

"Grace abounding in love and punishing the guilty."

*(Transcript of talk given by Don Carson at the Gospel Coalition conference, 14th April 2011.
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Well welcome to this additional session, grace abounding in love and punishment ...
abounding in love and punishing the guilty ... That's the way God introduces himself in Exodus
34. He's full of love and mercy, but he does not hold the guiltless innocent.

Let me begin with prayer, and then I will talk for a number of minutes. Then there will be a
panel up here that will push some of the discussion a little farther. Let's pray:

Put a guard on our lips Lord God, we beg of you, so that we may speak what is truth,
reverently in submission to your most holy word, with respect and charity toward all, yet not
flinching from things that we sinners find hard sayings in scripture, learning rather to conform
our minds to your most holy word. We beg these mercies in Jesus' name. Amen.

In very substantial measure, what we're doing in this session is considering universalism. Now
everybody knows of course that the extra session was precipitated in large part by Rob Bell's
recent book "Love Wins". And both I and the panel will be saying some things about that book
in due course. But I want to set the stage on a bigger venue, as it were. Rob is the latest
exemplar of this position, but its not as if he invented it. Its not as if what he is saying is brand
new. So its perhaps helpful to paint with a larger brush to begin with.

I shall begin with a few clarifying definitions:

Universalism is the belief that ultimately everyone will be saved, however you understand
saved in different religions. Everyone will go to heaven, everyone will be with God, however it
is put. That means that if there is a hell – and some universalists think there is, and some
universalists think there isn't – if there is a hell, it will one day be emptied. The citizens of hell
is an empty set, ultimately.

This is not to be confused with annihilationism. Annihilationism argues that, although there are
some who really are rightly assigned to hell, there they may be punished for different lengths
of time, but they will ultimately all be utterly destroyed, annihilated. So this is not saying
therefore that they will be saved, transferred from darkness to light after death, a post-
mortem salvation. It is saying rather that they will be utterly destroyed, annihilated. Now that is
an important topic, but its not one that I'm going to spend much time on today.

Beware the attempts to muddy the definition of universalism. Rob says he is not a universalist,
if, by universalist, we mean that God somehow imposes his will on people to force everybody
to go to heaven, whether they want to or not. Well of course if that's what you mean by
universalist, he's not a universalist because he doesn't think God forces his will on anybody.
Rather he thinks that love wins. That he keeps working at them and working at them and
working at them until he has got them all on his side.

But, as virtually everyone in the field uses the term, universalism does not refer to the mode or
degree of force or attractiveness of God's love or anything like that. It refers to the result. That

is, are there any people who are finally rejected absolutely and eternally? Or will everyone be saved?

That's the first thing, we need to be clear about definitions.

2. Universalism, in the broad discussion, usually builds out of several theological assertions. In other words, people assert certain kinds of things to be true about God, reality, sin and the like, and then, out of these assertions, they draw their inference, their conclusion that hell itself must become an empty set.

Let me list a number of them:

- (i) Everyone in the world is savingly loved by God and is already reconciled to God. Everyone in the world, without exception, is savingly loved by God and is already reconciled to God.

Now, the way that plays out is to keep asserting this means there is no wrath any more hanging over everyone. There is still some form of judgement, we'll come to that, but at the end of the day the fundamental wrath has been taken away. Its gone for everybody, equivalently.

- (ii) Because of the wideness of God's mercy, people from other religions will find their way to heaven, to God, somehow.

Some universalists will say "in this life". Perhaps through the fact that they've responded to whatever revelation they've received. Or perhaps they have been saved actually through Christ, whether they know it or not. Universalists vary in what they affirm in this regard. Or some say "they may not be saved in this life, but in the life to come, they will be saved". Regardless of what their background, regardless of what they knew of Jesus before they died. All will finally be saved and this is credited finally to the wideness of God's mercy and the fact that God is fair in his dealing with human beings, where fairness is so often tied to whether or not people have heard about Christ and have had enough information.

- (iii) Initially, the only lost people are those who reject God's love.

