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# Evangelical universalism: oxymoron?

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*We publish here a set of articles based on papers given at a conference entitled 'Is universalism an evangelical option?' and held at Spurgeon's College, London on Thursday 3 February, 2011. Dr Parry is editor for Cascade Books and Pickwick Publications (imprints of Wipf and Stock).*

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On Tuesday 22nd February 2011, Rob Bell – the influential pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan – posted the promotional video for his new book, *Love Wins*. Rumours started spreading almost immediately that Bell's forthcoming book advocated universalism and, unsurprisingly, the Internet went white-hot! On Saturday 26th February Justin Taylor, a well-known neo-Calvinist, posted his provisional reflections about Bell as a universalist on 'The Gospel Coalition' blog<sup>1</sup> and, reportedly, by that evening about 12,000 people had recommended his post on facebook. That same day Rob Bell was in the top ten trending topics on Twitter. And from there the number of blog posts exploded. Overnight, universalism went from being a marginal issue that most evangelicals felt that they could ignore to being the next big debate.

Bell's book, when it was published (15 March 2011), raised a lot of awkward questions about the traditional understanding of hell and argued for a view of hell as (a) the horrors resulting from human sin that are experienced in this age, and (b) divine judgment in the age to come. But, according to Bell, this post-mortem hell is not an everlasting punishment (either in the sense of everlasting conscious torment or annihilation) but a process intended by God as educative and corrective for those suffering it. Exit from hell is, in Bell's view, possible.<sup>2</sup> On the matter of universalism, Bell gently suggests that God desires to save all, sent Christ to die for all, promises to save all, and is able to get his will done.<sup>3</sup>

The question that I wish to address in this article is not whether universalism is true or not.<sup>4</sup> My question is, rather, whether one can be *both* an evangelical *and* a universalist.

At first blush the prospects do not appear terribly promising. Historically very

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1 <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2011/02/26/rob-bell-universalist/>.

2 Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell and the Fate of Every Person Who Has Ever Lived* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), chapter 3.

3 Bell, *Love Wins*, chapter 4. Having said this, the end of chapter 4 does draw back from claims cautiously implied earlier in the chapter towards a form of 'hopeful universalism.'

4 I have made a case for the truth of universalism in Gregory MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist* (Eugene: Cascade, 2006/London: SPCK, 2008).

few evangelicals have claimed to be universalists but, more than that, most have actively denied that universalism is compatible with evangelical faith. Think of any well-known evangelical preacher, evangelist, theologian, songwriter, or leader from any time from the eighteenth century onwards and it is almost a foregone conclusion that they will deny that God will save all people. So unanimous has been this consensus that even a book as notable for its open-mindedness and generosity towards divergent evangelical views on hell as *The Nature of Hell* (published by ACUTE – the theological arm of The Evangelical Alliance, UK) declares: ‘Whilst the universalist view may suit the spirit of our age, we shall confirm that it is inconsistent with evangelical faith. In particular, we shall show that it diverges seriously from the doctrinal bases of those key evangelical bodies which constitute ACUTE.’<sup>5</sup> And indeed most evangelical bases of faith have been shaped to rule out the possibility of universalism, even if they are not always successful.<sup>6</sup> Surely there is no doubt that ‘evangelical universalism’ is an oxymoron! However, although the odds seem stacked against me, I shall argue that the near-unanimous evangelical opposition to universalism is, in fact, *contingent* and *not a necessary entailment* of evangelical commitment.

Before I make my case, it is important that we have a clear view of what I mean by ‘evangelical’ universalism.<sup>7</sup> I would suggest that ‘evangelical’ universalists are, along with mainstream evangelicals, believers who affirm orthodox Christian faith,<sup>8</sup> have a high view of Scripture,<sup>9</sup> and share the distinctive cluster of theological emphases typical of evangelicalism.<sup>10</sup> What marks them out as ‘evangelical’ universalists are two more unusual beliefs:

*EU1: ‘In the end, God will reconcile all people to himself through Christ’s atoning work.’*

*EU2: ‘EU1 is a biblical belief.’*

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5 ACUTE, *The Nature of Hell* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 4.

6 For an unsuccessful attempt consider, for instance, the most recent version of the UCCF Doctrinal Basis of Faith. It reads, ‘The Lord Jesus will return in person, to judge everyone, to execute God’s just condemnation on those who have not repented.’ There is nothing in that statement that a universalist need have problems affirming.

7 I shall put scare quotes around the word ‘evangelical’ in the phrase ‘evangelical universalism’ so as not to prejudice the conclusion.

8 By ‘orthodox Christian faith’ I mean that they affirm the Rule of Faith and subscribe to the ecumenical creeds, most especially the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed.

9 I do not wish to be over-prescriptive about what having a ‘high view’ of Scripture amounts to because evangelicals hold a range of views on this question. Suffice it to say, it is a view of the Bible that sees it as inspired by God’s Spirit, trustworthy, and authoritative for Christian faith and practise. It may include a doctrine of inerrancy but it need not.

