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# Can evangelicals be universalists?

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KEY WORDS: Universalism, evangelical, hell, judgment, punishment, love of God, justice of God, annihilation, salvation.

As with most questions the immediate reply to the question ‘Can evangelicals be Universalists?’<sup>1</sup> is not ‘yes’ or ‘no’ but ‘it all depends what you mean by...’ There is no single expression of the concept of Universalism. Among the varied forms it takes many can be judged immediately to be incompatible with evangelicalism because they do not credit the teaching of scripture with supreme authority that is evangelicalism’s essential hallmark, or are in flat contradiction to it. It is impossible to square the belief that all will be saved irrespective of how they have lived or what they have believed with the plain and consistent teaching in scripture of the wrath of God, the judgment of unbelieving sinners, and the necessity of faith in Christ for salvation.

However, a few evangelicals have advocated apparently more acceptable forms of universalism in the past and more recently Robin Parry, in *The Evangelical Universalist*,<sup>2</sup> has put forward a version which a few evangelicals have flirted with previously. Its proponents argue that it not only as compatible with core evangelical convictions but even demanded by them. This paper addresses Parry’s contribution.

## Appreciation of *The Evangelical Universalist*

I want to express appreciation to Robin Parry for the sensitivity he demonstrated in the way he published *The Evangelical Universalist* and the tone of the argument he adopts, knowing that the topic would be controversial. Although he claims to be a ‘hopeful dogmatic universalist’<sup>3</sup> the dogmatic spirit is far from evident in the book and the claims are expressed modestly and tentatively. Indeed,

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- 1 This paper is an edited version of the initial paper given at the dialogue between the author and Robin Parry at Spurgeon’s College on 3rd February 2011 on the topic of ‘Is Universalism an Evangelical Option?’ I have used the academic convention of referring to Parry throughout this paper but I want to testify towards warm relations between Robin and myself in spite of our differences over this issue.
  - 2 *The Evangelical Universalist* was published under the pseudonym of Gregory MacDonald (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2006). A collection of historical papers was subsequently published entitled, *All Shall be Well: Explorations in Universal Salvation and Christian Theology, from Origen to Moltmann* (Cambridge: James Clarke: 2011)
  - 3 *Evangelical Universalist*, 4.

at times, one wonders whether he is really convinced of his position or is just thinking aloud in the hope of convincing himself and others, even if the weight of evidence is against him. So, at one point Parry writes, 'I do not claim to have disproved traditional interpretations nor to have demonstrated the truth of my suggestions. I do claim to have proposed a range of possible interpretations that are both compatible with universalism and the text [in this particular context] of Revelation'.<sup>4</sup>

There is an evident reluctance to question the traditional interpretations and it is not done lightly, or with any desire to upset the evangelical appletart. Nonetheless Parry believes that sensitivity to the pastoral dilemmas of others and his own personal pilgrimage compel him to explore the issue. He feels compelled to venture where 'angels fear to tread' even though he knows only too well that evangelicals are not known for their ability to deal with subtleties, preferring the certainties of black and white, and that his subtle version of universalism is unlikely to be given a fair hearing.

### The heart of the argument

*The Evangelical Universalist* does not advocate what might usually be thought of as universalism – that everyone will be saved in the end – but a particular form of universalism that seeks to take the biblical teaching of sin, the awfulness of judgment and the reality of hell seriously. This universalist, as opposed to universalists in general,<sup>5</sup> believes 'hell is something to be avoided at all costs, just as Jesus warned us'.<sup>6</sup>

Parry's objection to traditional evangelical teaching lies in interpreting hell as endless conscious torment because, although he thinks 'sin incurs very *serious* demerit', he does not think it 'incurs *infinite* demerit'.<sup>7</sup> Such a punishment would, he argues, be disproportional to the offence and in conflict with the justice of God, let alone a God who is love. Once this argument is placed in the context of the contemporary emphasis on punishment as restorative, rather than retributive, it leads logically to the position that the purpose of hell is educative.

Hell is seen as a 'terrible but temporary fate',<sup>8</sup> which therefore logically may not indicate a person has passed the point of no return.<sup>9</sup> So hell becomes 'the state in which God allows the painful reality of sin to hit home'<sup>10</sup> but a state from which, once it has done so, someone can be released so that God may be seen to triumph over all and win all in the end, rather than be defied (and so defeated) by a stubborn cadre of impenitents. Israel's experience is said to provide

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4 *Evangelical Universalist*, 131

5 Notwithstanding an unguarded claim on 166.

6 *Evangelical Universalist*, 166.

