

Summary of *The Evangelical Universalist* (Gregory MacDonald)

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Chapter 1: A Hell of a Problem

I) General Problems with the Traditional Doctrine of Hell

A) The Justice of Infinite Retribution

- 1) Definition: The punishment should not be for its rehabilitative effect, nor for its effect on deterring crime, but to fit the crime
- 2) Problem: What possible crime can a finite human commit that would be justly punished by eternal conscious torment?
- 3) Proposed Solutions
 - (a) Since God is infinitely great, and since any sin is an offence against him, then any sin incurs infinite demerit
 - (i) Objection 1: the gravity of a sin is determined not only by the status of the injured party, but also by the offence
 - (ii) Objection 2: this theory automatically makes all sins equally bad
 - (b) God only punishes sins with a temporary punishment, but the damned are so furious at God that they rage against him, thus sinning more. A neverending cycle is set up.
 - (i) Objection: in the coming age God destroys sin from his creation
 - (c) Hell is everlasting, but from the perspective of the damned, it is not that bad a place to be
 - (i) Objection: this is not biblical
 - (d) Hell is annihilation, possibly preceded by temporary torment
 - (i) Objection: this also seems unbiblical

B) The Joy of the Redeemed

- 1) Definition: the redeemed are in pure bliss while their loved ones are in conscious torment
- 2) The Problem: how can the redeemed be truly happy and blissful when their loved ones are in eternal conscious torment?
- 3) Proposed Solutions
 - (a) The saved could be supremely happy as long as they were unaware of the fate of the damned. God could do this by wiping their memories.
 - (i) Objection 1: a memory wipe would lead to the loss of much or most of our past.
 - (ii) Objection 2: nobody who really loves someone else would want to remain blissfully ignorant of their fate, even if it were horrible.
 - (iii) Objection 3: the Bible hints that the saved are aware of the fate of the damned (Is 66:24)
 - (b) The saved could be supremely happy because their vision of God could consume them to the exclusion of everything else.

- (i) Objection: this vision of God would make us more aware, not less aware of the fate of the damned.
- (c) The redeemed will look on the sufferings of the damned and rejoice in God's just punishment of the wicked.
 - (i) Objection 1: God does not rejoice in the death of the wicked (Ez 33:11), nor in the pain he sometimes has to afflict (Lam 3:31-33). How could his people do so?
 - (ii) Objection 2: Even if the saints rejoice that justice is served, it won't be rejoicing at the suffering inflicted.

II) An analogy

- A) God, being all-powerful, *could* cause all people to freely accept Christ
- B) God, being all-knowing, *would know how* to cause all people to freely accept Christ.
- C) God, being all-loving, would *want* to cause all people to freely accept Christ.
- D) Therefore, 1-3 mean that God *will* cause all people to freely accept Christ.
- E) It follows that all people *will* freely accept Christ.

III) Calvinism and Hell

- A) Calvinism denies point C above: God does not love all people and does not want to save them. Rather, he loves the elect, and it is them for whom Jesus died. This is despite God's nature being love (1 Jn 4:8,16b) and Christ dying for all (1 Jn 2:2), and God wanting to save all (2 Pet 3:9, 1 Tim 2:4, Ezek 33:11)
- B) Calvinism may say that by saving some and not others, salvation by grace is made clear.
 - 1) Objection 1: Why does "grace not works" require anyone to be damned?
 - 2) Objection 2: It seems close to this analogy: Imagine a man whose sons suffer from a disease that make them constantly disobey him (original sin). One day, as a result, the sons fall through the ice on a pond their father had warned them not to walk on. They begin to drown, having brought their fate on themselves. Being afflicted with the disease, they are too stupid to even respond to the father's calls to grab the safety ring he has thrown in (the gospel). The father has the solution, in a ray gun which will cure the sons of their disobedience and enable them to grasp the ring (irresistible grace). He could, therefore, save both, but to make the point that he does not have to, he only saves one son. To this, we wouldn't say "Well done", rather "Why didn't you love your son enough to save him when you could".
- C) Calvinism may say that God displays his love in saving the elect and his justice in punishing the non-elect.
 - 1) Objection 1: In saying that God must show his justice by punishing many in hell seems to limit God's sovereign freedom to save everyone, if he wants to. In other words, God's justice is higher than his freedom.

2) Objection 2: Calvinism itself already has a place for God's justice to be done: the cross.

According to the penal substitutionary theory of atonement, God shows his love and justice at the same time when Jesus dies on the cross. Justice is shown when the sin of the world is placed on Jesus, and love is shown when the way of salvation is opened. Since justice has already been accounted for, hell is unnecessary.

IV) Freewill Theism and Hell

A) Freewill theists (Arminians etc) deny point A: God cannot cause all people to freely accept Christ. He loves all, and wants all to accept Christ, but he will not force them to.

Chapter 2: Universalism and Biblical Theology

I) Introduction

A) What does it mean for a theology to be Biblical?

