

The Sledgehammer of Universalism: “Few will be in Heaven but Billions Will Be in Hell”

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One of the great, emotional appeals that those who embrace universal reconciliation, and universalism in general, make is to appeal to reason and emotion. They ask: How can a good God bring only a relatively few into heaven and doom all the vast majority of mankind to an everlasting place of torment, i.e., to hell?

Universalists such as Talbott, McLaren, Bell, and most recently, Paul Young in his several novels (*The Shack*, *Crossroads*, and *Eve*) and in his movie make this pitch. It is the pitch of UR throughout its history. And a sales pitch it is. For instead of selling their universalism by sustained, convincing arguments from the Bible (which the church has adequately refuted) and from church history (which the church has also refuted) they make a highly emotional appeal.

Paul Young is typical here, but untypical as to the extent to which he has gone to make this appeal. His language is quite inflammatory. Note his words from what he wrote in 2004 when he converted to UR. Several (at least five) times Young noted the contrast between billions in hell and a few in heaven (in “Universal Reconciliation,” pp. 22-25). Here are a couple examples.

“Jesus Christ . . . either is the active agency or chooses to allow everything that is done in heaven or on earth. If one hundred billion helpless human beings are eventually being tortured, then Jesus, in an ultimate sense is fundamentally involved (p. 22).

“Satan has brought suffering and death to the whole human race. However if eternal torment is ‘true’, then Jesus Christ will torture *forever the whole human race*, except the small handful that will be saved. *In one hour*, in a hot searing hell, our Lord will inflict more pain and agony on each person than Satan inflicted on that person during his *entire life*” (all italics are Young’s) (p. 22).

“If this torture lasts through out eternity, then *each unsaved person* will suffer more than *all the suffering of all the people* that ever lived on earth combined. Think of it! Billions have suffered horrible pain for hours, days, weeks, months, and years, during the time they were alive. And yet, *after they die*, ‘every’ unsaved person will suffer more agony *than all the suffering of the whole race put together*, from Adam until now. The first was finite, the second infinite . . . Except for Satan himself, Pharaoh, Nero, and Hitler were among the most horrible killers of men this world has ever known. Yet, the doctrine of eternal torture makes Jesus *a million times* more vicious and vindictive than these three put together. . . . Instead of torturing them for a season and then ending their suffering with death, (as a Hitler or Nero) Jesus will oversee their *torture through all eternity*” (all italics and bold type are Young’s) (p. 23).

All who read these words get the point. This is the “sledgehammer” that UR uses to convince people that UR must be right since it asserts that everyone will end up in heaven, not hell—appealing to the broken hearts of many. If people have not believed before they have died, they will believe after dying, and hell ceases to exist. Never mind that Scripture has not been cited.

To the billions of these being tormented in hell Young would also add all the billions of children who die in the womb or who die in infancy, those who die in ignorance who never hear the gospel, and those who respond to the revelation of God in the creation (pp. 25-28). Paul rejects the claims of Christians who have historically believed that all such groups will go to heaven because, he says, there is no Scripture that clearly states this. I believe that Young wants to paint as black as possible the picture of the destiny of the lost. What an emotional rush!

But it is all untrue!!

Instead of these categories adding to those in hell it is just the opposite. Christians have historically believed that these groups are destined for heaven; and they make the number of those in heaven far greater than the number in hell. In fact, the number is vastly greater!

Here is the support for this Christian belief.

First, is it not true that God wants a universe where he receives **ever-increasing pleasure and glory**? It isn't the case that without this he is lacking (for he lacked nothing prior to creating the universe and people). But he is delighted by those freely giving him pleasure and glory. Thus having determined to create the universe and human beings for his own pleasure it was absolutely necessary that **all subsequent events had to follow**: creating people in his image and likeness, including a free will to choose; allowing people with a free will to choose to sin and incur everlasting guilt (so the Fall), and they and all their progeny being everlastingly on a trajectory of judgment and hell; intervening in such a way that it was he himself as the second Person of the Godhead who joined the human race with his purpose to rescue his human creation; then he himself freely choosing to die as the innocent one to make atonement to satisfy his own requirement of justice to pay the penalty for sin and its lasting guilt; inviting people to respond by their freely choosing to be redeemed and saved by believing that Christ's work was done for them (this is the human responsibility side of the coin; the other side is divine sovereignty); and then giving everlasting life to those who so chose to believe. Thus in the end God is more highly worshipped and receives increasing delight from those who from their fallen state choose to believe and love him than he would have received by creating automatons without freewill who would have **had** to worship him.¹

What does this have to do with the numbers in heaven and hell? Simply this. God receives ever increasing pleasure by the increasing numbers of humans who willingly choose him as their God and Savior, whom he reconciles to himself.