10 I have in mind emphases such as salvation through Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone (i.e., not by works); the importance of mission, and so on. Simply hold three or four evangelical doctrinal bases of faith together and look for what they have in common and you will quickly discern the typical evangelical emphases that I refer to.

Now Christian universalism is diverse and there is disagreement between Christian universalists on a range of issues.<sup>11</sup> Even within the subset of Christian universalism that I am calling ‘evangelical’ universalism there is disagreement on various matters. But I speak for most ‘evangelical’ universalists (and perhaps the majority of Christian universalists) when I say that they would affirm all of the traditional orthodox Christian doctrines but modified by the addition of two atypical (and highly controversial) beliefs: (a) a belief that people *can be* redeemed from hell, and (b) a belief that, in the end, all people *will be* redeemed from hell.<sup>12</sup>

## Part I: Why think that universalism is essentially unevangelical?

One of the striking things noted from a quick perusal of some of the mass of Internet comment in advance of the publication of Rob Bell’s infamous book was that while many went straight for the jugular, many others were keen not to judge Bell before reading what he had to say. We must not, they argued, assume the worst (i.e., that Bell *really* is a universalist); we must wait and see. But even behind this viewpoint lies the clear assumption that *if* Bell did turn out to be a universalist *then* he had clearly fallen off the wagon. Perhaps so. But why suppose that such *has* to be the case?

There are various reasons why most evangelicals have considered universalism to be highly problematic. In the first part of this article I wish to consider some of the key ones in order to show that, in fact, they do not put universalism outside the evangelical camp.

### *Reason 1: universalism is unbiblical*

By far the main reason for thinking that a universal salvation is incompatible with evangelicalism is that it is ‘obviously unbiblical’. Given that evangelicals affirm the teachings of Scripture and that universalism is believed to run counter to those teachings then the matter is a no-brainer: ‘evangelical universalism’ is *obviously* an oxymoron.

Now I have argued elsewhere that, contrary to common belief, the Bible *can* be interpreted in universalist-compatible ways.<sup>13</sup> But whether I am right or not is a secondary issue in this context. What is clear is that ‘evangelical’ universal-

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11 See the ‘Introduction’ to Robin Parry and Christopher Partridge (eds.), *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003); and the Introduction to Gregory MacDonald (ed.), *All Shall Be Well: Explorations in Universalism and Christian Theology, from Origen to Moltmann* (Eugene: Cascade, 2011).

12 I need to qualify (b) in so far as ‘hopeful universalists’ will maintain that they ‘hope’ that ‘all people will be redeemed from hell’ but that, for one reason or another (perhaps human freedom, perhaps divine freedom, perhaps the ambiguity of the Bible) certainty is not possible.

13 MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist*.

ists *believe* that the Bible can be interpreted in universalist-compatible ways. My key proposal here is that *even if* they are mistaken in this belief, the mistake would only place them outside the evangelical camp *if it involves them in affirming something incompatible with a central evangelical belief or practice*. After all, evangelicals disagree about the interpretation of all sorts of biblical texts and themes without casting each other out of the camp over it. For instance, Calvinists think that Arminians have misunderstood the teaching of the Bible on some important issues but they do not thereby declare Arminians to be ‘non-evangelical’. Rather, they consider Arminians to be mistaken but, if I can put it this way, ‘mistaken in an evangelical-compatible way’. So presumably all would agree that having an evangelical-compatible belief does not thereby make the said belief true.

It is important to understand that the debate between Arminians and Calvinists is analogous to that between universalists and non-universalists. The issue is not whether one party accepts the Bible and the other party rejects it. The issue is a *hermeneutical* one. How do we hold together those texts that *seem* universalist (e.g., Rom 5:18; 1 Cor 15:22; Col 1:20; Phil 2:11) with those texts which *seem* to contradict universalism (e.g., Matt 25:45; 2 Thess 1:6–9; Rev 14:11; 20:10–15)? The answer to that question is not straightforward and differences of opinion are hardly surprising.

But for now it is sufficient to note that for Bible-believing universalists to be excluded from being considered evangelical it must be shown that their belief in a universal restoration entails the denial of central evangelical beliefs or practices. Is that the case? I shall argue that it is not. Let us consider some candidates.

### *Reason 2: universalism undermines the seriousness of sin*

Evangelical statements of faith all rightly stress the seriousness of sin. There is a common belief shared by many evangelicals that universalism somehow underplays the true horror of disobedience to God. The suspicion is that universalists claim that God simply *ignores* sin or that sin is ‘not really that bad’. Perhaps belief in universal salvation even encourages the attitude that it does not matter what we do because God will forgive us all in the end anyway.

