

IS THERE A HELL? UNIVERSALISM, HELL, AND THE FATE OF THE IGNORANT

by Stephen Davis

Introduction.

Christianity traditionally teaches that at least some people, after death, live eternally apart from God. Let us call those who believe this doctrine separationists, because they hold that these people are eternally separated both from God and from the people who are with God. Some Christians, on the other hand, espouse the quite different doctrine known as universalism. Universalists believe that all human beings will ultimately live eternally with God, i.e., that no one will be eternally condemned.

Though I am sympathetic with the intentions of those who espouse universalism, I am not a universalist myself, and will argue against the doctrine in this paper. What I will do here is:

- (1) state the strongest doctrine of universalism
- (2) present the strongest arguments in favor of it
- (3) reply to these arguments from a separationist standpoint; and
- (4) make a case for separationism.

Universalism.

Let me now sketch what I take to be a strong doctrine of universalism: God does indeed hate sin and does indeed judge sinners. But God's judgment is always therapeutic; it is designed to bring people to repentance. Thus God's wrath is an integral part of God's loving strategy for reconciling people to God. Some are reconciled to God in this life; some die unreconciled. But God continues to love even those who die apart from God, and to work for their reconciliation.

If there is a hell, it exists only for a time, i.e., until the last recalcitrant sinner decides to say yes to God. It is possible that hell will exist forever because it is possible some will deny God forever. But after death, God has unlimited time, arguments, and resources to convince people to repent. God will not force anyone into the kingdom; the freedom of God's creatures is always respected. But because of the winsomeness of God's love, we can be sure that God will emerge victorious and that all persons will eventually be reconciled to God. We are all sinners and deserve punishment, but God's love is so great and God's grace so attractive that eventually all persons will be reconciled to God.

This, then, is what I take to be a strong version of universalism. Now, what about the arguments in favor? Let me mention five of them.

(1) *The Bible implies that universalism is true.* Many universalists are quite prepared to admit that their doctrine is not taught in the Bible and indeed that separationism seems much more clearly taught. Nevertheless, they do typically argue that universalism is at least implied or suggested in various texts. First, it can be pointed out that many texts show that it is God's intention that everyone be reconciled to God. Second, it can be shown that the work of God's grace in Christ was designed for the salvation of everyone. Third, texts can be cited in which God's total victory is proclaimed and in which it is said that everything will ultimately be reconciled to God. Finally, there are texts which seem to the universalists explicitly to predict that all will eventually be reconciled to God.[1]...

(2) *How can God's purposes be frustrated?* Universalists sometimes argue as follows: eternal sin and eternal punishment would obviously frustrate God's intention that no one be eternally lost. But if God is truly sovereign, how can any divine intention be frustrated? If separationism is true, some will eternally resist God and it follows that God is at least a partial failure. Surely if God is omnipotent nothing can eternally frustrate the divine aims; if it is God's aim that all be rescued, all will be rescued.

(3) *How can a just God condemn people to eternal torment?* Universalists frequently argue that no one deserves eternal punishment. Perhaps terrible sinners deserve to suffer terribly for a terribly long time. But surely sin should be punished according to its gravity; why do they deserve to suffer for an infinitely long time? They certainly do not cause anyone else (or even God) eternal sorrow or pain. Suppose we decide that some tyrant, say Nero, deserves to suffer a year in hell for every person he ever killed, injured, treated unfairly, insulted, or even inconvenienced. Suppose further that on this criterion he deserves to suffer for 20,000 years. The problem, however, is that once he has served this sentence he will not have made even the slightest dent in eternity. According to separationism, he must suffer forever. Is this just? It does not seem so. (And this is not even to speak of more run-of-the-mill sinners who perhaps never cause anyone serious harm.)

(4) *How can the Blessed experience joy in heaven if friends and loved ones are in hell?* Obviously (so universalists will argue), they can't. People can only know joy and happiness in heaven if everyone else is or eventually will be there too. If the Blessed are to experience joy in heaven, as Christian tradition says they are, universalism must be true.

(5) *What about the fate of those who die in ignorance of Christ?* Christianity has traditionally taught that salvation is to be found only in Christ. Jesus is reported as having claimed this very thing: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; No one comes to the Father but by me" (John 14:6). And this claim seems to dovetail well with standard Christian

notions about sin and salvation: there is nothing we can do to save ourselves; all our efforts at self-improvement fail; all we can do is trust in God as revealed in Christ; those who do not know God as revealed in Christ are condemned. And surely-so universalists argue-the traditional notion is unfair. It is not right to condemn to hell those who die in ignorance of Christ.

Suppose there was a woman named Oohku who lived from 370-320 B.C. in the interior of Borneo. Obviously, she never heard of Jesus Christ or the Judeo-Christian God; she was never baptized, nor did she ever make any institutional or psychological commitment to Christ or to the Christian church. She couldn't have done these things; she was simply born in the wrong place and at the wrong time. Is it right for God to condemn this woman to eternal hell just because she was never able to come to God through Christ? Of course not. The only way Oookhu can be treated fairly by God is if universalism is true. God is just and loving; thus, universalism is true.

Critique of universalism.

These are the best arguments for universalism that I can think of. We now need to see how separationists will handle them and defend their own doctrine.