7 *Evangelical Universalist*, 166. Italics his.

8 *Evangelical Universalist*, 155.

9 *Evangelical Universalist*, 167.

10 *Evangelical Universalist*, 136.

the paradigm for his argument. Referring to Isaiah. 51, Parry claims ‘it is clear [from Israel’s experience] that one can drink God’s wrath and move beyond to redemption’.<sup>11</sup>

### The elements of the argument

The argument of *The Evangelical Universalist* is constructed from several components, which it is worth briefly reviewing but which cannot be thoroughly critiqued in this paper.

*There is a moral component.* Infinite retribution cannot be just and nor can it be that the redeemed enjoy the fate of the lost eternally suffering in hell. Both are said to be unworthy and incompatible with the character of God as we know him. These are familiar arguments to which many have provided counter arguments especially emphasising the seriousness of sin and the holiness of God. But even if the arguments were upheld they could be used to argue a case for annihilation rather than for Parry’s form of universalism.

*There is a philosophical component.* This is the essential starting point of the treatise. Again it takes the form of a familiar claim: it is logically incompatible to say that God is all knowing, all powerful, all loving and not willing for any to perish, and yet to argue at the same time that God does not bring about his will for all to be saved because some have the power to resist him and therefore have to be punished eternally. The issues are well worn. Scripture does not resolve the tensions but leaves us humbly unable to fathom all the depths of the mystery of God.<sup>12</sup> Philosophy has certainly demonstrated no superior ability to resolve the issue.

*There is a theological component* in which various arguments are advanced and examined. I refer to just a few:

1. Calvinists say God has to be just but he does not have to be merciful. But Parry rightly protests that this is problematic for a Christian view of God<sup>13</sup> which teaches that ‘it is his (God’s) nature always to have mercy’, to use the words of the liturgy. Belief in hell, however, is not the province of this formulation or of Calvinism alone.
2. If the powers that oppose God were created by him, as Colossians 1:15-16 asserts, and yet in the end have to be destroyed or annihilated, this indicates that God has been defeated rather than triumphing since they have succeeded in frustrating his will and authority. But surely God does triumph over them in his judging of them, even if he does not do so in the way 21st century people shaped by the thinking of a liberal culture think ideal.
3. It is affirmed that love is compatible with punishment but it is not thought

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<sup>11</sup> *Evangelical Universalist*, 127.

<sup>12</sup> For a recent relatively popular look at such mysteries by a leading evangelical scholar see, Christopher J. H. Wright, *The God I Don’t Understand* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).

to be compatible with everlasting punishment. The story of Israel is said to illustrate this since although they were punished severely in exile they were subsequently restored to their homeland.<sup>14</sup> However, this pays insufficient attention to the fact that it was only a refined remnant that was restored to Judah, not everyone. Another biblical example could be advanced in this respect, namely, the generation of the children of Israel who were not permitted to enter the Promised Land because of their unbelief.

4. Crucial to Parry's argument is his rejection of the traditional belief that there are two forms of punishment: a disciplinary form that is not ultimate to be experienced by believers, and a retributive form that is ultimate to be endured by unbelievers.<sup>15</sup> The arguments advanced 'to resist this claim' are not, to the current writer, sufficiently grounded in biblical exegesis.
5. Constructively, Parry argues that divine justice must be integrally linked to divine love. Love and justice cannot function independently or be 'disconnected' from each other.<sup>16</sup> God is one. This leads Parry to argue that divine punishment must take the form of education and rehabilitation and never retribution. But this is only one way of resolving the apparent tension between divine justice and love and not a necessary conclusion. It uses a particularly recent and limited cultural view of what is acceptable punishment as its criterion.
6. Parry has sympathy with the view that 'how it all fits together is *a mystery*' but regards it as 'a last resort'.<sup>17</sup> But perhaps that is the only position we can adopt with integrity and the refusal to accept this is a sign not of our wisdom but of our hubris. Stephen Williams warns that 'although we're bound to think logically, we are also bound to regard as precarious the forging of some conceptual interconnections which go beyond biblical data'. Quoting Deuteronomy 29:29, he advocates 'a due sense of our inability to penetrate beyond a certain point in our understanding'.<sup>18</sup>

