

# Evangelical Universalism

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**WARNING:** this is not a summary of *The Evangelical Universalist* by Gregory MacDonald. It covers some of the same ground but it does so in a different way and it leaves out a lot. If you want the biblical exegetical stuff, the philosophical arguments, or the responses to criticisms, you will have to read the book. This summary simply sketches some of the systematic theological connections in my thinking.

## Preliminary Thoughts

1. Universalism inhabits a space between heresy and dogma. It is neither forbidden (heresy) nor fundamental Christian teaching (dogma). It is a minority tradition with roots in the early church.<sup>1</sup>
2. How I became a universalist (through philosophical reflections on human freedom).

## The Theo-Logic of Evangelical Universalism

A theo-centric vision of universalism:

“For from him and through him and to him are all things” (Rom 11:36)

Discussions of universalism usually go straight to eschatology (and usually to proof texts about Hell) but our eschatology must be properly connected to our doctrine of God, of creation, of Israel and the nations, of the incarnation, the atonement, our ecclesiology, our missiology, etc.

Colossians 1:15–20. Read and sketch.

### *Universalism in Creation (from him)*

Christians affirm that God created all things. They were made by him and for him. Humanity as a species was created good and with a telos rooted in a divine calling (“image God on the earth! Rule! Have dominion!”) and accompanied by divine blessing (Gen 1–2).

Eschatological universalism is a way of affirming that God’s intentions for creation *will be realized*.

Eschatological non-universalism must postulate either (a) that God’s purposes for creation will be frustrated in (large?) part, or (b) that God secretly purposed that only *some* creatures would reach their created telos whilst others were intended to fall short of that telos. Both alternatives to universalism seem at-odds with the idea that God created humans for a good, blessing-filled purpose.

### *Universalism in Incarnation (through him)*

The Word became flesh and stood before God as man on our behalf. In incarnation he stood in solidarity with all Israel (as Messiah) and with all humanity (as an Adam figure). He represents all humanity before God in his humanity (and God to all humanity).

### *Universalism in the Atonement (through him)*

In his role representing all humanity before God Jesus died for all people. That is the most obvious interpretation of numerous NT texts.<sup>2</sup> And such a claim fits most naturally with the idea that it is God’s *desire* and *intention* to save all humans – to enable them to reach the telos set before humanity in creation (the restoration and completion of the divine image).

Indeed, I think we should go further and say that in Christ’s resurrection all humanity is *already* reconciled. There is nothing that needs adding to his work. It is *enough* and it is *finished*. Of course, to

<sup>1</sup> On this see Gregory MacDonald (ed.), *“All Shall Be Well”: Explorations in Universal Salvation and Christian Theology, from Origen to Moltmann*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> On key texts in the Pastoral Epistles see I. Howard Marshall, “For all, For all my Saviour Died” in S. Porter and A. Cross (eds.), *Semper Reformandum*. Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003.

*experience* such reconciliation we must be united to Christ by the Spirit (through trust and baptism) but this is simply to make real in our lives (over an extended period of time) what is already a reality for us in Christ.

So God has *already* reconciled the world to himself in Christ (2 Cor 5:19).

For God was pleased to have all his fulness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Col 1:19-20)

This peace-making is a thing of the *past*. Universal salvation is a present reality in the person of Jesus-our-representative! Universalism is not something we *hope* God might do; it is something that God has *already achieved* (in Christ). This is to deny the classical Arminian picture that Jesus only makes salvation *possible*. I maintain that it guarantees it will be actual.

Universalism is simply the claim that all for whom Christ shed his blood will be saved. That God's grace in Christ is deeper, wider, and stronger than sin and death.

The denial of universalism requires either that (a) we narrow the scope of salvation by claiming that Christ died for some and not others (classical Calvinism) or that (b) many (most?) for whom Christ died will not, in the end, be saved (classical Arminianism). In my opinion, the first has *too narrow* a view of the scope of Jesus' cross-work and the second has *too feeble* a view (where sin abounds grace abounds ... quite a lot but not as much as sin; the Second Adam cannot undo the effects of the first Adam's sin, contra Rom 5).