- 1) It has positive support from Scripture
 - (a) It is explicitly taught
 - (b) It can be reasonably inferred from what is explicitly taught
 - (c) It is consistent with the biblical meta-narrative
- 2) It does not conflict with what is explicitly taught in the Bible

B) We all hold to a theology in spite of some awkward texts

- 1) Calvinists: Heb 6:4-6
- 2) Arminians: Rom 8:29-30
- 3) Protestants: parables that seem to teach salvation by works

C) Three Propositions

- 1) The three propositions are
 - (a) God's redemptive purpose and will for the world is to reconcile all sinners to himself
 - (b) God has the power to achieve his redemptive purpose for the world
 - (c) Some sinners will never be reconciled to God and God will therefore either consign them to eternal punishment or else put them out of existence altogether
- 2) It is impossible to believe all 3 of them at the same time
 - (a) Holding to the second and the third leads to Calvinism
 - (b) Holding to the first and the third leads to Arminianism
 - (c) Holding to the first and second leads to Universalism
- 3) Interesting: there are theological arguments and biblical texts that seem to support each of the three propositions
 - (a) Prop 1: 2 Pet 3:9, 1 Tim 2:4, Ezek 33:11
 - (b) Prop 2: Eph 1:11, Job 42:2, Is 46:10b,11b
 - (c) Prop 3: Matt 25:46, 2 Thess 1:9, Eph 5:5
- 4) The Problem: when taken at face value, the Bible seems to teach three things which cannot all be true. Either we affirm that the Bible is contradictory, or we reinterpret one set of texts.
- 5) The Question: which set of texts do we reinterpret? Universalists are in exactly the same position as Calvinists and Arminians; they need to reinterpret one set of texts – the hell texts.

II) Christ, Cosmos and Church: The Theology of Colossians

A) The Christ-hymn in 1:15-20 teaches creation and then redemption from the fall

- 1) The “all things reconciled” in verse 20 is definitely the same as the “all things created” in verse 16

- 2) Some argue that “reconciliation” denotes a restoration of divine order to the universe, which can mean salvation for some and punishment for others
 - (a) Objection 1: the poem expands on the reconciliation in making peace through the blood of the cross. The same connection is in Eph 2:14-16 and it’s clear there that the peace is a positive outcome. The same occurs in Romans 5.
 - (b) Objection 2: in vv. 21-22, reconciliation is applied to the believers and retains its salvific meaning.
- 3) Some argue that although the passage envisages the reconciliation of all creation as God’s desire, it doesn’t follow that God will bring his desire to reality.
- 4) Some argue that the passage simply cannot mean what he seems to say.

B) Church and Cosmos

- 1) The parallels between the creation and the church in the hymn are clear
 - (a) Christ is the firstborn of all creation – Christ is the firstborn from the dead
 - (b) Through him all things were created – through him to reconcile all things to him
 - (c) In the heavens and the earth – whether things on earth or things in heaven
- 2) Rather than the church being a small subset of God’s plan, the church is the beginning of the new creation, the firstfruits!

C) Realised Eschatology

- 1) The reconciliation of creation is already achieved in Christ and yet is only experienced as a reality by those in Christ by faith (note the “but now” in verse 22 which connects the Christ-hymn with the current state of the believers).
- 2) Therefore, the church is a present sign of the reconciliation that the whole creation will one day experience.
- 3) In Colossians, that reconciliation is only found in Christ (1:13-14).
- 4) Gospel proclamation and living (1:10) are ways for the church to bring about the goal of the reconciliation of all creation (universal reconciliation).
- 5) Members of the church community need to live out, in their societal relationships, a model of the future (3:8-15).
- 6) The message proclaimed by the church speaks of the destiny of the whole creation.

Chapter 3: Israel & the Nations in the Old Testament

I) Israel and Adam

- A) Abraham is a new Adam, Israel is a new humanity, and Canaan is a new Eden
- B) Humanity, in Adam, lost the blessing, but Israel, through Abraham, is the vehicle through which God restores it
- C) Adam's expulsion finds its echo in Israel's exile
- D) Israel's return foreshadows humanity's restoration

II) Israel and the Nations

- A) Being God's chosen people is both a privilege and a responsibility
- B) Servant-Israel is to
 - 1) Establish justice on the earth
 - 2) Provide a law for the nations to put their hope in
 - 3) Be a covenant for the people
 - 4) Be a light to the Gentiles

III) Israel's Exile-Restoration and the Light to the Gentiles

- A) Israel did not keep the covenant and so went into exile. Later, Israel was restored from exile.
- B) The servant song in Isaiah 52 embodies Israel's exilic suffering and restoration in the imagery of death and resurrection

IV) The Fate of the Nations: Judgement then Salvation

- A) A common theme in the OT is that for the nations, salvation follows destruction
- B) A key OT text about salvation for the Gentiles is Isaiah 45:20-25
 - 1) "... Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth, for I am God and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity, a word that will not be revoked: Before me every knee will bow, by me every tongue will swear. They will say of me, 'In the Lord alone are righteousness and strength.' ..."
 - 2) This is not a forced subjection of defeated enemies
 - (a) God has just called all the nations to turn to him and be saved, and it's in this context that the oath is taken
 - (b) The swearing of oaths in Yahweh's name is something his own people do, not his enemies
 - (c) Those who confess God go on to say 'In the Lord alone are righteousness and strength', which sounds like a cry of praise from God's people
 - (d) It is those who have (past tense) raged against God who will (future tense) come to him
 - (e) The being put to shame is a reference to their turning from idolatry and being ashamed of their past actions (Ezek 16:63)

V) Conclusions

- A) The Old Testament, when read as a whole, sees God's plan as the salvation of all the nations through Israel, his new humanity
- B) In the OT, however, it is not the salvation of every person who has ever lived
 - 1) This is because it has almost no conception of life after death
 - 2) Thus, the salvation of all extends to those who are living
 - 3) This explains Isaiah 66:23-24, where all mankind is saved alongside a valley of dead bones