Now I am aware of no version of Christian universalism that diminishes the gravity of sin, but even if some did there is no reason why their universalism would require them to do so. You can come up with the most extreme assessment of the depravity of sin as you like and there is no reason why a universalist could not hold it *so long* as they also believed that God’s love was deeper, his grace wider, and the cross more powerful: ‘Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more.’

Responding to the charge that belief in universal reconciliation arises from an overly optimistic view of humanity that fails to take seriously evil and sin, Tom Greggs advocates what he calls ‘pessimistic universalism’, grounding the argument for universal salvation *in the sin and unbelief of the Christian*. He writes:

The wider hope that Barth and Bonhoeffer both seem to suggest appears to be grounded... in their recognition that even the saint is a sinner, and

united to humanity's sinfulness; and that even the believer in her sin and doubt is faithless. Therefore, to offer any hope to the Christian at all, there is required a broader hope for all humanity not grounded generally in God's love, but most especially in the love expressed ultimately even towards the continued unloveliness of the Christian.<sup>14</sup>

As Søren Kierkegaard wrote, 'If others go to hell, then I will go too. But I do not believe that; on the contrary I believe that all will be saved, myself with them – something which arouses my deepest amazement.'<sup>15</sup>

To somewhat cheekily turn the tables, perhaps the problem is not that universalists have too weak a view of sin but that mainstream evangelicals have too *narrow* (Calvinists) or too *weak* (Arminians) a view of grace.

### *Reason 3: universalism undermines divine justice and wrath*

One very common objection to universalism is that it sentimentalises God's love and thereby ignores or denies divine justice and divine wrath. Universalists are sometimes caricatured as thinking that 'it is God's *job* to forgive us' or that 'God is such a *nice* person that he would not hurt a fly.' In response to this perceived sentimental view universalists are regularly reminded that, 'Of course, God is loving... *but he is also just!*' The *assumption* here is that advocates of universal salvation have forgotten about the justice and wrath of God and, consequently, have an unbalanced doctrine of God. Let's us consider both sides of this objection.

#### *(1) God's love*

The standard evangelical objection is that universalists take their understanding of 'love' from human experience and then impose that on to God. But God is known through revelation and we must allow God to reveal to us what it means for God to be love. Thomas F. Torrance expressed this concern about the universalism of John A. T. Robinson as follows:

[This] takes us to the root of the matter. Is the love of God to be understood abstractly in terms of what we can think about it on a human analogy, such as human love raised to the *nth* degree, or are we to understand the love of God in terms of what God has actually manifested of his love, that is biblically?... Can we ever get behind God's self-manifestation and his action and discuss the relation of omnipotence and love in terms of the necessity of his divine nature? Surely not, and yet this is just what Dr. Robinson has done.<sup>16</sup>

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14 Tom Greggs, 'Pessimistic Universalism: Rethinking the Wider Hope with Bonhoeffer and Barth,' *Modern Theology* 26 (2010), 495–510, quotation from p. 504.

15 Søren Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses: The Crisis and A Crisis in the Life of an Actress*. Translated and edited by H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 209–10.

16 Thomas F. Torrance, 'Universalism or Election?', in John A. T. Robinson, *In the End, God... Special Edition* (Eugene: Cascade, 2011), 144. (Originally published in *SJT* 2 (1949), 310–18.)

Central to Torrance's objection is a fundamental theological insight, expressed well by James I. Packer:

Basic to Christianity is the conviction that we learn what love is from watching God in action – supremely, from watching God in the person of the Father's incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, as he loves, gives, suffers, and dies to achieve our redemption. We do the watching through Bible study, following the narratives of the Gospels and the explanations of the Epistles... We must never let ourselves think of *agape* in any term not validated by the redemptive work of Jesus.<sup>17</sup>

Absolutely! But why suppose that the universalist does not do this? In *The Evangelical Universalist* I argued that

To get some understanding of the love of God one must begin with some prior notion of human love or one could not even get into the hermeneutical circle. If we are to speak in any meaningful way of God's love, it must bear, at the very least, an analogical relationship to human love. But then a Christian understanding of God's love will be nuanced by its revelation in salvation history. We stretch our concept of God's love across the poles of creation, covenant, and redemption. We drape it over the shape of the cross to follow its contours and wrap it around the stone rolled away from the tomb. Only thus can we begin to see the shape of God's heart.<sup>18</sup>

And I sought to show that it is *precisely when* we seek to 'flesh out' God's love in terms of the divine self-revelation testified to in Scripture that we feel the strong pull towards universalism.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, I went further and argued that it is traditional evangelicals who have *underestimated* the implications of the biblical claim that 'God is [in his very nature] love' (1 John 4:8, 16) and that it is they, and not universalists, who have the theological problem.

## (2) *God's justice and wrath*

Now 'evangelical' universalists do not have a single agreed understanding of the nature of divine justice and divine wrath but then neither do mainstream evangelicals. However, all of them agree that God's holiness and justice must be *central* to the understanding of God. And few of the participants in the debate shrink away from speaking of divine wrath. There is certainly no reason why universalism *per se* would require anyone to deny God's 'anger' at sin and historically Christian universalists have often taken the wrath of God very seriously indeed. To suggest that *anyone* in this debate is forgetting that God is holy and just is just too simplistic.

