

Universalism

Introduction

Universalism, in the Christian context, refers to the belief that, in the end, everyone will be saved. It is sometimes called ‘universal reconciliation’. We are not sure when the doctrine emerged: it is often claimed the Origen was a universalist, but the evidence is not clear, because *apokatastasis*, the main theological term used in this context, does not carry the same meaning as the modern doctrine.

The majority of Christian traditions have always rejected universalism. Opponents of universalism often characterise it as wishful thinking, a denial of the clear teaching of the New Testament, but this is unfair: many passages in the New Testament are unmistakably universalist in both their language and content.

Belief in universalism generally rests upon three main strands of argument, all clearly based in New Testament teaching.

- Firstly, **the character of God**. The God revealed to us by Jesus is a loving Father, and would not condemn people to be tormented for all eternity.
- Secondly, **the scope of the atonement**. Jesus died for the sins of the world, not just for the sins of His followers.
- Thirdly, **the future hope**. We are promised that, in the end, all people will be united in Jesus.

In response, I would like to suggest two things.

- Firstly, the arguments commonly used to reject universalism do not succeed.
- Secondly, this entire argument is based on a misunderstanding.

The Arguments

The Character of God

The argument concerning the character of God is fairly clear. I have regular conversations around this topic, and people frequently tell me they believe in universalism, or suspect it may be true, because they find it impossible to believe that a loving God would eternally torture any of his creatures in hell, and they cannot reconcile such activity with the New Testament’s teaching about God.

There are two main strands to the response, depending on your theological tradition. Some argue that you do not understand either the character and holiness of God, or the offensiveness of sin: if you did, you would appreciate that an eternity of torment is an appropriate punishment for the unrepentant sinner. They generally do not address the question of why Jesus failed to mention this side of God’s character.

The other approach is to say that God loves us and does not want to send anyone to hell, but something makes Him do it. There are many different arguments used here, but they all end up in one of two places: either God is schizophrenic, one part of Him wanting to be nice to us and one part wanting to hurt us; or there is something outside of God, forcing Him to do something He doesn't want to do. Neither of these options are consistent with the New Testament picture of God.

The Scope of the Atonement

When the New Testament writers talk about Jesus' death, the language used is very often universal in scope. Let's pick a few examples.

And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. (1 John 4:14)

He [Jesus] is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:2)

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. (2 Corinthians 5:14)

For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! (Romans 5:10)

The usual approach to this problem is to transform the harsh Biblical language of 'payment' into the much cosier language of an 'offer'. Jesus did not, they say, actually pay for the sins of unbelievers; instead, He offered to pay for their sins, but His offer was refused. Like the guilty man in court who cannot pay the fine, the unbeliever has a friend who offers to pay the fine for him, but he rejects that offer and chooses to suffer the penalty of the law. It's a nice image, but it is not what the Bible actually teaches.

The Future Hope

We are repeatedly told in the New Testament that, in the end, everybody will be united with Jesus. Here are just a few familiar passages.

And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfilment – to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. (Ephesians 1:9-10)

For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. (1 Corinthians 15:22)

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Philippian 2:9-11)

God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them. (2 Corinthians 5:19)

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Colossians 1:19-20)

And I [Jesus], when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. (John 12:32)

The traditional interpretation of these passages often includes the unsubstantiated assertion that ‘all people’ actually means ‘all Christians’, ‘all things’ means ‘all redeemed things’, and so on. It is essentially an assurance that we ‘know’ the text can’t mean what it appears to say.

The traditional interpretation generally goes on to claim that everyone will have to ‘acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord’— whether they want to or not. We are familiar with stories of tyrants forcing people to bow the knee and praise them, but it is hard to see how God would be glorified by such empty praise.

The majority of Christian traditions effectively teach us that we should believe the Bible’s teaching, while also explaining that many passages in the Bible must be understood to mean almost the opposite of what they appear to say.

The Misunderstanding

I would like to suggest that the whole argument between universalists and their mainstream opponents is based on a shared misunderstanding: both parties are assuming that hell is a place of eternal torment – one claims that God sends people there, and the other denies it. But, if it turns out that there is no place of eternal torment, then there is little point in arguing about how many people go there.

The universalist reading of scripture is generally right: the Bible generally means exactly what it says, the God revealed to us by Jesus would not condemn people to be tormented for all eternity; Jesus died for the sins of the world, not just for the sins of His followers; and, in the end, all people will be united in Jesus.

But this does not mean that the universalists were right after all. There are many other passages which clearly teach that many people will not be saved. Again, here are just a few examples.

But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. (Matthew 7:14).

those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned. (John 5:29)

Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. (Matthew 25:41)

So we need to understand what the Bible teaches us about love and salvation.

I believe it is essentially both simple and straightforward. If you would like more details, they can be found in my (currently unpublished) book, *Jesus and the Other Place*. If you are interested, please ask for a copy!

- God is love, and love must be freely chosen. If you love someone, you can offer them your love, you can demonstrate your love, but you cannot make them love you. To love is to be open to the possibility of being rejected.
- God expresses His love by wanting the very best for every one of His creatures, and by allowing us to have, ultimately, what we choose.
- Since the Fall, the natural end of life is death, but God offers us the possibility of a new kind of life: a resurrection life, which begins here and now, and contains the promise of resurrection after death into a new kind of bodily existence.
- Jesus died for the sins of the world – for the sins of those who reject Him, just as much as the sins of those who receive Him.
- Full salvation is about embracing the love of God and living the life of God: the two go together. Having our sins forgiven is what enables us to start fully living and loving. Salvation is mostly about how we live here and now, not what happens to us after death.

It follows that those who choose to reject God's love and God's life will get what they choose: if you reject life, you choose death, not torment – you perish. So all those who remain can be brought together under the headship of Christ; every knee can bow and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord; all things can be reconciled to Jesus; and God can be all in all.

Next steps

This was written by Paul Hazelden as a contribution to the *Strong Foundations* exploration. You are welcome to use it and distribute it how you like, but feedback would be appreciated.

- Is it helpful?
- Would you change anything?
- Would you like to talk about how we can learn from each other about how best to follow Jesus where we are?

You can contact me through the web form at mad-bristol or join the conversation on the *Strong Foundations* site.

- Web form: <http://mad-bristol.org.uk/contact/>
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