Chapter 4: Christ, Israel and the Nations in the New Testament

I) Jesus as Israel

A) Throughout the NT, Jesus is portrayed in terms that mirror Israel and its mission

- 1) Titles for Jesus have strong association with Israel
 - (a) Son of Man (Dan 7)
 - (b) Son of God (Hos 11:1 [see connection with Matt 2:15], Ps 2:7)
 - (c) The Servant (Matt 3:17 / Is 42:1, Mk 10:45 / Is 53:10, Acts 8:30-35 / Is 53:7-8)
- 2) The gospels tell the story of Jesus to parallel Israel
 - (a) Jesus baptism – wilderness 40 days – crosses Jordan to begin mission – death – resurrection
 - (b) Israel exodus – wilderness 40 years – crosses Jordan into Canaan – exile – return

II) Jesus as Second Adam

A) Rom 5:12-21

- 1) The “therefore” in v 12 looks back to the whole of Romans
 - (a) Rom 3:23-24 said “all have sinned” and “all are justified freely”
 - (b) It is in 5:12-21 that Paul gives the argument for all being justified freely
- 2) Contrasts between Adam and Christ
 - (a) v15. Many died – God's grace and gift overflow to the many
 - (b) v 16. Judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation – the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification
 - (c) v 17. Death reigned through one man – life and righteousness reign through one man
 - (d) v 18. One trespass brought condemnation for all people – one act of righteousness brought justification and life for all people
 - (e) v 19. Through the disobedience of one man the many were made sinners – through the obedience of one man the many will be made righteous
- 3) Numerous strategies to avoid the universalist implications
 - (a) Strategy 1: The “all” in the first group means all in Adam; the “all” in the second group means all in Christ
 - (i) Defence 1: Paul was clear that justification and life only belong to those who believe on Christ
 - ◆ The fact that Paul teaches that salvation is only for those who believe and that not all currently believe does not contradict with his statement that all/many “will” be made righteous
 - (ii) Defence 2: v. 17 speaks of those who “receive” God's provision, seemingly restricting salvation to those who receive it

- ◆ The “receive” in v.17 is passive tense, and has nothing to do with anything people must do to be saved. It refers to God giving us the gift of salvation and has no limits to the number of people
- (iii) Defence 3: Paul only says “many” in v. 19
 - ◆ The “many” was a common Hebraic way of referring to all
 - ◆ v. 19 read parallel with v 18 shows that the many are the same as the all
 - ◆ v. 15 says that the many died because of sin, which certainly means “all”
- (b) Strategy 2: The “all” means all kinds of people; ie. Jews and Gentiles
 - (i) It is certainly true that Paul’s focus contextually (elsewhere in the letter) is on Jews and Gentiles
 - (ii) This does not mean he does not refer here to individual Jews and individual Gentiles; 3:9b-12 makes clear that he is thinking of individual people
 - (iii) The argument is basically “all without distinction” rather than “all without exception”
 - ◆ Problem is that the Greek has one meaning for “all” which is “all”
 - Exception 1: contextually determined domain (eg. All the heaters are broken in a house)
 - Exception 2: hyperbole (eg. All Americans love burgers)
 - (iv) As far as Paul and Romans 5, we can ask “Did Paul mean to say that most people are condemned in Adam, or that all are condemned in Adam?”
- (c) Strategy 3: The verses speak only of the salvation bought and offered and not everyone will receive the gift
 - (i) Problem is that Rom 5 says nothing about an offer of salvation but a salvation achieved for all, which all will receive
 - (ii) Paul’s overriding aim in Rom 5 is to show the overwhelming power of grace; none will be left behind

B) 1 Cor 15:20-28

- 1) Is v. 22 referring to all humans or just Christians?
 - (a) Clearly says “as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive”
 - (b) Perceived problem is that the “all” is qualified with “but each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him, then the end”, which seems to limit the “all” to “those who belong to him”
 - (c) Contextually, Paul’s only real focus is the death of, and future hope for Christians

2) Does Christ destroying all enemies sound a death knell for universalism?

(a) The only enemies in view are the powers, sin and death; no mention is made of humans.

Therefore, even if God destroys his enemies, it's to deliver humanity

(b) The powers are not actually destroyed

(i) The Greek word in v. 24 for "destroy" is *katargeo*, which literally means "to render powerless, to nullify". While it can mean "annihilate", the context determines the meaning.

(ii) Christ's enemies are "put under his feet" (25) and "put in subjection under his feet" (27), and then "all things" (27) are subjected to Christ. This includes the redeemed, and they are not annihilated.

(iii) Also, Christ then subjects himself to the Father. This leads to the subjection being a restoration of the order of creation.

