do universalists defend their views? Nels Ferre strongly advocates the position.² His defense rests on: (1) the sovereign love of God witnessed to by the Cross and Resurrection; (2) the logic of the Bible—'who will have all men to be saved' (1 Tim. 2: 3-4) and 'With God nothing shall be impossible' (Luke 1: 37); and (3) 'the New Testament itself, the existential source-book (not the literal textbook) of Christian doctrine, contains three teachings on the subject'.³ He gives the three as 'eternal damnation' . . . in some passages, 'annihilation is also there' and 'God's final victory is also stated'. Only the last view is fully and finally consistent with God as *agape*, according to Ferre, and the other positions are in the Bible 'because preaching is existential'.⁴

In reply to the views of Ferre, we would make the following apologetic. The idea that the New Testament contains three contradictory views of man's final destiny is open to several criticisms. The dominant exegesis of the NT does not agree with this idea. The historical analysis of Jewish opinion on the subject at the time of the NT era does not support the notion. The adoption of a view which admits three contradictory teachings in Scripture goes against the church's historical position that the Scripture is authoritative in all its parts. It also means that any kind of Systematic Theology is almost impossible because synthesis is part of the essence of systematics.

The idea that certain teachings are in the Scriptures for their existential relevance and are not to be taken in a 'literal' or normal language way leads to all kinds of difficulties. If God is the Source of the Scriptures, how can he ethically originate teachings which are in fact not true? How can the 'ultimate triumph teaching' (universalism) be taken seriously? If the first two views are non-literal, then perhaps the third is also non-literal. The idea of scaring people with notions that God knows to be untrue even if it results in a good end is unworthy of God (cf. Rom. 3: 8 on the condemna-

² See his book, *The Christian Understanding of God* or his summary in 'Universalism: Pro and Con', *Christianity Today*, March 1st, 1963, p. 540.

³ *Christianity Today*, March 1st, 1963, p. 540.

⁴ *Ibid.*

¹ Canto III: 1-9.

tion of the philosophy of 'Let us do evil that good may come').

The universalist appeal to a text like 1 Timothy 2: 3, 4 'who will have all men to be saved' must be referred to the New Testament scholars for detailed exegesis. However, the following observations are pertinent: (1) the Greek word *thelo* ('will') is commonly translated 'wish' or 'desire'. (2) Theologians often make a distinction between God's desire and God's decree. (3) The book of 1 Timothy clearly teaches that some will depart from the faith (4: 1-3) with no indication of their restoration. (4) The statement occurs as an encouragement to pray. So the passage strongly urges prayer because God is gracious and merciful, and His desire is for all men to cease their sin and rebellion and turn to Jesus as Saviour. The character of God is such that He takes no delight in the death of the wicked. As Ezekiel prophesied, 'I take no pleasure in the death of anyone—it is the Lord Yahweh who speaks. Repent and live!' (Jerusalem Bible, Ezek. 18: 32, cf. 18: 1-32).

The major argument of the universalists is from the love of God. Since God is love, it is argued that this love cannot be eternally frustrated. Ultimately, this love will win out by God's sovereignty. As John Hick states it, 'It seems morally impossible that the infinite resourcefulness in unlimited time should be eternally frustrated, and the creature reject its own good presented to it in an endless range of ways.⁵ Or again, 'For if there are finally wasted lives and finally unredeemed sufferings, either God is not perfect in love, or He is not sovereign in rule over His creation.'⁶

There are a number of ways in which Christians have argued against the particular stress on sovereign love in universalism. A Calvinist might reply on the basis of the teaching of particular love. For example, the Scriptures reveal a special love which God grants. In the case of the nation Israel, it was chosen in love by God while other nations were destroyed (Deut. 7: 1-8). Arminians have often argued that God in His sovereignty has permitted *real* free will, and thus it is possible for a creature to irrationally choose against the Creator. Barth stressed the *freedom* of God's love so that to say God *must* in love save all is to deny His freedom.

The strongest arguments against the sovereign love stress in universalism are a criticism of the universalist's definitions of sovereign love in God. The typical universalist definition of God's love is too anthropocentric. It assumes God's love is

greater and fuller in the salvation of all men.⁷ But the Triune God has within Himself a perfect love which is not added to in the relations He has with His creatures. The argument of the universalist assumes an increase in the perfection of God's love if all mankind is saved. But if God is love, the perfection of His love in universalist thought comes only in creation and redemption. In this way of thought, God's perfection in His being is bound up with His creation and thus His aseity or absolute independence is compromised. This kind of a god bound to his creation can only be a sophisticated idol of the human mind.

Along with the fallacy of an anthropocentric definition of God's love is the related fallacy which 'assumes that men are autonomous beings who stand "out there" with some integrity of their own and to whom God may or may not direct his love'.⁸ But since men are creatures and are not autonomous, their value, meaning and integrity stem only from God. Without Him and apart from Him, they are nothing. The idea that God could be 'eternally frustrated' by the lack of response from 'nothing' is impossible.