In other words, on this view, God's love has already been demonstrated on the cross. All of God's wrath has been turned aside, that's not really an issue. And the only people then who are not saved, as it were, are those who self-consciously reject God's love. Some reject God's love in this life and therefore they form a sort of hell for themselves. Some may, at least initially, resist God's love in the life to come too. But ultimately the hope is that all of them will be won over by the glory and magnificence of God's love.

- (iv) Despite their rejection of his love, that does not mean they are unloved. God's love continues to pursue such people. One can therefore at the very least hope that ultimately everyone will be saved.

Now at this point universalists can be divided into two camps. With someone like Karl Barth, everyone could be saved, but he doesn't go quite so far as to say that everyone will be saved. With someone like John Hick, everyone will be saved, there's no question about it, however

long it takes. And there are some who then sort of waffle between the two positions and say one of those is right but they're not quite sure which is.

- (v) I think it is important to point out that this set of theological commitments invariably teaches other theological things that are not always acknowledged.

In other words the question of universalism is not just about numbers. Its not just about being orthodox across the whole spectrum and then saying "but you know we all believe that God loves us , and we all believe that the cross achieves a great deal and so on. All we're doing is saying it is so powerful that we add a few more numbers and eventually everybody's in.

Universalism, as I've read it in the literature at least, is never merely a question of numbers. Its always tied to a whole lot of other things that are not always explicitly articulated. Let me explain. This view of God's love and complete absence of wrath sooner or later affects your view of the atonement.

There is any number of people nowadays who want to think of the atonement as not actually setting aside in any sense the wrath of God but somehow conquering sin or conquering death or overcoming evil, but not setting aside the wrath of God, because after all, God loves us. And thus the wrath of God sooner or later is reduced from the scene and that gets harder and harder to square with scripture, the more you push it. We'll look at some texts in due course. I'm merely giving you an overview.

And then this begins to affect also our view of holiness. Instead of such blistering holiness that even the angels of God, who have never fallen into sin, cover their faces before him and cry 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty', everything gets suffused instead with softer light. And God's love becomes a little bit more sentimental. They would say "richer". I would say, its becoming impoverished because it is not tied so tightly to holiness. I don't think you see the spectacular love of God until you see the spectacular holiness of God. The two actually diminish each other as any one of them is diminished. The more you emphasise holiness and love, the clearer you are beginning to understand how the Bible is put together. If, on the other hand, you diminish one, you inevitably diminish the other one.

If you soften your views of God's holiness then what the cross achieved also is a little weakened. And if instead you say that everyone is saved because of the love of God, pretty soon you're not only diminishing the atonement, you are diminishing the very character and glory and integrity of God.

And this then is touching other matters as well. We're speaking of God's love as if the Bible speaks of God's love in utterly univocal ways. That is, it always speaks of God's love in exactly the same way. But I'm convinced that the Bible speaks of God's love in a number of different ways, depending on context. Context, context, context.

For example, in some evangelical circles, how often do we hear “God loves everybody just the same.” True or not true? It depends. There are some passages where it is true and there are some passages where its not true, depending on what the focus of the discussion is. Let me back off just a wee bit. The Bible can speak of God’s love in at least these ways:

- Sometimes the Bible speaks of God’s providential love. He sends his sun and his rain upon the just and upon the unjust. In that sense God is loving both the just and the unjust in exactly the same way. He’s providential. And Jesus can use that truth in the Sermon on the Mount to say so also we ought to love our enemies. We shouldn’t be counting people up that way.
- Then the Bible can speak of God’s love in an intratrinitarian context. That is, the Father loves the Son, the Son loves the Father. Now in that kind of context God the Father finds the Son lovely. That is to say the love is tied to the loveliness of the object. There is no sin in the Son. The Father is not saying to the Son “I love you despite what you are.” And when the Son loves the Father, he’s not saying, “Well I love you, Heavenly Father but, frankly, I don’t like you a wee bit. You’re a bit of a disappointment.” He’s not saying anything like that. The Son finds the Father utterly lovable. And indeed this intratrinitarian love of God , which is talked about so much in John’s gospel then is supposed to become the very model and framework in which Christians also learn to love one another. Re-read John 17. That’s the second way the Bible speaks of the love of God.
- A third way. God’s love is spoken of in a yearning, inviting, passionate, welcoming sort of way. Think for example the prophecy of Hosea, where God dares to depict himself as the Almighty cuckold; the ultimate betrayed husband. But though betrayed he still loves them anyway, he goes after them anyway. “Turn, turn, why would you die? The Lord has no pleasure in the death of the wicked.”
- And then in the fourth place, sometimes God’s love is spoken of in a particularising way. “Jacob have I loved, but Esau I have hated.” In theological terms, God’s love is tied to the doctrine of election. Israel itself is chosen before God that way. Re-read Deuteronomy 7 and Deuteronomy 10. Why has God chosen Israel? Not because Israel is bigger, or more intelligent, or mightier, the best of the nations. “I set my affection on you because I loved you. I loved you because I loved you. Its bound up in the mystery and the categories and the mind and the plan and the sovereignty of God. Its a wonderful thing. And that is applied equally to God’s choice of believers under the terms of the new covenant. Re-read Ephesians chapter 1.
- And then in the fifth place sometimes God’s love is conditioned by our obedience. We might call that a covenant love or a familial love. You see, there is a sense in which I love my kids, I think, unconditionally. I’ve got a daughter who is in California teaching SPED, special educational needs kids. I’ve got a son who is in Afghanistan. But if they were not there, if one was a hooker on the streets of LA and the other were a drug pusher on the streets of New York ... I think I’d love

them anyway. They're my kids. I, there is some sense in which I love them unconditionally. Yet I have to tell you when they were 18 or 19 and had the car, you know, and I said "get home by midnight", if they didn't get home by midnight, they got in about ten past, and they didn't have a jolly good reason, they would face the wrath of Dad. And that didn't mean I didn't love them. In one sense I loved them unconditionally. In another sense my love is contingent upon their obedience. And so in the New Testament likewise Jude can say "keep yourselves in the love of God." Which turns on obedience. Re-read the Ten Commandments, the same sort of thing is said, do you see? If you love me, you will keep my commandments and then I will do such and such. And the alternative instead is for judgement and discipline to be poured out in one fashion or another.

Now, all of these ways the Bible has of talking about the love of God, all of them make sense. And it's easy enough to see how they cohere, when you realise that on the one hand, God is sovereign and on the other hand, he's personal and interacts with us as persons. But if you take any one of the ways of talking about God's love and absolutise it, you make mincemeat of the doctrine of God. You will utterly destroy what the Bible says about God. You simply cannot take one of them and then absolutise it.

So, if you say, for example, "God loves everybody exactly the same way", well that's true of the first way the Bible speaks of the love of God, but that makes no sense at all about what the Bible says about election, or about contingency and obedience; it just doesn't make any sense at all. "God will never love you more than he does right now." There is a sense in which that's true, if you stretch it backward before the foundation of the earth. That's true, there are ways the Bible speaks along those lines. On the other hand, in all the passages where God's love is contingent upon our obedience, that's just not the way the language works, do you see?

So what has happened with universalists is to take one of these ways, God's yearning, inviting ways of talking about God, and then absolutised it. And all the rest of the biblical ways of talking about God are simply written off as if they're not there. This is horrible exegesis, it's not bowing to the word of God.

Moreover, if the text says at some point or other that God desires that all will be saved then you attach that to God's sovereignty and say therefore, eventually, everybody will be saved, because God's sovereign. Without asking how many ways there are in which the Bible talks also of different ways of speaking of his desires, his will. In some cases, the Bible speaks of his will in declarative (declarative?) terms, that is, what he wills, he decrees, and it happens whether you like it or not. And at other times its speaking of God's desire, and this too is because on the one hand God is sovereign and on the other hand he's personal and that's why the Bible happily speaks of both ways. If you absolutise things merely to make the answers turn out the way you want them to, pretty soon you have a horribly diminished view of what the Bible says about God.

Well, there are other doctrines that are affected, but let me press on.

- (vi) It is fair to say that in our present time and place in history we feel pressure to find universalism attractive.

