THEOLOGY

I Don't Want to Be a Universalist

Richard Mouw says the best forms of the doctrine still disappoint those counting on God to do the right thing.

RICHARD MOUW FEBRUARY 13, 2023

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I am not a universalist. There is nothing surprising about my saying that. Having spent my career in evangelical institutions, I have signed many theological statements affirming the realities of heaven and hell, and I have always done so in good faith.

But here is something that would surprise many of my fellow evangelicals: I don't even want to be a universalist. I have often heard the opposite from evangelical friends: "I would like to be a universalist, but I really see no biblical basis for the view that everyone will be saved in the end." It is

reassuring that those who express this sentiment usually acknowledge that the Bible is clear on the subject. I do worry, though, about their wishing that it were not so clear.

I am convinced that the idea of universal salvation fails to capture some important elements in the Bible's teachings about the requirements of divine justice. The Scriptures make it clear that God heeds the cries of the oppressed and that on the Day of Judgment all evildoers will be dealt with according to their deeds (Rev. 20:12). Universalism tries to get around the unspeakable harm that people do to each other, evading the need for repentance, while detracting from the Cross and a real joy in God's justice.

There are certainly some aspects of evangelicals' traditional teachings about hell that do trouble me. I don't want to hear repeats of the fire-and-brimstone sermons of my youth. These are similar to the infuriating message of folks who carry signs at funeral gatherings declaring that the deceased person will burn for all eternity.

To be sure, the hellfire images are there in the Bible, as in Matthew 25:41, when Jesus tells those on his left, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

But those biblical images have become so much the stuff of caricature that unbelievers can make fun of the imagery while ignoring the clear biblical message that persistent unbelief has eternal consequences. Such frivolity works in the same direction—away from the joy and the seriousness of salvation—as does unloving glee. We evangelicals have gained a reputation for being mean-spirited people, and I am glad when my friends look for ways to tone down the rhetoric while not compromising the essential message.

I hold out for a wideness in God's saving mercies. I take my cue on this from Charles Spurgeon, who observed in one of his wonderful sermons, "Heavenly Worship," that while the Bible tells us "there is to be a multitude that no man can number in heaven," he has not found anything in the Bible that says "that there is to be a multitude that no man can number in hell."

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Suppose an evangelical said, "I would really like to believe that Jesus was not divine, but just one of the great ethical teachers, but the Bible does not allow that." How could we trust such a person's faith?

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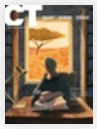
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But the case of universalism is different. A desire to believe in universalism is usually born out of concern for loved ones. We rightly don't feel betrayed by those wishing for the eternal joy of Heather or Bradley, loved ones they pray for fervently. Or perhaps they are thinking about their wonderful non-Christian neighbors. We can empathize with those concerns.

Nevertheless, the biblical depiction of a state of eternal separation from God is real. As N. T. Wright puts it in *Surprised by Hope*, when we study "the New Testament on the one hand and the newspaper on the other," we cannot avoid the conclusion that divine justice requires a decisive end-time accounting for the grave injustices that occur in our world. For example, a man who sells 13-year-old girls into sexual slavery and enjoys living off the profits will face ultimate condemnation. So will murderers, blackmailers, and hypocrites of all kinds.

This does not mean that we can give up on any human being in our witness to God's amazing grace. When we sing, "To God Be the Glory," we affirm that wonderful promise that "the vilest offender who truly believes that moment from Jesus a pardon receives." In our hope that vile offenders will come to true faith, we must also find ways of assuring their victims that the Lord will not ignore the demands that justice be done. God's forgiveness is still just.

Wright says that individuals who persistently rebel against God eventually become so dehumanized that they irreparably damage the image of God in which they were created. When they pass on from this life, he says, after having "inhabited God's good world, in which the flickering flame of goodness had not been completely snuffed out," they enter into "an ex-human state, no longer reflecting their maker in any meaningful sense."

As the psalmist observes, sinners become like the idols whom they worship (115:8). And as Wright points out, this dehumanizing pattern turns us into creatures who are "not only beyond hope but also beyond pity." Wright reinforces his point by citing C. S. Lewis's observation in *The Great Divorce* that the Lord will eventually proclaim to unrepentant sinners, "*Thy* will be done."

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In order to keep myself honest on this subject, I do keep up on defenses of universalism. Although many who argue for universalism make no effort to reconcile the Bible with their disbelief in hell, there are some arguments that stay within the pale of Christianity and are worth paying attention to.

The most recent and significant argument is set forth by David Bentley Hart in his book *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation*, which has received much attention. A couple of my evangelical friends have recommended it to me as "fascinating" and "challenging."

Hart discusses the topic on a number of fronts, but I could not get past his refusal to pay attention to biblical specifics. All that the Bible provides, he tells us, "are a number of fragmentary and fantastic images that can be taken in any number of ways, arranged according to our prejudices and expectations, and declared literal or figural or hyperbolic as our desires dictate." In other words, hell might not be hell. And if it isn't, no one goes there, of course. Nor could God be taken as serious at all about avenging evil.

But what if we can get to universalism by proving that each person will eventually want Jesus as Lord—that no one chooses hell when they see him? This is a much stronger argument than simply that the God we love wouldn't (despite what he said) condemn people. This is also what Hart argues. He says we have to ask whether a proper understanding of human nature allows us to believe that "this defiant rejection of God for all eternity is really logically possible for any rational being."

This argument for universalism relies on people being reasonable, sooner or later, leading to their saving faith. But there is no evidence that each person will finally be repentant, as well as enlightened.

