

**UNIVERSALISM**  
**ITS DISTORTIONS AND DANGERS**

By

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# UNIVERSALISM: ITS DISTORTIONS AND DANGERS

There has been in recent years a resurgence of universalism as a theological option among Christians. Perhaps it is the pluralism of our day, the rise of postmodernism with its debunking of truth, the speed of communication via the internet, the challenges of living Christianly in an increasingly polarized world, and general biblical illiteracy in the West that have contributed to the new appeal of universalism.

## Definitions and Historical Overview

Universalism is the belief that all people, and even fallen angels and Satan himself, will be reconciled to God. While the wicked of this life go to a place of torment, such as hell, they do not go there “forever.” In due time the “fires” of hell will purify all the wickedness away and all will eventually go to heaven, to spend “eternity” in the presence of God.

This is the usual Christian form of universalism which maintains restoration after future punishment. Another form of Christian universalism asserts that restoration takes place immediately after death. The idea of restoration only after punishment was declared by the Universalist movement in America to be the “orthodox” view in 1878, at Winchester, N.H. “Penitence, forgiveness, and regeneration” are all involved.<sup>1</sup> There is also a pagan form of universalism that teaches that all will ultimately be happy since all are, by nature, the creatures and children of God.<sup>2</sup>

The chief argument of universalism is the emotive appeal to God's mercy and love. As the argument goes: How can a loving God torment people forever in hell, the lake of fire, for failing to believe during a lifetime of a relatively few number of years? There is also an appeal to Scripture, but in the end Scripture takes second place to the appeal to a sense of fairness and justice in God's dealing with people.

Followers of universalism go back at least to the third century when Clement of Alexandria and, especially, Origen (d. 254), a leading biblical scholar of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, espoused such a belief. The Scriptural arguments rest on three points: (1) the purpose of God to restore all things to their original excellence (Acts 3:21; Origen called this *apokatastasis*); (2) the means of restoration through Christ (Rom. 5:18; Heb. 2:9); and (3) the nature of restoration as the union of every person with God (1 Cor. 15:24-28). The Christian church answers that the texts which speak about “all” refer not to all but to everyone who is in Christ; and that this interpretation is the only one compatible with the Bible's teaching on the “diverse destinies of the righteous and the wicked (Matt. 25:46; John 3:16; 5:29; Rom. 2:8-10; 9:22-23).”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gerstner, “Universalism,” *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, ed. E. F. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1966), 539. See the similar entry in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. See also M. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), who cites other forms of universalism (universal conversion by evangelism, universal atonement, universal opportunity to respond) that are not examples of true universalism. In contrast to the classic form expressed by Origen, true universalism may take the forms of universal explicit opportunity (before or after death all place faith in Christ after explicitly hearing the gospel), universal reconciliation (reconciliation is already an accomplished fact for all), and universal pardon (in the end God will change his mind about condemning many and impute not only righteousness but also faith to all, and will forgive all).

<sup>3</sup> Gerstner, “Universalism,” 539-40.

## An Evaluation of the Defense of Universalism

This paper was occasioned by a defense made of universalism in the spring of 2004, at a session of M3 Forum. Paul Young presented his case for universalism in a paper over a hundred pages in length. Paul has attended an evangelical Bible college and shows a special interest in pursuing theological truth. He has many biblical tools, reads widely, and writes with conviction. His paper is one of the most comprehensive defenses of universalism and is convincing, to a certain degree. Paul and I have been friends for many years.

This paper is my response to Paul. I believe that universalism falls short of the truth of biblical revelation and logic and distorts the emotive appeal to the love of God. I defend the orthodox view of salvation. In the first half of the paper I cite each of Paul's points and then seek to respond to each one. This format allows the reader to follow Paul's case for universalism and then to read my response and evaluation. In the second half of this paper I discuss major texts of Scripture that Paul for the most part does not discuss. These texts oppose, I believe, the universalist position. Then I raise questions that present theological obstacles to universalism, cite dangers inherent within universalism, and make some final observations.

My intent in this paper is to seek to discover and propound the truth regarding universalism. My motive in addressing this issue is to pursue truth in a context of loving concern for those who may be wondering about the validity of universalism.

Paul presented his case for universal reconciliation under four major considerations, followed by a substantial "summary and conclusions." I briefly consider each of these in turn.

Yet, first, I wish to address one topic raised in the introduction. That is the matter regarding the state of the lost who have never had the opportunity to hear the gospel. While this is a concern that Paul repeats later—how can untold billions who have never heard the gospel be confined to endless punishment?—Jesus, Paul the apostle, and others certainly thought the same thoughts. They suggest that all have heard, that all have a certain degree of knowledge of the true God, that all have a conscience to discern right from wrong; and they assert that people are culpable for rejecting this knowledge (Rom. 1-3; 10). I give further elaboration of this response below.

A. Paul Young's first part is a defense of universal reconciliation by "Arguments from Language." He takes up a discussion of three sets of words: (1) *olam, aion, aionos*; (2) hell, sheol, hades, gehenna, lake of fire; and (3) torment, punishment, burning, brimstone, judgment. While I find this section helpful at times, there are serious errors that concern how one discovers the meaning of terms, the use of word studies, etc. It is correct to assert that "usage determines meaning" (p. 7) [or perhaps it should be more accurately stated: context determines meaning], but I find that Paul often does not follow this principle himself. While Paul builds a substantial case for proving that *aion* and *aionos* do not always mean "eternal" (with which I agree), it is incorrect to assert that "nowhere in Scripture does AION mean eternal. Its simple meaning is *an age*" (p. 7). This claim goes too far. Christ's reign will be forever, and 1 Cor. 15:24-28 does not contradict this (contrary to Paul; pp. 8, 10). For the text can be interpreted to mean that Christ is co-ruler with the Father; or that the Father rules through the Son. At least the meaning of "God" here may refer to the divine nature or being, which both the Father and the Son share. In addition, Rev. 22:1-5 pictures the final state, and the "throne (note the singular) of God and of the Lamb" is mentioned twice (vv. 1, 3), just like both divine persons of

the Godhead are designated the temple (21:22), and the lamp of the Holy City (21:23), although later (22:5) only the “Lord God” is said to shine on people. Is it not possible that Jesus Christ as God reigns forever, but as Son there is ongoing subjection of the Son to the Father? It is also possible that this text means that there is not eternal subjection, but at a point of time in the future God as Father, Son, and Spirit is “all in all.” I will return to the discussion of 1 Cor. 15.

Other errors include the claim that *aion* should always be translated “age” and not “world” in some contexts (p. 9); that the “singular form cannot have the same meaning as the plural” (p. 10). Yet the singular and plural might mean the same if the context has a collective idea, or if the author seeks to make a point of emphasis. Paul Young also claims that the KJV translators did not accurately follow the Greek and Hebrew texts in translating *aion* because they were bowing to an “ecclesiastical doctrinal mandate” so as not to disturb the church. In truth, the translators were the best scholars of the day; and modern translations validate in many places their choice of translation. Further, there is no proof that they had a motive to avoid any allowance for universalism. Next, Paul claims that “eternity is absolute timelessness.” Yet eternity may include time or a different kind of time. How else can the Bible, accommodating itself to how mortal human beings think, express a reality beyond them? Since context determines meaning there are places where *aion* commends itself as meaning “eternity.” See Matt. 25 discussed below: it is difficult to deny it as applying to the future life of the righteous in order to deny it as applying to the future torment of the wicked. Finally, Paul does not cite the standard Greek lexicons of our day (e.g., *BDAG*). The latter gives four definitions (determined by context) for the term *aion*, with many references for each: (1) very long time, eternity [esp. in doxologies (see Matt. 6:13; Rom. 11:36; etc.; note Heb. 13:8)]; (2) a segment of time, age; (3) the world as a spatial concept; (4) the Aeon as a person. The adjective has the meanings of (1) without beginning; (2) without beginning or end [esp. of God]; and (3) without end. It seems that scholars affirm several meanings for these cognates including “forever” regarding the destiny of people (cf. John 6:51, 58). This lexicon also cites secular Greek sources (Plato; etc.) where “eternity” is an appropriate meaning.

