

HEAVEN OR HELL?

by

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Death is the most democratic institution on earth. It comes to all men, regardless of color, education, wealth, or rank. It allows no discrimination, tolerates no exceptions. The mortality rate of mankind is the same the world over: one death per person. The only exception we know of are Enoch and Elijah, both of whom were taken up into the presence of God without dying, and those believers who, living at the time of the return of Christ, will be transformed without passing through death.

"It is appointed for men to die once." With this scriptural verdict there can be no dissent. But the immediately following statement in Hebrews 9:27--"and after that comes judgment"--opens the door to a thousand questions. What follows death? What is man's state after he has left this life? Is there a heaven for the righteous, a place of everlasting bliss, where they will enjoy endless communication with God? Is there a hell for the wicked, a place of eternal banishment from the presence of God? Are the souls of the wicked (or of all men) annihilated at death? Or may we hope that all men, Judas Iscariot included, and all demons, even Satan himself, will at length be restored and returned to the good graces of their Creator? Questions like these might have haunted Hamlet when he said:

*To die; to sleep;
To sleep, perchance to dream; ay, there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause . . .*

After Death--Judgment

The idea of a final tribunal, a Great Assize before which all men must appear and at which they will be assigned their eternal destiny, did not, of course, originate in the ghoulish depictions of medieval artists and writers. Behind them lies the source of this awesome concept: the joint testimony of the Old and New Testaments. When the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews refers to a post-mortem judgment, he is not introducing some novel idea. Earlier in the letter he placed "eternal judgment" as the final item in a catalogue of "elementary doctrines of Christ" consisting of such tenets as repentance from dead works, faith toward God, baptism, ordination, and the resurrection of the dead (Heb. 6:1, 2). Since "eternal judgment" occupies a place among the six basic articles of Christian faith, it is not surprising to discover references to it throughout Scripture.

In the Old Testament God is repeatedly designated as the God of judgment who as "the

Judge of all the earth" will "do right" (Gen. 18:25), who "will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth" (Ps. 96:13), and who "will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil" (Eccles. 12:14). That judgment will make an eternal distinction between men, for "many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Dan. 12:2).

These prophetic intimations come to final expression in the New Testament. What were once seed thoughts, germinal and incomplete, now appear in full maturity in the teaching of Jesus Christ and of his apostles.

Never were there words as solemn and as searching as those in which Jesus warned of the judgment to come. In twelve out of thirty-six of his parables he depicts men as judged, condemned, and punished for their sins. In one, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, he draws back the veil on the conditions of men in the hereafter to show the rich man in torment, suffering an anguish that has no relief and no end, confined to one side of a chasm that is forever unbridgeable (Luke 16:19-31).

Some of Jesus' sternest teaching on divine retribution appears in the Sermon on the Mount. Commenting on the consequences of hatred, he warns of the impending "hell of fire" (Matt. 5:22). Later, speaking of the adulterous implications of a lustful look, he pleads with men to make every kind of sacrifice, to surrender eye, arm, foot, rather than be cast into hell (Matt. 5:27-30). Then, comparing a man's life to a tree, he declares, "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matt. 7:19). And, anticipating the superficial adherents who would be among his followers, he tells of a day when their pious protestations will not avert his awful rejection: "I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers" (Matt. 7:23). Finally, in describing the fool whose house, built on the sand, collapsed when the winds and the rain beat against it, Jesus warns of the possibility of a great and irrevocable tragedy overtaking the human soul (Matt. 7:24-27).

Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus' teaching sounds the same deep note of judgment. The terms he employs to warn of that impending crisis are, to be sure, graphic, symbolic, figurative; but they are nonetheless terribly real. He speaks of unquenchable fire, of outer darkness, of the undying worm, of the weeping and gnashing of teeth, of the resurrection of judgment, of the judgment of hell, of perdition, of many stripes.

In his last public teaching, as he sat on the Mount of Olives, Jesus outlined the details of the last judgment in his parable of the sheep and goats. To one class of men, those on his left hand, he as the Son of Man, will say, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." Concluding that parable with a description of this punishment, Jesus said, "And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Matt. 25:46).

The doctrine of the last judgment occupies a significant place elsewhere in the New Testament, though not as pervasively as in the four Gospels. Paul summarizes his view in

Second Thessalonians 1:6-9: "God deems it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant rest with us to you who are afflicted, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might." As did Jesus, the Apostle describes the punishment as "eternal" and its nature as "exclusion from the presence of the Lord." Thus the "destruction" is not annihilation but endless ruin in separation from Christ.