*There is a hermeneutical component.* The claim is rightly made that all our theology is done in particular contexts and that we cannot 'just read the Bible'. Even if we affirm that Scripture is inerrant we must concede our interpretations of it are not. Hermeneutically we interpret scripture, paying attention to 'tradition, reason, and experience'.<sup>19</sup> For Parry, reason and experience suggests the primary hermeneutical lens through which scripture must be read is that which

13 *Evangelical Universalist*, 21.

14 *Evangelical Universalist*, 102.

15 *Evangelical Universalist*, 137.

16 *Evangelical Universalist*, 163.

17 *Evangelical Universalist*, 32-34.

18 Stephen Williams, 'Universalism', *New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics*, eds. Campbell Campbell-Jack and Gavin J. McGrath, (Downers Grove and Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2006), 729. In his presentation at the Spurgeon's Consultation Robin Parry agreed theodicy was a mystery but is apparently unwilling to extend this to questions of eschatology.

19 *Evangelical Universalist*, 1.

is predisposed to favour universalism. The dice, he writes, 'is loaded in favour of universalism should an impasse be reached'<sup>20</sup> not least because punishment is seen as restorative not retributive.<sup>21</sup>

It may be cogently argued, however, that tradition and experience do not load the dice in favour of universalism. Even though some have flirted with universalism throughout history mainstream tradition has set its face against universalism, from the condemnation of Origen onwards.

And one's experience is very much dependent on one's context. A different context may well lead Parry to argue very differently. Miroslav Volf, for example, has spoken of the way in which,

I used to think that wrath was unworthy of God. Isn't God love? Shouldn't divine love be beyond wrath? God is love, and God loves every person and every creature. That's exactly why God is wrathful and against some of them. My last resistance to the idea of God's wrath was a casualty of the war in the former Yugoslavia, the region from which I come. According to some estimates, 200,000 people were killed and over 3 million displaced. My villages and cities were destroyed, my people shelled day in and day out, some of them were brutalised beyond imagination, and I could not imagine a God not being angry. Or think of Rwanda...where 800,000 were hacked to death in a hundred days...Wasn't God fiercely angry with them? Though I used to complain about the indecency of God's wrath, I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who wasn't wrathful at the sight of the world's evil. God isn't wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful because God is love.<sup>22</sup>

In *Exclusion and Embrace* he similarly argues that violence flourishes in a world which believes that God himself will not wield the sword – a belief that only makes sense in 'the quiet of a suburban home' but not in a 'land soaked in the blood of the innocent'. The message of a nonviolent God will invariably die in such a context, Volf claims.<sup>23</sup> God's violence is beneficial to us in the here and now as we experience the conflicts and injustices of our world. The same must also be true of the eschatological future: God must make a final end to violence if he is to be worthy of worship.

The question is how?

## The biblical evidence

In writing on universalism, Michael Green has correctly said, the key question is

20 *Evangelical Universalist*, 117.

21 *Evangelical Universalist*, 148.

22 Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 138-39.

23 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace, Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 303-04.

‘Can it be found in the New Testament teaching on salvation?’<sup>24</sup> This is true for all Christians but is especially important for evangelicals. If it cannot be found in scripture, then, universalism, however finely nuanced, is incompatible with evangelicalism. Scripture, rather than experience should be our starting point. As John Stott wrote in his discussion of the meaning of hell, ‘As a committed Evangelical, my question must be – and is – not what does my heart tell me, but what does God’s word say?’<sup>25</sup>

So, to what extent is Parry’s form of universalism to be found in the New Testament? This will determine to what extent it can be an evangelical option. The answer is that it is only found in the New Testament if we are prepared to accept the revision of traditional interpretations of various texts. This is not a difficulty in principle, since evangelicals are constantly revising their interpretations.<sup>26</sup> But it is a task to be undertaken with cautious discernment and in this particular case many would feel the attempts to reinterpret key texts fall short of ‘compelling demonstration’ and that the proof texts do not support the case when closely examined.<sup>27</sup>

### *Jesus*

Jesus’ teaching warns of the reality of separation at the end of time and of the terror of hell. He used the image of fire, even everlasting fire (Matt. 5:22; 18:8-9; 25:41, 46; Mark 9:42-48 etc.) and famously refers to Gehenna, ‘where the worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched’ (Mark 9:48) which is clearly a place of rejection and destruction.