Perhaps I can say something regarding how I understand divine punishment.

17 James I. Packer, 'The Love of God: Universal and Particular,' in J. I. Packer, *Celebrating the Saving Work of God* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 147.

18 MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist*, 101.

19 MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist*, 100–104. See too Thomas Talbott, *The Inescapable Love of God* (Boca Raton, FL: Universal, 1999), chapter 7.

I believe that in Scripture God's punishment is *both* retributive *and* corrective/restorative. Now traditionally evangelicals have seen divine punishment of 'the lost' (as opposed to his punishment of 'the saints') as *purely* retributive and some universalists have seen it as *purely* corrective/restorative. It seems to me that the Bible would call us to hold together both motivations for punishing sinners. In my view, any view of hell as *purely* corrective/restorative struggles to make sense of some biblical descriptions of punishment. Nevertheless, any view of hell as *purely* retributive punishment brings God's justice and wrath into serious conflict with God's love and is in danger of dividing the divine nature. Christian universalists typically defend an integrated view of the divine nature such that all God's acts are acts of 'holy love'. Everything that God does is compatible with *both* his justice *and* his love. One potential danger with traditional evangelical theology is that sometimes it can divide the divine nature in such a way that some of God's acts are understood as acts of love (e.g., saving undeserving sinners) while others are understood as acts of divine justice, holiness, and wrath (e.g., punishing sinners in hell). On such a scheme hell is a manifestation of justice and anger but has nothing to do with God's love. Here be dragons! 'Evangelical' universalists maintain that any theology of hell that is not compatible with divine redemptive love reflects an inadequate doctrine of God. And the traditional theology of hell – certainly in its eternal conscious torment version – does seem very hard to square with God's love for the damned. To see a restorative/corrective/educative dimension to hell would obviate this problem but it would also seem to require the possibility of redemption from hell.

Now, there is a real disagreement here and a debate worth having. But, and this is my *only* point in this context, universalists do not ignore divine holiness, justice, wrath, or punishment. And 'evangelical' universalists do seek to do justice the biblical teachings on such hard matters.

#### *Reason 4: universalism undermines hell*

It is commonly claimed by evangelical critics that universalists do not even believe in hell. In fact, this is simply false. Historically, all species of Christian universalism prior to the twentieth century affirmed a doctrine of hell and most versions of Christian universalism still do. Where they differ from the mainstream is in their belief that redemption from hell is possible.

Once this is cleared up, the concern commonly expressed is that the universalist view of hell is soft. If universal restoration is correct then, in the words of the rock group ACDC, 'hell ain't a bad place to be.' After all, a hell from which one can exit is not much to worry about. (Those who view hell as climaxing in the annihilation of sinners will have some sympathy with universalists here because they have faced the same objection.<sup>20</sup>)

Now, if we insist that hell is only to be feared if we construe it as *maximally*

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20 The best defence of hell-as-annihilation and the best response to this objection remains the 1982 classic, now available in a significantly revised and updated form, Edward Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes: Third Edition* (Eugene: Cascade, 2011).



*horrible* (and eternal conscious torment would fit the bill here) then this objection is fair enough. But surely that is ridiculous! That something is not *maximally* horrible does *not* mean that it is not *very* horrible, nor that it is not to be feared. To take a biblical example, think of Jeremiah. He warned Israel that unless they repented they would face devastating destruction. After a while Israel passed the point of no return and judgment became inevitable (although there were still opportunities to mitigate it). Now Jeremiah also believed that Yhwh would, in the end, restore the nation and this gave him hope. However, to suggest that because the Babylonian onslaught was not the end of Israel's story it 'wasn't that bad' or that it was 'nothing to be worried about' would be absurd. Jeremiah was clearly devastated at the thought of coming judgment and was motivated to warn others of it. This is how 'evangelical' universalists typically view hell.

Universalists do differ in their understandings of hell – its nature, intensity, and duration – but there is nothing about universalism *per se* that requires a 'soft' view. Take the eighteenth century Baptist universalist, Elhanan Winchester (1751–97). He speculated that individual sinners may suffer dreadful torments in hell for millions of years.<sup>21</sup> My point is not to endorse his view but simply to note that such a view is compatible with the claim that '*in the end*, God will redeem all people through the atoning work of Jesus Christ.'

If I may turn the tables again, one might be forgiven for thinking that the traditional Christian vision of hell is riddled with theological and moral problems<sup>22</sup> and that the failure of 'evangelical' universalists to uphold it is not a liability but a *strength*. Be that as it may, in this context my only concern is to establish that universalists can have a robust doctrine of hell.