Peter, in his second epistle, speaks of fallen angels who are "cast . . . into hell" and of God's keeping "the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment" (2 Pet. 2:4, 9). Jude writes in the same vein, saying that "the angels that did not keep their position but left their proper dwelling have been kept by him in eternal chains . . . until the judgment of the great day" (Jude 6). And in the last book of the Bible, John portrays the visions he saw of the last day. Those who worship the beast and his image "shall be tormented with fire and brimstone . . . and the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; and they have no rest, day or night, those worshipers of the beast and its image" (Rev. 14:9-11). In a final apocalyptic scene, John sees "the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, by what they had done. . . . If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (Rev. 20:12-15).

In a world created and governed by a sovereign and holy God, there must be judgment, or else the very fabric of the spiritual universe is torn to shreds. But Scripture calls it God's "strange work" (Isa. 28:21, KJV); he takes no delight in it, and in the fullest way possible he extends his mercy that it may triumph over judgment.

And where in human history do we see the fullest expression of the mercy and judgment of God? At the cross of Christ. There, in the sufferings and death Jesus Christ underwent in dealing with our sins, we behold unveiled the divine love. This is the love the New Testament writers perceived when they looked at the cross. And for this reason they rarely speak of the love of God without in the same sentence referring to the cross of Christ and to our deliverance from the guilt into which our sins had plunged us (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8).

But more than the love of God is revealed at the cross. There we see, unsheathed, the implacable hostility of God's wrath against sin--past, present, and future. There at the cross God judged sin in Christ, having imputed our guilt to the Redeemer; Christ was our substitute and the bearer of our sin in his own body on the tree. The cross, therefore, is also a judgment, a divine execution of wrath upon sin, and is as such a precursor of the last judgment, when history, as we now know it, will be brought to a close.

Eternal Retribution

A judgment without the possibility of retribution is inconceivable. In a court, the accused is charged with breaking a law. If he is found guilty, the court decrees an appropriate punishment. Such punishment has in it a clear penal, retributive element, designed to satisfy the law.

Divine judgment may fall upon the sinner in innumerable temporal guises, such as the gnawing unrest of a guilt-ridden conscience, the accelerated loss of health and life, and the punishment administered by human courts. Against these temporal aspects of divine retribution, most of us raise little or no opposition. Such expressions of punishment, we agree, are consistent with human convictions and experience.

But transfer the concept of punishment from temporal to eternal categories, refer to everlasting punishment in hell, and the climate of the discussion changes. The silence with which any serious treatment of the subject is greeted, the reticence even of evangelicals to preach on hell and everlasting punishment, the modern resurgence of universalism (the belief that all men will ultimately be saved) in Protestant theology, and the frequent, glib use of the word "hell" in ordinary language, not only that of the street but also that of government, news media, and literature--these are the varied reactions that the doctrine of eternal retribution evinces today. The Russian theologian Berdyaev, feeling the pulse of modern thought, rightly diagnosed the ailment: "It is remarkable how little people think about hell or trouble about it. This is the most striking evidence of human frivolity" (*The Destiny of Man*, Scribners, 1937, p. 338).

"Hell," a word subjected to much perverted use in common profanity, is a biblical term that occurs more often in the teaching of Christ than elsewhere in Scripture. Noting this fact, William Shedd writes, "The strongest support of the doctrine of Endless Punishment is the teaching of Christ, the Redeemer of man. . . . The mere perusal of Christ's words when he was upon earth, without note or comment upon them, will convince the unprejudiced that the Redeemer of sinners knew and believed that for impenitent men and devils there is an endless punishment" (*The Doctrine of Endless Punishment*, Scribners, 1887, p. 12). To establish this, Shedd takes three pages to quote the words of Christ, citing such passages as Matthew 7:22, 23; 10:28; 11:23; Mark 9:43-48; Luke 9:25; 12:9, 10, 46; 16:22, 23; John 5:28, 29; 8:21.