Adolf Hitler looms large as an example of persistent defiant rejection. Haven't the monstrous deeds for which Hitler is responsible put him beyond any claim to God's mercy? Hart directly addresses this question, using Hitler as his case in point. No human being could ever willfully choose, he says, to "fulfill the criteria necessary justly to damn himself or herself to perpetual misery."

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The fact is that "the character of even the very worst among us is in part the product of external contingencies." To follow Hart's argument, we would have to assume that "somewhere in the history of every soul there are moments when a better way was missed by mischance, or by malign interventions from without, or by disorders of the mind within," as he put it.

And then, to underscore the point he is making, he observes that "rather than any intentional perversity on the soul's own part," these are precisely the kinds of factors at work in a case like Hitler's.

The horrible deeds of a Hitler, which are surely "infinitely evil in every objective sense," are still "prompted into action by a hunger for the Good, [and] could never in perfect clarity of mind match the sheer nihilistic scope of the evil it perpetrates." By this logic, a Hitler could not rationally "resist the love of God willfully for eternity." Hart tells us that he is drawing upon insights here from Byzantine orthodoxy. His argument clearly accepts the Byzantine fondness for Plato's philosophy.

Plato taught that since evil is the absence of the Good, no one willingly chooses that which is evil. This perspective allows Hart to argue that what we might want to label in the Hitler case as "intentional perversity" is in

reality a state of ignorance—due to the "external contingencies" that Hart has listed.

Hart includes the influence of "disorders of the mind within" as one of the factors that could have kept Hitler from clearly grasping the Good. What Hart likely has in mind—in line with his Platonism—is the ways in which some of Hitler's past experiences or brain chemistry might have kept him from seeing facts clearly. Or maybe Hart thinks that Hitler could not grasp the truth because he relied on unreliable sources for his information.

For those of us who do not want to set the Bible aside in thinking about these matters, we cannot ignore Jesus' extensive teachings, such as those in Matthew 25 on how some will be welcomed and some shut out, followed by his warning that those who despise the gifts of God will not only be thrown out into the outer darkness but also lose what they were given.

Nor can we forget what the apostle Paul says about willful disobedience to the Good: "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them … . [They] are without excuse" (Rom. 1:18–20).

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I have taught many courses on Plato's dialogues, and I have pointed my students to this Pauline teaching that people who deny God are without excuse. In light of it, we must reject the Byzantine insistence that it is not possible for a human being to knowingly choose that which is evil.

However, the Bible does describe a (non-Platonistic) process of rejecting the Good without what we would normally call willfulness. We can fail to follow the truth we see in what seem like minor ways, leading us to wander further from the path of wisdom. Our spiritual lives have a fundamentally directional character. We are each on a trajectory toward God or away from him. The Westminster Shorter Catechism highlights this factor in its first question and answer, in telling us that our "chief end" as human beings is "to glorify God and to enjoy him forever."

Redeeming grace restores our ability to pursue that end once again. We Christians are in a process of moving toward the end for which God creates and redeems us. This reality is captured beautifully in 1 John 3:2: "Now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."

In classic theological terms, this is about sanctification as a process and glorification as the goal. When the Spirit plants new life in the deep places of a person's being, the person begins a process of becoming sanctified, moving toward the eschatological goal of being glorified. That end product is what

we will be when Christ appears. In the present preglorification stage of our journeys, we live with the mystery of what we will be like when our chief end is reached.

In his "Weight of Glory" essay, Lewis captures the mystery of how—as the KJV puts it—"it doth not yet appear what we shall be"in the Christian journey. Lewis observes that while we have little problem thinking much about our own future glory, we are in no danger of reflecting too much on the future glory of others. It would be spiritually healthy, Lewis says, for us to reverse this pattern: "The load, weight, or burden of my neighbour's glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken."

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It is a good spiritual exercise for us to "remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship." This is a compelling observation, and understandably it is frequently cited.

But there is a brief clause that concludes Lewis's observation that is less frequently quoted. He immediately adds that, in addition to those who will be marvelously glorified, there are some human beings who, if we could catch a glimpse of them in their final state, we would witness "a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare." For those who are heading in a direction opposite to that of glorification, it is also true that "it doth not yet appear" what their destination will be like. The ultimate lost-ness of hell is real.

I don't mean to be harsh with my evangelical friends who wish they could be universalists. They are often motivated by a concern for the souls of loved ones who have not accepted Christ. I am concerned, though, about theological slippage in our evangelical community. To tell our younger generation that we wish the Bible were not so clear about the reality of hell could encourage them simply to take the step that we resist taking.

Embracing universalism means theological and spiritual loss. We miss out on the glory of redeemed people and the fullness of the divine glory. In a universalist future, God brushes off the degradation of his creatures. The wedding supper is not filled with guests dressed in the clothes of righteousness but with people trying to pass off their sins as inevitable, and therefore able to be dismissed. And God lets them. I find such a present (and such a hypothetical future) to be disheartening. I find it to be something far short of the joyful and triumphant repudiation of wrong the Bible promises.

While I don't want to be a universalist, I do pray for unbelievers whom I love, even as I pray for justice for victims of oppression. And I do so in hope, as Abraham said in Genesis 18:25: "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

Richard Mouw served as president of Fuller Theological Seminary for 20 years.

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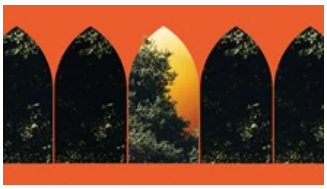

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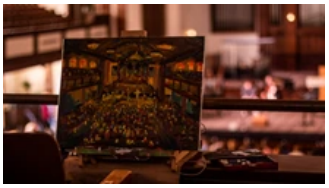

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