(iv) Col 1:15-20 anticipates the redemption of the powers

(v) Eph 1:21-22 speaks of the subjection of the powers in the age to come, which suggests their continued existence

(vi) If the powers were created good, then annihilation would mark a defeat for God

(vii) Even death, the last enemy, is not "destroyed" but rendered powerless in this sense

◆ Death is merely the absence of life the same as dark is the absence of light

◆ Death and sin are not actual beings

◆ Therefore, Paul can speak of the annihilation of death and sin, and the "rendering harmless" of the powers

III) The Church as Eschatological Israel and New Humanity

A) Jesus is the true and faithful Israel, and those who are in him by faith are the transformed Israel in him

B) The church is not a new Israel, but rather is in organic continuity with OT Israel

1) Rom 11:13-24 speaks of Israel as an olive tree rooted in the Abrahamic promises

(a) Individual Jews who reject Jesus are like branches cut off, which can be rejoined

(b) Gentile believers are like wild branches grafted in

2) The church is not a new tree running parallel to Israel

3) The church is not a replacement for Israel

IV) The Future Salvation of "All Israel"

A) Summary of Rom 9-11

1) Is God still faithful to Israel even though they are currently cut off?

(a) There is more to being Israel than mere physical descent from Abraham (9:6-14)

(b) What matters is election, and this is in God's hands (9:11-18)

- (c) God is the potter and has made two pots out of the one lump of clay
 - (i) One pot is an object of mercy and election (9:23-26), Christian Jews and Gentiles
 - (ii) The other pot is an object of wrath prepared for destruction (9:22), unbelieving Jews
- (d) Israel pursued righteousness yet failed to attain it, while the Gentiles did not pursue it but found it in Christ (9:30-33)
- (e) Paul's heart's desire is that all Israel be saved through faith in Christ (10:1-11), but the Gentiles are inheriting their blessings
- (f) Did God reject his people? May it never be! (11:1)
 - (i) There is a remnant of Jews at the present time; the rest, the non-believing Jews, have had their hearts hardened by God (11:1-10)
 - (ii) Israel were hardened and stumbled over the gospel, but not beyond recovery; their rejection has all along been part of God's plan for the Gentiles being blessed (11:11-12)
 - (iii) Israel is like an olive tree, and unbelieving Jews have been broken off (11:13-24)
 - (iv) These unbelieving Jews will be grafted in if they don't persist in unbelief. Thus, Paul envisages non-elect Jews becoming elect Jews, which shows that "elect" is not a rigid category as in Calvinism
 - (v) And indeed, the non-elect Jews will be regrafted in, at the coming of Jesus, since they are still elect (28) and God's call and gifts are irrevocable (29) (11:25-29)
- (g) God, in his wisdom, will save everyone through Israel's unbelief (11:30-32)
- (h) How stunning is God! (11:33-36)

B) What does Paul mean by "all Israel" in v. 26?

- 1) The church as the spiritual Israel of God? No.
 - (a) Every other use of the term "Israel" in Rom 9-11 means national Israel
 - (b) Paul is clear that God's covenant with national Israel is irrevocable, which shows that the "all Israel" is national Israel
 - (c) The OT scripture quoted says that the redeemer will banish iniquity from Jacob
 - (d) Paul's point in explaining the mystery is to stop Gentile Christians being arrogant, which only really makes sense if the church is not spiritual Israel and national Israel will be regrafted
- 2) Elect Jews? No.
 - (a) If so, the "all Israel will be saved" is an anticlimax
 - (b) "all Israel" is a contrast with the present remnant and so is not the same as it

3) The whole nation of Israel? Yes.

(a) Every individual Jew or the majority of Jews? Text doesn't say, but it seems that Paul would have trouble saying a single Jew would be excluded from salvation

(b) All Israel living at the time of the coming of Jesus, or all Israel throughout history?

Probably all throughout history.

(i) Paul shows how God is faithful to his covenant to Israel by saving them all

(ii) If this promise applies only to the final generation, then the vast majority of Jews who have lived are not saved, and the problem Paul was solving remains unsolved

V) Every Knee Shall Bow (Phil 2:5-12)

A) The acknowledgement of Christ is universal. Paul expands the "every knee will bow" from Isaiah with "in heaven and on earth and under the earth"

B) This vision is of universal salvation

1) Objection 1: Paul is not a universalist, so he cannot mean what he seems to mean

2) Objection 2: Isaiah speaks of some who are shamed before him (dealt with earlier)

3) Objection 3: Rom 14:11 has the same oath in the context of the judgment seat of Christ

(a) The oath stresses that Christians, whether strong or weak, are accountable to God for their own behaviour, and may not take on God's role by standing in judgment of each other

(b) The text is about the conversion of the Gentiles alongside Israel, which reinforces Paul's point that they must accept each other since God accepts them all equally

4) Positive reasons to support a universalist reading

(a) The previous chapter argued that the Isaiah text indicated all humans

(b) The terminology is suggestive of salvation rather than forced submission. Elsewhere when Paul speaks of confession, it's always in the context of salvation (1 Cor 12:3, Rom 10:9)

VI) The Inescapable Love of God

A) The love of God in the Old Testament

1) God's love was a covenant-keeping, merciful, loving-kindness love

2) God's anger at Israel's disobedience and just punishment of them is done because he loves them

3) Covenant love is not a sentimental love; but it does guarantee grace in the end

B) The love of God in the New Testament

1) God loved the world, the rebellious human society which was his enemy (Jn 3:16, Rom 5:6-9, 1 Jn 4:9-10)

2) Christ died for the whole world (Jn 1:29, Rom 5:18, 1 Cor 15:22, 2 Cor 5:14, Heb 2:9-10, 1 Tim 2:4-6, Tit 2:11, 1 Jn 2:2, 2 Pet 3:9)

3) God's love keeps looking for the wayward until he finds it (Lk 15)