In the desire to set aside Christ's clear-cut teaching on eternal retribution, men have resorted either to open rejection of its validity or to subtle reduction of its language. Nels F. S. Ferre, for example, says that the doctrine of the Second Coming "completely shut out the living God, embracing and reconciling all men with His eternal time and power," and substituted the concept that "all mankind would be extinguished or tormented forever except the few who would escape punishment through faith in the merits of Jesus." He adds: "it seems doubtful that Jesus ever taught such a doctrine" (*The Sun and the Umbrella*, Harper, 1953, p. 33). Ferre deliberately overstates traditional teaching on eternal retribution by grotesquely contrasting the "all mankind" and "the few" and by employing the word "extinguished," a term not found in the Gospels or in historic Christian theology. Thus by a brusque wave of the hand he dismisses not only a conspicuous element in the teaching of Jesus but all the catholic witness of the Church.

Other men, less bold than Ferre, have attempted to modify the meaning of the temporal terms Jesus used, to reduce their solemn impact. Formerly, F. W. Farrar and others insisted that the retribution, rather than being "eternal," was temporary, lasting but for an age. Today, J. A. T. Robinson speaks of "eternal" in a vertical sense, having it describe not an endless spiritual state but rather "the eternal seriousness of the choice before man."

But will the New Testament words for "forever" and "eternal" accommodate these interpretations? Does not the use of these terms for the eternity of God mean that they cannot be taken to imply a limited duration? God is said to be "the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God" (1 Tim. 1:17); glory is ascribed to him "forever" (Rom. 11:36); and he is blessed "forever" (2 Cor. 11:31). Moreover, their frequent use in the New Testament in reference to the never-ending "age to come" and to "eternal life" indicates that *aion* and *aionios* must have the significance of unlimited time. Thus, James Barr can say in his *Biblical Words for Time*: "The cases of *aionios* refer fairly uniformly to the being of God or to plans and realities, which, once established by him, are perpetual or unchanging."

Christ, in the parable of the sheep and goats, clearly defines *aionios*. To those at his left hand the Son of Man says, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal [*aionios*] fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41). This "eternal fire" he further describes as "eternal punishment" in the concluding statement of the parable: "They [the 'cursed,' those rejected by the judge] will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (v. 46). Here the phrase "eternal" [*aionios*] punishment" is balanced by the phrase "eternal [*aionios*] life," both states being permanent and final. It is impossible to remove the thought of "eternal" from one occurrence of the word *aionios* without taking the same liberty with its counterpart. Whatever is the duration of the "life" is the duration of the "punishment."

And this is not the only place in the New Testament where *aionios* is used to define the duration of man's ultimate destiny. Fifty-one times it describes the happiness of the righteous, and seven times the punishment of the wicked. No wonder W. R. Inge declared in *What Is Hell?*, "No sound Greek scholar can pretend that *aionios* means anything less than eternal."

Hell--The Place of Punishment

The Old Testament offers but little information about the eternal destiny of the individual, and most of this is concerned with the future of the righteous rather than of the wicked. *Sheol*, the place to which both godly and ungodly are said to go after death, is depicted as an abode of shadowy, limited existence, but existence nonetheless. Later, in noncanonical Jewish literature, we meet with the idea of compartments within *sheol*, areas designed separately for the wicked and righteous, in which each experiences a foretaste of his final destiny (Enoch xxii. 1-14).

Even the etymology of the Hebrew word *sheol* is uncertain. Some scholars derive it from a verb meaning "to ask" (suggesting either an insatiable pit always asking for more souls or a place where one may ask after an oracle). Others find its origin in a root meaning "hollow" and make it refer to a hollow, deep place under the earth.

Although the Old Testament information is meager, says Harry Buis, its meaning is clear:

The Old Testament clearly teaches a life after death, commonly in the form of an existence in Sheol, where good and evil alike share a similar dreary fate. However, there are also passages of inspired hope in a better life beyond death for the believer, a life of glorious fellowship with his God. Although there is in these passages no direct teaching with regard to the eternal punishment of the unbeliever, there is the beginning of a differentiation between the lot of the unbeliever and that of the believer [*The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment*, Baker, 1957, p. 12].

In Greek literature the underworld, or realm of the dead, was known as *hades*. This is the word that the translators of the Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament) used to render *sheol* in almost every instance of its appearance. *Hades* also appears in the New Testament. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus it indicates the place of the rich man's torment (Luke 16:23). It is the word denoting Satan's kingdom in its opposition to the Church in the statement, "The gates of *hades* shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). And it is the word representing the prison of Satan and the wicked in John's apocalyptic vision: "Death and Hades gave up the dead in them. . . . Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire" (Rev. 20:13, 14).

