

# Can God Be Too Good?



BY MONTE  
WOLVERTON

## Can We Hope That All Will Be Saved?

*...And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.—Ephesians 3:17-19*

**S**am Thompson sat on a concrete bench, staring at his father's tombstone. "Where are you, Dad?" asked Sam aloud. "I don't know how to think of you. When you passed on, what did you pass on to?"

Sam's dad, Ed Thompson, had lived in the same house for nearly 60 years. Together, he and his wife had raised three kids—all of them now middle-aged. When Ed died, he had nine grandkids, four great grandkids and one on the way. His

wife, Ellie, had passed away fourteen years ago. Ed missed her horribly, but between his family, his old business cronies and taking care of the house, he kept busy. He seemed healthy for a guy in his 80s. Then two weeks ago, he just fell asleep, sitting in his swing on the porch. He had a pretty good life—for an atheist.

His wife took the kids to church with her every Sunday. But Ed had never been remotely interested. He never talked about it—he had his private reasons for not believing in God. Ed's kids speculated that there had been a bad experience with a church or a minister. No one knew for sure.

As Ed's kids left home they went their separate theological ways. Ed's oldest, Barbara, had become an ardent church goer. She had worked on her dad for years, hoping to get him to "say the Sinner's

Prayer" and to accept Jesus. But Ed wouldn't budge. Barbara was devastated when he died. She was certain she would never see her father again, and she shuddered to think

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about him suffering in the blazing fires of hell. At times Barbara was overwhelmed with guilt. If only she had tried harder—spent more time "witnessing" to her dad—set a better example. If only—but now

it was too late. As far as Barbara was concerned, all hope for her father was lost.

Ed's youngest, Mark, the "hippie" of the family, had no concerns whatsoever about his dad. In a vaguely New Age way, he believed that his dad, like everyone who died, went to a better place, regardless. ~~even our people say,~~ would all find some kind of peace in the afterlife. Sort of like that network TV show where the lady helps spirits of recently departed people pass into the light. As far as Mark was concerned, his dad had most certainly passed into the light.

Sam, the middle child and "moderate" Christian, didn't know what to think about his dad, but he found his younger brother's ideas about the afterlife strangely attractive. *Universalism*, his sister had derisively called it—"nothing more than feel-good wishful thinking!"

But Sam wasn't sure. If God was infinitely loving and merciful, would he throw Sam's dad into hell to fry forever just because he never understood Jesus?

On the other hand, Sam couldn't believe that everyone who ever lived got a free ticket to heaven with no questions asked. Where did God draw the line?

If we had to pigeonhole the theology of Sam's younger brother Mark, we might call it *popular or pluralistic universalism*. Mark has a lot of company. According to recent Barna surveys<sup>1</sup>, 40% of respondents agree with the statement, "All people will experience the same outcome after death, regardless of their religious beliefs."

That's a good definition of pluralistic universalism. But there's a big difference between pluralistic universalism and *Christian universalism*, as we'll see.

### Can Christians Be Universalist?

When the subject of Christian universalism is raised among some traditional Christians, hackles rise like those on the back of a Jack



**W**hat about Ed Thompson—and his family in anguish and doubt over the fate of their atheist father? What about the billions of people in parts of India and China for whom Jesus is nothing more than a strange, foreign demigod?...Are all these people "saved" or are they "lost"? While many religious institutions claim to know the answer, the truth is that no one can say for sure.

Russell Terrier who has just spotted a cat.

As far as many "Bible-believing" Christians are concerned, the terms "Christian" and "universalism" are not compatible. Universalism, they say, is a dangerous heresy that has arisen from paganism like a toxic green slime, oozing through New Agers and Unitarians into mainstream Christian churches in recent decades, threatening to engulf and corrode cherished, time-tested doctrines (especially those having to do with an ever-burning hell).

But not everyone writes off Christian universalism as heresy. According to the same Barna surveys, some 25% of committed Christians believe that "all people are eventually saved or accepted by God."

That's quite a number—large enough to warrant our attention and careful investigation.

Just what is this thing called universalism? It's often misunderstood and misapplied because it can mean (or be confused with) several things:

**Theological inclusivity**—the idea that all faiths and philosophies share universal truths.

**The universal church**—certain churches believe themselves to be the one true church, encompassing all cultures and ethnicities. Historically, the Catholic (meaning universal) church believed this—and many denominations and cults still do.

**The universality of the church**—Yes, this sounds a lot like the previous item, but it's completely different. This is the truth that the genuine Christian church is catholic (universal)—embracing and including all believers in Christ from all backgrounds.

The first three items have to do with being a Christ-follower in the here and now. Our final definition, and the subject of this article, has to do with the universality of God's relationship and reconciliation with human beings in the afterlife:

**Christian universalism**—the assertion that somehow, in some way, all will ultimately enjoy eternity with God.

## Dire Implications

Why is Christian universalism such a hot issue? Because it carries with it several unsettling and far-reaching implications and questions:

- If everyone is automatically “saved,” why did Jesus have to die?

- If salvation is universal, what about an ever-burning hell? Is the eternal punishment spoken of in the Bible (Matthew 25:46) not one and the same as eternal punishing?

- If there is no justice or punishment for mass murderers, tyrants and terrorists, what’s the point of trying to live a good life?