These verses raise questions. ‘Eternal’ may refer to ‘belonging to the new age’ rather than this age, as it does in Matthew 25:46, but on other occasions, as in reference to the fire that never dies, ‘eternal’ must mean ‘unending’ or ‘everlasting’. Strictly speaking, Jesus states only that the fire is everlasting, not that which is consigned to it, which one must assume logically would be consumed. This consideration, combined with the plain meaning and emphasis elsewhere on ‘destruction’, led John Stott to declare himself agnostic on the question of everlasting punishment and at least amenable to a doctrine of annihilation.<sup>28</sup>

Parry takes the matter further and argues that the idea of Gehenna was ‘not a clearly worked out concept’ in Jesus’ day and cautiously points out that a few important Jewish Rabbis suggested people could escape from the fire.<sup>29</sup> He ac-

24 Michael Green, *The Meaning of Salvation* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1965), 225.

25 David L. Edwards and John Stott, *Essentials: A liberal-evangelical dialogue* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988), 316.

26 Most obviously many have revised their interpretations of biblical texts about women in Church leadership in recent years.

27 Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth: A handbook of Christian Belief*, (Nottingham: IVP, 2009), 366.

28 *Essentials*, 316.

29 *Evangelical Universalist*, 144.

cepts, though, this was not customary understanding of Gehenna and then surely pulls the rug from out under his own argument in saying, 'I think it is quite clear that Jesus' contemporaries would not have thought he was a universalist of any variety'.<sup>30</sup> In spite of this, which surely should be determinative in itself, he still wants to keep the door ajar.

John's gospel, with its strong sense of dualism, puts forward very explicit teaching on separation and judgement. It shows no embarrassment in speaking not only of God loving the world and sending his son so that 'those who believe in him may not perish but may have eternal life' (John 3:16) but in juxtaposing this with saying that those who do not believe that they are 'condemned already'. John 3:36 typically states, 'whoever disobeys the Son will not see life but must endure God's wrath'.

There is no hint in any of the teaching of Jesus that hell, or God's condemnation, is in any way temporary or irreversible. It reads as final. It is an ultimate destination for which people need to prepare themselves now.

### *Paul*

Paul appears to give evidence of two strands of teaching that are in tension. On the one hand, few would dissent from the idea that Paul, adopting the common teaching about two ways, two sorts of people and two destinations, speaks of the reality of judgment for the impenitent. God, to use Eugene Boring's description is 'the judge who separates'.<sup>31</sup> Romans 1:16-17; 2:7-9; 1 Corinthians 1:18; 6:9-10; Galatians 5:21; 1 Thessalonians 4:13; 2 Thessalonians 1:9, 2:10-12 and a host of other texts teach this. 2 Thessalonians 1 distinguishes between the afflicted believers and their afflicters, who are disobedient to the gospel. The latter will be subject to the vengeance of God and 'will be punished with everlasting destruction, and shut out from the presence of the Lord and the glory of his might' (v.9).

Parry admits that this verse 'remains a problem text for universalists'<sup>32</sup> since Paul does show no interest in restorative justice but sees justice in retributive terms. The fate of the disobedient is transparently final. We may be uncomfortable with this and reject it as unworthy and so to be ignored, or, more likely as evangelicals, dismiss Paul merely as a child of his time, but what we cannot do is make it say something that it does not say.

It should be added that the problem is not alleviated by suggesting there is a development in Paul's thought on this theme, whereby the early Paul gives way to a softer more mature Paul. There is no evidence of a later change of mind on his part; his message is one.

Difficulties arise because it seems that there is, on the other hand, a second picture in Paul, which is not that of 'the judge who separates' but of 'the king who unites all in his godly reign'.<sup>33</sup> Here the language of separation that is fits a

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30 *Evangelical Universalist*, 145.

31 M. Eugene Boring, 'The Language of Universal Salvation in Paul', *JBL* (1986), 280.

32 *Evangelical Universalist*, 154.