This last reference (along with others) strongly suggests that *hades* is an intermediate state of punishment for disembodied spirits, a place to eventuate, after the last judgment, in "the lake of fire." Elsewhere in the New Testament the final and eternal place of punishment, where persons in the body are to be incarcerated, is called *gehenna*. This term, which occurs twelve times in the New Testament, all but one of them in the teaching of Christ, is never named in connection with the torment of the present intermediate state. It is Christ who speaks of "the *gehenna* of fire" as equivalent to "eternal fire" into which men may be "thrown," in contrast to entering into "life" (Matt. 18:8, 9). He further explains it to be "the unquenchable fire . . . where their worm does not die" (Mark 9:43-47). It is Christ also who warns the Pharisees with the words, "You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to *gehenna*?" (Matt. 23:33). He instructs his own disciples, telling them to "fear him who, after he was killed, has power to cast into *gehenna*" (Luke 12:5). Calling for the most extreme sacrifice in the effort to avoid *gehenna*, he tells his hearers that "it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown in *gehenna*" (Matt. 5:29, 30). And it is Christ who exposes the consequences of hatred in the words, "Whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the *gehenna* of fire" (Matt. 5:22), a warning interpreted later by his apostle in plain terms: "Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him" (1 John 3:15).

There is no question that these passages, teaching as they do the reality of a place of eternal punishment, present profound problems to our mind. Much in our nature rises in revolt and horror against such a doctrine. Yet we ought not to compound the difficulties by insisting that the terms Christ used in describing *gehenna* be pressed to their full literal significance. Christian doctrine has never demanded that "the unquenchable fire" be interpreted as "a fiery oven" where "the flames do now rage and glow" and that "the view of the misery of the damned will double the ardor of the love and gratitude of the saints in heaven" (Jonathan Edwards). The Church has never formally taken the position that "in order that nothing may be wanting to the happiness of the blessed in Heaven, a perfect view is granted them of the torture of the damned" (Thomas Aquinas). Nor has the Church in its creedal formulations even remotely declared that "in fire exactly like that which we have on earth thy body will lie, asbestos-like, forever unconsumed, all thy veins roads for the feet of Pain to travel on, every nerve a string on which the Devil shall forever play his diabolical tune of hell's unutterable lament" (Charles Spurgeon).

Such grotesque literalism is not an interpretation of Scripture but a caricature. Protestant theologians have repudiated such macabre uses of terms that are obviously metaphorical. Calvin, commenting on Matthew 3:12, says:

Many persons, I am aware, have entered into ingenious debates about the eternal fire, by which the wicked will be tormented after the judgment. But we may conclude from many passages of Scripture, that it is a metaphorical expression. For, if we must believe that it is real, or what they call material fire, we must also believe that the brimstone and the fan are material. . . . We must explain the fire in the same manner as the worm (Mark 9:44, 46, 48) and if it is universally agreed that the worm is a metaphorical term, we must form the same opinion as to the fire.

Charles Hodge, the great Princeton theologian, echoes Calvin, saying:

There seems no more reason for supposing that the fire spoken of in Scripture is to be a literal fire, than that the worm that never dies is literally a worm. The devil and his angels who are to suffer the vengeance of eternal fire, and whose doom the finally impenitent are to share, have no material bodies to be acted upon by elemental fire [*Systematic Theology*, Scribners, 1876, III, 868].

And Louis Berkhof summarily declares, "A great deal of the language concerning heaven and hell must be understood figuratively" (*Reformed Dogmatics*, Eerdmans, 1941, p. 736).

None of these statements advocating a symbolical interpretation of such terms as "fire" and "worm" denies the reality of hell as a place of eternal retribution. None minimizes the misery and the doom of those who are eternally separated from hope, from Christ, and from God. None attenuates the remorse and suffering that will be the lot of those under the penal judgment of God. Hell, as Christ himself refers to it, is an awesome reality.