- If everyone is destined for heaven, why bother to evangelize and share the gospel? Will people who have not been evangelized in this life receive some sort of post-mortem evangelization?

- If all religious paths lead to eternal life, and Hindus and atheists get the same reward as Christians—why not just believe and do whatever suits your fancy?

- Most importantly, this issue may ultimately be based on what we believe about the nature of God—his mercy and judgment—in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

These questions can be disturbing, especially for those who are confident that they have all their theological ducks arranged in a neat row. Such Christians would be even more perplexed if they knew that some of the same early church fathers who helped develop fundamental doctrines such as the Trinity also dared to hope that Jesus

actually meant it when he said he would “draw all people” to himself (John 12:32). But more about that later.

If you’re not confused yet, you’re probably about to be. Within our definition above, Christian universalism represents a whole spectrum of beliefs (see “The Expanding Universe of Christian Universalism”). If you look at this table carefully, you’ll see that there are variations on the same recipe with differing mixtures of the following ingredients:

**Punitive punishment**—punishment for the sake of justice.

**Remedial punishment**—punishment intended to teach and reform.

**Salvation of Satan and demons**—yes, some believe it is possible.

**Justice**—will big-time evildoers get what’s coming to them? If so, how?

**Free will**—the ability for humans to have choice in their eternal destiny.

**Predestination**—the idea that God has already made choices for us. Also called determinism.

The last two items are fundamental issues in universalism. Many Christians reject universalism out of hand because they believe it does not allow for free will. You see, strict universalists insist that God has predestined all to be saved (ironically, they share this disallowance of human choice with Christians who insist that God has predestined some to be “saved” and others to be “lost”).

Less doctrinally adamant, but still considered by many to be under the umbrella of universalism, are those who hold hope and confidence that all will ultimately respond to and be reconciled to God, allowing for human choice and free will.

We add a major wrinkle to the discussion when we ask—how capable is a human being at making a genuine free-will decision about his or her own eternal destiny—a fully conscious and aware choice for or against God—in this life (see Greg Albrecht’s accompanying article, “How Free Is Human Free Will?”)?

## What Does the Bible Say?

Let’s consider three passages from the New Testament, beginning with Romans 6:23:

*For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Now let’s look at Matthew 25:41-46:

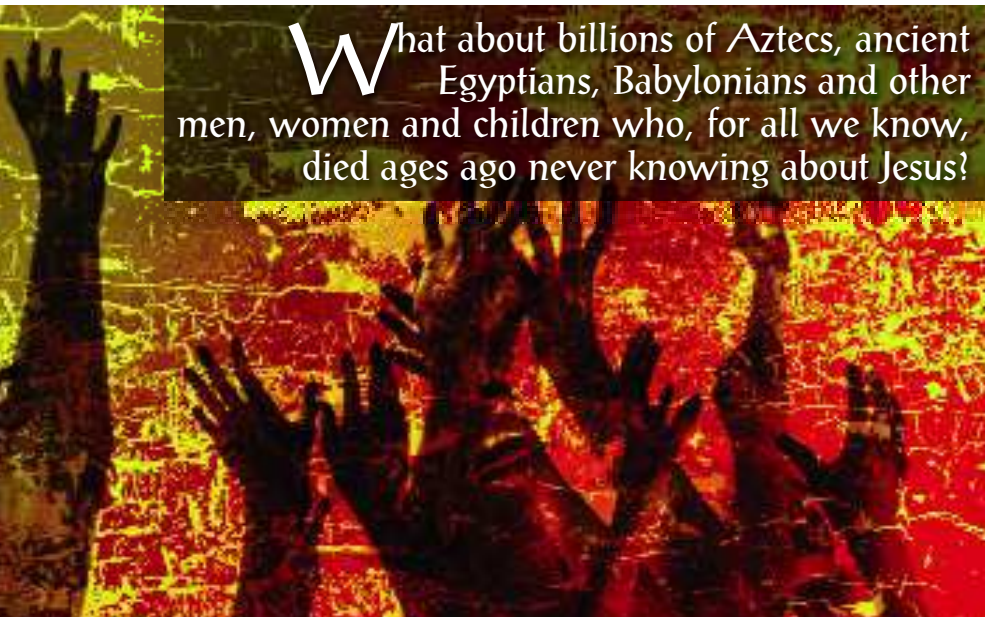
*“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink; I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’ They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ Then they*



We know from

Scripture that God is infinitely merciful and extends his grace to all his creation. Given this emphasis, dogmatic insistence on eternal torture and suffering is inconsistent with the gospel.

What about billions of Aztecs, ancient Egyptians, Babylonians and other men, women and children who, for all we know, died ages ago never knowing about Jesus?



There are many paradoxical and seemingly contradictory passages on this topic... It may well be that God intended these passages to keep us from being too dogmatic and polarized (of course this has not stopped institutional Christianity from doing so).

*will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."*

Finally, let's consider Philippians 2:9-11:

*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.*

If we were reading these passages with no prior knowledge of traditional Christian teaching about the afterlife, we might conclude that they contradict each other. The first passage tells us that those who sin will die. We might think that

"eternal" in the second passage says that the unrighteous will not merely die but be punished eternally. The third passage suggests that everyone will ultimately worship Jesus.