Against universalism it can also be pointed out that of the creation with which we are familiar, salvation is extended to humans (some) but not apparently to animals nor angels. With animals, it could be argued that they do not have a 'soul' or a spirit, that they do not sin and thus no salvation is needed. But in the case of angels, sin is revealed (Rev. 12: 7-9; John 8: 44) and no salvation is indicated. Logically, universalists should argue that the fallen angels and Satan will be saved by the sovereign love of God. This again goes clearly against the revelation in Scripture. If the Scripture on so basic an issue can be set aside, then where can the universalist find his source for his teaching on the love of God? The gift of salvation to believers is in principle no different than the gift of salvation to mankind and not angels. Both involve a particularism.

Further, it can be argued that the purpose of God is not limited or bound to soteriology in Scripture. The purpose of God in relation to mankind is also revelational to other creatures. Texts such as Ephesians 3: 10 indicate through the church the manifold wisdom of God is being made known 'to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places'. In the just punishment of sin in angels and men, God's wrath and power are also being revealed. The

⁵ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Collins/Fontana), 1975, p. 380.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 376.

⁷ Cf. the helpful analysis of Joseph Dabney Bettis, 'A Critique of the Doctrine of Universal Salvation' in *Religious Studies* 6: 329-344.

⁸ Bettis, p. 336.

notion of an eternally frustrated God is far from the Biblical revelation. Instead, our minds are staggered by the cosmic dimensions of the issues which are involved. With a modern understanding of the vastness of the universe, our conception of the greatness of God and the colossal implications of the Incarnation should likewise be expanded.

Less speculative and more pointed against universalism is the criticism that sin, history and human decision do not receive their biblical emphasis. T. F. Torrance claims that universalism 'commits the dogmatic fallacy of systematising the illogical'.⁹ Sin has a mysterious irrational quality to it. Thus to Torrance, for a universalist to 'solve' by reason the contradiction introduced by sin and to dogmatically assert universalism, reveals a foolish wisdom of the world which needs the humility of the Cross.¹⁰ More to the point is that in universalism sin loses its exceeding sinfulness. Men are so affected by sin that we all trivialize it. Too often sin is seen as ignorance or the result of human finitude. The enormity of sin can only be partially grasped in the light of the colossal Sovereign who framed the universe by His will. Yet in the mystery of iniquity, men and angels have set themselves to do their will and not His. The contradiction caused by sin is solved only in the Incarnation of the Son of God who suffers the agony of the Cross and is made sin in the place of the sinner. Universalism trivializes sin by effectively denying that sin deserves punishment. If sin deserves infinite punishment, then no sinner has a claim to salvation based on sovereign love. If sin does not deserve infinite punishment, the biblical revelation of the Death of the Son of God is trivialized. What was the necessity of the Cross?

Human time and history lose much of their significance in universalism. In the biblical revelation, a man's life and decisions are crucial for destiny. In universalism, there is always more time

and another era for personal decision. In Christianity, 'Now is the acceptable time, behold now is the day of salvation' (2 Cor. 6: 2). The saying of Jesus concerning Judas, 'It would have been good for that man if he had not been born' (Matt. 26: 24) is grounded on the biblical understanding of the significance of a man's decision in time and history. The choice of good or evil loses its cutting edge when the results are ultimately a good destiny in either case. How does morality fare in a universalist system? Certainly one could probably find universalists who live more attractive lives than some believers in eternal punishment. However, the logic of the position that all will be saved without regard to faith or life reduces the value of both.

The classic doctrine of justification by faith in universalism is no longer the article by which the church stands or falls. The biblical stress on the nature and necessity of faith in Jesus is bypassed. About ninety times in his Gospel, John exhorts men to believe in Jesus in order to come to life (John 20: 30-31). Universalists often claim that they believe in preaching the gospel, but is the motive for evangelism and world missions still present and strong? What is the significance of the future Judgment if all will be saved? (cf. Acts 17: 30-34).

The considerations argued above seek to show that the issues involved in the conflict with universalism are not peripheral but central to the Christian faith. The major apologetic against universalism must be that it is unbiblical and therefore unchristian. Its major defense ('sovereign love') comes not from exegesis of biblical texts but from an idea of love which has a humanistic orientation. A minor apologetic seeks to show that attempted theodicy by universalists creates far more problems than it solves. Finally, if the universalist position would turn out in the end to be correct, no lasting damage would have been done. But if the issues are as Jesus and the Christian church have proclaimed, the momentous nature of the decision concerning Christ's sacrifice is apparent. The choice is then—life or death.

⁹ T. F. Torrance, 'Universalism or Election?' *Scottish Journal of Theology* (2: 310-318) p. 313.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 314.