- 4) God's love is perfectly compatible with divine wrath and punishment, but divine wrath and punishment is always a means to the end (Heb 12:7-11)
- 5) God is love
 - (a) This is a claim about the very essence of God, similar to "God is light" and "God is spirit"
 - (b) It is not that God just happens to be love, nor that God chooses to be loving to certain people; rather, that it's impossible for God to be God and to act unlovingly towards anyone
 - (c) All God's actions must therefore be compatible with his love
 - (i) His holiness is loving
 - (ii) His justice is loving
 - (iii) His wrath is loving
 - (d) God's love is not in contrast to his holiness, justice and wrath; rather, any account of hell must see hell as a manifestation of God's love and mercy, albeit a severe one
 - (e) What kind of love would it be if God draws a line at death and says "My love never fails, unless you die"?
- 6) The traditional theological problem is that they underestimate God's love and disconnect it from his justice

VII) Conclusion

- A) God has acted to save Israel and therefore the world
 - 1) On the cross, Jesus takes Israel's exile and humanity's expulsion
 - 2) His resurrection anticipates the Jewish return from exile and the restoration of humanity and creation
 - 3) Christ is the Messiah representing Israel and the second Adam representing the whole of humanity
 - 4) Christ's death is not on behalf of some predetermined elect but on behalf of all, without exception
 - 5) Participation in redemption is not automatic; it requires repentance and faith
- B) The church is understood as an anticipation of the future salvation of all humanity
 - 1) Jewish believers anticipate the return from exile; Gentile believers anticipate the pilgrimage of the nations
 - 2) In the present age, humanity is divided into elect and non-elect, saved and perishing
 - 3) As one body, the church is the firstfruits, and tastes the future salvation of all humanity

Chapter 5: A Universalist Interpretation of the Book of Revelation

I) 15:2-4 as the Universalist Postscript to 14:9-11

A) 15:1-4 both concludes the 7 visions section and introduces the 7 plagues section (see the “plagues” link in v. 1 and v. 5)

B) Content of the vision

- 1) Sea of glass mixed with fire symbolises God’s judgment (13:1, 21:1)
- 2) Those standing beside the sea are the resurrected saints who refused to worship the beast and escaped the lake of fire
- 3) The song of Moses is now a New Testament song
- 4) All nations will come and worship God, and the nations are never identified as the church, but rather the objects of God’s wrath
 - (a) They are created by God and should worship him (4:11)
 - (b) The beast is given authority over them (13:7b)
 - (c) They partake in the sin of Babylon and in her judgment (14:8, 17:15, 18:3,23, 16:19)
 - (d) John prophesies against them (10:11)
 - (e) A final gospel call goes out to them prior to Babylon’s final destruction (14:6)
 - (f) They persecute God’s people (11:12)
 - (g) Satan can no longer deceive them in the millennium (20:3)
 - (h) Afterwards, satan raises them for the final battle against the saints (20:8)
 - (i) Therefore, they are the objects of God’s wrath (11:8, 12:5, 19:15)
 - (j) The saints are those redeemed from among the nations (5:9, 7:9)
- 5) Thus, the nations in 15:4 are the same nations the smoke of whose torment rises forever and ever
 - (a) Although they are now subject to God’s wrath, they will ultimately come and worship God
 - (b) John doesn’t say that people “from among the nations” (the church), but rather “the nations” will come

C) The conclusion is that those suffering eschatological punishment will at some point, exit and be redeemed. This is supported further by chapters 21-22

II) The Universalist Follow-Up to 20:10-15

A) The new creation (21:1) still contains the saved and the damned (21:6-8)

B) The New Jerusalem gives a description of the walls of the city

- 1) In the ancient worlds, the walls were for the protection of those inside the city
- 2) Here, they are not, as the wicked are in the lake of fire (21:8) and so the gates are left permanently open (21:25)

- 3) The walls are a boundary marker between the redeemed inside the city and those in the lake of fire outside the city
 - 4) Nothing unclean can enter the city but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life (21:27)
- C) 21:23-27 contains a vision of "the nations" and "the kings of the earth" coming into the city through the permanently-open gates. But "the nations" are in the lake of fire!
- 1) This vision is based on Isaiah 60
 - 2) There are only two places people can be
 - (a) Within the city enclosed in its walls of salvation
 - (b) Outside the city in the lake of fire
 - 3) The open gates are for the purpose of allowing all who want to enter to enter; no-one is excluded
 - 4) What's more, in the vision, the lost will actually take this opportunity!
- D) This universalist vision of salvation is confirmed by 5:13, where every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth worships and praises God

III) Another Look at 14:9-11 and 20:10-15

A) In the context of Revelation

- 1) Three distinct dimensions of judgment
 - (a) Retribution – the punishment is deserved and will fit the crime (11:18, 16:8, 18:3,6,7, 22:18-19)
 - (b) The means by which God delivers his suffering people from their oppressors (15:2-4, 19:1-10)
 - (c) Has a warning and educative dimension (9:20, 14:6-7)
- 2) God's judgments must always be seen in the context of his love (3:19)
- 3) The lake of fire can be seen as fulfilling each of these three functions, as it is the climax of escalating punishments