Even as you are reading this paragraph, however, you are attempting to reconcile these contradictory passages by filtering them through the doctrine you have been taught.

Many take the second passage at what they assume to be "face value" (because it fits comfortably with the traditional idea of heaven for the righteous and eternal hell fire for the wicked—even though it doesn't actually say that). If that's

your perspective, you will then develop (or consult Bible helps for) explanations as to why the other two passages don't really mean what they seem to say. And then you will sit back, satisfied and relieved, believing you have wrangled obstreperous scriptures into harmony.

If we were more honest and courageous, we might ask ourselves—*isn't Scripture inspired by God?* If so, why do we need to "harmonize" seeming contradictions? Was the Holy Spirit incapable of making the Bible internally consistent?

There's a better explanation. What if God has done this

## Infernalist, Annihilationist and Universalist

Infernalists (the majority Christian view) believe that God consigns the unrepentant wicked to some form of eternal punishment in hell.

Annihilationists believe that God simply allows the unrepentant wicked to die (perhaps after a "second death" in the "lake of fire").

Universalists believe that God will somehow, in some way, ultimately redeem and reconcile all humans to himself.

Each school of thought uses particular passages to support its claim—an easy task, since the Bible and New Testament in particular offer many paradoxical passages about the afterlife. Commentators often attempt to reconcile these passages by favoring one passage at the expense of others. The list below shows passages favored by each group. As we might expect, preferred infernalist passages emphasize dire punishment after death; favorite annihilationist passages emphasize eternal death as the only fate of the wicked; favorite universalist passages imply a future universal redemption.

But when we attempt to proof-text our pet doctrines, we may be missing an important point—perhaps God's intent is to show us different aspects of the same issue. Taking these passages (and many others) as a whole, we come away understanding that God is the ultimate judge, that God holds the power of life and death and that God, by his grace, offers reconciliation and salvation to all who will accept.

### Infernalist

Matthew 5:22  
Matthew 18:7-9  
Matthew 25:31-46  
Revelation 14:9-11  
1 Peter 3:19-20  
Luke 16:22-24  
Jude 1:7

### Annihilationist

2 Thessalonians 1:9  
Romans 6:23  
John 3:16  
Hebrews 10:27  
Revelation 19:19-21  
Revelation 21:4-8  
Matt 3:10-12; 13:30, 42, 49-50  
1 Corinthians 3:17  
Philippians 1:28; 3:19  
2 Peter 2:1-3; 3-7

### Universalist

1 Corinthians 15:28  
Acts 3:21  
Philippians 2:10  
Revelation 5:13  
Colossians 1:16-20  
John 12:32

# The Expanding Universe of Christian Universalism

Christian universalism is the idea that somehow, in some way, all will ultimately be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. Modern Christian universalism seems to have its roots in 17th century England, quickly spreading to America. It found fertile soil among pietist and Anabaptist believers, in addition to Quakers, Methodists and Lutherans. Early adherents were often of German ancestry.

Within Christendom today, the word universalism is most often associated with the Unitarian Universalist Church, formed in the 20th century by consolidation of two older organizations. Although the Unitarian Universalist Church has roots in Christianity, it now embraces non-Christian beliefs, and therefore does not represent Christian universalism. It's necessary, therefore, to make a clear distinction between the classically known unitarianism of the Unitarian Universalist Church and Christian Universalism.

Christian universalism includes a broad spectrum of belief. The following continuum moves from the most radical beliefs found within Christian universalism (#1) to more conservative and cautious (#6).

1. Every one of God's creatures will be saved—even Satan and the demons. God has predestined it so, and human (or angelic) choice is not a factor. Jesus' sacrifice has saved everyone. This variety of universalism has also been called restorationism, as it is believed that God will restore the creation to perfect harmony. This is not to be confused with other teachings known as restorationism, including the Christian primitivist restorationist movements, which are concerned with restoring the Christian church to its early apostolic roots, or the 19th century movement to restore the Jews to the Holy Land.

2. Same as #1, except Satan and the demons will not be saved. Their fate is sealed.

3. All human beings will ultimately be saved, with the addition of an element of choice: Those who have not accepted Christ in this life will receive, understand and choose to accept the gospel posthumously.

4. Same as #3, except that those who have not accepted Christ in this life will receive temporary punishment for their sins in the afterlife (similar in some ways to Catholic purgatory)—until they repent and accept Christ. This punishment is neither punitive nor soul-purifying (as is Purgatory), but remedial—intended to bring the soul to repentance, reconciliation and acceptance of God's grace. Some early restorationists (see #1) believed in this temporary form of hell. Others denied the existence of hell entirely.

5. Same as #4, except that those who have not accepted Christ in this life will not receive punitive punishment for sins, but they will have to review (and on some level, experience) the pain they have caused others—with the goal of repentance and reconciliation at the foot of the cross.

6. God will save "all but a few." Some may argue that this is not really universalism, which by definition means all, but we still include it under the Christian universalist umbrella. This is the type of "hopeful universalism" that some of the early church fathers maintained. While they did not say dogmatically that all would be saved, neither did they deny the possibility. This position allows for free will: God does not force salvation on anyone, yet it is possible that all will ultimately receive his grace.

deliberately? What if he is showing us different facets of eternal truths that can't be summarized in a single passage?