There is so much pressure to reduce any truth content in religion and make it all a matter of subjective commitment. If you reduce truth content, then there are no hard edges. You have your opinion, I have my opinion, and this fits into the contemporary view of tolerance. To be really good is to be tolerant, in the sense that you never say that anybody else is wrong. And so there are huge pressures along the line in our culture to shape our theology in that way. But if there is truth in Christianity, if, although there is more than truth, there is relationship and there's faith, and there's trust, there's hope, there's aspiration, there's affection, yet if there's truth, that's angular. That's non-negotiable. It's the truth. And at that point, the way tolerance ought to look is like this, the way tolerance has looked for centuries is like this. It's not a refusal to say that somebody else is wrong, it's an admission that we see things differently alright, and somebody's right and somebody's wrong, but I don't use the coercion of the state to crush you because you're wrong. That still remains tolerant.

The famous saying, long attributed to Voltaire, although I'm not sure he ever said it, "I may detest what you are saying, but I will defend to the death your right to say it", that was connected to tolerance for a long period of time. But nowadays, to say that you detest what somebody else is saying is already a mark of intolerance, do you see? So there are pressures in our culture to reduce the truth content of scripture and then simply dismiss people by saying that they're intolerant, or narrow-minded, or right wing, or bigoted or whatever, without actually engaging the truth question at all. And that is really and on the long haul horribly dangerous.

So, those are my first two points, the rest I'll cover much more quickly.

3. Despite frequent claims to the contrary, universalism is a late distortion of scripture. In other words, a lot of people say universalism has always been part of the Christian tradition. An essay I warmly recommend to you is by Richard Bauckham, "Universalism: a history". You can find it on the web, it's on the Gospel Coalition website. One of the things that Bauckham does is simply track out these claims that this has always been part of one stream of the Christian tradition. He points out very decisively that in fact it really became part of western Christianity in the nineteenth century. Before that it is virtually unknown. It is at no point in the mainstream.

If somebody says yes, but what about Origen? Yes, if by "Christian tradition" you mean everybody who has ever claimed the name of Christ, whether belonging to the mainstream of confessional truth throughout the ages, whether condemned as a heretic or not by anybody, but just somewhere connected with the Christian heritage, then obviously it's part of the Christian tradition. So, also is the denial of the deity of Christ. After all, the early church condemned Origen, considered him false, a false teacher on many fronts. And they condemned Arius, who taught that Christ was not truly divine, on many fronts. But we could say in this loose talking of "the Christian tradition", yes, Jehovah's Witnesses and their christology is part of the Christian tradition. Well, in the broadest sense, I suppose you could talk that way, but then words are being used to manipulate us. There is simply nowhere in the broad stream of genuine, confessional Christianity that Arius has been applauded. And the same has to be said about Origen's view of universalism. This is something that is not part of the wide track of the Christian tradition.

If you want to see specifically whether or not Luther can be claimed for universalism, I recommend to you warmly the blog by Carl Trueman on “Reformation 21” website. Very, very good indeed.

4. Now let me come to a number of frequently cited biblical texts that are sometimes thought to defend and justify universalism. This cannot possibly be an exhaustive list, but a handful won’t hurt. Let’s begin with 2 Corinthians 5:18

All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. That God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them.

So here you have the whole world reconciled to God, don’t you? Yet in the context, the word “world” is not being used for “everybody without exception” but something like “everybody without distinction”. Jews and Gentiles alike, God’s saving grace is cast very very broadly indeed. It pulls in men and women from many many places. Meanwhile, a little earlier in the chapter its very clear that because we know the anger of the Lord, the righteousness of the Lord, we proclaim the truth because only by this truth will people be saved.

Or again, Romans 5:18. We read

Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all.

So, it is argued, if all are condemned, and transparently all are, and now all are justified, then surely those two “alls” refer to the same locus of people and therefore if all are condemned, equally all must finally be justified and saved. But again I beg of you to look at the broader context. Don’t just pull a text out of the context. My Daddy used to teach me “a text without a context is a pretext for a proof text”. You just have to see what the argument is. And in the argument in the passage, what you’re dealing with is two humanities. The humanity in Adam, where all are lost, and the humanity in Christ, where all are saved. In both cases all fall under that rubric, do you see? The whole context is building this contrast between two different humanities, not saying that the “all” in both instances includes exactly the same circle of individuals. Again, its not very accurate interpretation of scripture.