### *Reason 5: universalism undermines Christ's role in salvation*

The online debates sparked off by the announcement of Rob Bell's book caused

21 He speculated that hell might last 'fifty thousand years, or fifty thousand times that number... 2,500,000,000 years.' Elhanan Winchester, *The Holy Conversation, and High Expectation, of True Christians... Letter to a Friend*, (London: Hawes, 1789), 50–51.

22 Such problems are well discussed in the literature. Amongst other things they include the following:

(a) Can a finite creature commit a sin big enough to warrant an infinite punishment? (The traditional Anselmian answer to this question itself raises as many theological problems as it solves, see MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist*, 11–15.)

(b) If, as *some* traditionalists maintain, hell causes sinners to rage against God, generating more sin and thus more punishment *ad infinitum*, then God's 'solution' to sin is not to eradicate it but to perpetuate it for eternity! That would be, to say the least, problematic.

(c) The problem of a loving God inflicting pain forever when there are alternatives (e.g., salvation).

(d) The problem of making death a point beyond which any chance of salvation is gone. Why would justice or love require that? To date I have yet to hear any remotely plausible candidates for an answer to that question.

many evangelical commentators to say that Bell obviously denied that Christ was necessary for salvation. It was taken for granted that universalists believe that ‘all roads lead to God’ and that while Christ may be ‘*a* way to God’ he is not ‘the *only* way to God’. Thus universalism is commonly perceived to be a kind of pluralism.

This misunderstanding is interesting given that, historically speaking, no Christian universalists (that I am aware of) were pluralists. Indeed, Christian universalists have happily maintained that salvation is *only* possible for anyone because of what God has done in Christ. Here is Rob Bell, the *bête noir* of the neo-Reformed, on this matter:

[if God saves all] many Christians become very uneasy, saying that then Jesus doesn’t matter anymore, the cross is irrelevant, it doesn’t matter what you believe, and so forth.

Not true.

Absolutely, unequivocally not true.

What Jesus does is declare that he,  
and he alone,  
is saving everybody.<sup>23</sup>

‘Evangelical’ universalism is not predicated on a soteriology that de-centres Christ but on one that has a very high view of the centrality and power of Christ’s incarnation-cross-resurrection-ascension for the salvation of the world.

### *Reason 6: universalism undermines the importance of faith in Christ*

A concern following on from the previous one is this: If Christ will save us all then it does not much matter whether we believe in him or not. So universalism undermines the importance that the NT attaches to faith.

Before looking directly at this question, we need to clear up some confusion surrounding the issues of inclusivism and exclusivism. In brief, exclusivists believe that salvation is through Christ alone and that one needs to have *explicit faith in Christ* to participate in this salvation. Inclusivists agree that salvation is found in Christ alone but think that explicit faith in Christ is *not* a necessary condition for experiencing this salvation. Thus, it may be that some have never heard the gospel or have only encountered it in ways that have undermined its authenticity (for instance, through abusive parents). It may be that if such people respond in humility and trust to the truncated revelation of God that they have received then God will enable them to experience the salvation won by the Christ they do not yet know.

The debate between exclusivism and inclusivism runs through evangelicalism and is often mistakenly confused with the question of universalism. I regularly find Christians, including theologians, who think that universalists are

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23 Bell, *Love Wins*, 164.

necessarily inclusivists and that non-universalist inclusivists are on the slippery slope towards universalism. Others mistakenly assume that inclusivism, exclusivism, and universalism are three different answers to the same question. In fact, the inclusivist/exclusivist debate concerns the question ‘How can people experience the salvation achieved in Christ?’ while the universal restoration debate concerns the question, ‘*How many* people will experience the salvation achieved in Christ?’ As such, one’s belief that all people will be saved does not prejudge where one will come down on the debate about whether explicit faith in Jesus is needed for salvation. ‘Evangelical’ universalists fall on different sides of the disagreement between ‘inclusivism’ and ‘exclusivism’. Some ‘evangelical’ universalists, Rob Bell included, are indeed inclusivists. But not all. In *The Evangelical Universalist* I argued for an exclusivist version of universalism.<sup>24</sup>

So, returning to the objection under consideration, the first thing to say is that, when rightly understood, this objection is not an objection to universal salvation as such but an objection to *inclusivism*. It seems clear that those ‘evangelical’ universalists who are exclusivists do not undermine the importance of faith in Christ. Faith in Christ is, for them (as for all exclusivists), essential. So this objection only has any ‘grip’ against inclusivist universalists (and whatever grip it has there it also has against inclusivists who are not universalists).

Second, we must stress that although inclusivists do relativise the importance of explicit (subjective) faith in Christ they most emphatically do *not* relativise the work of Christ nor do they consider explicit (subjective) faith in Christ as unimportant. Now while there is an important discussion and debate to be had here, many evangelicals are of the opinion that some versions of inclusivism are compatible with evangelicalism.<sup>25</sup> I am very much inclined to agree. And if this is the case then an ‘evangelical’ universalist who was of the inclusivist variety would not thereby cease to be an evangelical. And *even if* some do wish to ‘cast out’ all inclusivists from the evangelical clan they will not have thereby cast out all ‘evangelical’ universalists.