As Brad Jersak observes in his book, *Her Gates Will Never Be Shut*, "Our obsessive attempts to harmonize the Scriptures into artificially coherent, stackable propositions—as if they required us to contend for their reliability or authority—actually do violence to their richness."<sup>2</sup>

There are many paradoxical and seemingly contradictory passages

on this topic (see "Infernalist, Annihilationist and Universalist"). It may well be that God intended these passages to keep us from being too dogmatic and polarized (of course this has not stopped institutional Christianity from doing so).

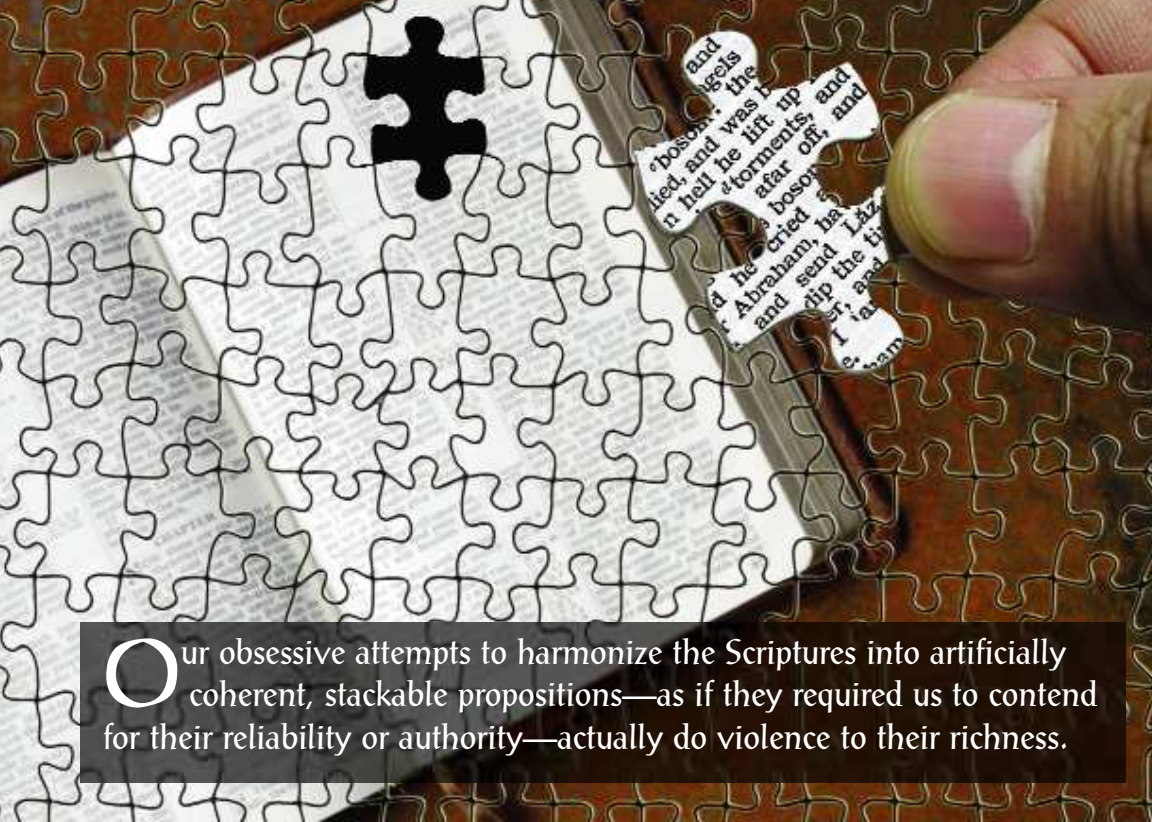
Jim Fowler argues that *The Extent and Efficacy of the Life and Work of Jesus Christ* should be seen as a balance between what he calls the objective-universal "all" of humanity at large and the subjective-particular wherein "not all" will choose to individually and

personally respond to Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>

## Historic Hopeful Universalists—They Dared to Hope

Many centuries ago, before Christian doctrine had become a political football, a few eminent Christian thinkers pondered the passages we have just discussed—and exchanged their ideas openly.

The early church fathers—especially those active before the council of Nicea in 313—lived during a time of doctrinal flux and forma-



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tion, when believers were grappling with major theological issues. When we look at the selected quotes presented here, we get a brief and surprising glimpse into what they were thinking about universal reconciliation.

**Clement of Alexandria** (c.150-c.215) was an early convert whose extensive classical Greek education contributed to his understanding and teaching of Christianity. He led the Catechetical School of Alexandria, and participated in the long discussion about which books to include in the New Testament. Clement suggested that Christ was working to save everyone—even after death! Clement observes:

*If in this life there are so many ways for purification and repentance, how much more should there be after death! The purification of souls, when separated from the body, will be easier. We can set no limits to the agency of the Redeemer; to redeem, to rescue, to discipline, is his work, and so will he continue to operate after this life.*



Clement of Alexandria

**Origen** (c.184-c.253) was a disciple of Clement, and his successor as leader of the Catechetical School of Alexandria. His prolific biblical interpretation and philosophical theology contributed to the foundations of church doctrine. But nearly three centuries after his death he would be declared anathema by the institutional church because it was alleged that some of his teachings were not orthodox. In particular, he suggested that God would ultimately restore all things (the Greek word *apokatastasis*, used only once in the Bible—see Acts 3:21)

and reconcile all souls to himself. Origen tells us:

*For stronger than all the evils in the soul is the Word, and the healing power that dwells in Him; and this healing He applies, according to the will of God, to every man.... Many things are said obscurely in the*



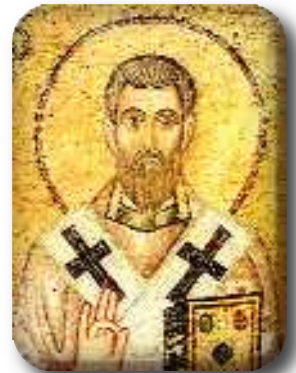
Origen

*prophecies on the total destruction of evil, and the restoration to righteousness of every soul....*

**Gregory of Nyssa** (c.335-c.395) was Bishop of Nyssa (a town in what is now south-central Turkey). Along with the other Cappadocian Fathers (Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus), he contributed significantly to the doctrine of the Trinity, and edited the revised Nicene Creed at the First Council of Constantinople. Influenced by the writings of Origen, he seemed to hope

for the eventual salvation of all. Gregory wrote:

*For it is evident that God will in truth be "in all" when there shall be no evil in existence, when every created being is at harmony with itself, and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord; when every creature shall have been made one body. Now the body of Christ, as I have often said, is the whole of humanity.... Participation in bliss awaits everyone....the annihilation of evil, the restitution of all things, and the*



Gregory of Nyssa

*final restoration of evil men and evil spirits to the blessedness of union with God, so that he may be "all in all," embracing all things endowed with sense and reason.*

**Jerome** (c.347-420) was a historian, theologian and priest from the city of Stri-

# How Free Is Free Will?

By Greg Albrecht

How much choice does any individual human actually have? We speak of "free will"—but how much of a choice to accept God's grace does anyone have, given the brainwashing and propaganda to which they are subjected? *How much of a choice to accept God's grace does a young boy in a radicalized Muslim school have? How much of a choice to accept God's grace does someone have who is ensnared by some ultra fundamentalist church, where performance-based religion rules?*

Being in Christ is a divine invitation to an eternal relationship, open to everyone. But being in Christ is not an automatic, divinely bestowed or imposed gift. Being in Christ is not a spiritual address or a relationship he forces on us. God is not coercive—he does not bully us into accepting his love. We may decline the relationship he offers. We have a choice.

But *how much of a choice* do we really have? Are we all on a level playing field, or when it comes to responding favorably to God's invitation do the odds favor some of us more than others?

**1) I believe God provides an open invitation to all mankind**—and that in some way, somehow, God will, in his perfect wisdom and love, eventually draw people to himself. Because of the cross of Christ, all are

don (in present-day Slovenia). In addition to his prolific writings, he translated the entire Bible into Latin. In this quote Jerome seems to foresee a time when God would reconcile everyone to himself:

*In the end and consummation of the universe all are to be restored into their original harmonious state, and we all shall be made one body and be united once more into a perfect man, and the prayer of our Savior shall be fulfilled that all may be one.*



Jerome

eventually invited to accept God's love. However, all are not, at any moment in time, equally drawn by God's grace to relationship in Christ. Therefore, all humans have free will, but at any given point in time, some are more free than others because God has drawn them, by his grace.

**2) God's grace draws us to Christ** (see John 6:44 and 6:65). *Drawn* indicates some divine illumination, some impartation of light and understanding that was not there before. By virtue of our humanity, we have a spiritual genetic predisposition, we are "hard-wired" or at least incredibly attracted to religion rather than grace, like iron filings to a magnet. In order for us to unplug from wrong-headed notions, including the attraction that bad-news religion presents to us, and plug into God's grace, God has to help prod us and "draw us." In this regard, perhaps God's grace is somewhat like a magnetic field.

When God "draws" us he graciously overcomes the spiritual inertia that holds us captive. So in drawing us I believe God, who is love, acts as the divine Lover. He pursues us and beckons to us (this in contrast with the religious idea that he is threatening to burn the hell out of us for all eternity, torturing us if we don't comply with his wishes).

So, for example, when we as Christians classically

use the word "repent" (as in turning from one behavior or action to another) how much of that action is directly and solely attributable to us and us alone? Can any human just decide to seek God one day, or does God have a part, even in the most elementary and initial part of our decision to seek him? I believe that God must draw us to himself—for by nature we are against God and his plan and his grace (Romans 8:7). God's grace offends us.

God, when he draws us, starts to pursue us somewhat like a man pursues a woman, the object of his interest. Having made his intentions for us clear, God patiently waits for us to accept and receive his embrace.

## All Are Invited, But All Are Not Responding

I believe that the gospel assures us, by virtue of the cross of Christ, that 1) all are or will be given the opportunity, an invitation if you wish, to relationship in and with Christ, and 2) in some way, somehow, all will be drawn by God. All, by virtue of the cross, are invited. In ways completely and absolutely known to God alone, he communicates an invitation, in his time and way, in a manner he determines as fair and equitable to humanity at large.