Or here’s another one, John 12. This one is frequently cited as well. John 12, we read verse 32, after a voice from heaven has spoken and Jesus says this voice was for the benefit of the hearers.

Now is the time for judgement (verse 31) now the prince of this world will be driven out. (verse 32) and I when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all people to myself. He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.

So does this mean that his love finally draws all people, both in this life and in the life to come? Well if you take the passage out of context I suppose you could draw that as an inference. But again look at the passage. What precipitates this discussion? What happens in the context of John 12 is that at some point in Jesus’ ministry some Gentiles try to get to him. Gentiles! Jesus at this point has been preaching to Jews, to the sons of Abraham. That’s the locus of his

ministry. But now the Gentiles come to him and he knows somehow, presumably as a signal from his own heavenly Father, that this is precipitating now the cross. The next stage is the cross and that is because the Gentiles cannot really approach him now, as Jews do, within the framework of the covenant history. But they are going to approach him only on the basis of the cross. And in that framework he says “the time has come, the hour is here. I will draw all to myself.” And what he means again, clearly in the context, is “not Jews alone”. There is a new covenant that is being established and it will draw in Jews and Gentiles – all human beings from every tongue and tribe and people and nation, the Apocalypse puts it, and there will be one new humanity in Christ, as Ephesians puts it.

Now the reason I mention those three verses in particular is because they are touted as verses that could be taken to defend universalism in the latest review in “Christianity Today” on this particular book. All are cited as if they could genuinely be taken as a biblical justification for universalism. But again, that old essay by Richard Bauckham is worth thinking about again. He not only says that universalism is not really known anywhere in the mainstream of the Christian heritage until the 19th century, he also says the exegetical arguments that have been used to defend universalism have all been trumped. People shouldn’t use them any more. They’ve all been shown not to work. And to trot out these verses as if they are somehow decisive in favour of universalism really, sadly, is simply not listening very well to the word of God.

Or again, this one more emphatically, Rob Bell on the prodigal son. He says that the parable of the prodigal son gives us as it were two stories. One story is by the prodigal himself. He squandered his fortune. He doesn’t deserve to take up a place in the father’s house. He doesn’t deserve to be called God’s son. That’s the prodigal’s story. But the father’s story is that the father himself would never stop loving his son and would welcome him back and so the point of the parable is “stop believing the son’s story and start accepting the father’s story”.

Our sins under this view are, to quote his words, simply irrelevant. Well, I strongly recommend as an alternative reading of the prodigal son that you read Tim Keller’s book “The Prodigal God”, which casts the entire thing in a slightly different way. In any case, what is so remarkable about the son’s return is that, although he is accepted by the father, he is returning with repentance and brokenness and you cannot really understand that parable in any case unless you see that the older son is equally condemned by his self-righteousness and his feeling of his own adequacy. The text says much about the prodigality of God’s love, but it does not say so much about who finally will be saved.

Or one could give other examples I’m going to pass by. Oh, one more, I have a long list here. One more. Several authors quote Revelation 21.25 where the gates of the New Jerusalem are never shut day or night. Surely that means that some people could get in even from hell, do you see? But that means its going to be really difficult to understand Revelation 20.15, where people are cast into the lake of fire. Moreover, the symbolism of the gates open day and night, in the context, is not talking about whether or not people can still get in there post-mortem. In the ancient world the gates were shut at night as defence against outside attackers, against dangers, against predators, against marauders and so on. To have the gates open day and night is not talking about how many people are finally going to get saved, its saying that in the

new heaven and the new earth there are no dangers any more. There aren't any marauders out there to come and get us. Now that's what its signifying. So once again the conclusion is controlling, I'm afraid, the exegesis.