33 Boring, 'Language of Universal Salvation', 280.



courtroom is displaced by the language of people and a discordant creation being united through God finally establishing his rule over all. Thus 1 Corinthians 15:26-28 speaks of God being 'all in all' as Christ puts everything in subjection to him. Philippians 2:10-11 looks forward to every knee bending and every tongue confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord. Colossians 1:20 speaks of 'God as pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through his blood on the cross.' And Ephesians 1:10 says that God's plan is 'to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth'. Do not these verses, it is asked, speak of universal salvation in which all is at harmony with God? If so, they must at least imply that, after a process of re-education in hell, people come willingly to surrender to Christ and place themselves under his rule?

None of these texts teach such a doctrine. The concept is simply absent from them. Each text may in fact be said to indicate the reverse. In 1 Corinthians 15, God becomes 'all in all' when things are put in subjection to him, including all his enemies, the last enemy of which, verses 25 and 26 tell us, is death *which is destroyed*, not re-educated and converted. Philippians 2 echoes Isaiah 45:23-24 which makes an appeal for people to turn from the ends of the earth to be saved. But it also indicates that not all will voluntarily do so and some will come to him 'and be put to shame'. So God's sovereignty is forced on them rather than voluntarily accepted by them.

In context, Colossians 1:20 speaks of the reconciliation of 'thrones, dominions, rulers and powers' rather than the reconciliation of every individual. Such reconciliation may well not be voluntarily accepted but in fact compulsorily imposed.<sup>34</sup> Two chapters later, in Colossians 3:6, Paul warns 'the disobedient' (to use the terminology of the parallel text in Ephesians 5:6) that 'the wrath of God is coming' on them in terms that implies this is the end of their story rather than a temporary blip in it. To argue for hell as temporary on this basis is to fill in several steps which are simply absent in Paul's argument and, on the basis of other teaching, these are steps which are misplaced or misguided.

Ephesians 1:10, sometimes quoted in support of universalism, is not about how many will be saved but about the unity and coherence which our diverse and fragmented universe will find in Christ.

Those disposed to interpret these texts in a universalist direction find encouragement in doing so by Paul's use of 'all' in certain key texts about salvation. Parry<sup>35</sup> insists that this 'all' must mean all individuals without exception or all without distinction, as, for example, in 1 Corinthians 15:22 where Paul writes 'as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ'. But are such texts proposing universalism? Surely not. The next verse to 1 Corinthians 15:22 clarifies its meaning. It is all those who 'belong to Christ', that is, who are in solidarity with

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34 F. F. Bruce in E. K. Simpson and F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistles of Ephesians and Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 210.

35 *Evangelical Universalist*, 81, 83.

him, who are made alive and experience the resurrection to the new order of the imperishable life, not all indiscriminately.

Romans 5 gives us the longer version of this. Verse 8 says 'just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all'. The 'all', it is reasonably claimed, must be the same when referring to all 'in Adam' or all 'in Christ'. But notwithstanding this, a universal reference is by no means clear here in the sense of 'all' meaning every individual being. N. T. Wright points out that in the argument of Romans, the 'all' refers to all types of humanity, that is, Jews and Gentiles, being made alive in Christ, rather than every individual. Romans is directed against Jewish particularism and does nothing to undermine particular salvation through Christ.<sup>36</sup> Howard Marshall, agreeing with this, adds, not unreasonably, that in the context of Paul's argument, 'all' means 'all those who are justified', all those who have faith, or all 'who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness', as mentioned in verse 17.<sup>37</sup> To argue for universalism here would be to 'do so in the teeth of (e.g.) Romans 2:6-16; 14:11-12, and other such passages as 2 Thessalonians 2:7-10'.<sup>38</sup>

The most supportive Pauline text I could find is 1 Tim. 4:10, 'we have our hope set on the living God, who is the saviour of all people, especially of those who believe'. Howard Marshall, however, believes the apparent inconsistency between this verse and the plain particularistic teaching found elsewhere disappears if we interpret *malista* not as 'especially' but as 'to be precise, namely, I mean', as we legitimately might.<sup>39</sup> The point is that Christ is potentially the saviour of all, not just of one special or of one particular ethnic group. Translating it as Marshall and others propose is, firstly, in harmony with 2:4, which expresses God's *desire* that all should be saved. This cannot be given a universalistic interpretation but is rather a reference to 'God's desire that all people should be saved, whether or not they actually respond to his gracious God's offer'.<sup>40</sup> Secondly, it also is in harmony with the particularistic notes in the rest of the letter like 2:20 and 4:1 and the importance of faith or obedience (1:16; 3:16; 2 Tim. 1:5; 3:15).