### *Universalism in Eschatology (to him)*

This is no more than the claim that what God intended in creation and achieved in the cross-resurrection-ascension of our representative Jesus Christ will finally be worked out through the Spirit's work in all creation. It is simply the belief that God will achieve his purposes and will not be frustrated in his goals.

Eschatological non-universalism requires either that we postulate curious and problematic eschatological intentions for Yhwh (i.e., that God could save everyone but chose not to because he *wanted* to send people to Hell) or a partial failure on God's part (i.e., God wanted everyone to share in salvation but sadly he did not manage to bring that about).

### *Universalism and God*

Universalism is also an attempt to hold together divine attributes that tend to pull apart on classical views of Hell. For instance, how can we claim *both* that "God is love" *and* that God is sovereign and will achieve his purposes?

1. It is very hard to maintain that God is love if God does not desire the good of some of his creatures. If God is love then it seems hard to deny that God would at least *want* to save everyone.
2. It is hard to maintain that God is sovereign in any strong sense, or that he will achieve all his purposes, or that he will win the ultimate victory over sin if many (or any!) of those he wants to save are not saved.

Calvinists and Arminians are compelled to dilute either God's love (as Calvinists do) or God's sovereignty (as Arminians do). Universalists try to maintain both.

Or – if all God's actions must be consistent with *both* divine justice *and* divine love then we need to see Hell as an act consistent with divine love (not easy to do on traditional views).

In other words, universalism is, in part, an attempt to hold together some important traditional Christian teachings about God. Traditional views of Hell create *serious* tensions for such an attempt.

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### *Universalism and Eschatological Wrath*

Universalism must do justice to the biblical teaching on eschatological wrath and punishment (Hell). It seeks to do so in a way that integrates with wider biblical-theological themes.

- Punishment in this age is an anticipation of eschatological punishment (Jn 3:18) so we should not see it as a fundamentally different kind of punishment.
- Divine punishment in this age is simultaneously retributive *and* corrective (and motivated by both divine justice *and* divine love) so punishment in the age to come should be understood as the climactic form of such retributive-corrective punishment.

- Classical views of Hell see the punishment as retribution motivated by divine justice but *not as correction motivated by divine love*. Universalist views of Hell seek to hold divine love and justice together so that Hell is understood in a way compatible with God's holy-love.
- The biblical justification for this view of Hell is (a) the desire to affirm both the Hell texts and the universal salvation texts (e.g. Rom 5:18; 1 Cor 15:22; Col 1:20; Phil 2:11) by interpreting Hell in the light of universal salvation, (b) the desire to hold together a divine love and justice, (c) the common biblical teaching of fiery judgement *followed by salvation* – a pattern modeled in the exile and restoration and in the death and resurrection of Jesus, (d) Rev 21:23-27 which present the nations and kings of the earth condemned to the Lake of Fire entering into the New Jerusalem (cf. 15:4), (e) the idea of Hell as having a purging function ('salted with fire', Mk 9:48-49)

So Hell is understood as a dreadful fate to be avoided at all costs but *not* as a fate from which one cannot be redeemed. Union with Christ by the Spirit, even for those in Hell, breaks our link with Adam and the condemnation that stands over him and united us with him in his resurrection.

### *Universalism in Ecclesiology*

My universalist ecclesiology is one in the church is a prophetic foretaste of the age to come.

