

UNIVERSALISM: FORMS AND FALLACIES

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Introduction

Whenever we attempt to discuss what is “universal,” we are inevitably delving into the broadest of categories, for “universal” refers to everything or everyone in the universe, without exception, encompassed in a singular category of thought. The very concept of “universalism” is extensively inclusive, meaning that it extends to all, without exception, and therefore includes all, without exception, in the class or category being considered. It necessarily comprehends an “all-ness in oneness” which allows for no exception.

This particular study of “universalism” will *not* be universal in its scope, for it is not our intent to study the entire history of universalistic thought, nor to consider all of the personages who have espoused and propagated universalistic teaching. Neither will we consider all of the logical and exegetical means by which various men and movements have arrived at their conclusions of “universalism.” The limited and particular scope of this study is to consider some of the major forms into which universalism has been formulated, and then to undertake a refutation of the premises of universalism in general by examining logical and theological fallacies of such thought.

Forms of Universalism

There is much ambiguity in the popular usages of the term “universalism.” The term has been used in the context of philosophy, sociology, religion, and elsewhere. We will note three general categories or forms of universalism: (1) Philosophical universalism. (2) Pluralistic religious universalism. (3) Christianized religious universalism.

Philosophical universalism

Some philosophers have referred to a conceptual universalism wherein all thought concepts must find unification in a particular paradigm of understanding. Everything, without exception, is alleged to find empowerment and meaning from a common source. Similar to what Einstein posited as the “unified field theory” in scientific thought, some philosophers have concluded that all ideas find their origin and culmination in one Mind of the universe. The religious expression of this postulate is found in the “Science of the Mind” tenets, which became the foundation of Christian Science and Religious Science.

Eastern philosophical and religious expressions of this form of universalism are formulated in monistic concepts of oneness. All is essentially and universally one, despite the illusory appearances of differentiation. If not pantheistic (everything is God), this form of universalism may espouse panentheism (everything is in God, and we must “see God in everything”). The contemporary “New Age Movement” of thought usually incorporates this form of monistic universalism from Eastern thought and religion.

Sociologically, some have espoused a moral universalism wherein every individual, without exception, is obliged to seek the highest teleological objective and welfare of all other persons in the society. Such universalistic egalitarian concern for all within the social community is advocated as a moral necessity for an ideal society.

Pluralistic religious universalism

It is the natural tendency of man to convert philosophical concepts into religious tenets. The broad concepts of philosophical universalism are transferred into religious universalism.

Throughout the history of religious thought there has been a recurrent tendency to advocate a blind tolerance of religious differences, and to project an overriding universality to human religious aspirations. All religions are regarded as having equal validity, for all religions are alleged to lead to the same God and to the same destiny for mankind. “All spiritual paths lead up to the same mountaintop called ‘God’,” is an example of such teaching. In this amalgamistic attempt to promote universal religious unity, all concerns for

truth or falsehood, orthodoxy or heresy, are eschewed. Christianity's claim of singularity of Truth in the Person of Jesus Christ is particularly repugnant to such unification endeavors. In the contemporary social climate of pluralism and tolerance of all variants, this form of pluralistic religious universalism is particularly appealing.

The phenomenon of exploding world population has convinced some that pluralistic religious universalism is a necessity. Some Christians have concluded that world evangelism is a hopeless endeavor. Millions of people pass through human life without the opportunity of hearing or responding to Christ's claim on their lives. "Are we going to conclude that the vast majority of the human race are hell-bound sinners who will eventually be 'written off' and 'fried in hell'?" they ask. "How can we continue to claim that a particular historical event is the singular means by which all men are to find significance for their lives and assurance of their destinies?" Accepting all religious belief in pluralistic religious universalism is regarded as the only feasible course of action.

Christianized religious universalism

As the term "Christian universalism" is regarded by traditional Christian understanding to be a misnomer in the form of an oxymoron, we have elected instead to refer to "Christianized religious universalism." What cannot be denied, however, is the mushrooming acceptance of universalistic thought among those who call themselves, "Christians."

It will be important to clarify how we are using the term "universalism" in this context. The new covenant gospel of Jesus Christ is universally available to all men, and not limited by race, nation, economic position, or gender (cf. Rom. 3:29; Gal. 3:28). Christ's death was the redemptive ransom for all men universally (cf. I Tim. 2:6; Heb. 2:9), in contrast to the exclusivist Calvinistic teaching of "limited atonement" which considers the death of Christ effective only for the "elect." The universality of gospel availability and redemptive efficacy are not the "universalism" being referred to in this article. By the term "universalism," we are referring to the teaching that "all men universally, without exception, will be included among the saved in heaven with God forever." Various labels have been applied to this teaching, including "universal restoration" (cf. Acts 3:21 where "restoration"

is the translation of the Greek *apokatastasis*), “universal restitution,” “universal reconciliation,” and “universal salvation.”