### *Reason 7: universalism undermines mission and evangelism*

The seventh common concern strikes at something that has always been central to evangelical praxis – mission. The objection runs as follows: Why should we ‘put ourselves out’ to engage in mission in general and evangelism in particular if everyone gets redeemed anyway? We may as well just sit back and relax and let God do his thing. As such universalism strikes at the heart of the spreading of the gospel. This is a serious objection, expressed well by James I. Packer:

If all people are, in the title of a nineteenth-century tract, ‘Doomed to be Saved,’ then it follows that the decisiveness of decisions made in this life,

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24 Obviously, this requires that death is not a point beyond which salvation is impossible because it is obvious that not all people have explicit faith in Christ before they die.

25 See, for instance, John Sanders, *No Other Name: Can Only Christians Be Saved?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

and the urgency of evangelism here in this life, immediately, are undermined... You can see what the missionary implications of this are going to be. What is the main job of the Christian missionary witness? To win men to Christian faith? Or to do something else for them? Universalism prompts the latter view... Universalist speculation at the present time is a very great evil, calculated to blight a ministry, and, as the older evangelicals used to think, 'guaranteed to ruin souls.'<sup>26</sup>

Now, I think that there is a reasonable and important warning here for 'evangelical' universalists. I think that Packer is right that to the extent that universalism undermines mission it is a danger. And, for some, it *can* undermine mission. However, it certainly *need* not. 'Evangelical' universalists have *many* motivations for mission. I hope that all evangelicals would agree that the fear of hell is not the *only* reason to preach Christ crucified! We engage in mission because Christ commanded it and because it is an honour to participate with God in his work of reconciling creation. We preach the gospel *because that is precisely how* God reconciles sinners to himself. And, as I said in *The Evangelical Universalist*,

it is a little ironic that Packer, as a five point Calvinist, faces an exactly analogous objection. If God will save the elect anyway, so the objection runs, why bother proclaiming the gospel to them? They will be saved one way or another. Packer's response, and I would agree with him, would be that the way God saves the elect is through the proclamation of the gospel. But if that response saves Calvinism, it will save universalism also; and if the criticism damns universalism it damns Calvinism too.<sup>27</sup>

We should also note that Arminian universalists – Yes, 'evangelical' universalists can come in both Arminian and Calvinist varieties – have a motivation for evangelism, based on the fear of hell, that Calvinists lack. For Arminian universalists, those who experience hell post-mortem do not do so because God sovereignly ordains it (as in Calvinism) but because of free choices – choices which could have been different – made by such individuals. Many will go to hell that would not do so if they are won to the gospel. So arguably hell ought to motivate the evangelism of Arminian universalists more than it motivates mainstream Calvinists.

### *Reason 8: universalism undermines the Trinity*

Because the Universalist denomination, founded at the end of the eighteenth century, was overtly unitarian in its doctrine of God, universalism and unitarianism are often associated in the minds of evangelicals. The worry is that this is no coincidence; that one heresy naturally leads to another.

However, the link between universalism and unitarianism is only that of a *partial overlap*. Not all unitarians have been universalists and not all universal-

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26 James I. Packer, 'The Problem of Universalism Today.'

27 MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist*, 169.

ists have been unitarians. Trinitarian universalism long predated the unitarian variety (indeed some universalists – Origen and Gregory of Nyssa – played important roles in the shaping of classical trinitarian theology) and continues to exist alongside the latter. As such it is clear that any link between the two theologies is historically contingent. That is to say, there is nothing about the doctrine of universal restoration that entails unitarianism. The doctrine of the Trinity is not at risk.

*Reason 9: universalism was declared ‘anathema’ by the church*

I said that ‘evangelical’ universalists subscribe to orthodox Christian faith. However, there is a widespread belief that the doctrine of universal salvation was declared to be a heresy by an ecumenical church council (the fifth ecumenical council in 553). As such, universalism is ‘unorthodox’ and thereby ‘unevangelical’.

Now the issues here are complex and I have dealt with this matter at some length in the introduction to *‘All Shall Be Well’*. But, in a nutshell, it appears that fifteen anathemas against Origen were added after the main session of the Council and appended to the official documentation (though some patristic scholars doubt their authenticity). However, I have argued that what was anathematised was not *apokatastasis* (universal restoration) *per se* but *apokatastasis* as associated with certain other, theologically problematic, doctrines (such as the pre-existence of souls and a panentheistic eschatology). We should bear in mind that Gregory of Nyssa, who was well known as a universalist, was not condemned by the council and that he was, in fact, honoured by the seventh ecumenical council as ‘the father of the fathers’. But Gregory’s universalism did not involve some of the more problematic aspects of Origen’s (or, at least, the versions of some of Origen’s later followers).