Even more complete is the longer entry for *aion* and *aionios* in the major source, *TDNT*, vol. 1:197-209. Paralleling much of the discussion in *BGAD*, some of the pertinent statements include the following. “Only in the light of the context can it be said whether *aiwn* means ‘eternity’ in the strict sense or simply ‘remote’ or ‘extended’ or ‘uninterrupted time’” (1:198-89). The “plur. use is simply designed to emphasize the idea of eternity which is contained but often blurred in the sing. *aiwn*” (1:199). Finally, these “formulae contain nothing peculiar to the NT. From the time of the LXX they form part of the common usage of Hellenistic Judaism” (1:199). Even *olam* begins in Isaiah “to have the sense of endless time or eternity in the true sense” (1:200). The “usage of the NT is distinguished from that of the LXX only by an intensification of the tendency already displayed in the LXX to replace the simple formulae by more complicated” (1:200). The word “has the full significance of eternity when it is linked with the concept of God” (1:200). “Eternity is thought of as unending time—for how else can human thought picture it?—and the eternal being of God is represented as pre-existence and post-existence” (1:201-202). These statements refer to the OT concept that the NT took over and extended to Christ (1:202). The *TDNT* goes on to discuss the noun as the time of the world and as personified (1:202-208), and the adjectival form with similar ideas (1:208-209).

(2) Paul's discussion of the terms for hell is more straightforward, although *BDAG* note that the term in the gospels “is the place of punishment in the next life” (p. 153). Yet I do not quite understand the logic that leads Paul to conclude that “because it [hell] is so twisted and warped it cannot obtain lasting fulfillment, being tormented by the fires of its own unsatisfied

passions” (p. 14). If in this age we have seen what horrible forms evil can take, why should this not continue to other, even more perverse forms in the coming era?

I find the discussion regarding the lake of fire quite confusing. To make the lake of fire an experience of purification and to give it the meaning that it ends death seem directly opposed by the context. It seems to be the final disposition of the wicked who are in hell and already dead. The text does not say that it brings an end to sin (note that sin still exists in Rev. 22:11, 15), nor that it is used to purify the wicked to make them suitable for the new Jerusalem (for some are still outside it in 22:15). A more obvious meaning in Rev. 20 is that the wicked experience a resurrection from hades or hell to be judged before the great white throne. As their final judgment they are cast into the lake of fire to experience another death (in addition to that natural death before) which is unending suffering (20:14-15; 21:8). The text does not say any thing regarding the change of this destiny. The text does not say that the lake of fire destroys death (p. 15), or that it “undoes all the work of the first death” (p. 16) so as to purge away sin (p. 16). It simply says that the lake of fire *is* the second death (20:15); having a part in the lake of fire is the second death (21:8). It is a final destiny beyond natural death. No where does the text even hint that the lake of fire has a cleansing, chastising, disciplining function. In addition, the lake of fire continues to exist (21:8) after God makes all things new (21:5). The Apostle Paul's claim that death is the last enemy to be abolished (1 Cor. 15:26) probably does not refer to the second death of Revelation [contrary to Paul Young], but speaks to the believers' hope of resurrection, that natural death is conquered. The wicked are resurrected, not to life but to another level or kind of death after judgment (they “will rise to be condemned,” John 5:28-29). The wicked are not considered in the context of 1 Cor. 15. Believers are the “all” who, after “falling asleep in Christ” (vv. 17-18), are “made alive” (v. 22), who are raised in their turn after Christ returns (v. 23). Finally, in contrast to Paul Young's use of Rev. 2:11, the promise to the overcomer is that he will be totally free of the lake of fire, not that he will not be “hurt” by it (as though he experiences part of it). It is totally unacceptable to compare the lake of fire judgment for the wicked with the Christian's purification and destiny. Believers never stand at the great white throne judgment. They go immediately into the presence of God as recipients of eternal life.

(3) Paul's discussion of “torment, punishment, burning, etc.,” leaves a great deal to be desired. There is misrepresentation of the character of Christ: he is said to be a lamb who would never afflict harm or torment, that his “desire is entirely redemptive” (p. 18). Yet this overlooks his being also the lion of Revelation, the one who became angry and beat the money changers in the temple, the one who is the “lamb of wrath” in Rev. 6:16-17, and the one who is worthy to inflict all the wrath of the seal, trump, and bowl judgments (5:9). He is the one who returns to punish with his sword all the wicked gathered against him; he is the one who inflicts God's wrath (19:15). Universalism's picture of Jesus Christ is distorted by ignoring several texts. It is correct to view Rev. 14:10 as saying that the wicked are “tormented” in the “presence of” or “before” the Lamb; but this also suggests that such “torment” has his approval. In addition, it seems to stretch the text to read this as internal torment, as referring to the conscience (since elsewhere it includes physical suffering (9:5; 18:10, 15)). Revelation 19 reveals that at his return Jesus smites the nations with his sword and will reign with a “rod of iron” (v. 15); he “treads the vat of the wine of the wrath of the anger of God almighty” (v. 15); and he actually puts to death the wicked with his sword (v. 21). The discussion of “eternal life” as meaning “life of the ages” (Matt. 25:46) does not do justice to the text (see my discussion below). Does Paul mean to say that there is not a single promise of the believers' having eternal life in heaven? He cannot take this view, and be consistent, for his whole thesis is that the wicked are going to be chastised until they are worthy of heaven. But what kind of heaven is it if it cannot promise eternal life? Finally, the attempt to limit the meaning of “torment” (*kolasis*) to

“correcting,” “chastising,” or “pruning” seems to neglect the context (cf. 1 John 4:18) and the several uses in the Apostolic Fathers where it means “punishment.” Again *BDAG* define it as “punishment” (p. 440). This particular word occurs only in 1 John 4:18 (which does not pertain to the suffering of the wicked) and in Matt. 25:46.

The other words for “torment” come from cognates of *basanos* (only occurring in Rev. 9:5; 14:11; 18:10, 15; Luke 16:23, 28 [the parable of the rich man and Lazarus—see discussion below]; Matt. 4:24 [suffering from demons]). The verb form (*basanizo*) occurs (so *BDAG*, 134) (1) literally of judicial examination (not in the NT); (2) of any severe distress, usually physical, as in diseases (Matt. 8:6; Rev. 12:2; Matt. 8:29—the demons ask Jesus whether he had come to torment them “before the time”; Rev. 11:10; 9:5; 14:10; 20:10); or essentially mental (2 Pet 2:8); and (3) generally, to harass (Matt. 14:24; cf. Mk. 6:48—the storm harassed the disciples). These various uses show that (1) torment was often physical; (2) that most of the references refer to God or Jesus tormenting the wicked or demons; or describe the wicked as suffering torment in hell.

The most interesting observation is that no one but Jesus uses the two terms for the torment of the wicked in hell (except Rev. 20:10 which implies that God torments the wicked in the lake of fire—but this may also be Jesus Christ). It is in his presence that the wicked are “tormented forever” in Rev. 14:10. No one else—not John, Paul, Peter, etc.—uses the terms in this way in the NT. This is a telling bit of information that should temper all attempts to think of Jesus only with regards to love. Surely this represents his sense of justice and anger toward sin (see below). To this must be added the statements of Jesus that his home town of Capernaum and its neighbors would suffer worse in the day of judgment than the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Matt. 10:15; 15:23-24; cf. Luke 17:29—Sodom itself is a picture of the judgment at the return of Christ).

The idea that there are only two “right” reasons for punishing a criminal (“to protect society and to restore the criminal to society improved by the punishment,” p. 17) overlooks the reason for punishment as an end in itself, the idea of retribution, which finds expression in the government's exercise of the sword (in war and in the death penalty) (Rom. 13:1ff.), in the OT's (and NT's) sense of judgment on various nations, and as one of the purposes of Christ's return (2 Thess. 1:8-9). The suggestion that those who commit the “unpardonable sin” will be pardoned in the coming age, that “a way opens up for even forgiving such a sinner as this” (p. 20), is reading into Scripture something it never says and runs counter to the finality of Jesus' words. It amounts to wishful thinking. The idea that the judgment of wrath in Rom. 2:5-9 is only remedial and temporary, that it continues only until the wicked are broken and call upon God for mercy, and are delivered, again adds to the text what is not there. This interpretation also overlooks the principle involved: all will be recompensed by God according to their works (v. 6). What “good works” marking the righteous (w. 7, 10) will the wicked be able to do in hell to change their destiny? One must do good works 100 per cent of the time and never commit a sin. The text gives every appearance of addressing people of the present age; the Apostle is not addressing those in hell. In spite of claims to the contrary (p. 20), universalists do “minimize” the wrath of God.