B) In the context of the Old Testament

- 1) John does not simply borrow words and phrases, but rather uses the same plot line as found in the Exodus story, and then in Isaiah
 - (a) The plot line has an enemy, a crime, a divine response, a result of the judgment and a new situation
 - (b) Things to notice from the Isaiah story
 - (i) The nations that come to Jerusalem have earlier been said to be destroyed in the fire of God's anger
 - (ii) God's oath is that all people will enter into a saving relationship with him

- (iii) This happens over time
 - (c) It's possible that John can also speak of the destruction of the nations and yet still hope for their restoration if and when they submit to God
- 2) The two lake of fire texts
- (a) The language of judgment is symbolic in Is 34:8-10; the smoke of Babylon does not literally rise forever
 - (b) We would expect that John is using judgment symbolism in the same way
 - (c) These texts don't rule out the possibility of post-death salvation
 - (i) Judah
 - ◆ Jer 25:27 tells us that Judah drank the wine of God's wrath to "rise no more"
 - ◆ Isaiah 51:17 tells us that Jerusalem will indeed rise up, even though she drunk the cup of God's wrath
 - (ii) Sodom
 - ◆ Sodom was destroyed with burning sulphur
 - ◆ Ezek 16:53-55 says that Sodom will be restored
 - (iii) Egypt
 - ◆ The Egyptians were destroyed at the sea
 - ◆ Is 19:16-25 says that Egypt will become God's people alongside Israel
- 3) Rev 14:11 and 20:10 use the phrase translated "forever and ever". This literally means "unto the ages of the ages" and could be translated as "forever and ever" or "for a very long but limited duration"
- (a) If it means "unto the ages of the ages", then this makes sense with 21-22
 - (b) If it means "forever and ever", then
 - (i) It's possible that John was simply adopting stereotypical descriptions of the post-death state of the damned, which contradict 21-22 but which are subverted by 21-22 and are not intended to be taken strictly literally
 - (ii) It's possible that 14 and 20 do not envisage the eternal damnation of humans
 - ◆ 14:9-11 says that the smoke rises forever and ever
 - ◆ 20:10 says that the devil, the beast and the false prophet are tormented forever and ever
 - ◆ Therefore, if the lake of fire means eternal torment for anyone, it will only be the devil, the beast and the false prophet
 - ◆ The beast is a system, not a being, a personification of a political kingdom
 - ◆ The false prophet is a system, not a being, a personification of a religious system
 - ◆ The devil appears to be tormented forever and ever

- Some universalists take this to mean that only humans will be saved
- However, Col 1:15-22 contradicts this (and Phil 2:9-11 backs this up)
- We can attempt to reconcile the apparent contradiction in two ways
 - a. The devil is not a personal being but more akin to a personification of evil
 - b. The devil will be punished forever but Lucifer will be saved
 - i. humans are created beings, fallen and then redeemed, after the old has died and the new has come (2 Cor 5:17)
 - ii. it's possible that the devil is like the flesh and Lucifer is reborn as a redeemed angel

Chapter 6: To Hell and Back

I) Theological Reflections

A) Divine Wrath

- 1) Wrath is not God flying off the handle, but rather God handing people over to the consequences of the sin they choose (Rom 1:18-32)
- 2) In this way, hell is the ultimate withdrawal of God's protection and guidance; it becomes harder and harder to fool oneself into believing the lies of sin anymore

B) Divine Punishment Now and Not Yet

- 1) God's wrath is experienced now (Rom 1:18-32) and in the future (1 Th 1:10, Col 3:6)
- 2) The condemnation that stands over those not born of above (Jn 3:1-15) is a foretaste of the same phenomena they will experience in the future
- 3) For the church, God's punishment is to reform and educate, rather than destroy (although Acts 5:1-11)
- 4) For Israel, God's ultimate purpose is to restore and punishment is not forever (Lam 3:22-23, 31-33)
- 5) For unbelievers, God's love still motivates his punishment and there is every reason to think his purpose is to restore and redeem

II) The Teachings of Jesus

A) Did Jesus actually speak of hell?

- 1) Recent scholarship has argued that Jesus spoke of within-history judgment before AD 70
- 2) We will assume that this is incorrect, and that Jesus and the NT authors spoke of hell

B) Jesus' teaching in context

- 1) The imagery used would, if taken literally, be contradictory (outer darkness, flames)
- 2) Certain themes stand out about Gehenna
 - (a) A place of rejection with a sense of anguish
 - (b) A place of destruction by fire
 - (c) A just punishment for the wicked
- 3) Gehenna as the Valley of Hinnom in the OT
 - (a) Ahaz and Manasseh sacrificed humans to Molech
 - (b) Funeral pyre for the King of Assyria (Is 30:33)
 - (c) Dead bodies piled up and ashes thrown (Jer 31:40)
 - (d) So full of the dead that it would be called the valley of slaughter (Jer 7:32)
 - (e) Filled with dead bodies being consumed by worms and fire (Is 66:24)
- 4) When Jesus spoke of Gehenna, he referred not to the literal valley nor to literal fires and darkness, but to a state of condemnation to be avoided at all costs

- 5) Jesus' contemporaries taught many different things on Gehenna, and the only reasonable conclusion is that it was a place of punishment and fire, but beyond that was left unexplained
- C) Did Jesus affirm the everlastingness of Gehenna?