It is important to state that there is nothing about a belief in universal restoration that runs counter to the Rule of Faith or the great ecumenical creeds. In *‘All Shall Be Well’* I argued that universalism should be seen to occupy a space between heresy and dogma. It is, I suggest, *theologoumena* – a matter on which orthodox Christians are permitted to take different views.<sup>28</sup>

*Reason 10: historically evangelicalism has rejected universalism*

‘Evangelical’ universalists are claiming to be among the legitimate heirs, even if not the *only* heirs (and certainly not the most *important* heirs), to an historical tradition. But the problem with such a claim is that the tradition in question has almost universally rejected the idea that all people will be saved. So how can anyone claim that universalism is a *legitimate* development of a tradition that has (almost) consistently denied such ideas? Wesley, Whitfield, and Jonathan Edwards would be turning in their graves!

My claim in this article is that the historic rejection of universalism by evangelicals is contingent and, on its own, is not decisive for settling our question.

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28 See MacDonald, *‘All Shall Be Well’*, 2–13.

Evangelicalism is not a fossil but a *living tradition* with the capacity for healthy development. The question before us is that of discerning legitimate, healthy development within a tradition from unhealthy mutation and deformation. Does a claimed ‘evolution’ of the tradition bend it out of shape or is it true to the heart of what has gone before? The test, I propose, is whether a change within a tradition is in accord with the *heart* of that tradition. Does it *deny* fundamental aspects of the tradition or does it *arise from* reflection on central aspects of that tradition?

In the second main section of this paper, I wish to suggest that ‘evangelical’ universalism is an *authentic* development within the evangelical tradition and is not, as many fear, an unhealthy, perhaps even lethal, distortion of it.

## Part II: ‘Evangelical’ universalism as authentically evangelical

### *Ancestors*

Before making my main point it is worth noting that contemporary ‘evangelical’ universalists are not unprecedented. Indeed, we find different species of ‘evangelical’ universalist from the first generation of evangelicals onwards. James Rely (1722–78) was a Welsh convert of George Whitfield and, for a while, one of Whitfield’s preachers. He developed his own idiosyncratic version of Calvinistic universalism – interestingly as a way to retain a doctrine of penal substitution in the face of its moral critics. Rely’s universalism was passed on in America through his better-known successor John Murray (1741–1815). In the European pietist tradition there was George De Benneville (1703–93) who was both an ardent evangelist and a universalist. Indirectly De Benneville influenced the conversion to universalism of an American Baptist minister called Elhanan Winchester (1751–97). Winchester was a successful revivalist preacher and remained a committed gospel-preacher after his turn towards, what he called, ‘the universal restoration’. Winchester founded a universalist Baptist church in Philadelphia before coming to London where his influence, both in his preaching ministry and in his writing, was at its most effective. He was, without question,<sup>29</sup> an evangelical with a passion for evangelism and yet unequivocally a universalist. This narrow stream of ‘evangelical’ universalism continued through the nineteenth century with people such as Johann Christoph Blumhardt (1805–80) and his son Christoph Friedrich (1842–1919), Thomas Erskine (1788–1870), Andrew Jukes (1815–1901), Samuel Cox (1826–93), Josephine Butler (1828–1906), Hannah Whitall Smith (1832–1911), and Marianne Farningham (1834–1909).<sup>30</sup> Yes, ‘evangelical’ universalists have been, and remain, a rare breed but the view has never been without a witness.

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29 Unless, of course, one insists that a universalist is *by definition* a non-evangelical. But my goal in this article is to challenge precisely this claim.

30 For information on some of the people in this list, along with a host of others see MacDonald, ‘*All Shall Be Well*’.

*'Evangelical' universalism grows from reflection on common evangelical convictions*

Now, I wish to argue that part of the appeal of universalism has arisen from its connection to some common evangelical beliefs. Consider the following: Arminian evangelicals have always maintained that God loves all people, wants to save all people, and sent Christ to die for all people to achieve this goal. 'Evangelical' universalists agree. Calvinist evangelicals have always maintained that God will achieve all his purposes in salvation; that all for whom Christ died will be saved. 'Evangelical' universalists agree. But, of course, the Arminian belief-set and the Calvinist belief-set, when combined, *entail* universalism. Consider:

1. God, being omnipotent, *could* cause all people to freely accept Christ.
2. God, being omniscient, *would know how* to cause all people to freely accept Christ.
3. God, being omnibenevolent, would *want* to cause all people to freely accept Christ.