One serious concern surfaces in reading Paul's defense of universalism. Throughout much of this discussion very little is said of the need for the wicked to believe in Christ as their savior. Little is said of the role of faith. Instead, there is wording to the effect that the wicked are chastened to call out for mercy. But this is not saving faith in Jesus Christ, which alone gives entrance into “eternal” life. As James says: “the demons believe but tremble” (Jam. 2:19). There is much argument from silence, there is much appeal to what God must do as the God of love, but virtually nothing is said of the finality and permanence of God's justice and judgment on those who do not

believe. John 3:16 makes faith the defining issue (cf. vv. 17ff.).

B. Paul Young's second major division concerns "Arguments from Reason and Emotion."

1. The first section concerns "Argument from Concept." I must confess that I found this section particularly disturbing. I believe that Paul overstepped the bounds of critique and argumentation and ended up slandering God, Jesus Christ, and every traditional Christian. I base my claim on the statements that Paul makes in reaction to the traditional Christian belief of the eternal suffering of the wicked. These statements include the following: that "Jesus is fundamentally involved" in the torture of billions of people (p. 22); that Paul Young's own compassion "seems greater than God's" (p. 22); that "God in the end is grossly unjust" (p. 22); that, in comparison to Pharaoh, Nero, and Hitler, "the doctrine of eternal torture makes Jesus *a million times* (italics his) more vicious and vindictive than these three put together" (p. 23). It goes without saying that the vast majority of Christians must somehow be able to believe what they do about eternal suffering without becoming slanderous of the nature of God and of Jesus. The resolution lies in a fuller understanding of the meaning, i.e., the cost, of the death of Christ, of the seriousness of sin, of how humanity fell into sin in Adam, of the incarnation, of the nature of God himself as both one who is just and one who is love.

2. As far as the "Pragmatic Argument" is concerned, I suggest that how we are to conduct ourselves in light of the eternal suffering of the wicked should be dictated by how Jesus lived, and how the greatest apostle, Paul, conducted himself. I don't think that even Jesus and Paul would meet Paul Young's *ad hominem* argument—"either those who teach eternal torture are extremely and brutally calloused or *they do not truly believe what they teach* (italics his)." Moreover, Paul Young thereby indicts the shortcoming of universalism and himself—that universalists care less about winning the lost to Christ now since they believe that the wicked will have a second chance. I don't know of any universalist running door to door, pounding and warning people to turn from sin and to believe in Christ. I'm sure that Paul doesn't live the way that he condemns others for failing to live.

3. As far as the "Evangelistic Argument" is concerned. Paul argues that Christians use the torments of hell to evangelize the lost, whereas Jesus and the Apostle Paul did not do so. I think that there may be some other considerations that Paul Young has overlooked (such as trusting in the purpose of God—Rom. 8:28), or that would be framed in terms other than what he is defining as the evangelistic argument. Moreover, the Apostle Paul was highly motivated by the love of God—the love of God revealed in Christ and the consequences for those who did not place faith in him and his atoning work. Paul was constrained by love to reach all men (cf. 1 Cor. 5:14ff.), but also warns of God's condemnation and wrath (Rom. 2; 11) and a day of retribution and eternal destruction (2 Thess. 1:8-10). In addition, Jesus himself warned of hell four times more frequently than he spoke of heaven (note Matt. 5-7). Finally, Peter's first sermon on the Day of Pentecost has overtones of judgment to come (Acts 2); and in his message on "Mars Hill" Paul explicitly warns of a day coming when God will judge the world in righteousness by the resurrected Christ (Acts 17:30-31; cf. Rom. 3:21-26).

4. In the section, "A Just Punishment for the Crime," Paul claims that eternal judgment is "unreasonable, illogical. . . wicked and unjust" for a temporal sin committed within time. I answer this below. In addition, Paul is wrong in saying that a sinner commits a "crime which is inherent in his own nature" (p. 25), for people were not created with a sin nature. In addition, Paul is incorrect to say that people have "no choice but to sin," that they are "slaves" to sin; that Adam "already made the choice for each person" (p. 25). This sounds very much like the objections raised to the Apostle

Paul's teaching: some would advocate that people ought to sin to make grace abound (Rom. 6:1, 15); others would insist that God should not fault anyone for failing to obey him, for no one can resist his will (9:19). Instead, a better theology affirms that we all made the choice corporately when Adam chose, and our daily sinning confirms that we would repeat our sin in Adam's. This corporate identity in Adam has inherently the seed of a promise within it—it enables a corresponding identity of deliverance from sin in Christ for those who believe (see further below). Further, God holds all responsible for their choices to sin (note Rom. 2; Jam. 1:12-18), just as he holds all responsible for their choice in Adam (Rom. 5). Does not our continuing to sin as believers confirm that the responsibility is deserved? We are hardly to be described as “victims” of the inheritance of sin (p. 25). Certainly Scripture does not so describe humanity, nor believers.

5. In the section, “For Unborn or Infant Children,” Paul faults the church for creating a way for infants to be saved. Whether this be right or not, the problem exists for universalism as well, but even more so. For universalism would hold that the infants go to hell rather than to heaven! The church’s concern for fairness or justice leads to infant salvation; but universalism’s concern for the same seemingly leads to a far greater perversion of justice—the salvation of even Satan and his angels apart from the death of Christ (see below).

6. Regarding the section, “For Those Who Die in Ignorance,” Paul takes the orthodox view that ignorance of the gospel is not a basis for reception with God. Yet in some sense “ignorance” of the gospel is the basis for acceptance with God in the OT and in some NT contexts.

7. Regarding the section, “God Reveals Himself to Every Man,” Paul accepts the traditional view that natural revelation is not sufficient to bring salvation to any person. I would observe, however, that general revelation holds the potential of leading to faith in the true God. It was possible for people in the times of ignorance to be saved apart from faith placed explicitly in Jesus Christ (Acts 17; Rom. 3:21ff). However, according to Romans 1:18ff, the usual response of people to general revelation is to reject it and become idolaters.

8. In the section, “Wages of Sin=Death?” Paul challenges the fact that the wages of sin is death, at least if “death” is defined as eternal torment (p. 29). He denies that the traditional view can maintain that Christ ever atoned for sin, because he never suffered eternal torment. Paul seeks to define “death” as spiritual death (“dead in trespasses and in sins,” p. 30). Paul is correct to challenge the idea of eternal torment in Romans 6:23 (the word occurs only in a few places: see the references above). It may be that eternal death is torment only for the most wicked of sinners. That is, there are various degrees of suffering in hell; and some will suffer more than others. Clearly the “death” is spiritual and also physical (as proof of the spiritual). But Paul Young is in error when he affirms that Jesus’ death abolished death for all, for clearly Scripture witnesses that only those who believe in Christ, who place faith in him as their savior, receive eternal life, that they are alive spiritually (Rom. 6:22-23; John 11:25-26). The rest of humanity abides in spiritual death. Apparently here in Rom. 6:22-23 is a case where “eternal” must be “eternal.” In addition, while there is mystery in the concept of Christ’s death (since he also died as the God-man), in some way Christ’s sacrifice is viewed as sufficient for the wages or payoff for the sin of all for all time (it took care of sins which before the cross were not fully dealt with in the justice of God; Rom. 3:22ff). Whatever the penalty of sin is, including eternal torment, the death of Christ for sin, by which he was separated from God, is sufficient payment for sin. His death was the redemption, the payment required, to bring freedom from sin’s penalty and power (Rom. 3:24; Col. 1:14). The rest of humanity that rejects Jesus Christ rejects deliverance from sin and are still in bondage to it and to death (Rom. 6:19-23).

9. In the section, ““Good News”? Luke 2:16,” Paul misrepresents the biblical use of the phrase. The gospel is “good news” because it is the message of deliverance from the penalty and power of sin for those who believe. The rest who reject the message reject the forgiveness and deliverance and life found in Christ. Unbelief rejects the good news; and those who fail to exercise faith are held responsible for their decision. (Rom. 10:14ff). Retribution comes to those who “do not obey the gospel” (2 Thess. 1:8).