1) The Rich Man and Lazarus

- (a) Nowhere else does Jesus suggest that the coming judgment will be before the end of the age
- (b) If it's assumed that this is consistent with the rest of Jesus' teaching, then it can't be about the final fate of the damned because it describes the fate of the lost in Hades (sheol), not Gehenna
- (c) The story is an adaptation of a common pagan post-death story about wealth and poverty
- (d) Contextually, the parable is the climax of a sustained attack on the Pharisees
 - (i) Chap 14: in the house of a Pharisee
 - (ii) Chap 15: three salvation parables
 - (iii) Chap 16: direct attack on Pharisaic piety, including lovers of money (*philaguroi*)
 - (iv) Chap 16: Rich man and Lazarus; rich man is a *philaguroi*
- (e) The purpose of the story was not to teach about the afterlife, but to demonstrate the inadequacy of Pharisee piety

2) The Sheep and the Goats

- (a) [My note: if this parable really does teach about eternal salvation and damnation, then it also teaches that salvation is by works, which clearly goes against the rest of Scripture]
- (b) Two fates are in parallel: eternal life (*zoen aionion*) and eternal punishment (*kolasin aionion*)
- (c) *Aionion* possibly means "pertaining to the age to come" (cf. Heb 6:2, 9:12), which means "eternal life" might well be "the life of the age to come" and "eternal punishment" might well be "the punishment of the age to come"
- (d) The punishment of the age to come can certainly be for a long time but it in no way means the punishment itself is everlasting; just the age to come
- (e) Jesus did not comment explicitly about this one way or the other, so we should interpret these verses in the light of the biblical meta-narrative
 - (i) God is love and would never do what was not ultimately best for a person
 - (ii) Gehenna as a punishment must mean that the punishment is more than retributive; it must have a corrective element as well
 - (iii) Gehenna must be compatible with God's ultimate triumph over sin and his fulfilment of his redemption purpose for all creatures

- (iv) John could use strong language about the fate of the lost and then portray the inhabitants of the lake of fire as entering salvation
- (f) The purpose of Jesus' hell texts was to provide a warning to avoid it at all costs
- (g) There is a hint in mark 9:42-50 that Jesus was modifying the traditional teaching of Gehenna
 - (i) "For everyone will be salted with fire" indicates that everyone (believers and not) must undergo purification by fire
 - (ii) Perhaps Jesus was urging his hearers to take the better route of being ruthless now (removing hand, foot and eye) rather than ending up in the fires of Gehenna
 - (iii) Either way, it seems to indicate that the fires of Gehenna are to serve a purpose of getting people into salvation, rather than as an end in itself

III) Paul on Hell

- A) Paul sees humanity divided into two groups: those who are being saved and those who are perishing (1 Cor 1:18, 2 Cor 2:14-17) with two alternative destinies (Rom 2:7-8)
- B) Often, Paul does not mitigate his warnings of final judgment but sometimes he does (1 Cor 5:1-5, 1 Cor 6:9ff, Rom 9 then Rom 11)
 - 1) He may have rhetorical reasons not to limit the division in certain contexts
 - 2) In some contexts he does limit the division
 - 3) In other contexts he makes universalist claims which suggests he saw the division as limited
- C) The only genuine problem passage: 2 Thess 1:6-10
 - 1) The Greek text says "They will be punished with eternal destruction from the presence of the Lord" rather than "They will be punished with eternal destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord"
 - (a) The "from" could mean "away from" or "coming from"
 - (b) It probably means that the destruction comes from Jesus
 - (c) It probably doesn't indicate any separation from Jesus
 - 2) The "eternal destruction" is *olethron aionion*
 - (a) The "eternal" is "the age to come" and so does not mean "everlasting"
 - (b) The "destruction" can mean "ruin" or "destruction" depending on the context
 - (c) Thus, the phrase probably means "the ruin of the age to come" which fits well with "the punishment of the age to come" in the sheep and the goats
 - 3) This means that Paul's point is that those who persecuted the Christians will not get away with it, rather than a doctrinal statement about eternal destiny
 - 4) Nevertheless, this text remains a problem text for universalism, but it is not so great as to sound a death-knell. Also, every "ism" has its own problem texts.

Chapter 7: Advantages to Christian Universalism & Replies to Other Objections

I) Advantage 1: The Problem of Evil

A) The Problem of Recompense

- 1) Traditional Christian view is that many who suffer in this world will go straight to hell and suffer for eternity
- 2) Universalism avoids this and allows us to expect ultimate divine comfort for all the victims for the world

B) Irenaean Theodicies: John Hick

- 1) Part of the reason God allows evil is for the constructive role it can have in shaping character and for a greater good
- 2) Uni. can use the suffering and even death of a person to contribute not only to others but also their own good and salvation after death
- 3) Trad. has no answer to the death of a person who contributes to the salvation of another; it makes it seem as though God treats the person merely as a means to someone else's good

C) Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God: Marilyn Adams

- 1) Punishing people in hell forever will not overcome horrendous evils in the lives of victims
- 2) Uni. enables hell to be seen as overcoming evil in the life of every individual, not just "the world as a whole"

II) Advantage 2: The Coherence of Christian Theology

A) Not only does God desire to save all people, he actually will succeed!