The process of thought by which Christians arrive at the hypothesis of “universalism” varies. The following are a few admittedly arbitrary categorizations of variant forms of Christianized religious universalism. These are not self-defined or organized forms of universalistic thought, but generalized categories that seek to explain the reasoning by which different people have arrived at the conclusion of universalism.

“God is Love” Universalism

Commencing with the revealed truth that “God is love” (cf. I John. 4:8,16), some surmise that the absolute benevolence of God requires that He accept and receive all men into His eternal presence. “If God loved men enough to create them, He will love them enough to preserve them,” is their reasoning. Leading rhetorical questions are often employed to challenge other views: “Is God a ‘respector of persons’?” The answer is “No” (cf. Acts 10:34). “Does God divide people up into ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’?” No. “Is God a self-righteous, unforgiving, cold-hearted God?” No. “How could a good and loving God condemn mankind, impose death on His created beings, and send people to hell?” He cannot. He does not. But implicit within their questions is a serious misunderstanding or perversion of Christian theology.

A compassionate and benevolent God must of necessity act in grace toward His creation, they argue. Their understanding of grace is that of sentimental indulgence whereby God accepts man’s behavior, whatever character is exhibited. Despite their references to “sovereign grace universalism,” their premises seem to be another form of the “cheap grace” that Dietrich Bonhoeffer repudiated. This form of universalism misunderstands God’s love as sentimental benevolence, and misunderstands God’s grace as doting indulgence.

Calvinistic Universalism

As strangely ironic as it may seem, the deterministic exclusivism of five point Calvinism has been one of the strongest driving forces for inclusivistic universalism. Many

thinking people react to the arbitrary limitation of the atonement of Christ to the predestined “elect,” but they often seek to maintain their deterministic view of God. From divine determinative exclusivism, the pendulum swings to the divine determinative inclusivism of universalism. The “L” of “limited atonement” in the Calvinistic TULIP acrostic is mutated into “limitless atonement.” The other petals of the flower remain intact in the deterministic system that diminishes or denies the conditional faith response of man to God’s action in Jesus Christ. Personal responsibility is waived, and this is one of the primary drawing points of universalism. It is a natural propensity of man to seek a religious system wherein he is relieved of personal responsibility.

When divine sovereignty is merged with divine love as the primary impetus of God’s action, then God necessarily enacts within man all that He intends and desires for man. The sovereign love of God enacted by His irresistible grace initiative is always sufficient and will inevitably bring all men to salvation and heavenly glorification. The omnipotent love of God always achieves the predetermined will of God, for divine *agape* “never fails” (cf. I Cor. 13:8). So goes the reasoning of Calvinistic or deterministic universalism.

Covenant Universalism

When God created the human race He established an eternal covenant with mankind, an arrangement wherein all human descendants have an inherited participation in God’s covenant blessings. This aberrant form of “covenant theology” reveals an intrinsic weakness of overemphasizing the continuity of covenant benefits. When Old Testament persons of faith are regarded as “saints” or “pre-Christ Christians,” having exercised a faith that did not involve epistemic knowledge of Jesus Christ, then people in every age can be said to have saving faith without explicit knowledge of the historical Christ, His incarnational advent, His redemptive sacrifice, or His resurrection restoration of life out of death. The content of faith is inconsequential, for what is important is the “faith principle” (cf. Matt. 8:10; 15:28) whereby sincere people seek God, trust God, fear God (cf. Acts 10:34,35), and evidence genuine humility. The continuity emphasized in unilateral divine covenant agreements can be misused in a form of “covenant universalism.”

Soteriological Universalism

Soteriology, the study of salvation, is obviously central to any study of “universal salvation.” The Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, emphasized a unique incarnational soteriology that left itself open to “soteriological universalism.” Barth’s thesis explained that when God became man in the person of Jesus Christ, deity subsumed humanity into Himself to the extent that we can now speak of the “humanity of God” (the title of one of Barth’s books). If Christ’s taking of our humanity causes humanity to be subsumed into God, then the resultant conclusion is that all of mankind is universally drawn into reconciliation with God. The question that must be asked is whether when “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14) and the Son of God “was found in appearance as a man” (Phil. 2:8), this necessarily implies that deity became humanity and subsumed humanity into deity.