In the end, discussion of this doctrine must not rest on human feelings, nor should it be removed from the whole subject of the character of God, the nature of evil, and the requirements of justice. This is the tack taken by C. S. Lewis in his reply to five objections raised against the doctrine of eternal punishment (*The Problem of Pain*, Macmillan, 1944, chap. 8). We summarize the objections and Lewis's replies:

1. Is not retributive punishment an idea wrong in itself? No, says Lewis. All punishment is basically retributive, not reformatory or deterrent. We have strictly no *right* to punish merely for reformatory and deterrent purposes. Unless a man deserves to be punished, we ought not to make him suffer. Nothing can be more immoral than to inflict suffering on a man who does not deserve it for the purpose either of improving him or deterring others. (See also Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament*, Eerdmans, 1965, pp. 385 ff.). Furthermore, what else can God do with a man who has always lived a hellish life? God cannot condone this evil. To condone it would amount to treating evil as if it were good.
2. Is not "eternal damnation" for "transitory sin" a gross disproportion? No, says Lewis. A man's life is always long enough for it to become set in its direction. If a million chances were necessary for a man to do good, God would provide them. But they would make no difference in a wicked man's essential choice of self over God.
3. Is not the description of the pains of hell merely metaphorical? No, says Lewis. None of the images Christ used to describe hell--punishment, destruction, banishment should be used to the exclusion of others, but all of them agree on something "unspeakably horrible."
4. How can the saints in heaven have pleasure if they know there is a single human soul still in hell? If this idea is true, says Lewis, then man is more merciful than God.
5. Is not God defeated in his purpose if a single soul is ultimately lost? In a sense, yes, says Lewis; but this was the chance God took in "creating beings with free wills." Those in hell are there of their own volition, refusing, even while being punished, to give up the selves they have chosen above God.

Most of these arguments can be strengthened, and all of them need the buttressing of divine revelation. In the light of scriptural testimony we dare not reduce hell to the status of "a remedial, terminable retribution" (Farrar). Nor can we conceive of it as a Roman Catholic purgatory, "a pedagogic cleansing process" (Brunner). Nor may we imagine it to be, of all things, "a means of grace," a place of a second (and successful) chance (Ferre). Hell, in Scripture, is never viewed in temporary terms; it is an ultimate and eternal place of punishment.

Roads Bypassing Hell

From the time of Origen, the Alexandrian Church Father (185-254), there have been attempts to bypass the scriptural teaching on eternal punishment. One such evasive route is annihilation. Advocates of this view say that only the righteous will live forever. The

wicked will be judged, condemned, and destroyed, put out of existence. This view, a form of which is also known as conditional immortality, has not found acceptance in the Church. It circulates largely among the sects, as, for example, the Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses. In Scripture, all the references to the punishment of the impenitent are of such a nature that they cannot be applied to a state of annihilation. The figures employed by Christ--everlasting fire, the undying worm, eternal darkness--have no meaning if punishment is annihilation. Moreover, the parallel in Matthew 25:46 between eternal life and eternal punishment cannot be maintained if the fate of the wicked is cessation of being.

Another detour taken to avoid the implications of Christ's words on eternal punishment is universalism, the belief that all of God's creation will ultimately be redeemed. Origen himself envisioned the final restoration of all men to holiness and blessedness, a hope he extended to Satan and all other demonic spirits. To Origen the fires of hell were remedial, not penal, and were limited in duration, not eternal. In the end, after sufficient purging, the devil himself will be saved and God will be "all in all."

At the second Council of Constantinople (553) the Church condemned Origen's views, and since then none of the major branches of the Christian Church--Roman, Eastern, and Protestant--has held to universalism. Not until the Reformation did the universalism controversy break out again, in the teachings of the Anabaptists. Chapter 17 of the Augsburg Confession (1530) formally condemned the Anabaptists, "who believe that there will be an end of punishments of the damned and the devils." In the nineteenth century new impetus came to the universalist position. In Germany Schleiermacher, who taught that God elected all men, gave the weight of his tremendous influence to it. In England, Thomas Erskine, Andrew Jukes, and (with reservations) F. S. Farrar promoted the view. In America a denomination came into being specifically to advance universalism as a doctrine. The Universalist Church (which in 1961 merged with the Unitarian Church) began in New England with the preaching of John Murray (1741-1815), who for a time had been a Methodist preacher. Today the Unitarian-Universalist Association numbers about 164,000 members.

Nineteenth-century poets probably did more than any formal theological work to move opinion toward universalism. Tennyson, Browning, Faber, Whittier, and Longfellow all expressed a hope in a redemptive love that would ultimately embrace all mankind in its bosom. Tennyson's *In Memoriam* provided the movement with its well-known caption--"the larger hope":

*The wish, that of the living whole
No life may fail beyond the grave,
Derives it not from what we have
The likest God within the soul?*

*I stretch lame hands of faith, and grope,
And gather dust and chaff, and call
To what I feel is Lord of all,*

And faintly trust the larger hope.