5. I have to say this, to my mind its the most painful part of this business. The handling of the atonement itself in most discussions of universalists is deeply manipulative. And I say it with respect, I say it with brokenness ... but it is blasphemous. You just have to say it. You simply cannot talk about the cross in such slighting, denunciatory, cheapening, belittling ways.

He was wounded for our transgressions... He was bruised for our iniquities... He was made sin for us, he who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him... God set him forth to be the propitiation for our sins, that God might be just and the one who justifies the ungodly... He bore our sins in his own body on the tree.

It will not do to say "yes but there are only three or four instances where the word propitiation is used. Because the doctrine of substitutionary, penal atonement does not turn on one word. Behind the various words used is the massive structure of the old testament. That's one of the reasons why this topic is tied into this conference. Because in the old testament, begin for example with Passover. You could begin a lot earlier than that, but begin with Passover. What is the Passover about? Because of the God-ordained sprinkling of the blood of the lamb on the two doorposts and the lintel, God, through his angel of destruction, passes over. And that is celebrated year after year after year after year, until we hear the apostle Paul saying "Christ our Passover has been crucified for us". That is, because of Christ, the wrath of God has passed over us. He has taken what should have come to us.

Or think of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, where the High Priest, once a year, takes the blood of bull and goat and goes behind the veil and presents it before God, sprinkling it on the ark of the covenant, and this to turn aside the judgement of God, both for his own sins and for the sins of the people. Year after year after year after year. That was understood and taught. And Hebrews picks up the theme and says "but don't you understand the ultimate Yom Kippur has happened. Its happened in the cross, don't you see that? You don't have to use the word propitiation to talk about penal substitutionary atonement.

So please, if you are amongst the universalists, and you think that those of us who see things a little differently are wrong. We don't mind if you say pretty demeaning things about us. But I beg of you, do not say demeaning things about the cross.

Moreover, to talk, as many people do, about models of the atonement, is corrupting, just a wee bit. I know what is meant. There is a sense in which this language can be used. The Bible speaks of what the cross achieves along a number of different axes, that's correct. So one model of the atonement is penal substitution. Another model is moral. Its a model of something or other. Then there's the Christus Victor theme in which Christ overcomes the enemy. He overcomes death and darkness and the like. And there are other models as well.

But when people start talking of the models of the atonement, very frequently what they begin to do after a while is say "since there are different models of the atonement in church history and in the Bible itself, pick your model." Whatever it is, it doesn't matter. Just pick your

model. That's not the way to approach models. Rather the right way to approach models is to say something like, "if these are taught by scripture, how do we integrate them?" Not "how do we turn them aside and pick one?" You do not have the right to take the various ways the Bible speaks of the cross and then choose only one and mock the rest.

Let me say one more thing and then we're done. Jesus says a great deal about hell. The book of Revelation describes hell in graphic terms. When we're done you might well read Revelation 14. But then more powerful yet, consider these words from Revelation 20:

Fire came down from heaven and devoured the Beast (and so forth). The devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of burning sulphur, where the Beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night forever and ever. Then I saw a great white throne and him who is seated on it, the earth and the heavens fled from his presence and there was no place for them and I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne. The books were opened. Another book was opened which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done, as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it and death and hades gave up the dead that were in them, and everyone was judged according to what they had done. Then death and hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death.

It is not for nothing that in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus we are told that there is a great gulf fixed between heaven and hell. So that none can pass from the one to the other. You see, hell is not filled with people who want to get out. They don't want to be there, but I don't think there's a scrap of biblical suggestion that people in hell repent. The rich man in hell does not repent. In fact he's still abusing Lazarus by the form of his speech. He still is correcting Abraham's theology, he still thinks he's at the centre of the universe. He wants some relief for his friends back home, but at the end of the day there's not a sense of repentance.

You must not think of hell as a place where people are saying "Oh now I get it. Your love has finally conquered. Please forgive me. I'd like another chance." Its filled with people rather who for all eternity are so self-focused they cannot even there stop trying to be god for themselves. An endless cycle of sin and rebellion and curse, world without end. And we know the only solution to this. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Those are the stakes at issue, brothers and sisters.