B) Human free will remains intact since in the end everyone will freely choose salvation

C) God's love and justice are not set in conflict with each other, but are held together in his eternal purposes with heaven and hell

D) Hell is seen as a loving response to evil with the aim of correcting, educating and redeeming rather than an unreasonable neverending punishment

III) Objection 1: Universalism Undermines the Severity of Sin and the Righteousness of Judgment

A) The seriousness of sin

- 1) Universalists do not have unusually weak views of sin, but rather unusually strong views of divine love and grace
- 2) Where sin abounds, grace abounds even more

B) The seriousness of hell

- 1) Even though a sin does not incur infinite demerit, this does not mean it does not incur very great demerit
- 2) Imagining that we don't take hell seriously unless construing it in the most maximally awful way possible is absurd

3) Universalists still see hell as a place to avoid at all costs, just as Jesus did

IV) Advantage 3: The Church

- A) The church is still Christ's body, but it is also a foretaste of what is in the coming age
- B) Instead of containing people from every tribe and tongue, it will contain all people
- C) The church's calling is to act as a prophetic sign to the nations representing the destiny of all humanity
- D) The worship of the church is a foretaste of the age to come, when all creation will worship
- E) Evangelism
 - 1) To obey Jesus' command
 - 2) To save people from the coming wrath
 - 3) To bring people into fellowship with God and his community
 - 4) Playing a part in God's purpose of reconciling the whole of creation to himself

V) Objection 2: Does Universalism Undermine Evangelism?

- A) The argument is that if universalism is true, then there is no need for anyone to evangelise, since everyone will be saved in the end
- B) The argument is based on the assumption that the only motivation for evangelism is to save people from eternal damnation
- C) The NT provides many other motivations
 - 1) Hell is still a place to be avoided at all costs and is temporary conscious torment
 - 2) People are only saved through faith and they can only believe if they are told (Rom 10:13-15)
 - 3) Jesus commands it (Matt 28:18-20)
 - 4) It serves the purpose of summing up all things in Christ (Eph 1:10)
- D) A counter-question is this: If God will save the elect anyway, why bother evangelising?
 - 1) The response is that that's how God saves the elect
 - 2) This works precisely the same for universalism: evangelism is the tool through which God saves people
- E) There is a possible extra motivation: if the universalist believes that people temporarily condemned to hell could be spared that fate by being saved, then that is the motivation
- F) The church has a mandate to live out the gospel, and failure to live up to it is failure to love God and our neighbour

VI) Advantage 4: Pastoral Issues

- A) It provides a theology of hope in the death of loved unbelievers
- B) The pastor can promise that even if the loved one goes to hell, it will not be forever, and it will be for redemption purposes

VII) What If I Am Wrong?

A) Universalism does not deny any central claims to orthodox faith

- 1) Trinity
- 2) Creation
- 3) Fall
- 4) Redemption
- 5) Inspiration of Scripture
- 6) Incarnation of Jesus
- 7) Mission

B) If I'm wrong, then I will have inspired some false hope in people but not done any irreparable damage

C) Comparing traditional and universalist views on the following. Which position...

- 1) Has the strongest view of divine love?
- 2) Has the most powerful story of God's victory over evil?
- 3) Lifts the atoning efficacy of the cross of Christ to the greatest heights?
- 4) Best emphasises the triumph of grace over sin?
- 5) Most inspires worship and love of God bringing him honour and glory?
- 6) Has the most satisfactory understanding of divine wrath?
- 7) Inspires hope in the human spirit?

Appendix 3: The Lamb's Book of Life

I) The Book of Life (BOL) is mentioned in Revelation

- A) 3:5: He who overcomes will be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and the angels.
- B) 13:8: All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast – all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world
- C) 17:8: The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the Lamb's book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast.
- D) 20:12, 15: And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and 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...If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown in to the lake of fire.
- E) 21:27: Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

II) The following points are agreed by all

- A) Some people have their names written in the BOL and some people do not
- B) Those whose names are written in the BOL enter the new Jerusalem
- C) Those whose names are not written in the BOL will not enter the new Jerusalem

III) Is the content of the BOL fixed?

- A) The interpretation of 21:24-27 as universalist is plausible and indicates the possibility of being added into the BOL
- B) 3:5 strongly suggests that one could have one's name removed from the BOL
 - 1) The OT background to the BOL envisages the possibility of being blotted out from the BOL
 - (a) Ps 69:28: May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous.
 - (b) Ex 32:32-33: But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written. The LORD replied to Moses, Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book.
 - (c) Dan 12:1-2: At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered.
 - 2) Revelation is clear in its warnings that Christian apostates will be thrown into the lake of fire
 - (a) In the letters to the churches it is only the overcomers who inherit the blessings of the new creation
 - (b) The list of sins in 21:8 and 22:15 closely mirrors the sins in Rev 2-3

- (c) This indicates that John's primary purpose was to warn the churches against apostasy so they don't end up in the lake of fire. This is confirmed by 18:4-5 and also John 15:1-8
- (d) The argument that these weren't genuine Christians doesn't work, since 2:20 calls those being led astray "my servants".
- C) This possibility of being removed from the BOL resolves the tension between texts such as Phil 1:6 and Heb 6:1-8, and in so doing provides a way of understanding the so-called "warning passages". Genuine Christians could fall away and end up in hell and yet still ultimately be saved.
- D) Options for 17:8
- 1) The BOL is a record of those who will receive eternal life, and within it, there is only one entry: Christ. When a person believes the gospel they are in Christ and therefore in the BOL. If they apostatise, they are out of the book of life and no longer in the BOL from the creation of the world.
 - 2) Talbott suggests that people can receive a new name at the new birth, and that this new name has been written in the BOL from the creation of the world.

THE END