The New Universalism

Today, as we move toward the close of the twentieth century, universalism appears with a new face, one made welcome in most of the major denominations. It no longer hugs the shadows as an outlaw of Christianity but finds its way into the best of ecclesiastical circles. The Confession of 1967 of the United Presbyterian Church tends to make room for universalism, if not actually to endorse it. For example, it affirms a second coming of Christ but makes no mention of hell. It speaks of Christ's role as judge but omits reference to eternal retribution as a possible consequence of his verdict.

The new universalism comes to expression also in the thrust of the new evangelism. If "all men are doomed to be saved," then evangelism is not the winning of men to Christ. Men need only to be informed that they are in fact redeemed and ought to begin enjoying the felicity of the Kingdom of God sooner. The evangelist, therefore, is no longer burdened with the task of soliciting the response of individual men and women to repent and in faith to say yes to Jesus Christ. The missionary is not concerned to bring Christ to Asia or Africa, for Christ, the universal Saviour of all men, is already there. The new breed of evangelist and missionary goes forth to announce the universal lordship of Christ and invites men to acknowledge it in their lives.

It takes no great amount of reflection to conclude that, if all men are finally saved, it makes little difference whether they are reached with the Gospel now or never. Why bother promoting the cause of foreign missions? Why call young people to a life of Christian witness overseas? Why pray for the salvation of the lost, if indeed there are no lost? Why ask for mission contributions, if the money can more profitably be used for social uplift? Why disturb people in their beliefs or lack of beliefs? Who cares whether their practices are shameful, their worship idolatrous, their religion hideous? Universalism's attack on missions is instantaneous and devastating. It strikes at the nerve of all Christian witness, killing the sense of urgency, deadening the feeling of responsibility, and anaesthetizing the impulse of concern. It is the modern restatement of the first lie, "Ye shall not surely die" (Gen. 3:4).

The Theology of the New Universalism

Two enticing appeals have opened the door to the new universalism. One is theological and the other biblical. The voices making these appeals sound new, fresh, and modern, but what they offer is old and time-worn.

The theological appeal focuses on the redemptive character of God's love and the victory of the cross. Nels Ferre sees God's nature as radical love, a love that will pursue every man until every man is redeemed. In *Evil and the Christian Faith* he says, "God has no permanent problem children," for in love He will "put the screws" on every man until he

comes to acknowledge God as his Father. Indeed, God could not be God, nor heaven be heaven, if one of God's creatures were excluded from his presence. "Love so amazing, so divine" must triumph in the end in the reconciliation of all mankind.

Emil Brunner takes the same theological tangent. For him, the scriptural statements concerning hell and retribution do *not* refer to objective facts about the hereafter; the Bible uses them merely to challenge us to decision and action. Furthermore:

God confronts man with the unequivocal demand that he should recognize and endorse the prior decision which God has already made concerning him by electing man to belong to Himself. . . . The doctrine of forgiving Grace--the doctrine of justification--finds its crown in a proclamation of universal redemption [*Eternal Hope*, London, 1954, pp. 177, 178, 182].

To this optimistic hope, Ethelbert Stauffer adds his voice: "God's irresistible grace and will is destined to overcome the most obdurate opposition. . . . None is to remain outside" (*New Testament Theology*, Macmillan, 1955, p. 223).

The most forceful impetus behind the new universalism is the theology of Karl Barth. To be sure, Barth nowhere directly teaches universal salvation. Nor does he say, in so many words, that no men are to be forever lost and that all will be forever with God in glory. Yet he will not divide men into the saved and lost. Instead, he considers all men as both lost and saved. Thus Barth allows the possibility that elect are lost, incongruous as that may seem. All men are reprobate in Christ, who is the only reprobate. All men are elect in Christ, who is the elected man. In Christ, God chose death and rejection for himself and life and acceptance for mankind. And since all men are in Christ, "election is God's decision concerning all and for all as the decision of the gracious God who is *for* man" (G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, Eerdmans, 1956, p. 265).