So while all are invited and all are welcome, there is absolutely no

**Augustine of Hippo** (354-430) was a philosopher, theologian and bishop in the city of Hippo in what is now northern Algeria. A firm believer in the grace of Christ, his ideas reinvigorated the

Roman church, enabling it to survive the dissolution of the Western Roman Empire. He is considered one of the most influential thinkers of Christianity. Yet he feared that earlier

church fathers' universalist leanings could lead believers to dangerous permissiveness. Partially because of this, Augustine firmly established and embellished the idea of a hell of endless torture (partly based on his misunderstanding of the context of the biblical

Greek word later translated as "eternal" in most English Bibles). Augustine emphasized that only some would be saved—and those only by God's will. He even taught that



Augustine of Hippo



doubt, if we open our eyes and ears, that many in our world are living outside of Christ. They are "in the dark." Are some people in the dark, and outside of life in Christ, because, while God has invited everyone, he has not yet drawn them? Are they in the darkness, outside of the Light of Christ, because God has not yet started, for some reason unknown to us, to seriously court and woo them—to use the human expression of romantic love? Yes, I think we have to conclude that.

However, are some people walking in darkness because they have refused to be drawn by God's overt and active interest in them, as he makes his invitation plain by drawing them? Have some actually rejected what God offers? Yes, based on the evidence of our world and what we have seen and heard and read, I think we have to conclude that some have or

some seem to be rejecting him.

Next question. Of all the people who are outside of Christ, what percentage are living in darkness because, while Christ has died for all mankind and all are, or will be invited to be in Christ, God has not yet drawn them—and how many have been drawn by God in some way and yet have still rejected him? No one knows that number or percentage, of course.

Some believe that God will so relentlessly draw all to himself that in the end, everyone—100% of humanity—will accept God's invitation. They seem to believe that God will not give up until everyone says "yes"—in this scenario some seem to think that the entire world, even the most obstinate, willful, and wrong-headed will eventually just get so tired of God's constant "advances" that they give up, just to "get rid" of his constant attention. In this view, it seems to me that some

unbaptized infants, because they had inherited original sin, would be subjected to eternal (albeit mild) punishment. He also allowed that lesser sinners would undergo temporary punishment in purgatory, until they were sufficiently cleansed of sin to enter heaven.

Such ideas appealed to leaders of the institutional church, especially in light of the waning power of the Roman Empire. It was time for the Roman church to fulfill its destiny as the Augustinian "City of God." And let's face it—threats of eternal torture make a far better tool for controlling the masses than nebulous visions of a loving God and

universal reconciliation. Augustine's presumptions about eternal conscious torment generally won the day in the Western Church, although the Eastern Church did not ultimately follow his teaching.

By the time of **Justinian**, Byzantine emperor from 527 to 565, the concept of universal reconciliation had come to be regarded as non-orthodox. Justinian's iron-fisted rule encompassed the church, where he sought to insure uni-



Justinian

... While all are invited and all are welcome, there is absolutely no doubt, if we open our eyes and ears, that many in our world are living outside of Christ. They are "in the dark."

believe that God will just eventually wear down every single last person who has ever lived. Based on what I read of the gospel, I can't buy this idea. I wish it were so. I can hope for it, and I do. If God chooses to do such a thing, I will rejoice. But I can't tell others to believe such a thing, because I don't believe anyone can absolutely know such a thing for certain.

Given that the primary purpose of the gospel of Jesus Christ is extending an invitation to receive God's love and given that God has infinite resources to convince and "woo" us, we can reasonably hope that most will, at some time and in some way, say "yes" to God.

However, the intimate and eternal relationship that God reveals and to which he invites us is not a forced relationship. There are no forced eternal marriages with God. We have a say. That means some will resist God's gracious advances and reject him—no matter how relentlessly he pursues them. But I could be wrong. Check back with me when Jesus sits me down on the other side of eternity and sighs, and says, "Okay Greg—you had a few things right, but we need to go back to some basics." □

formity of doctrine and suppression of anything that looked like heresy. Among his edicts was a posthumous condemnation of Origen and his views on universal reconciliation, following the Synod of Constantinople in 543. Ironically, although Gregory of Nyssa had taught something similar, his orthodoxy was never questioned.

In any case, the universalism that the early church fathers had discussed and considered was now *anathema*—forbidden by the insti-

(continued on page 35)



# William Barclay (1907-1978)

**Professor, Theologian, Author, Greek Scholar**

*Professor of Divinity and Biblical Criticism at the University of Glasgow, William Barclay dedicated his life to "making the best biblical scholarship available to the average reader."*

*The result was the Daily Study Bible, a set of commentaries on the New Testament, exploring verse by verse through Barclay's own translation of the New Testament, listing and examining every possible interpretation known to*



*providing all the background information he considered possibly relevant. The 17 volumes of the set were all instant best-sellers and continue to be so to this day. Following is an excerpt from his Spiritual Autobiography.*

I am a convinced universalist. I believe that in the end all men will be gathered into the love of God. In the early days Origen was the great name connected with universalism. I would believe with Origen that universalism is no easy thing. Origen believed that after death there were many who would need prolonged instruction, the sternest discipline, even the severest punishment before they were fit for the presence of God. Origen did not eliminate hell; he believed that some people would have to go to heaven via hell. He believed that even at the end of the day there would be some on whom the scars remained. He did not believe in eternal punishment, but he did see the possibility of eternal penalty. And so the choice is whether we accept God's offer and invitation willingly, or take the long and terrible way round

through ages of purification.