### *General Epistles and Revelation*

Brief mention may be made of a number of key texts.

Hebrews 9:27, 'And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgement...', suggests death and judgement to be the final events of a person's journey without any chance of post-mortem re-education or possible salvation. This text seems to support Marshall's concern that universalism, of

36 N. T. Wright, 'Towards a Biblical View of Universalism', *Themelios*, 4 (1979), 55.

37 I Howard Marshall, 'Does the NT teach universal salvation?' in *Called to One Hope*, ed. John Colwell (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), 20.

38 Wright, 'Towards a Biblical View', 55.

39 I Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, ICC, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 556-57.

40 Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 426.

Parry's or any other sort, is not supported by the New Testament either implicitly or explicitly because (i) final judgement is final, (ii) there is no indication of a future offer of the gospel or that people will change after death, or (iii) that everyone will in fact respond in faith to God.<sup>41</sup> As N. T. Wright states, 'these is no biblical warrant for the idea of a "second chance" after death'.<sup>42</sup>

2 Peter 3:9, 'The Lord is not slow with his promise but is patient with you all, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance'. The question universalists ask is if God does not want any to perish, why does he not arrange for them not to do so? But to extrapolate the verse in this way, rather than interpreting it in the more limited sense of God's desire, runs counter to the grain of the whole argument in 2 Peter 3 which just two verses earlier speaks of the 'destruction of the godless'.

1 John 2:2, speaks of Jesus Christ as 'the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world'. However, John's letter provides ample evidence that he is no universalist and so the verse cannot be taken in this way. He demonstrates an acute awareness of two kinds of people and the two paths that they may tread. 1 John 5:23 says, 'Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son does not have life.' So, this must mean that the whole world only has one saviour – Jesus Christ and all who receive salvation, irrespective of race, gender, wealth, education or status, do so because of him.

Revelation: here we enter complex ground, which Parry has expounded in full, juxtaposing, if I understand him correctly, chapters 14 and 20, which speak of judgement, with chapters 15 and 21-22 which speak of God's universal triumph. The latter are taken by him to be universalist postscripts to the earlier chapters. Several of his arguments about structure and content are unexceptional. The imagery of the wine press and the lake of fire in chapter 14 is built on Jeremiah 25:15-38 and Isaiah 34:8-10, where the nations drink of God's wrath and experience his fierce judgement. But then, Parry asserts, beyond God's wrath they will experience redemption. Furthermore, he claims, there is nothing in Revelation 14 or 20 that demands that the torment of the damned is '*forever and ever*'.<sup>43</sup> Strictly speaking, Parry argues, the text only demands 'the demonic trinity' (devil, beast and false prophet) of 20:10 will be tormented everlastingly.

The chapters that 'reply' to these judgmental chapters celebrate the victory of God and the triumph of his grace over evil. The gates of the new Jerusalem are kept open, it is suggested, not just as a symbol of security but 'primarily [as] a symbol that [God] excludes no one from his presence for ever'.<sup>44</sup> So, Parry concludes 'the universalist texts do seem to indicate clearly that the damned...will be redeemed at some point and enter the New Jerusalem'.<sup>45</sup> However, this is

41 Marshall, 'Does the NT teach universalism', *passim*.

42 N. T. Wright, 'Universalism', *New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright, (Downers Grove and Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 703.

43 *Evangelical Universalist*, 128. Italics his.

44 *Evangelical Universalist*, 115.

45 *Evangelical Universalist*, 120.

not the most obvious interpretation of those passages, which indeed celebrate the triumph of God over evil. It is hard to see that any such thing is indicated 'clearly', although it can perhaps be read in to the text if one is predisposed to do so. What seems clearer is the destruction of evil and of those who perpetrate it without repentance and the exclusion of 'the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters and all liars' and their confinement to the lake of fire, 'which is the second death', without any hint of a resurrection to follow this second death (21:8).