For Barth, therefore, the reconciliation that takes place in Jesus Christ is actually the reconciliation of all men of all times and all places--*objectively*, at least. Because the objective elements of reconciliation--justification, sanctification, and calling--concern all men equally, there is no difference between the Christian and the non-Christian. Whatever differences there may be, come about because of the individual or subjective aspects of reconciliation. These differences, according to Barth, are chiefly a noetic concern. The Christian is different because he knows and acknowledges that he is reconciled; the non-Christian does not know it--yet.

Clearly, Barth's theology leaves scarcely any room for the biblical insistence on faith. Whereas Scripture calls on men to believe and be saved, Barth's emphasis on objective universalism reduces the seriousness of unbelief as guilt and removes the urgency from the Church's mission to urge lost sinners, "Be reconciled to God."

Serious dangers are imbedded in the theology of the new universalism. For one thing, there is such an exclusive emphasis on the love of God that all other divine attributes

seem subordinated or even eliminated. The apostle who said, "God is love," also said in the same epistle, "God is light," thereby stressing the absolute holiness of God (1 John 1:5; 4:8). Scripture depicts God as manifesting his redeeming love in the salvation of believers but also as exhibiting his holy justice in pronouncing the condemnation of unbelievers. There is what W. M. Clow called "the dark line in God's face."

Universalism also ignores the consideration that continued impenitence throughout eternity involves never-ending retribution. It refuses to face the fact that divine judgments, however severe and repeated they may be, however mingled with long suffering and common mercies, nevertheless fail to secure the repentance of the wicked. Indeed, we may well abandon the hope that the prodigal will come to himself in a day of mercy at some remote stage of eternity after accumulated aggravations of transgression. For, as a contemporary British theologian has tersely put it, "God has no more to show to Judas than was shown to Judas in the course of his life in this world."

Even more dangerous are the extreme statements made by neouniversalists regarding the sovereignty of God, statements that skirt perilously close to mechanistic determinism. How can this conclusion be avoided when such statements as these are made: "God's will is destined to overcome the most obdurate opposition" (Stauffer); "God will make our own way so self-punishing that at last we come to our better selves" (Ferre); "How should the feeble creature in its defiance of God, its 'no' to God, show itself to be stronger than God? Must God be content with a situation in which He . . . is obliged to accept a second-best solution?" (Brunner)? Even a Calvinist would demur from making such statements. He would refuse to say that God forces men to be saved. He recognizes the reality of what F. W. Robertson called "God's terrible permission"--his allowing a man to deny him to the point of self-destruction.

Universalism's Bible

Universalists, from Origen to the present, have appealed to certain texts of Scripture in support of their view. Six of these passages seem to predict the ultimate salvation of the entire human race. Christ said, "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (John 12:32). Peter spoke of "the times of restitution of all things" (Acts 3:21, KJV). Paul declared that "one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men" (Rom. 5:18). God's purpose, he wrote in another place, is to "unite all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:10). The same apostle declared that Christ shall reign until "all things are put in subjection under him" (1 Cor. 15:22-28) and "every tongue [shall] confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil. 2:9-11).

Two passages of Scripture announce God's benevolence toward all men. Paul declared that God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). And Peter affirmed that "the Lord is . . . not wishing that any should perish" (2 Pet. 3:9).

A group of five passages indicate that the cross of Christ has reference to all men. "God

was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). God designed through Christ to "reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven" (Col. 1:20). "The grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men" (Tit. 2:11). Christ came into the world "so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone" (Heb. 2:9). And, finally, Christ's death provided a propitiation for "the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2).

We seem to hear a grand note of universal restoration echoing in these passages. Yet when we compare Scripture with Scripture, bringing within view the full orbit of divine revelation, we are compelled to conclude that the Bible does not teach universal salvation. All these passages stand in contexts that contain references to the judgment of God against certain souls. John 12:32, for instance, must be seen in the light of the dual destiny announced in verse 25: "He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life." Ephesians 1:10 is followed by the statement that "we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind" (2:3). Two verses after Acts 3:21 ("the time of restitution of all things") we read of a warning against certain people who shall be "destroyed from the people." And if Philippians 2:11 predicts that every tongue shall confess the lordship of Christ, Philippians 3:19 asserts that the end of those who are the enemies of the cross of Christ shall be "destruction."