Gregory of Nyssa offered three reasons why he believed in universalism. First, he believed in it because of the character of God. "Being good, God entertains pity for fallen man; being wise, he is not ignorant of the means for his recovery." Second, he believed in it because of *the nature of evil*. Evil must in the end be moved out of existence, "so that the absolutely non-existent should cease to be at all." Evil is essentially negative and doomed to non-existence. Third, he believed in it because of *the purpose of punishment*. The purpose of punishment is always remedial. Its aim is "to get the good separated from the evil and to attract it into the communion of blessedness." Punishment will hurt, but it is like the fire which separates the alloy from the gold; it is like the surgery which removes the diseased thing; it is like the cautery which burns out that which cannot be removed any other way.

But I want to set down not the arguments of others but the thoughts which have persuaded me personally of universal salvation.

First, there is the fact that there are things in the New Testament which more than justify this belief. Jesus said: "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw *all* men to myself" (John 12:32). Paul writes to the Romans: "God has consigned *all* men to disobedience that he may have mercy on *all*" (Romans 11:32). He

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writes to the Corinthians: "As in Adam *all* die, so also in Christ shall *all* be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22); and he looks to the final total triumph when God will be everything to everyone (1 Corinthians 15:28). In the First Letter to Timothy we read of God "who desires *all* men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth," and of Christ Jesus "who gave himself as a ransom for *all*" (1 Timo-

**G**od is not only King and Judge, God is Father—he is indeed Father more than anything else. No father could be happy while there were members of his family forever in agony... The only triumph a father can know is to have all his family back home.

thy 2:4-6). The New Testament itself is not in the least afraid of the word *all*.

Second, one of the key passages is Matthew 25:46 where it is said that the rejected go away to eternal punishment, and the righteous to eternal life. The Greek word for punishment is *kolasis*, which was not originally an ethical word at all. It originally meant the pruning of trees to make them grow better. I think it is true to say that in all Greek secular literature *kolasis* is never used of anything but remedial punishment. The word for eternal is *aiônios*. It means more than



everlasting, for Plato—who may have invented the word—plainly says that a thing may be everlasting and still not be *aionios*. The simplest way to put it is that *aionios* cannot be used properly of anyone but God; it is the word uniquely, as Plato saw it, of God. Eternal punishment is then literally that kind of remedial punishment which it befits God to give and which only God can give.

Third, I believe that it is impossible to set limits to the grace of God. I believe that not only in this world, but in any other world there may be, the grace of God is still effective, still operative, still at work. I do not believe that the operation of the grace of God is limited to this world. I believe that the grace of God is as wide as the universe.

Fourth, I believe implicitly in the ultimate and complete triumph of God, the time when all things will be subject to him, and when God will be everything to everyone (1 Corinthians 15:24-28). For me this has certain consequences. If one man remains outside the love of God at the end of time, it means that that one man has defeated the love of God—and that is impossible. Further, there is only one way in which we can think of the triumph of God. If God was no more than a King or Judge, then it would be possible to speak of his triumph, if his enemies were agonizing in hell or were totally and completely obliterated and wiped out. But God is not only King and Judge, God is *Father*—he is indeed Father more than anything else. No father could be happy while there were members of his family forever in agony. No father would count it a triumph to obliterate the disobedient members of his family.

The only triumph a father can know is to have all his family back home. The only victory love can enjoy is the day when its offer of love is answered by the return of love. The only possible final triumph is a universe loved by and in love with God.

Quoted from *William Barclay: A Spiritual Autobiography*, pp. 65-67, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1977.



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tutional church. With few exceptions, the institutional Christian church to this day has effectively bowed to Justinian's authority on the issue. Ultimate redemptionists have been on the fringe ever since.

### What Does It All Mean?

1,500 years later—what does this mean for us? What about Ed Thompson—and his family in anguish and doubt over the fate of their atheist father?

What about the billions of people in parts of India and China for whom Jesus is nothing more than a strange, foreign demigod? What about billions of Aztecs, ancient Egyptians, Babylonians and other men, women and children who, for all we know, died ages ago never knowing about Jesus?

Are all these people “saved” or are they “lost”? While many religious institutions claim to know the answer, the truth is that no one can say for sure. What we do know is this:

- When we remove our dogmatic reading glasses, Scripture allows for the *possibility* of ultimate redemption for all.
- We also know that in an earlier age (before dogmatic church/state institutions quelled such speculation), devout and learned Christian leaders freely and openly discussed

the hope of universal reconciliation. Considered one of the most important theologians of the 20th century, Swiss Catholic Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988) expressed hope that all will be saved while warning we must not assert such a belief dogmatically.

- We know from Scripture that God is infinitely merciful and extends his grace to all his creation. Given this emphasis, dogmatic insistence on eternal torture and suffering is inconsistent with the gospel.

- It seems both biblically reasonable and Christ-like to believe that God allows every human being a choice—that human beings have free will.

- Further, depending on how one defines freedom it may be that some choices could be freely made only in the afterlife—free from the encumbrances that enslave many in our world.

- But since by its very nature, the outcome of free will can't be predicted with certainty, neither can we know dogmatically whether all will ultimately respond to God's grace.