10. In the section, “Argument from God’s Love,” Paul Young struggles with the command that Jesus gives us, that we should love our enemies, while God himself, in the traditional view, hates the wicked and torments them forever in hell. “Are we required to be more loving than God?” he asks. A proper response here seems to be that there need be no contradiction. God is omniscient, knows far more than we, mercies some and hardens others (Rom. 9), and is both hated and is hostile toward human beings (Col. 1:21; Rom. 9:14-24). Again Paul Young has neglected a substantial body of truth—that God is not only love but also holy and just, who will not, and cannot overlook sin but pours out his wrath both now (Rom. 1:18-32) and in the judgment to come (Rom. 2). If God’s people can provoke him to anger (Heb. 3:7-11), certainly the wicked can do so. God can be both merciful and harsh (Rom. 11:22; cf. v. 28). Jesus’ death was not only an act of the love of God (Rom. 5:6-11) but an act that satisfied his justice—that he “might be just and justify the one who believes” (Rom. 3:26). Jesus himself demonstrated that justice toward sin was necessary, including the suffering of torment. His opponents who were worthy of hell included not only Pharisees (that Paul Young admits) but all those in his home town of Capernaum (and the neighboring towns) and Jerusalem—including women, children, and people who perhaps had never seriously considered his claims.

Note that at his passion, Jesus only promised paradise to the one thief, who expressed a measure of repentance and faith; he did not “out of love” promise the other thief, who rejected Jesus’ claims, such a destiny. Apparently Jesus’ own love did not extend so far as to violate his sense of justice and holiness when it was violated. Our conduct is to be as loving as much and as often as we can, by divine enablement. Yet we are also to pursue holiness (Heb. 12:14), and justice as citizens of a state (Rom, 13:1-7) (which may mean that “love your enemies” may have a limit). The first commandment, to love God, has priority to that of loving our neighbors.

11. Paul’s section, “The Existential Argument,” is his personal testimony. He claims that his embracing universalism has made him a more loving, caring person, among other changes. Yet he acknowledges that this argument carries “no weight” as to the validity of universalism. I concur.

12. In his “An Interesting Side-Note,” Paul questions whether physical death fixes our eternal destiny. He claims that there is not one text in Scripture that limits God’s grace to physical life. If God’s grace were limited to physical life, it would mean that God has “no will and no power” to save a spirit without a body (p. 33). He concludes that “there is more love and compassion in the natural world than there is in the spirit world” (p. 34). He affirms that “God will not inflict punishment on men who have not had ultimate knowledge” [of the way of salvation] (p. 34). These are troubling questions and statements. For Paul Young argues without any support for his own view: not one text can be cited that says that people have opportunity to alter their destiny after they die. Indeed, the weight of Scripture implicitly suggests that people cannot alter their destiny after death in light of all the warnings about preparing to undergo judgment after death (Heb. 7:25: “It is appointed for men once to die, and after this the judgment”). The clear statement of Scripture is that no one can cross over from the place of torment to the place of bliss (Paul overlooks Luke 16; see my discussion below). It is not a question of God’s power and will (and love), but of his plan and order for

humanity. Finally, who defines what ultimate knowledge is? Believers aren't saved on this basis, but on the basis of an adequate knowledge of who Christ is, on the basis of which they believe. Knowledge is not the issue; faith is (Rom. 10:14ff.).

Paul Young then proceeds to defend the descent of Christ to hell after his death and resurrection to proclaim the gospel to the lost. Yet these texts can be otherwise interpreted so that no such descent of Christ occurred. In either case the text doesn't support the use Paul wants to make of it. (1) The preaching was limited, for some reason, to an audience of people that perished at the time of the flood; those of subsequent eras were not involved. (2) To link this with the teaching that Christ has led "captivity captive" (Eph. 4:7ff.; Col. 2:14-15) is problematic, for in Colossians these are opposing spiritual forces, probably fallen angels, which most certainly have not already been brought into heaven (in light of Eph. 6 where they are described as still opposing God and his people). (3) To link this with the triumph of Christ in the Apostle Paul's life is impossible, for Paul was a living human who placed faith in Christ, and became his willing slave, whereas those in Ephesians are either dead humans or fallen angels who are "militarily" conquered. For Paul Young to claim that Christ could go a "thousand times" to hell to repeat his leading "captivity captive" rests on no Scripture at all. In fact it contradicts the many statements regarding Christ--that he during the present era is enthroned in the place of honor at the side of God and dwells by the Spirit within his people. (4) Finally, the tenor of Christ's triumph in these texts (1 Pet. 3; Eph. 4; Col. 2) is one of a king conquering by force, which runs directly counter to all Scripture describing how people are brought into personal relationship with him. The picture describes a conquest, a subjugation or pacification of rebellious forces that Christ accomplished by his death on the cross: he sealed the fate of all opponents, visible and invisible, and their destiny is settled. All that remains is the carrying out of the sentence at the end of this era. It is conquest *de jure*, but not yet *de facto*. Revelation 20:10 presents the carrying out of the sentence. To call this traditional interpretation of the Scripture "sadistic humbug" (p. 37) is disturbingly unfortunate.

C. Paul Young's third major section, "Arguments from Church History," occupies several pages, with the basic assertion being that universalism was the view of the church for the first five centuries before Augustine corrupted the theology. I find this section to be filled with half-truths (points #5, 13-18, 31), overstatements (#8, 9), assumptions (#1, part b of #3), falsehoods (#4, 6, 7, 10-12, 23-24), and totally irrelevant or arguments from silence (#19-22, 25-26, 29, 30). Several interesting admissions are made, such that the earliest Christians followed Jesus' terminology of "endless torment." While universalists define this as neither "endless" nor "torment," what if this interpretation is in error? Then church history gives witness to the traditional view. Also admission is made that the Jews believed in endless torment. If this is meant to reflect OT truth, how is it that Christians, according to universalism, departed from the Jewish concept? Finally, in all my years of teaching the earliest Apostolic Fathers I have found none that support universalism. The same assessment can be made of Paul Young's appendix 3 (pp. 84-88) that gives further so-called support from church history. What is interesting to note from these pages is the admission that universalism became particularly popular in Germany, where, I may observe, rationalism has virtually destroyed theology; and in the liberal seminaries and churches of America. This should say something regarding the dangers inherent in universalism. Moreover, there is an entire omission of any discussion of how recent evangelical theology and writers have dealt with universalism (they have condemned it as heresy).

The claim that universalism was the majority view of the church for the first five hundred years of church history (p. 99) is without foundation. Also I'm not aware of support for the claim that universalism was the position of four out of six schools in the early church (pp. 99-100).

D. In Paul's final major section, "Arguments from Scriptures," there is a restatement of the universalist view of interpreting Scripture and concepts. Fifteen texts or groups of texts are discussed. Virtually all are cited because they use words such as "all" or the "whole world," etc., seemingly to support universalism; but they may otherwise be interpreted as meaning that Christ's death is sufficient for all but effective only for those who exercise faith. There is an inherent contradiction among some of the points listed. Young interprets John 12:31-32 (point #4) to mean that Jesus will "forcibly" draw all people to himself; yet in #5 he interprets certain texts (Phil. 2:10-11 and its use of Isa. 45:22-23) to mean not a "forced confession" or "compulsory" submission ("every knee will bow, every tongue confess") but a "willing acknowledgment and acclamation" (pp. 45-46). [Yet even the latter is also stated, in contradiction, to be a "command" and not a statement, p. 45]. Interestingly, *BDAG* defines *helko* in John to be figurative, of the pull on a person's inner life, to "attract" (p. 251). Young also gives faulty or incomplete, and therefore, distorted interpretation. For example, in discussing #13 (1 Cor. 15:21-22; Rom. 5:12-21), he (pp. 48-49) fails to discuss Romans 5:17, the most important verse in the passage, since it affirms that identity in Christ the second Adam comes only to those who "receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness." It is they who shall reign in life. This clause places chapter 5 within the context of the rest of Romans where believing on Christ is absolutely necessary to receive God's righteousness and forgiveness (3:21-31; ch. 4). Much of this assessment also applies to his discussion of #14-15 (2 Cor. 5:14-20; Rom. 6:5-8; Col. 1:16-21; Rom. 5:10). Also see below where I discuss the Colossians 1 text.