## Summary

Whatever our emotions may say concerning the lost state of the impenitent, it is very hard to find a doctrine of universalism in the New Testament, whether of a general variety or the more specific 're-educative' variety proposed by Parry. There are two distinct forms of universalism which the NT does teach and two only: (i) that the offer of salvation is universal in its scope in the present time and is available to all without distinction of race, gender, wealth or social standing, and (ii) that God will reign 'all in all' when the whole of creation is brought into submission, voluntarily or otherwise, to his rule at some future time.

There are, then, as it seems to me, a number of fatal objections to Robin's proposal:

1. At best it is an argument from silence, since scripture nowhere positively states several crucial elements of universalism. It is a 'theology of the gaps' where the supposed gap between the God who is love and the God who is judge is bridged. But there is no evidence that this is the way to bridge it and, like London's Millennium Bridge when first built, its construction is unsteady and wobbles somewhat. It is hard to refute what simply does not exist, or equally to affirm what you believe not to be there.
2. The accent of New Testament teaching falls on the significance of this life and the decisions made here, with no hint of a second chance, post-mortem, or of re-education in a hell prior to release in heaven.
3. There is no reason to believe that those who were impenitent on earth will become penitent in hell. This is pure supposition. Hell may, indeed, logically have the reverse effect and harden its residents against God because of their experience of a terrible, if temporary, suffering.
4. The proposals, if correct, would involve three resurrections to life: that of Christ, that of believers, and subsequently that of 'the rest'. Scripture speaks only of two orders of resurrection to life (1 Cor. 15:22; 1 Thess. 4:16-17) that of Christ, the firstfruits, and of believers.
5. Paul, as Eugene Boring has correctly pointed out,<sup>46</sup> is far more reticent in describing the fate of the damned than the fate of the redeemed. What little is said emphasises the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1:10, Col. 3:6 etc.).

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46 Boring, 'Language of Universal Salvation', 275.

The most graphic description is found in 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10 and certainly conveys the impression of the finality of judgement, without hope of subsequent redemption. Even if, as some hold, this is Paul's pastoral technique to provide an incentive for godly living, it is more than this. Paul is not likely to use creative but ill-founded imagination merely as a means of motivation. On the other hand, his argument would be fundamentally flawed if he did not present the full picture which enabled the Thessalonians to place their experience of suffering in context.

6. The logic of Parry's argument could just as well lead to a belief in annihilationism, which at least in the form of conditional immortality has been espoused by a number of evangelicals, than to his form of universalism. Annihilationism seems to solve most of the problems Parry perceives in the tradition view.
7. The triumph of God and the reconciliation of 'all things' are adequately explained in terms of the destruction of evil and of all that opposes him – if necessary, the pacification of his enemies who are forced to reconcile themselves to his rule – as much as by any proposal of universalism. To say that reconciliation cannot take place unless enemies are persuaded by re-education to agree with God puts a particular contemporary cultural spin on what we believe must happen. The restoration of health to the cancer sufferer is achieved not by the voluntary reconciliation of the cancer cells but by their destruction. We do not see that as a failure of medicine but celebrate it as a triumph. So too, the triumph of the God, who is not only love but light, not only gracious but holy, not only merciful but mighty, is a cause for celebration.

Universal homage will one day be paid to the King of kings and Lord of lords. Does that mean all will be saved whether they have gone directly into his presence or come into it via a temporary, if terrifying, detour in hell? The Bible presents no evidence to support the latter. Hell is presented as the final destination of the impenitent rather than a temporary deviation. To believe otherwise is to 'clutch at insubstantial straws'.<sup>47</sup> With Michael Green, I conclude, whatever arguments there may be from general considerations of the nature of God and man...there is little enough solid ground in the biblical language about salvation to enable us to pronounce with any certainty in its favour, and a great deal which warns us in the most stringent terms of the danger of "everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord" (2 Thess. 1:9) for those who wilfully reject the gospel of salvation'.<sup>48</sup>

### **So, is universalism compatible with evangelicalism?**

Giving a precise answer to this question leads to a discussion of the nature of evangelicalism. One's answer will be affected by how one defines that move-

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47 Marshall, 'Does the New Testament teach', 24.