(Premises 1 and 2 are Calvinist whilst premise 3 is Arminian.) Now 1–3 entail:

4. God *will* cause all people to freely accept Christ.

From which it follows that:

5. All people *will* freely accept Christ.

My point in presenting this argument is not, in this context, to persuade readers to be universalists. Rather, it is simply to illustrate that widely accepted evangelical beliefs can, in certain circumstances, motivate universalism. Both the Arminian and the Calvinist belief-sets above are evangelical-compatible, so are 'evangelical' universalists unevangelical because they believe both? That seems odd. Or *must* evangelicals believe either (a) that God *cannot* save all without violating their freedom (Arminianism), or (b) that God *does not want* to save all (Calvinism)?

*'Evangelical' universalism grows from reflection on the evangel itself*

I would maintain that 'evangelical' universalism is grounded not in a sentimentalised view of God's niceness but in the gospel story itself. For Christians, Jesus Christ is the starting point and the ending point for our theological reflections. *He* is the definitive revelation of God and of God's kingdom purposes. And thus all our eschatological reflections and speculations must be utterly reconfigured around Jesus.

Christ, as Second Adam, represents all of humanity before God. He is the eschaton-made-flesh. In Christ, the 'Last Things' – the coming of final judgment and resurrection – have erupted into the present in his death and resurrection. So eschatological speculations on the final state of humanity must take Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, as definitive. On the cross sin and death were dealt a lethal blow; in his risen body the destiny of humanity is revealed.

Now my theological worry about traditional views of hell is simply this: to

me, the suggestion that some (indeed, ‘many’ or even ‘most’) people will never experience salvation sounds very much like the claim that *something other than Jesus Christ is definitive for the shape of the future*. And the suggestion that God’s final victory will involve the irreversible destruction of some/many/most people sounds to me like something other than the death and resurrection of Christ is being allowed to govern our understanding of ‘God’s triumph’. The idea that God will ‘reconcile’ some creatures by *forcing* them to acknowledge that he is the boss *and then destroying them* is, to my universalist ear, a call to allow the theological concept of ‘reconciliation’ to wander free from its anchoring in the gospel and Scripture. The proposal of some that we need to allow God the ‘freedom’ to decide the ‘end of the story’ and that universalism is a presumptuous attempt to snatch such freedom from God sounds to me like an exhortation that we find another God ‘behind the back’ of Jesus Christ. God has *already* shown his hand in the story of Jesus. He has *already* chosen, in his freedom, to ‘be our God’. (And what kind of ‘freedom’ are we being asked to allow God here? The freedom to damn people he could just as easily redeem? To me, this sounds like the ‘freedom’ for God to be someone other than God. Such a ‘freedom’ is, to my mind, an imperfection and unworthy of God).

Eschatological universalism is the claim that the *telos* of creation is determined by God in Christ; that the end of the story cannot be anything other than an empty tomb. Anything less is not a divine triumph but a divine failure because on any other scenario the future of the world is being shaped, not by the redeeming action of God in Christ but by sin; not by the Second Adam but by the First.

Now, I expect few readers to agree with my argument here and that is fine. I am not primarily concerned with persuading you that I am right. Rather, my intention is to illustrate how theological reflection on *the gospel itself*, the evangel, is the basis for a robust, biblical hope for universalism. As such, in the most *radical* sense, universalism can be seen as *evangelical*; as a gospel-focused and gospel-grounded hope.

## Conclusion

I have argued that ‘evangelical’ universalists can be considered as bona fide evangelicals.<sup>31</sup> They are orthodox Christians with a high view of Scripture; their universalism (contrary to popular opinion) violates no non-negotiable evangelical beliefs or practices and, what is more, it is actually motivated by theological reflection on central evangelical commitments. Evangelical universalists are christocentric, trinitarian, evangel-focused, biblically-rooted, and missional. So

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31 We could add a further reflection: David Bebbington famously sees a common core in the diversity of expressions of evangelicalism in terms of a quadrilateral – biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, and activism. And ‘evangelical’ universalism can certainly be all four of those things.



my question is simply this: *What else does one have to be to count as 'evangelical'?* What I am asking of my fellow evangelicals is not that they endorse evangelical universalism as true but that they consider the debate over how many will be saved to be an *inner-evangelical* debate and that they extend to evangelical universalists the same tolerance that Calvinists and Arminians, say, extend to each other. If we can make that move then it will take considerable heat out of the current discussions and, hopefully, allow for a more fruitful debate.

### Abstract

There are numerous arguments to the effect that universalism (the doctrine that all people will finally be saved) is incompatible with evangelical theology. The author considers ten such arguments and seeks to show that all of them fail. He then argues that universalism is not merely evangelical-compatible but can, in fact, be motivated by evangelical beliefs. Evangelical universalists are christo-centric, trinitarian, evangel-focused, biblically-rooted, and missional.

In this paper the author is not seeking to demonstrate that evangelical universalism is true but rather to argue that debates over the question of universalism can be seen as *inner-evangelical* disagreements. If evangelicals can make that move then, he maintains, it will take considerable heat out of the current discussions and, hopefully, allow for a more fruitful debate.

## STUDIES IN EVANGELICAL HISTORY AND THOUGHT

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