- The prophets anticipated Israel's coming redemption and the nations flowing to join them in the worship of Yhwh. God's redemptive plan for creation is the eschatological salvation of Israel and the nations in a new creation.
- The church is the anticipatory fulfillment of that vision of the future in the midst of the present age. Jew and Gentile united in Christ.
- BUT the church is the firstfruits (Jas 1:18; Rev 14:4) of the salvation of 'all Israel' (Rom 11:26) and the pilgrimage of the nations and the kings of the earth (Rev 21:23-27).
- The church is not saved *instead of* the world but *on behalf of* the world and as an anticipatory promise for the world.
- This ecclesiology maintains a real and important distinction between the church and the world, between those in Christ and those in Adam, between the elect and the non-elect<sup>3</sup> for as long as anyone remains outside Christ. In the final eschatological phase such a distinction will be gone but for now it remains critical.

### *Universalism and Mission*

The mission of the church is to

- Embody the values of the new age in the midst of the present age as a prophetic witness. Hence the importance of issues such as reconciliation and love within the community.
- To proclaim the gospel to the world in word – "Jesus, Israel's Messiah, has died for our sins and been raised to new life, ascended to heaven, and is Lord. Bow your knee to him and confess him as Lord!" – and deed.
- "The form of Christian universalism offered here is certainly not pluralistic ('all religions lead to God'). It is rather strictly christocentric in nature: Jesus Christ alone is 'the way, the truth, and the life.' No one may come to God except through him. The difference from traditional evangelicalism is that everyone *will* come to God through him, because everyone *has* come to God *in him*."<sup>4</sup>
- But as salvation is *experienced* only as we respond in repentance and trust so the proclamation of the gospel is critical.

<sup>3</sup> NOTE on election. My current view is that Israel is elect. Christ, representing Israel, is elect and fulfils Israel's election. Anyone united to Christ is 'chosen in him', participating in his election. So I was not elect before I was a Christian but now I am elect in Christ.

On classical Calvinist theology the elect are a fixed group of certain humans (past, present, and future) chosen for salvation. Thus there are many people in the world who are not yet believers but who are members of 'the elect'. The NT never uses the terminology of election in that way. Unbelievers (even those who later become believers) are *never* referred to as the elect. That language is reserved exclusively for those *currently* united to Christ.

<sup>4</sup> David Congdon, "The Problem with Double Predestination and the Case for a Christocentric Missional Universalism" in *Testamentum Imperium*, vol 2, 2009, p. 14.

*Summary:*

Universalism aspires to be a way of performing the biblical symphony so that the ending is neither discordant nor out of place.

Such universalism is

- Trinitarian
- Christocentric
- Gospel-focused
- Missional

It *aspires* to

- be biblical<sup>5</sup>
- conform to creedal orthodoxy

It is consistent with Bebbington's four core aspects of evangelicalism

- biblicism
- crucicentrism
- conversionism
- activism

So, even if it turns out to be mistaken, can we really claim that universalism is unorthodox,<sup>6</sup> unchristian, or even unevangelical? Cannot it be tolerated as another option within the spectrum of orthodox Christian faith?

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<sup>5</sup> I think that universalism is biblical but I need to clarify what I do and do not mean by that in this context. Am I saying that the biblical authors were universalists? I am not committed to making such a claim. My claim is more modest – I think that their theology is naturally extended in universalist directions and held together in a universalist framework. Karl Barth in his great work *Church Dogmatics* states “dogmatics . . . does not ask what the apostles and prophets said but what *we* must say on the basis of the apostles and prophets” (*Church Dogmatics, Volume I The Doctrine of the Word of God*, Part 1, 2d ed. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2004, 16) The task of theological construction is our task but it must be undertaken in submission to divine revelation. My proposal is that universalism provides a way of holding together a wide range of biblical teachings better than its alternatives. The case for it is, like the case for the Trinity, not just based on proof texts but on a way of doing justice to the whole.

<sup>6</sup> It is true that the Fifth Ecumenical Council added some condemnations of an *Origenist version* of universalism (which was not identical at all points with Origen's own universalism) but we should not confuse that as a condemnation of universalism *per se*. After all, Gregory of Nyssa's universalism was never condemned.