- Beyond this, we can't fully know, understand, predict or fathom the judgment and mercy of God. Since God's will is truly free, we can't presume (as many have done) to

## Love or Justice?

The discussion of eternal torment and the fate of the “unsaved” is often framed, by the law and order crowd, as a matter of God’s love or his justice. Those who are intent on relegating those who, to their knowledge and satisfaction, have never heard or accepted their version of Christianity to eternal torture, often characterize those, like myself, who primarily look for answers based on God’s love and grace, as soft-headed, soft-hearted and weak.

So which is it—love or justice? Is God primarily a God of love or a God of justice? Here’s what I see as the fundamental flaw in real, he-man, tough-as-nails Christianity:

- Jesus Christ is the very embodiment of God’s love—he is God’s love personified. When I study his life and teachings I am overwhelmed by his compassion and mercy, and find few examples when he models a heavenly hanging judge who makes tough, by-the-book decisions in favor of religious perceptions and definitions of justice.

- The Bible reveals that God is love. The Bible defines the very heart and core of God as love. Love is what God is, rather than one of his attributes. God has many attributes, with justice being among them. But all of God’s attributes flow out of his love—his attributes do not flow out of his justice. God is merciful, sovereign, holy, just, perfect, good, righteous, omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient—and all of these attributes are summarized in his divine love.

- Most of the arguments attempting to place God’s justice and wrath as his defining characteristics go something like this: *Yes, the death of Jesus Christ was the ultimate expression of divine love. But, it was the ultimate expression because God cannot, by his very perfection, pass over sin. To vindicate his justice God did the unthinkable—in the person of Jesus he died for us. So at the center of the cross is the glorification of God’s perfect justice.*

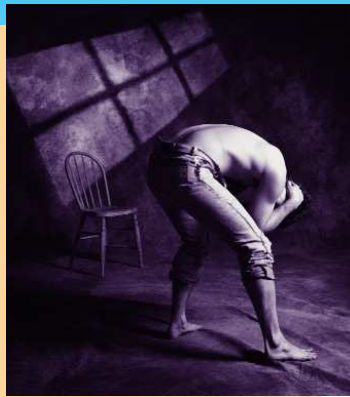
Such ideas then lead to the insistence on an ever burning hell fire for the vast majority of humans who have ever lived, and, by comparison, an exclusive and small kingdom of heaven occupied primarily by paid-in-full, dues-paying slaves of Christ-less religion.

I absolutely reject a characterization of God as a primitive god of wrath on the grounds of the person of Jesus Christ and the fullness of his gospel. God the Father did not insist that God the Son die so that God the Father could be vindicated. In seeking a humanly satisfactory motive for the cross of Christ, this outrageous idea diminishes the love of God and perverts his very nature.

We must beware of defining God by human standards. Human ideas of retributive justice, or vengeance, often masquerade as a divine manifesto. God never said we would, in this lifetime, completely fathom his love—by his grace we are saved from theological attempts that try to do just that!

- Those who argue for eternal punishment of those who fall short of humanly imposed religious standards are not only violating the fundamental definition of God as love, they are, in pitting the wrath of the Father against of the compassion of the Son, violating the revelation of the unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. According to some theological presuppositions, in order to place justice on the divine throne, justice must be presumed to trump God’s love in the end. That is, God may desire to forgive those who in some way are deemed to have fallen short, but he can’t—his justice compels him to send such poor souls to eternal torture. This belief and teaching bifurcates the very nature of God, separating his very essence.

In order to advance their own sense of retribution and satisfaction, theological lynch mobs have to place God’s love and justice in tension. They must set God against himself! But the Bible insists that the matter is not love or justice—it is not either/or, but both/and. And the Bible insists that love triumphs over all! The gospel is good news because God’s love is unalloyed, infinite and relentless.—Greg Albrecht



place him in a corner in terms of his decisions and plans.

- So, as we attempt to understand God and his wisdom and grace, we will err—but surely God would prefer us to err on the side of more individuals being with him for all eternity than a small remnant of our particular denominational brand of theological thinking.

- If we are truly in Christ and he in us we cannot help but hope. We can have peace and confidence that we do not need to anguish over departed friends and loved ones. Rather than dogmatic condemnation, or anxious uncertainty, our response to the question of what will happen to all humanity for all eternity can be hope. □

1. <http://www.barna.org/faith-spirituality/484-what-americans-believe-about-universalism-and-pluralism>

2. *Her Gates Will Never Be Shut*, Brad Jerzak, Wipf and Stock publishers, Eugene, Oregon.

3. *The Extent and Efficacy of the Life and Work of Jesus Christ*, James A. Fowler, <http://www.christinyou.net/pages/pdfs/ExtentEfficacyEbook.pdf>

### For Further Reading:

*Universal Solution? The Current Debate*, Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Partridge

*Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell and the Fate of Every Person Who Lived*, Rob Bell

*The Inescapable Love of God*, Thomas Talbot

*The Evangelical Universalist*, Gregory McDonald

*Christian Universalism: God's Good News for All People*, Eric Stetson

*Hope Beyond Hell: The Righteous Purpose of God's Judgment*, D. Scott Reichard and Gerry Beauchemin

*Dare We Hope That All Men Be Saved?* Hans Urs von Balthasar

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