In his "summary" (pp. 51-52) Paul Young claims that the "history of exegesis contains no stranger fact than the persistent ignoring of many New Testament passages." I don't believe that this is the case. Rather I think that Paul does not like the way that traditional theology for 2000 years has interpreted them because this interpretation does not countenance universalism. Can Paul's complaint really be true, that 2000 years of study have failed to deal with all the texts (indeed a whole host of them)? Isn't the hope that further study will convince the majority of the correctness of universalism an empty hope? If universalism is true, would not the church have "returned to its moorings" (as Paul would probably like to view it) by now? Isn't it more likely that the vast majority of the church finds the interpretation belonging to universalism to be forced, distorted, and based more on emotive concerns and wishful thinking than on solid exegesis of the text which is committed to the need for saving faith in Jesus Christ? Does not the history of universalism demonstrate this deviation, a history that has seen it embrace unitarianism and reject its "Christian" identity? These questions also answer Paul's list of reasons why people resist the idea of universalism (p. 53: "Summary and Conclusions").

In Paul's appendices (four of them; pp. 54ff.) there are additional citations of sources for word studies, the concept of hell, history, and "more Scripture." Some of the same faults cited earlier regarding his word studies are here repeated. There is failure to discuss in depth the truly pertinent passages bearing upon "eternal torment" (Matt. 25; pp. 60, 92; cf. p. 19), or "torment" with implications of "eternal" (Luke 16; see below). There is failure to respond to the fact that many sources do give "eternal" as a definition of *aion* (12 of 18 sources; pp. 54-55; also Weymouth, p. 57). There is incomplete or misrepresentative citation of all the evidence from the sources (so Vincent; Lange); and there is little or no interaction with sources who take a view contrary to Paul's (e.g. *BDAG* and several other recent dictionaries, lexicons, and evangelical commentaries). Paul often "flails at windmills"—criticizing the reading of "eternal" into texts where no serious biblical scholar now reads them. No one has ever asserted that *aion* always means "eternal," yet this is the burden of Paul's whole approach. Paul's treatment of *aion* as describing the glory of God in various doxologies (Rom. 11:36; 16:26 ; p. 60f.) avoids the obvious: since God is eternal, his glory will be.

To deny “eternal” here, on the basis of an erroneous concept that a word always carries its root idea (here “age”) is to commit the “root fallacy.” Context determines meaning, and here the context demands the concept of timelessness (as *BDAG* acknowledges). It seems to me, that Paul’s insistence that the final age has not yet dawned, that there are yet future ages, contradicts the statements of Hebrews 9:26 (that Christ has suffered at the conclusion of the *aions*) and 1 Corinthians 10:11 (that believers live in the consummation of the *aions*), notwithstanding Paul’s protests to the contrary (p. 64). When Paul cites modern translations that use “eternal” or “forever” scores of times (NTV, Beck, Jerusalem, NAB, GNB, Kingdom) he complains that they “refuse to use a word which more closely expresses the Greek” and instead “use inconsistent renderings.” Perhaps they are expressing the force of the Greek and it is Paul who is inconsistent.

In Paul’s appendix 2, “More about Hell” (pp. 68ff.), there are continuing claims (as in section one of his paper) regarding the limited or symbolic nature of hell, gehenna, the “smoke that rises forever” (Rev. 14:10), and “the lake of fire and second death.” Much of this repeats what is said in section one; and the same objections arise to the material here as they arise to the material in section one. There are red herrings, misrepresentation of what the texts say, omission of texts, and failure to see the symbolic nature of much in Revelation. Paul’s discussion of the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16; pp. 71ff.) proceeds to dismiss it as simply Jesus’ use of a pagan story that he didn’t believe, to teach Gentile acceptance and Jewish rejection. Yet it seems to teach much more (see below).

In appendix 4, “More Scripture,” there is a listing of Scripture, mainly without comment, that concerns the topics of “ages,” free-will and divine sovereignty, hell, immortality, judgment, “things hard to understand,” and verses referring to the redemption of all creation. A second list gives 73 texts used to support universal salvation because of the use of “all” or “every” or related terminology. While many of these speak of universal atonement (1 Tim. 4:10; Heb. 2:9) they do not necessarily argue for universal salvation (note how 1 Tim. distinguishes “those who believe” from the rest of humanity).

Paul’s final appendix (#5), “Final Words,” gives five summary paragraphs. The first summarizes Paul’s view of “eternal,” and the second deals with free will and divine sovereignty under the picture of the potter (an apparent allusion to Rom. 9). The third asserts that “God’s ‘judgment’ is not vindictive punishment”; rather it is restorative (yet the allusion he makes to the Potter says nothing in the text regarding restoration but refers to “vessels prepared for destruction”; Rom. 9:20-22). The fourth statement asserts that hell and the lake of fire are not final but places of cleansing from which all the wicked, including Satan and his angels, will be restored to God. The fifth and final statement is that all will finally be restored to fellowship with God that he may be all in all. Interestingly, nothing is said as to the basis upon which the wicked in hell and the lake of fire are restored to God. Apparently, it is not (nor can be—see below) by placing faith in Jesus Christ.

## **Major Texts of Scripture at Odds with Universalism**

Having interacted with the position of universalism as espoused by Paul Young, I wish to deal with several texts of Scripture that argue against universalism. While these are major texts they comprise only a partial list.

(1) In Luke 16 Jesus gives the account of the “rich man and Lazarus.” Upon death both find themselves in conscious existence, Lazarus in a place of celebration, the rich man in hell

suffering torment. The parable (though it is not called a parable) teaches the following, (a) There are only two destinies for all people. One is that of comfort and the other of "terrible pain" (v. 23-25). (b) A great chasm "has been fixed" (note the perfect tense) so that people cannot cross over from the place of bliss to the place of torment, and neither can people cross over from the place of torment to the place of bliss (v. 26). (c) People must respond to the written Scripture before they die; otherwise there is no "second chance"; they will not repent. There is no indication that the rich man repented, (d) Even if people are given special revelation by one rising from the dead, from the grave, to tell people to respond, they will not "hear" or obey, since they have rejected Scripture. In other words, if people do not respond to the authoritative Scripture they will not repent before or after death no matter what message is brought to them (including, apparently, the report of how painful separation from God really is). This suggests that even the resurrection of Jesus from the dead will not convince any to repent and believe the gospel.

(2) In Matthew 25:31-46 Jesus deals with the destiny of the nations at the final judgment. Jesus makes a distinction between the nations. On the basis of how they responded to him and his people, some are favored (designated sheep) and some are not favored (designated goats). He concludes with the words: "and these [the goats] shall go out to eternal torment, but the righteous [shall go out] to eternal life." The parallelism of the clauses makes it clear that the length of the destiny of each is equal: it is "eternal." Since everyone believes that the righteous have a destiny of life without end, it is inescapable that the unrighteous have a destiny of torment without end. Yet if there is not an "eternity" of torment for the wicked, there can be no heaven that has "eternal" life. If there is no such heaven, if heaven is temporally limited, then the whole point of redeeming the wicked out of hell offers only a little respite. What follows then for those in heaven? There is an obvious conclusion: *There can only be an eternal heaven of bliss if there is an eternal hell of punishment.* The one gives meaning to the other.

This is similar to Jesus' teaching in the parables of the sower and the weeds (or, tares). In the former the evil one snatches away what is sown in the heart (Matt. 13:19). If the devil is able to do this during the present era, what is to prevent him from doing so in the state after death? In regard to the parable of the weeds, Jesus taught that the devil sows evil people among the righteous. At the end of the age angels will gather everything that causes sin and all lawbreakers and throw them into a fiery furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (13:40-43). The righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom (v. 44). Jesus presents this as the final disposition of people; he does not hold out a future time when all will be righteous and when there will be no "evil one" (the devil).

(3) Romans. In Paul's Epistle to the Romans we have some of the strongest statements that seemingly support universalism, and some of the strongest statements against universalism.

- (a) Romans 2. The texts 2:1-16 and 3:19 teach that there is a final day of judgment coming which will settle the destinies of all people. It is a day of wrath and anger (w. 5-6) for those who do not do the truth (w. 8-9), who will perish (v. 12); but for the righteous, who persevere in good works, there is eternal life (v. 7).
- (b) Roman 5. Universalists often cite verse 18 with its emphasis on "all." Paul contrasts how condemnation came to all by the trespass of one (Adam) with how justification to life came to all by the righteous act of one (Christ). Yet the surrounding verses more frequently state the comparison in the terminology of "many." In v. 17 Paul makes it clear that, as "death reigned by the one trespass of the one man," the contrast is with "those who receive the abundance of the grace and the gift of righteousness shall reign in life through the one, Jesus Christ." Here the "all" and the "many" in the context are defined as "those who receive." The contrasts of being in

Adam and being in Christ are not equal: all humanity has corporate identity in Adam by choosing to sin in him and this is confirmed by committing daily sin in our experience. But all humanity is not corporately identified in Christ; only Christians are so identified. This is witnessed by the many exhortations to believe in order to be in Christ.