Oneness Universalism

As the West becomes more and more enamored by Eastern oriental thought, the philosophical and religious concept of monistic universalism is often Christianized with a veneer of Christian vocabulary. Despite the observation of C.S. Lewis that Christianity is differentiated from Eastern thought by its insistence on the distinction between the Creator and the creature, many seek to merge the Creator God with His creation in a pantheistic and monistic manner. If “God is all and in all,” then this all-inclusive oneness and unity of the created order implies that all men are universally united with God. God, the “divine spirit” is alleged to be in every man and to be the energizing source “in whom we live and move and have our being” (cf. Acts 10:28). The “divine light” of Christ (cf. John 1:9) dwells intrinsically in every person universally, and their only need is to recognize such. A human response of faith is not required, just an expanded awareness of the inner reality of the divine presence of the universal Christ. The legitimate truth of “union with Christ” can be pushed beyond its relational intimacy into an abstracted essentiality of “oneness universalism.”

The Christianized forms of universalism, rather than the philosophical and pluralistic religious forms, are the focus of this present study, though there is some cross-pollination of thought. The five (5) forms of Christianized universalism that we have identified do not

constitute a complete or exhaustive listing of universalistic formulations, but simply serve as a representative explanation of the variant means by which persons and groups arrive at their conclusions of universalism.

Fallacies of Universalism

We will not attempt to dissect each of the abovementioned forms of universalism and identify their particular fallacies, but we will instead present a generalized critique of universalistic premises as they contrast with basic tenets of Christian doctrine. The church has long recognized that the teaching of universalism impinges upon the major doctrines of Christianity, and has determined that universalistic teaching is contrary to the core foundation of Christian orthodoxy, and is therefore heretical. In response to Origen's (A.D. 185-254) teaching of universalism and subsequent formulations of the theory, the Council of Constantinople declared universalism to be "heresy" in A.D. 543. Though revived by John Scotus Erigena (A.D. 810-877), by John Denck in the Anabaptist backlash to the sixteenth century Reformation, and by the German mystic, Jacob Boehme (1575-1624), it was not until the theological liberalism of the nineteenth century became prominent that Christianized universalism began to proliferate and become popular. That it remains heretical and contrary to the orthodox teaching of Christianity, we will herewith set forth.

Theology (*Doctrine of God*)

Theology proper, the consideration of God's Person and work (in that order), is assaulted by the fallacies of universalism. Whereas "oneness universalism" posits deity intrinsic within humanity, "soteriological universalism" posits humanity intrinsic within deity post-incarnationally. Both of these theses imply a "universal reconciliation" of God and man by virtue of the intrinsic connection of deity and humanity. "Covenant universalism" binds God into a legal obligation to keep His alleged unilateral covenant agreement, and "Calvinistic universalism" forces God into a deterministic implementation of His decree to save all men in Christ. "'God is love' universalism" likewise creates a logical necessity that demands the salvation of all men in order to justify God's love. They all impinge on God's

absolute divine freedom to act in the expression of His own Being, without any strictures of necessity.

God is Self-existent, autonomous, and independent. He is not dependent or contingent on any other, and certainly not on the human creature that He created. Nothing and no one can lay claim on God's necessary action, for there is nothing that necessitates His doing what He does, anymore than anything outside of Himself necessitates His being Who He is. Out of His own Being (*ek theos*), He *does* what He *does*, because He *is* Who He *is*. What He does is always His own Being in action, for He does not act instrumentally in the conveyance or dispensing of separated benefits apart from His own Being. God's action to save mankind, for example, is not necessitated by His love, His decrees, His covenant arrangements, His relational oneness, or the incarnational involvement of the Son. His actions cannot be legitimately relegated to logical/mechanical instrumentation of necessity.

Christian theology must commence with Who God is, His character, and the recognition of how His very Being is expressed in His actions. Universalism may appear to do so, as it typically presents its argument by focusing on God's love and His conveyance of such by grace. This is deceiving, however, for the major premise of universalism is the predetermined decree of God's objective to save all men. This fallacious starting point posits a predetermined objective that is then used to define and justify God's character of love and His functional grace.

Without question, "God is love" (I John 4:8,16). Love describes Who God *is*, not something God *has* in order to distribute to others. The God Who *is* love preceded the creation of man, and He was complete and fulfilled in His Trinitarian love expression from eternity-past. God did not have to save mankind through Christ in order "to prove Himself" to be love. There was no external logical mandate that necessarily implied that in order "to be true to Himself," He had to act to save all fallen creatures. This impinges upon the absolute freedom of God to function as the God that He is, and ever so subtly binds God in a logical necessity (which deifies human logic and relegates God as the instrumentation of such).