Consider the parallel with the angels. If Revelation 12:4 hints that only one-third of the angels rebelled under Lucifer, then this means that the greater majority did not. Most of heaven's angels remained loyal, and forever will be loyal. And if God should create additional angels the new ones will never rebel, having the historical record to inform them.

The Age of Accountability Impacts the Numbers in Heaven

¹ See a similar argument in Don Richardson, *Heaven Wins: Heaven, Hell and the Hope of Every Person* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2013), pp. 21-36.

But what is the support for the larger numbers in heaven over hell's numbers? First, the Bible's teaching must come first to show that there is an age of accountability, below which all go to heaven.² Then, statistics show that this number is vastly greater than those who live to an age of accountability.

Richardson cites an array of OT and NT texts that assert or suggest that those below the age of accountability go to heaven: Deut 1:35, 39; 2 Sam 12:23; Psalm 8:2 (cited by our Lord in Matt 21:16); 51:5; 58:3; Isa 7:16. The NT texts include the difficult texts of Matt 7:14 and 22:14 (but they concern choices that adults are able to make). Also note Matt 18:3, 10; 19:14 and the parallels in Mark and Luke; Rom 7:9, 11 (sin sprang to life when the commandment came and Paul died); 2 Cor 5:10 and Rev 20:13 (judged according to works); Jam 4:17; Rom 3:23; 5:12 and 1 Cor 15:22; Eph 2:1, 5; Col 2:13; 2 Pet 3:9.

In the early church, Irenaeus in the third century affirmed that innocent children who have had no sense of evil are saved and receive the inheritance.³ He is commenting on the children of Bethlehem murdered by Herod (Matt 2:16-18).

Contrary to Young and other universalists, suffice it to say that there are enough texts that support the view that children below the age of accountability are destined for heaven.

The Astounding Number of Those Who Die in Infancy and in the Womb

So how great is this number of children?

Richardson points out that scientific studies show that the number of unborn children lost to misconception is at least 40% of all conceptions that occur. In addition, another 30-40% or so of all children die prior to the age of six. Hence 70-80% of all those children conceived in the womb do not live to the age of accountability.⁴ These all find their destiny in heaven. We could also add to this number those persons who lack the capacity to make a rational decision.

The Number in Heaven Is Increased Further By Those Responding to General Revelation

Yet the number of those in heaven is enlarged even further by the fact that some adults are saved, both in the OT period and in the NT period, by a proper response to general revelation. While theologians are divided over this matter, there is a compelling case to be made for the saving power of general revelation.

As a supporter of the idea that general revelation is both informative and salvific, Richardson cites many texts.⁵ He gives seven texts that present general revelation as informative (Ps 19:1-4;

² See again Richardson, 43ff. Richardson traces total depravity not to birth but to the age of accountability. The Adamic nature is passively dormant in children and uncondemned. While I don't agree with his interpretation of all of these texts there are enough texts to make his argument persuasive regarding the destiny of infants and children.

³ Richardson, p. 52.

⁴ Richardson, pp. 67-73.

⁵ Richardson is an inclusivist—one who believes that general revelation is both informative and salvific, and some of mankind will be saved on this basis alone. In contrast, exclusivists believe that only special revelation is saving; general revelation is only informative. Joining Richardson would be such theologians as Millard Erickson and William Shedd. Yet all of these writers object strenuously to the idea of universal reconciliation.

Eccl 3:11; Acts 14:15-17; Rom 1:20; 2:14-15; Phil 4:8; John 1:9).⁶ Then he discusses fifteen texts that show that general revelation is both informative and salvific (saving) (Job in many places, such as 1:5, 20; 2:9; 12:6; 31:1; 35:11; Acts 17:26-28; 2 Chron 16:9; Ps 50:1-5; John 1:9 linked with 3:21; 1 John 4:7; and nine more).⁷

Others have spoken of the salvation of those who have not heard the gospel. William Shedd, a theologian of the 19th century, wrote a powerful refutation of universal reconciliation current in his day. He also appealed to the larger number of those in heaven than those in hell.⁸

Shedd noted that the future number of the redeemed rests much on the cases of the heathen and infants. Shedd (109) argues on the basis of several texts that God has elected to salvation some unevangelized people even though they have not heard the Word. Their inward disposition involves penitence for sin and the longing for its forgiveness and removal (as in John 9:35-38; Gal. 3:7-9; Matt. 8:11). It is not because such people are virtuous, which arises from egotism and self-righteousness, Shedd observes, but because they are repentant, penitent, and of a contrite spirit (note Matt. 5:3; Acts 10:35). The former condition is one of works, which can never save (110-114).