- (c) Romans 8. The passage listing the five traits of believers in w. 28-30 all go together. God foreknew them (God enters into a loving relationship with them), predestined, called, justified, and glorified them. The chain is complete from beginning to end. There is no allowance for some falling out of the chain, or for some being later added. It is impossible that the text would allow all humanity to be included since Paul repeatedly makes a distinction between the elect and the non-elect (see texts below). This text teaches the sovereignty of God (cf. 9:1-29); the other side, human responsibility, is reflected in 8:4, 13; 9:30-10:21; 11:20-22.
- (d) Romans 9. This passage which teaches so strongly the aspect of divine sovereignty implicitly argues against universalism. Verse 12 makes it clear that "the purpose of God according to election" or "by means of election" abides or remains, "not because of works but because of the one who calls." This concept of election cannot be the basis for a charge that God is "unjust" Paul says (v. 14; cf. the charge of universalism), for God shows mercy and compassion to whom he wishes (v. 15). So then "this compassion does not belong to the one who has an inner desire nor to the one who does outer works but to God who shows mercy" (v. 16). The example of Pharaoh shows, "therefore, that to whom God wishes to show mercy he shows mercy, and whom he wishes to harden, he hardens" (v. 18). Thus universalism cannot affirm that the fires of hell will move people to repent and believe, for it is not within their power to do so unless they are part of his elect. It is God who gives faith as a gift; it is he who circumcises hearts, in the circumcision of Christ, who buries believers, who raises them, who makes them alive with him (Col. 2:11-13).

There is another point to make regarding Pharaoh. The greater affliction from God that he endured, the more revelation he received regarding God's will, the more power from God that he experienced, the harder he became. He is a type of all the wicked who become more wicked still when confronted with the revelation of the truth, whether this side of hell or after. Why are we to believe that entering hell will make the wicked respond differently?

- (e) Romans 10. This chapter emphasizes so strongly human responsibility to believe the gospel and receive Christ (w. 8-13). In w. 14-21 Paul sets forth four steps or conditions that must take place in the chain of faith: there must be one who sends the preacher, there must be the preacher who proclaims good news; there must be the hearing of the gospel; and there must be faith that results in calling upon God (w. 14-15). If universalism teaches that those in hell will repent and believe the gospel, who will be there to preach it? For no believer will go to hell to begin the chain of steps that lead to faith.

In Israel's case Paul says that the problem came with the fourth step: God sent the preacher of good news and Israel heard (completing three of the four steps); still she did not believe and call on the Lord. So God cannot be faulted. How did Israel hear? The gospel is like general revelation (v. 19; Paul cites Ps. 19:4), for all to observe and respond to. All have heard in the sense that the mission to the Gentiles was designed to provoke them to jealousy (v. 19; Paul cites Deut. 32:21), but only the Gentiles, who really didn't seek God, responded in faith, along with a remnant of Jews (w. 20-21). What does all this have to do with universalism? There are several points. On the basis of the analogy with Israel, all humanity have heard the good news and are held responsible for believing (cf. Col. 1:5-6). It cannot be said that some have never heard, and that in hell they will hear and respond.

- (f) Romans 11. In this powerful chapter Paul explains the basis for the future restoration of Israel. Israel's present state of rejection (she as natural branches has been broken off from the cultivated olive tree) is only partial (Paul himself is an example that a remnant has believed) and temporary. According to the special revelation given to Paul (the "mystery," v. 25), there is a time coming

after the ingathering of the Gentiles, when their "fullness" is realized, when "all Israel is to be saved" (v. 26). Applying this to universalism, (1) how can there be an additional ingathering of Gentiles out of hell, when the earlier one is viewed as final and complete? (2) How can there be additional Jews saved out of hell, when their "fullness" takes place at the end of the age?

Further, v. 29 powerfully affirms that the "gifts and calling of God are irrevocable." If the elect are determined for this age, and this decision is irrevocable, how can this decision be later recanted, changed; or annulled, so as to include all?

Yet Romans 11 contains one of the strongest texts attractive to universalism. It is the verse that Origen cited to justify universalism. "For God has consigned all to disobedience so that he may show mercy to all" (11:32). In light of the context the second "all" cannot be everyone, including the wicked in hell, but must be interpreted to mean all who believe, whether Jews or Gentiles. To find universalism here contradicts the particularity that Paul has defended throughout much of Romans: it is only by faith that one is justified and discovered among the elect remnant (rather than the non-elect; see 9:20-29). In addition, Paul never hints anywhere that the mercy of God is experienced by any after death. The whole book deals with what people do with the knowledge of God before they die (cf. Rom.

1:18-32). Another way to take the second part of the verse is to affirm that God's mercy has been shown to all in the sense of providing Christ as an atonement for all, offering salvation to all (note the context which refers to God's offer of salvation to the Gentiles), but only those who accept the offer of salvation will experience it (cf. w. 7-10, 21-22).<sup>4</sup>

These texts are difficult to understand, and ultimately divine sovereignty and human responsibility are not reconcilable. They are not reconciled in Scripture and we should not attempt to reconcile them, I believe. Instead, we bow, as Paul did, before the greatness of our God, whose judgments are unsearchable and whose ways are inscrutable. He is the source of all, the means of all, and the goal of all. To him alone is all glory forever due (11:33-36).

(4) Colossians 1:19-20. This is one of the few passages that affirms that "all" in the universe has been "reconciled" to God. It is difficult for the traditional view and seems to support the "universalism view." In light of the fact that Paul uses "all" eight times in w. 15-20, and that it consistently refers to the entire universe, "all" has to mean the entire universe throughout, including humanity, the inanimate creation, and Satan and fallen angels (note v. 16). So how can the traditional view respond? From Romans 8 it is clear that only the inanimate creation is awaiting deliverance from its unwilling subjection to bondage (Satan and his angels are excluded, since they willingly revolted against God and did so prior to humanity's fall). Only this part of creation can be rescued by Christ's death for sin. Thus the promise that God was pleased through Christ "to reconcile all [things] to himself by making peace through the blood of his cross—whether things on the earth or things in heaven" (v. 20) cannot refer to the salvation of wicked angels (note my discussion elsewhere re. the impossibility of saving fallen angels on the basis of Christ's atoning death for human sin). "Reconciliation" has a salvific connotation for fallen humanity and for fallen inanimate creation, but not for fallen angels and Satan. Furthermore, the salvific sense cannot include all of fallen humanity. The very next verses affirm that, whereas the Colossians were once not reconciled (hence the

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<sup>4</sup> See Erickson, *Theology*, 1032.

"reconciliation" of v. 20 did not include them) they now are reconciled by Christ's death by faith if they continue in faith (v. 21). Thus it seems that the "reconciliation" of v. 20 is not salvific but refers to subjection and pacification brought about by a triumphant conquest. The apostle does not say that "all" have been redeemed. Verse 20 has a potentially salvific and redemptive meaning, but this is only realized by those who willingly believe the gospel.

This is what Col. 2:15 affirms. Christ (or, God) has "disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public disgrace of them, triumphing over them by the cross." This is not a salvific triumph, not one that is willingly embraced and that brings freedom from bondage, but one like a military conquest from which none ever escapes. This hardly pictures the freedom from the bondage of sin that accompanies the gospel when it is willingly believed and embraced.

(5) The preceding also is the explanation of the somewhat parallel text in Phil. 2:9-11: "As a result God exalted him, and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow—in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess to the glory of God the Father that Jesus Christ is Lord." In citing (or, alluding to) Isa. 45:23, Paul is affirming that all the universe will come to acknowledge the supremacy, the triumph of Christ. Again this does not require a salvific relationship. By his death Jesus' consigns all to his wrathful day of judgment and vindicates his victory on the cross.