We must beware of any form of theological reductionism that tends to reduce God to a single or primary attribute or character trait, such as love. The "God is love" form of universalism is the most popular contemporary expression of universalistic thought, and its thesis finds its way into the arguments of the other forms, but there is always the danger of

attempting to define God only on the basis of His love, or to explain His love in expressions analogous to human love, rather than in the singularity of the incarnational manifestation of love in the Son, Jesus Christ.

When the omnipotence of God's sovereign action is logically connected to the character of divine love, Christian theology can soon go astray in asserting that sovereign omnipotence must always achieve what it desires, even if by imposition or coercion. Though the desire and "will of God" is clearly stated, for "God is not willing that any should perish" (II Pet. 3:9), this does not necessarily imply that God must bring this to pass in universal enactment, for this once again binds God in a logical necessity.

Divine love must be understood in a relational context, for God's love was eternally expressed in the Trinitarian relations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Any mechanical understanding of God's love as a unilateral force deterministically and omnipotently imposed upon man by the "will of God" does violence to a proper understanding of God's love. Relational love cannot be forced or coerced. On a human level this is called "rape," and on the divine level such a unilateral determination to coerce man to participate in God's love does violence to the genuine faith-love relationship that God intends by a freely chosen response and willingness of man to be intimately involved with Himself. Such a personal faith-love relationship is what God intended when He Self-limited His own sovereign omnipotence in order to grant man a genuine "freedom of choice" that allows a freely chosen relational participation in the inner love relations of the Trinity.

Yes, God "desires all men to be saved" (I Tim. 2:4), but His love and sovereign omnipotence must not be defined, evaluated, and legitimized by effectual universal quantification in the salvation of all men. God *is* love, whether He saves all men, or does not save any man. God's love is not contingent on man's need of salvation, or on the result of universal quantification.

If in any manner we reason "God is love because He saves all men," we establish God's Being by a utilitarian process that defines God by what He does for man. This is the essence of idolatry, for idols are defined by how they serve, satisfy, and benefit man. Idols are constructed for man's well-being. We must not engage in the idolatry of making God a magical means to man's ends. Universalism often ends up being both humanistic and idolatrous as it constructs a "god" who is a universal producer of egalitarian benefits and

blessings for man. The benefits and blessings are then elevated for worship, instead of worshipping and glorifying God for the worthiness of His own Being. We do not worship God for what He can *do* for us, but for Who He *is* in Himself.

Universalism often reacts vehemently to any mention of divine judgment or wrath. Granted, Christian teaching has too long focused on the juridical and punitive consequences of man's sin, and cast such in some grotesque forms, but God's love is not necessarily a denial of His justice and judgment. God's love and justice are not contradictory, and God's judgment is not just an illusory and temporary phase wherein God forces man to repentance and participation in His deterministically universal love. God judges and determines all things in accordance with Who He is. His all-glorious character alone brings glory to Himself, which is the purpose of all creation (cf. Isa. 42:8; 43:7; 48:11). The loving justice of God implies intolerance and rejection of all evil and sin that are not consistent with Himself, for such thwarts divine glorification and frustrates derivative man in his created *raison d'être*. God's judgment and the reprobation of those who reject God's love and grace do not comprise or reveal a failure of divine sovereignty or love. The tri-personal God of love grieves over those who reject Him, "not willing that any should perish," but grief and suffering are not indicative of the failure of love, but of love reacting to freely chosen rejection.

God's love is not prescribed or contained in a decreed "plan" for the final universal destiny of mankind. Rather, God's love is revealed in the "Person" of Jesus Christ and the gracious opportunity all men have to participate in the love-life of the triune Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Universalism tends to deify human reason, creating a God of human deduction that is prescribed by logical necessities, rather than worshipping the God of the universe who has revealed His love in Jesus Christ, and is desirous of a love relationship with those who are receptive to His life in faith, and willing to allow Him to become the basis of their identity and function.

Anthropology (*Doctrine of Man*)

Deficient theological understanding of God is often closely allied with a humanistic anthropology that sets man up as a "god," or makes God dependent on man. Correct

understanding of man must recognize that the Creator God is Self-existent, autonomous and independent, whereas man, the creature, is dependent and contingent upon God, functioning as intended only by derivative receptivity of the character of God in human behavior.