48 Green, *Meaning of Salvation*, 230.

ment. Those, like Don Carson or David Wells,<sup>49</sup> who define it primarily as a doctrinal movement will unequivocally say universalism is incompatible with any form with evangelicalism. Universalism, at best, seems highly speculative, requires a great deal of eisegesis of scripture by way of justification, and is contrary to the tradition of classic evangelicalism. To hold such a view is to soften scripture's plain teaching regarding the challenge of the gospel in this life, and God's wrath and the fate of the impenitent in the next. As such, it is discordant with evangelicalism and seen as doctrinally erroneous.

Others, however, define evangelicalism not as a strictly bounded movement but as a coalition of groups whose relationship to one another is characterised more by a shared culture than a rigidly defined set of propositions. From this perspective the idea of a centre-set rather than a received 'statement of faith' is a better way to understand evangelicalism. The best known, and most robust, example of such an approach is found in David Bebbington's quadrilateral to which Parry refers his paper.<sup>50</sup> Bebbington identifies conversionism, Biblicism, activism and crucicentrism, as Evangelicalism's key characteristics.

If such an approach is adopted Evangelicals and Evangelical institutions may be plotted somewhere in relation to those characteristics at the centre of the movement and may be closer to the centre in regard to one characteristic than others. Positively, this allows for the fluidity and diversity that is evident in the history of Evangelicalism and equally evident among contemporary evangelicalism. Negatively it gives little guidance as to how far one can distance oneself from the centre and on how many issues before one ceases to be an Evangelical? Those who criticise this definition have some understandable fears that such an approach can lead to a dilution of the meaning of evangelical.

However, if one accepts a centred-set approach it seems possible for Parry to defend the integrity of his Evangelical credentials, as he does with verve in his paper. It is possible for him to argue that he continues to wrestle with scripture and take the holiness of God, the awfulness of sin and the horror of hell seriously and that therefore, his interpretation of what happens after death is not so central as to disqualify him from being an evangelical. But the niggling question remains, at least to this author, as to whether scripture is being handled with

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49 E.g. Don Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), 444-61; among David Wells' numerous writings in this area see 'On being Evangelical: Some Theological Differences and Similarities' in ed. Mark A Noll, David W. Bebbington and George A. Rawlych, *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles and Beyond, 1700-1990* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 389-415. The basic doctrinal consensus is explored in J. I Packer and Thomas C. Oden, *One Faith: The Evangelical Consensus*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004).

50 David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in the Modern World, A history from the 1730s to the 1890s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2-17. For the author's understanding see Derek J. Tidball *Who are the Evangelicals: Tracing the Roots of Today's Movement* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1994).

integrity and whether it truly supports the views expounded, which any genuine evangelicalism requires.

Thirty years ago, James Davison Hunter pointed out that evangelicalism was increasingly manifesting a desire to present itself as a civil faith. As evidence he pointed to the way in which offensive aspects of its message were referred to less with doctrines such as a future hell being avoided or de-emphasised in favour of speaking about 'hell on earth'.<sup>51</sup> We must ask if the embrace of universalism is not a further example of evangelicals seeking to be civil and of stretching doctrine to accommodate as comfortably as possible to contemporary culture rather than allowing scripture to be determinative of their belief?

Together, though, we can gladly affirm that God's offer of salvation now is universal and that in the age to come his triumphant reign will be universal as well.

### Abstract

In the light of biblical teaching the author offers what seem to him to be fatal objections to Robin Parry's proposal. Whatever our emotions may say concerning the lost state of the impenitent, it is very hard to find a doctrine of universalism in the New Testament, whether of a general variety or the more specific 're-educative' variety proposed by Parry. There are two distinct forms of universalism which the NT does teach and two only: (i) that the offer of salvation is universal in its scope in the present time and is available to all without distinction of race, gender, wealth or social standing, and (ii) that God will reign 'all in all' when the whole of creation is brought into submission, voluntarily or otherwise, to his rule at some future time.

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51 James Davison Hunter, *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983), 87-89.

## Wesley as a Pastoral Theologian

### Pastoral Theology in the Context of the doctrine of Perfection

David B. McEwan

Wesley as a Pastoral Theologian examines Wesley's life from his time in Oxford to the point at which he becomes the leader of the Methodist Movement and beyond and demonstrates that he was a theologian concerned more with the living relationship between humanity and God than with an academic comprehension of propositional truths about God.

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