

“Are We Universalists?” 1/23/22

A drunken man got on the bus late one night, staggered up the aisle, and fell into the seat next to a woman who was clutching a large Bible. She looked over the drunken man and said, “I’ve got news for you, Mister. You’re going straight to hell!” The man jumped out of his seat and shouted, “Oh man, I’m on the wrong bus again!”

Most of us don’t go around telling people that they’re going to hell, but the hymn we just sang, “Come, Ye Thankful People, Come,” takes the image of a fall harvest and uses it as a metaphor for final judgment! Verse 2 begins,

*“All the world is God’s own field,*

*Fruit unto God’s praise to yield;*

*Wheat and tares together sown,*

*Unto joy or sorrow grown.”*

Verse 3 concludes,

*“Give the angels charge at last*

*In the fire the tares to cast,*

*But the fruitful ears to store*

*In God’s garner evermore.”*

Those words represent the traditional Christian view of human destiny- that one day God will hold us all accountable for our lives and we will be separated into those saved for eternity in heaven, and those who are damned to spend eternity in hell. The basis for that judgment is tied up in our acceptance of what God has done for us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our creeds voice this view, including the Apostles Creed which states that Jesus will return “to judge the quick (living) and the dead.”

There are many scriptures which seem to support this view, including the teaching of Jesus himself. In John 14:6, he said, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*” And, many of Jesus’ parables talk about judgment, including the Rich Man and Lazarus, the parable of the Laborers, the wheat and the tares, the parable of the unprepared bridesmaids, the parable of the stewards, and the famous parable of the sheep and the goats.

In this parable, when the Son of Man comes back to earth, people are separated like sheep and goats into two groups, with one group receiving the Kingdom of God because by treating the poor and oppressed with compassion during their lives, they were treating Jesus in the same way. But, the others- well let’s read it. *Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the*

*devil and his angels; <sup>42</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup>I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ <sup>44</sup>Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ <sup>45</sup>Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ <sup>46</sup>And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” (Matt. 25:41-46)*

Paul had a similar view of human destiny. For example, in I Cor. 6, he lists a whole bunch of sins and says that those who commit them will not inherit God’s kingdom. (I Cor. 6:9-10) And Rev. 20 tells us of a future judgment in which those whose names are not written in the book of life are thrown into the lake of fire. (Rev. 20:11-15) This understanding of the end of things assumes that what we do in this life really matters, and that we are held accountable for it. Most of us instinctively want to see evil punished in some way, be that Adolph Hitler or Osama bin Ladin or Bernie Madoff. People who prey on others should be held accountable.

But, there are some theological problems with this view. Christians have always affirmed that it is God’s nature to love. But in the traditional view, at some point God is no longer loving toward some people, instead

becoming their eternal torturer. How can this be? Because they believe in the love of God, those who hold to the traditional view need to make some exceptions to the rule that those who die apart from Christ are condemned to hell. Allowances are made for children, for example, who are unable to fully understand such things. And some also make exceptions for those who have never heard the Good News of God's love in Jesus during this lifetime. Somehow, God's grace covers those people until they get a chance to respond on the other side of the grave. But why couldn't God just do that for everyone? And, is it really just to condemn someone to eternal torment for wrongs done in a finite amount of time? Just sayin'.

There is an alternative to the traditional view which is called "Universalism." It states that since it is always God's nature to love, that in the end, everyone is saved; Everyone goes to heaven. There have always been Christians who held this view, but it has been a small minority until recent times.

This view also has some scriptural backing. I Tim. 2:4 says that God, "...desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." When John the Baptist sees Jesus, he says, "...Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) Note the emphasis on taking away the sin of the whole world, not just for some of us. II Peter 3:9 says, "The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some

*think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.” And, Paul states in I Cor. 15, “for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.” (I Cor. 15:22)*

“All will be made alive in Christ.” Clearly, God desires to extend his grace to everyone! Universalists believe that God’s love for all will not be thwarted by evil and that all will be saved. They acknowledge that there are biblical references to hell, but note that they are rare and that usually the word we translate as “hell” is the Greek word, “Gehenna,” which is an actual physical place, not some future torture chamber! “Gehenna” was a garbage dump outside Jerusalem. And, they believe that the biblical references to fiery judgment are not about destruction, but about purification, for fire has purifying properties when used on metal.

So, Universalists can make a strong case for their view, but it is not without problems, either. First, while this view easily accommodates God’s love, it seems to shortchange God’s justice. Miroslav Volf, a theologian from Croatia, used to reject the notion of God’s wrath and judgment, but his experience in his own country during the Balkan War in the early 90’s changed his mind. 200,000 people were killed and over 3 million were displaced. Villages and cities were shelled relentlessly, and rape and torture were common. Volf came to understand that a God who truly loves people must be as outraged by these atrocities as he was, holding people

to account for their actions. Otherwise, there is no justice in the world. That's a problem for Universalists.

Universalists also have a problem with human choice. If heaven is to be heaven, there can be no sin there. Otherwise, it would quickly devolve into the kind of world we live in now, filled with greed, exploitation, hate, and pain. But what if some people don't want to repent, to turn away from their sins, to change? What if they have no remorse for the awful things they have done? Many people certainly don't want to change here on earth! Why would they be any different later on? In order for Universalism to work, God would need to override human wills so that people would change whether they wanted to or not. So much for human choice!

Or, what if people don't want to acknowledge Jesus as Lord, even when they meet him after death? After all, many who met him on earth rejected him! C.S. Lewis puts it like this, "There are only two kinds people in the end: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, in the end, "Thy will be done." The second group of people are choosing to live apart from God.

So, we are left with two competing views of human destiny, both of which have strengths and weaknesses, and both of which have biblical support. I think this is an area in which we need to show some humility and not go further than the scripture itself does. We may lean toward one view

or the other, but we should know their problems and acknowledge the limits of our understanding as human beings. Perhaps C.S. Lewis was right in his view that we all get to choose whether we'll acknowledge Jesus as the Lord of our lives after death, and that some will choose to live apart from God, rather than give up their personal freedom and sovereignty. That solves some of the problems of both views, but I struggle to find any biblical support for it!

So, I must admit I am not entirely satisfied with either the traditional view or with Universalism. But what I do believe is that God is a God of love and a God of justice. That through Jesus, God has provided for the reconciliation of the world to him. And that in the end, God will do the right thing for every part of his creation, including you and me. What do you think?