The rationalized logical necessities of universalistic thought regard humanity as the necessary object of God's action, whether it is His love, His decrees, His covenants, His incarnational subsumation, or His absorptive inclusivism. As the necessary object of God's action, man is posited as an independent and autonomous being upon whom God can and must act. This humanistic premise of man as a self-existent, "independent self" that is the foundational premise of most universalistic thought is contrary to a Christian understanding of anthropology. "Oneness universalism," on the other hand, goes to the opposite extreme of positing the essential deification of man, which is just as inconsistent with the Christian recognition of the distinction of God and man that allows for relational union. Christian anthropology insists that man is not an autonomous, self-existent, independent object that God is obliged to love and save in order to justify His Being, nor is man ever merged or absorbed into God.

Christian anthropology is unique in its assertion that the Creator God created man as a derivative creature whose intended identity and function are contingent and dependent upon dynamic receptivity from God. Unable to function as a self-existent, "independent self," man must derive his being, identity, nature, character and immortality from God in order to be man as God intended man to be. Man has no legitimate existence on his own, apart from God. Only when God is spiritual present within man, and man is receptive to God in relational dependence and operational derivation, can man function as God intended, as the vessel of the manifestation of God's all-glorious character, thus fulfilling his created *raison d'etre* (cf. Isa. 43:7). It requires God present within and functioning through a man for man to be man as God intended man to be.

Man's receptive derivation from God is founded on the premise that God created humans as choosing creatures. Human "freedom of choice" is not to be equated with any absolute sense of "free-will," which would deny human derivativeness. Man is not a lesser self-generative "god," who can freely "will" something into being by auto-productivity. Only God has the "free-will" to determine what He will do in accordance with His character, and the inherent power to implement His willed intentions. Humans, on the other hand, were

created by God's "free-will" to be receptive choosing creatures with "freedom of choice," which involves the responsibility (response-ability) to contingently and dependently derive from God in order to be fulfilled (full-filled) humanity. The Creator God Self-limited His own absolute "free-will" function in so creating man with freedom of choice, for He desired a personal relationship with man through a man's freely chosen faith-love dependency. To disallow man the opportunity to choose such a dependent relationship, or conversely to reject God and to experience the consequences (Col. 3:25) of such rejection is to depersonalize humanity.

Universalism undermines the personhood of human beings by advocating that God imposes His determinations upon man without respect for the freedom of choice which He granted man in creating man as a choosing creature. Man is disallowed his response-ability of receptive faith to make a dependent decision of derivation to participate in all that God made available in His Son, Jesus Christ. Universalistic thought is necessarily deterministic. Men are considered as but pawns of God's universalistic determinism whereby He imposes His predetermined objectives upon them, consistent with well-known forms of Augustinian and Calvinistic theological formulations.

The divine determinism of universalism recoils at any thought of receptive faith being a "condition" of relational union with God. What they fail to understand is that the chosen response of receptive human faith places no contingency upon God to act on man's behalf, for contingency is always man's place before God. The "condition" of a freely chosen response creates no contingency of divine action, but simply allows man to exercise human choice for the receptivity of God's activity, as faith responds to grace (cf. Eph. 2:8,9). Conversely, there is human freedom to reject a faith-love relationship with God in Christ, clinging instead to a self-imposed bondage that refuses to participate in God's design for functional humanity.

Universalism's violent reaction to the conditionalism of a required faith response on the part of man, and insistence upon an "unconditional" imposition of love, covenant, salvation, etc., creates numerous fallacious concepts of faith. The most radical, deterministic universalists declare, "God does not mean for man to have faith." Others define faith as a commodity that belongs to the Son (cf. Gal. 2:20), and which God gives to (cf. Eph. 2:8) and confers upon the "elect" to produce a divinely imposed response to God's determinations. 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 dependently 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 can receive or reject God. Instead, they purposefully stress the collective and corporate aspect of humanity, preferring to view mankind 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 mankind in Christ, mankind is organically and relationally connected as "salvation" implements the universal reunification of the unity of mankind. 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 response-able, 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 and 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 predetermined 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 hamartiology. 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 its theoretical certainty of the security of the universal “elect,” “Calvinistic universalism” 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

the expression of His all-glorious character, and His intolerance for the misuse and abuse of humanity when diabolic and evil character, contrary 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 derivation 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 “miss His goal” of universal salvation, and would thereby Himself become a “sinner.” This twisted logic is based on an arrogant assumption of their knowing 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" (II Thess. 2:7 - KJV). The inexplicable mystery of evil set up the illogic of the crucified Christ on the cross on Calvary to facilitate the "mystery of godliness" (I 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" (II 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 very 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 Christ 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 every one 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 delivery of divine "benefits," but of the availability of the very "Being" of God in Christ to dwell within and function 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 Christian 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" *from* 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 epistemic 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

should be understood as the dynamic continuity and perpetuity of the spiritual union each person has accepted.

Conclusion

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 multiculturalism 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

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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