These passages, moreover, are open to more likely explanations than that which sees in them universal salvation. The words "all" and "whole" in not a few of them refer rather to the universal offer of the Gospel. Christianity, as Paul points out in his Areopagus address, lays emphasis on the *one* risen Saviour, for the *one* human race, in view of the *one* divine judgment (Acts 17:22-31). As a world faith, Christianity operates in two ways: it excludes all other faiths as competitors, and it includes all men in its offer--"to *everyone* that believes." For this reason the Church has a universal mission--"to make disciples of *all nations*"; a universal message--"God . . . commands *all men* everywhere to repent"; and a universal Messiah--"Christ Jesus . . . gave himself as a ransom for *all*."

The two texts that tell of God's desire that all men be saved are precise in the verbs they employ: "desire" and "wish"--not "will" or "purpose." Thus they point, not to God's purpose to save all men, but to his benevolent desire toward the human race, as shown in his provision of a Redeemer and offer of salvation. And when Paul says, "As in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:22), he is speaking of persons previously described as "those . . . who have fallen asleep in Christ" (v. 18)--those who by spiritual birth belong to Christ, as by their natural birth they belonged to Adam.

Particularly significant is the statement in Second Corinthians 5:19. When Paul declares that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself," he adds immediately what this involved: God's "not mounting their trespasses against them." The reconciliation, therefore, is defined in terms of the non-imputation of trespasses, the trespasses that are not reckoned to men were reckoned to Christ: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (v. 21).

But are we to assume that the word "world" implies that Christ was the Sin-Bearer for all men indiscriminately? No, for the context indicates that some men are reconciled and

some are not as yet reconciled. "God, who through Christ reconciled *us . . .*, gave *us* the ministry of reconciliation. . . . *We beseech you* on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (vss. 18, 20, italics added). It is evident that, as B. B. Warfield says:

There is the need for men to respond to the divine grace; . . . reconciliation is not something which is carried through independently of men's reaction. While it is true that, in some sense, reconciliation can be thought of as something offered to man on the basis of Christ's work, yet it cannot be thought of as availing in the case of any individual man until he himself has become reconciled to God [*The Plan of Salvation*, Eerdmans, repub. 1942, pp. 70, 71].

Indeed, all these "universalist" passages, however they may be individually interpreted, must be considered in the light of the urgent call to repentance and faith so prominent throughout the New Testament. Only "he who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him" (John 3:36). God "justifies him who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26). "This is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life" (1 John 5:11, 12). "Without faith it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" (Heb. 11:6). The Gospel is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith" (Rom. 1:16). There can be no mistaking Scripture's insistence that no man gains salvation through the victory of the cross until he turns from his sin and believes the Gospel.

There is a true universalism in the New Testament--not only of the worldwide proclamation of the Good News but also of the cosmic triumph achieved by Christ in his cross and resurrection. For Christ's redemptive work accomplished more than the salvation of individuals. The cross and empty tomb laid the groundwork for the redemption of mankind, the world, and the universe. For this reason Scripture speaks of Christ as coming to save the world, accords him the title of "the Saviour of the world," and declares that God purposed "through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross" (Col. 1:20). Such statements do *not* mean that all men without exception will be saved; they mean that "the human race attains the goal for which it was created, and sin does not snatch it out of God's hands: the primal purpose of God with it is fulfilled; and through Christ the race of man, though fallen into sin, is recovered to God and fulfills its original destiny" (B. B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation*, p. 103).

Today Is the Day

Heaven or hell?--these are the alternatives the Word of God sets before the human race. By its warnings, threats, invitations, and commands, it urges men to recognize the decisiveness of this life. It permits no cavalier view of life, or of death, or of destiny. Instead, it insists on the inevitable fact that a man shall have what he has chosen, that "whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap" (Gal. 6:7). It further declares that "now

is the acceptable time" and that "now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2).

If Christ told his contemporaries, "you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he" (John 8:24), it is unthinkable that a follower of his should take an indifferent attitude toward the issues of life. If the Apostle Paul sought to persuade men, prompted as he was by "the terror of the Lord," it is difficult to see how a preacher of the Gospel can be unconcerned for the salvation of the lost.

Today's generation needs to be told what the New Testament teaches about hell and the awful reality of eternal punishment. Admittedly, this task is not congenial; but it is necessary. It must be done not sadistically but seriously. And the task is not only to preach but also to pray with a heart of love for the lost. Coupled with the message of judgment must be the glorious offer of eternal life through faith in the redeeming work of Christ. We must call men to repentance, off the path that leads to hell, and on to the way that leads to life everlasting.

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