Shedd points out two errors regarding the salvation of the lost: first, the claim that all people are saved; and second, that only a few are saved (114-115). Shedd develops this second point by asserting that there will be many more people in heaven than there will be in hell! The opposite view rests on such texts as “Many are called, but few are chosen” and that there are many on the broad way to destruction (Matt. 7:13ff.). But these texts clearly refer to those above the age of accountability and are spoken prior to the cross. The Bible often speaks of the great numbers in heaven (Rev. 5:11-13; 7:9; 19:6) but never uses such terminology for those in hell.⁹

Regarding the salvation of infants, Shedd makes it clear that all such are lost because of original sin. All have a will inclined toward sin. The fact that all evangelicals believe that infants are elect rests on the unmerited and optional grace of God. God does as he pleases and in accord with his nature (116-117).

Thus whether one takes Richardson’s view discussed above or the view of most evangelicals, heaven is the destiny of the vast number of those who die in miscarriages, infants who die before the age of accountability, and of an additional number saved via general revelation. Adding the

⁶ It is interesting to observe that when Paul cites an OT text to support special revelation in Rom 10:18, that people have heard the “word of Christ,” he points to general revelation—Ps. 19:4 and Isa 65:1. I dealt with this text in my paper, “The Meaning of ‘The Law’ in 1 Corinthians 14:34, with Implications for General and Special Revelation” (presented to the Evangelical Theological Society, Northwest Region, Salem, Or., Feb. 24, 2007). Richardson includes this text in his discussion of fifteen texts.

⁷ Richardson, 87ff. The remaining nine are John 8:12; 10:16; Acts 10:1-11:18; Rom 1:18; 2:4; 2:7-11; Joel 2:32; 10:17-18; Heb 11:6. Richardson also affirms that Melchizedek of Gen. 14, who blessed Abraham, was a king and priest in service to the true God (107-110). So Hebrews 7 treats Melchizedek; and asserts that Jesus’ priesthood is according to the order of Melchizedek (6:20; 7:1ff.).

⁸ William G.T. Shedd, *The Doctrine of Endless Punishment* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1886; rep. 1980), 109ff.

⁹ I suggest that this view is correct in light of the fact that “every creature in all creation” are found in heaven joining in the praise of Rev. 5:11-13.

percentages together (70-80% of all below the age of accountability plus another 10% or more) there may well be as many as 90% of all those ever conceived who will be in heaven!

The Limited Nature of Hell, the Boundless Nature of Heaven

Shedd concludes with some final, somewhat surprising observations that are as needful now as when he wrote. First, people need to consider the limited extent and scope of hell. It is only a spot in the universe. In the immense “range of God’s dominion, good is the rule, and evil is the exception” (159). Sin is only a moment of eternity, a spot on the sun. Hell is a “pit,” a “lake,” not an ocean. It is bottomless but not boundless (159).

In addition, the number of unfallen angels and the redeemed greatly exceeds the enemies of God (Ps. 68:17; 103:21; Deut. 22:2; Matt. 6:13; 1 Cor. 15:25; Rev. 4-5; 14:1; 21:16, 24-25). More of mankind will be saved than lost. Shedd affirms that this was the belief of the Reformers Calvin and Zwingli, and later theologians such as Edwards, Hopkins (who said that the ratio of those in heaven compared to those in hell will be many thousands to one), Hodge, and others (160-161, note 1).

Second, Shedd reminds us that it is important to remember that the mercy of God and his desire to save is infinite. This point is proven by three great truths (162-163). (1) The eternal Judge took the place of the human criminal. (2) God substituted his own satisfaction for that due from man, without relinquishing any claims of law and justice and did it by drinking the cup of “punitive and inexorable justice to the dregs.” (3) God has made deliverance from endless punishment available to anyone who simply avails himself of the gospel by means of penitent faith (162-163).

There you have it! By Paul Young’s own criteria God is not unjust, Jesus is not more “vicious and vindictive” than the most evil men of history. The number of those in heaven will far exceed those in hell; and Young is a blasphemer of the first order—by calling into question the character of God and our Lord Jesus Christ (as he has done this elsewhere: see my site, burningdowntheshackbook.com).

The foregoing bounty of heaven is the real hope that Christians have—it is not the vain hope for the reconciliation of all humanity that universalists falsely propagate. Here again is an example of how UR asserts ideas that prove to be false. There is no second chance to believe after death so as to increase the numbers in heaven.

The heavy hammer which UR uses to drive people to an anti-biblical view of reconciliation rests upon an anti-biblical view of heaven and hell.

For those grieving over the deaths of preborn and infants and others, the real comfort and encouragement comes from the God of the Bible, not from *The Shack* and Paul Young and other universalists. Parents who believe on Jesus Christ will see their children again.

Universalists are one group who will not see their children in heaven. They, the parents, will not be in heaven but their young children will be there!