The context makes it clear that this victory had to be salvifically applied by the Philippians. Christ's triumph did not make them Christians. They are to work out their salvation with fear and reverence (v. 12). They had to appropriate Christ personally by faith (1:29; cf. Rom. 11:20-22) and contend for the faith (1:27).

(6) Hebrews 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12-13; 12:1-2 quote or allude to Psalm 110:1, the OT text most frequently cited in the NT. Psalm 110:1 is also cited in 1 Cor. 15:27. The text clearly affirms that Christ's present position is on a throne at the right hand of God in heaven. He is waiting till the Psalm's promise is completed (note 10:13): "until his enemies be made the footstool of his feet." Thus the final picture of the triumphant Son is not that of salvific reconciliation of all to him, so that there is only one group of saints or beings surrounding him in adoration and worship in heaven. Rather the final picture in these texts concerns that time, future to us, when all his "enemies" become totally subjected to him—they become a place for his feet to rest. The enemies are pacified by conquest. The contexts (esp. in 1 Cor. 15) picture this as the final disposition of all things, so that when the Son yields all to the Father the subjected are still subjected or conquered—not saved (1 Cor. 15:28). This hardly pictures adoration and salvation. If universalism is correct, who will serve as the footstool of his throne? While this is highly symbolic language, the meaning is clear. This interpretation agrees with that of Eph. 4, Phil. 2, and Col. 1:19-20, as discussed above.

(7) Israel's experience in the wilderness during the Exodus sets forth a pattern of God's dealing with people that argues against universalism. Their experience is set forth as a pattern that Christians should heed lest they fail to enter God's rest (Heb. 3:14-4:13). According to Num. 13 and 14 the Israelites refused to go into Canaan to possess the land promised to them because they disbelieved God, heeding the majority "bad" report and rejecting the minority "good" report. Consequently God doomed that generation to forty years of wandering till they all died in the wilderness. Note the following, (a) Even after they repented and God forgave them (14:20-30), they could not alter their destiny, (b) One could claim that the judgment was disproportionate, for they spent one year in the desert for every day of testing God (14:34f.). (c) Even after they showed their sincerity of repentance (they confessed their sin, 14:40) by trying to go into Canaan (seemingly in obedience to God), the Lord was not with them and they were defeated (14:43-45). So they never

entered rest (cf. Ps. 95). The points against universalism are obvious. Unbelief dooms one to a destiny, seemingly disproportionate (from our limited understanding) to the sin, that is unchangeable even with repentance and accompanying good efforts. Apparently the repentance here is not genuine.

(8) The warning passages of Hebrews are particularly pertinent to the question of the nature of God and the destiny of unbelievers (note 2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:12 [note that it is "impossible to renew to repentance those who fall away because they continually crucify the Son of God anew against themselves and make an open shame of him"; v. 6]; 10:26-39; and 12:25-29). The fourth passage warns that there is no sacrifice for sin left if people sin "willfully after receiving knowledge of the truth" (v. 26); there is only a "fearful expectation of judgment and a fiery zeal that will consume those who oppose" (v. 27); they will be worthy of "more severe judgment" than those under the Mosaic covenant (v. 29). God is a God of vengeance who will repay (v. 30; cf. Deut. 32:35-36). "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (v. 31). The fifth passage warns that God is a "devouring fire" (12:29; cf. Deut. 4:24; 9:3; Isa. 33:14). All these passages have an air of finality and judgment to them.

(9) When the Scripture unfolds the final destiny of the bride as occupying the new Jerusalem and the new heavens and new earth (Rev. 21:1-22:15), the final view that is given of the wicked is that they are "outside" the city into which the righteous "enter" (22:14-15). There seems to be no basis for a change in the position of either group.

(10) The Book of Revelation also suggests a pattern for understanding how suffering and torment affect the wicked. Universalism asserts that the "fire of judgment" leads the wicked in hell (or the lake of fire) to repentance and faith, and hence acceptance into heaven. Yet the response of the wicked on this side of eternity, as a result of the series of the seal, trumpet, and vial judgments, does not lead to repentance. Instead, in response to the seal judgments, the wicked cry out for death to take them and wish to hide from the wrath of God (6:16-17). After the trumpet judgments people "do not repent" of their evil deeds but persist in them—in idolatry, murders, magic, sexual immorality, and stealing (9:20-21). During the last series of judgments, the bowl or vial judgments, the wicked "blaspheme God over these plagues and they would not repent and give him glory" (16:9; so also v. 11, and 21). The judgments are worse than any before, but the refusal to repent is even more entrenched and mentioned more frequently than ever. Does this not suggest that the wicked are placed in a frame of thinking and doing that becomes more and more hardened age after age after age after age, etc.?

## **Questions That Raise Theological Obstacles**

1. If Satan and his angels are "saved" or "reconciled" to God, what kind of reconciliation is this? People are reconciled on the basis of faith and trusting Christ for the forgiveness of sins, because he was made the "atoning sacrifice" ("propitiation") for sins, but never is this "atoning sacrifice" said to be for angels, nor is it offered to them. Jesus Christ became a human being, to atone for human sins; he did not take on the nature of angels to atone for their sins. How then could angels and Satan ever be reconciled to God? On what basis could they be? He did not come "to help" (or, "show concern for") angels but came "to help" ("show concern for") the descendants of Abraham (Heb. 2:16). The whole text of Heb. 2:14-18 is worth considering as a rebuttal against universalism, emphasizing Jesus' incarnation and being tempted on behalf of human beings.

2. If Satan and fallen angels are to be reconciled to God, on what basis will this take place? They are not of the present creation in bondage due to the fall of humanity in Adam (see Rom. 8), since they fell before Adam's sin. Hence their restoration cannot be by the death of Jesus Christ, who came as God incarnate to die as a human being for the sin of Adam's race. If some other basis can be found for reconciling Satan and fallen angels, why cannot that basis work also for humans? Again, this suggests that the coming and death of Jesus was not truly necessary after all. It becomes a divine feint.

3. How is it that people in hell will suddenly be able to "understand spiritual things" when natural people cannot understand them in this life (1 Cor. 2:14)? How can they discern truth from falsehood when Satan the great deceiver will have a "free hand" in hell and be unrestrained by good, by the gospel, and by the Spirit?

Will not Satan, who blinds the minds of unbelievers now "so that they cannot see the light of the glorious gospel of Christ," so that "the gospel is veiled to those who are perishing" (2 Cor. 4:4, 3), continue to do so? What will hinder him from acting true to character in the lake of fire? Will those who are now "sons of Satan" (in Jesus' words, John 8:44) suddenly change to become God's sons? Is it not necessary for Satan to be converted first for all of this to happen? Yet point 1. above seems to place Satan outside the realm of the reconciled.

4. Is the faith of demons who "believe" now, yet "tremble" (Jam. 2:19), saving faith? Obviously, it is not, for the Scripture neither says that the demons have saving faith, nor are we led anywhere to believe that they can be saved. If their "belief does not save now, how will it save in the future?

5. How can those in the lake of fire exercise faith when "faith is being sure of what we hope for, being convinced of what we do not see" (Heb. 11:1)? That is, it seems that there is no longer the need for faith in the lake of fire, for hope has given place to reality (cf. Rom. 8:24-25).

6. When Paul speaks of the whole creation being reconciled he explicitly defines this as all non-human creation, since it was subjected to frustration or bondage because of human sin (Rom. 8:19-22). He does not speak of the wicked nor of angelic beings; he does not mention faith.

7. The purpose of pain or suffering seems to contradict universalism. Universalism argues that the torments of hell are meant to be "purifying," to cleanse people of their rebellion against God and to surrender to him to make them acceptable to heaven. The more the suffering the more certain is the repentance of even the most hardened sinners or fallen angels. Yet suffering in Scripture does not appear to have this purpose: to coerce people to put faith in God. Rather, suffering is intended to refine believers, to be discipline to cause them to live holy lives, not to enter into faith in the first place. Suffering is confirmation that we are already sons of God (cf. Heb. 12:4-11). Why should God have to coerce people into believing when faith is God's gift given to the elect (note the text below from Rom. 10) and arises out of his love? Would not the unbelievers, when subjected to pain and suffering, simply blame God and rebel all the more, as they do now? The New Testament writers begin with faith, which when tested, leads to endurance and hope. etc. They do not start with other things, such as trials, that lead to faith (cf. James 1:2-4; 2 Pet. 1:5-8; Rom. 5:1-5; etc.).

8. If the suffering of pain and torment in hell becomes the catalyst for faith, isn't there the danger that suffering becomes the means of salvation, so that salvation comes about by works rather than by faith (which is theologically unacceptable)?

9. If the suffering of pain and torment in hell constrains the wicked to repent and believe, does this not amount to divine coercion? Does not universalism become more constraining and determinative than the determination for which Calvinism is often faulted? Where is "free will to choose" or personal responsibility in universalism?

10. It is claimed that it is unjust for God to leave the wicked in hell suffering punishment forever when they committed unbelief only during a human lifetime. Yet it is not unjust if the unbelief and rejection continue for eternity. Indeed, with each passing moment, the judgment becomes more just because each passing moment is lived with the consciousness of greater revelation regarding the wages of sin. Similarly, from the opposite spectrum of eternity, it may well be asked if it is just for God to reward the faithful with an eternity of bliss for making a momentary decision to believe in Christ? The only reason that this is just, in both cases, is because of the work that God did in Christ. It cost God so much. He gave himself in Christ, his unique Son, to reconcile the world to himself; and this purpose is accomplished for the "world" that will believe and receive Christ.

11. There are other options to universalism that meet some of its concerns about suffering an eternity of torment. A more orthodox option is annihilationism or conditional annihilationism: the wicked are "consumed in the lake of fire." They cease to exist, either immediately upon death or after degrees of judgments appropriate to the works that all those outside of Christ have done (based in the just-ness of God: Gen. 18:25; Rom. 2). Another option is to find that annihilationism and conscious existence are both true: the wicked remain in the reality of this world but they do not enter the reality of the world of bliss (the new heavens and new earth). From the standpoint of the former they continue to exist; but from the standpoint of the latter they "cease to exist"—they are forgotten.

Another helpful option is to affirm the possibility that in the end the number of those in paradise will be greater than the number in hell. This is possible if the former includes all those children who die before the age of accountability, all the infirm or mentally challenged, and those who respond by faith in the true God on the basis of general revelation.

12. Since Satan is the great deceiver, what will restrain him in hell from continuing his deceit? If even the faintest whisper of the gospel be heard, if even the smallest sliver of truth should break out, he will certainly block it, corrupt it, distort it, destroy it, so that no particle of truth will be tolerated upon which anyone could seize to gain information regarding deliverance from sin and hell, and believe. How will his trait as the great deceiver be overcome? If it be suggested that perhaps he and his angels will be the first "to be reconciled" to God, this is impossible. As the originator of sin in the universe, he has caused more havoc than any human. Justice demands that he must suffer longer in hell and "be reconciled" last. Yet this allows him to deceive all.

13. If universalism is true, why is there not a single, clear statement to the effect that all people in hell, after the judgement, will take the opportunity to put faith in Christ, be born again, and go to heaven?

14. The truth in universalism is that all kinds of people from every tribe and nation can and will be saved. But not all will be saved. The case is not that the church does not wish to see all saved but that Scripture teaches that some will be lost. In summary,<sup>5</sup> the universalist texts cited by universalists do not teach universal salvation but refer to (1) God's universal desire that none perish,

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<sup>5</sup> Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, vol. 3: "Spirit-Given Life: God's People Present and Future" (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 489-490.

not to a universal plan to save all; (2) God's universal purpose through the atonement to provide "the blessings of common grace to all"; (3) the universal sufficiency of Christ's atonement for all; (4) the universal pacification that disarms forces of evil but does not lead them to Christ (Col. 2:15; Phil. 2:9); or (5) Christ's being the savior of the world, but this means only that Christ has provided sufficient salvation for the world. Its "realization is limited to those who respond in repentance and faith."

## Dangers Inherent within Universalism

The following seem to be dangers that arise if one is going to embrace universalism.

1. In adopting universalism, one rejects the traditional view of the church through the ages, and embraces what the community of faith has identified as heresy (it is rejected by the Eastern, Roman and Protestant church).<sup>6</sup> Universalism has been close to unitarianism in "sentiment and action." The Unitarians have become increasingly humanistic. In 1825 they declared that they are not a part of the Christian church. In 1859 they voted to merge with the Universalists.<sup>7</sup> It is not surprising that Unitarians and universalists enjoy company, since they part company with the community of the faith over the end of the wicked and end up disparaging the work of Christ.

2. Universalism disparages the love of God by rejecting, in the end, the value of the greatest act of God's loving, the redemption secured by the sacrificial, substitutionary, atoning death of Christ. If in the end all, even Satan and his angels, are saved and enter heaven, what in the end is the value of Christ's death? Does it really matter that Jesus became incarnate and died if in the end God is so loving that everyone without exception enters heaven? Does this view not subject God's justice and holiness to his love, so that they are distorted?

3. Ultimately the person of Jesus Christ is disparaged. His death and resurrection does not make a difference in the end. Yet he is worthy of all honor by all (Phil .2:11). The very text used as a basis claimed for universalism, the reconciling of all to God, counts for nothing in the end, as far as exalting Jesus on a par with God the Father (giving him the name that is above every name—the name Yahweh). The history of universalism witnesses to this increasingly humanistic trend.

4. There is the real danger that the proclamation of the gospel will be considered less urgent because there is the ever-present option that people, all people, will ultimately be saved anyway.

5. Does not universalism taint society's own concept of justice and retribution? If universalism teaches that even the most incorrigible of persons, the most leprous specimens of society, who have given themselves over to evil till the moment of death and beyond, still will be accepted one day into God's heaven, then is not our conception of fairness, of right and wrong, of justice, debased?

6. If there is a legitimate place for the imprecatory psalms, that implore God's judgment on his enemies, then in universalism they ultimately become meaningless. For in the end there is no distinction between the righteous and the wicked.

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<sup>6</sup> Gerstner, "Universalism," 539.

<sup>7</sup> C.G. Singer, "Unitarianism," *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, " ed. E.F. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1966), 538.

## Final Observations

It seems to me that the claims of universalism rest on faulty bases. (1) There is no clear teaching in Scripture that affirms a "second chance" for people to alter their destinies after death, for the hearing of the gospel after death, for the exercise of faith in Christ after death, for repentance after death. Jesus himself is the strongest proponent (as in Luke 16) of eternal suffering in hell and thus the strongest opponent to universalism. (2) It is a falsehood that the church held universalism for the first five centuries. The earliest Apostolic Fathers do not give place to such a view. Instead, they affirm what the NT does: the wicked are lost in hell forever. (3) The only real basis of universalism is a distortion of the love of God—distorted because, by its adherents' own admission, God's justice must be subservient to God's love. The universalist ministers of Boston said that God's justice is "born of love and limited by love" (p. 89).<sup>8</sup> Yet the death of Christ was both a satisfaction of love and justice (Rom. 5:6ff.; 3:22ff), and neither can be qualified by the other without losing its true value. (4) Universalism is the new face of the old opposition taken by the creature who defies the Creator, accusing him of injustice (Rom. 9:14). There are some things that God cannot do—to act contrary to his nature as God. If in the end even the devil and his angels are to be saved or reconciled into God's favor and heaven, what becomes of hell? Why did God create Satan and allow him to fall, if in the end even he is brought back? Why such an infinite cost requiring the death of the incarnate Son if in the end all reach heaven anyway? (5) Universalism minimizes the death of Christ. Note that in the lengthy statement of the universalist ministers (p. 89-90) there is no mention of placing faith in Christ in order to be reconciled to God. Yet God has exalted Christ so as to make him worthy of the title of Yahweh (Phil. 2:9). There is salvation in no other than he alone (1 Tim. 2:5; John 14:6). Even omnipotent love cannot transform the wicked into the righteous suitable for heaven, for the kind of righteousness required for heaven is only found by being justified by faith in Christ.

Final quotes are pointedly pertinent. C.S. Lewis remarked (in *The Great Divorce*): "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'thy will be done.'"<sup>9</sup> Alister McGrath (*Justification by Faith*) has said: "Universalism perverts the gospel of the love of God into an obscene scene of theological rape quite unworthy of the God whom we encounter in the face of Jesus Christ."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Note also the statements to the same effect by Nels Ferre, *The Christian Understanding of God* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), 246-247, cited by Erickson, *Theology*, 1029.

<sup>9</sup> Lewis and Demarest, *Theology*. 498.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 163.