Let us begin with the biblical argument of the universalist. The first thing to notice is that separationists like me do not deny that God desires the salvation of all persons and that Christ's atoning work was designed to rescue everyone. Accordingly, the texts cited under these headings ... do not tell against separationism. As to the texts that emphasize God's total victory and which seem to universalists to predict universal salvation, the separationist replies that this is not their proper interpretation. To affirm that God is ultimately victorious over all enemies and that God's authority will one day be universally recognized is one thing, and will be agreed on by all Christians. But to say that every person will eventually be reconciled to God is quite another, and can only be based on a surprisingly literalistic interpretation of such terms as "all," "all things," "every knee," and "the world" in the passages cited. It is odd that universalists, who typically protest against literalistic interpretations of the many texts that seem to teach separationism (see below), appear themselves to adopt a kind of literalism here. They need to approach the passages cited with a bit more hermeneutical subtlety; they need to ask (especially in the light of other texts-again, see below) whether this is what these passages really mean.

Furthermore, the fact that these "universalistic passages" appear in many of the same texts in which separationism seems clearly taught ought to make us doubt that universalists interpret them correctly....

Furthermore, separationists can produce a biblical argument of their own, one which is much more compelling. For the reality of hell—and even of eternal hell[2]—is spoken of often in the New Testament, and seems inextricably tied to such major themes in New Testament theology as God, sin, judgment, atonement, and reconciliation. Thus it would seem that the introduction of universalism would require severe changes at various other points in the traditional Christian scheme of salvation.... In fact, if there is no hell it is hard to see, in New Testament terms, why there would be any need for atonement or a savior from sin.... Furthermore, it seems methodologically odd for a person both to deny the reality of eternal hell and (because of biblical teaching and Christian tradition) affirm the reality of heaven. For both seem to stand on an equally firm exegetical and traditional foundation. It is clear that for most universalists, exegetical considerations are outweighed by philosophical ones.

My reply to the biblical argument of the universalist, then, is as follows. It is true that when read in a certain way, a few New Testament and especially Pauline texts might lead one toward universalism. But a careful look shows that not even those texts actually imply universalism. Furthermore, biblically oriented Christians believe that problematical passages on any topic are to be interpreted in the light of the testimony of the whole of scripture, and universalism—so I have argued—is inconsistent with that testimony.

Let me confess that I would deeply like universalism to be true. Like all Christians, I would find it wonderfully comforting to believe that all people will be citizens of the kingdom of God, and certain thorny intellectual problems, especially the problem of evil, might be easier to solve if universalism were true. But as a matter of theological method, we cannot affirm a doctrine just because we would like it to be true. The fact is that separationism is taught in the Bible and that the so-called "universalistic passages" do not imply universalism. That is enough for me; that is why I am a separationist. Philosophical and theological arguments over what God should do are outweighed by the teaching of Scripture. God has revealed to us a doctrine of eternal judgment; we had best accept it. That God has not also revealed to us how to reconcile this doctrine with our understanding of God's love creates a theological problem which we must do our best to solve.

Separationism.

I will now briefly sketch the separationist doctrine I believe in and am prepared to defend. It differs from some traditional theological accounts at two points: (1) For exegetical reasons I do not believe people in hell suffer horrible fiery agony; and (2) while I believe hell in some sense can be spoken of as punishment, I do not believe it is a place where God, so to

speak, gets even with those who deny God. It is not primarily a place of retribution.

We know little about hell. Much of what the New Testament says is clearly metaphorical or symbolic. For example, the New Testament uses the metaphor of fire to convey the suffering of people in hell. But this need not mean that condemned people actually suffer the pain of burns. Mark 9:48 describes hell as a place where "the worm does not die" and "the fire is not quenched." Why take the second literally and not the first? I would say both are metaphors of the eternity of hell. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31 has been taken by some interpreters as a picture of the after-life, but this does not seem sensible. It is a parable, i.e., a made-up story designed to convey a certain religious message. Furthermore, it is difficult to imagine that heaven and hell could be separated by a "great chasm" which cannot be crossed but across which communication can take place. There are many biblical metaphors for hell, e.g., everlasting fire, bottomless pit, outer darkness, place of weeping and gnashing of teeth, place of no rest, place where the uttermost farthing must be paid.[3] None, I would argue, is a literal description.

Hell is a place of separation from God. Not total separation, of course—that would mean hell would not exist. Furthermore, the biblical tradition denies that anything or anyone can ever be totally separated from God.... But hell is separation from God as the source of true love, joy, peace, and light. It is not a place of agony, torment, torture, and utter horror (here I am opposing the lurid and even sadistic pictures of hell envisioned by some Christian thinkers). But there is no deep or ultimate joy there and I believe its citizens are largely miserable. To be apart from the source of love, joy, peace, and light is to live miserably.

A defense of separationism.

Why are the damned in hell? I have already ruled out retribution or any notion of God's "getting even" with them.[4] To put it radically, I believe they are in hell because they choose to be in hell; no one is sent to hell against his or her will. Sadly, some people choose to live their lives apart from God, harden their hearts, and will continue to do so after death; some will doubtless do so forever. For such people, living in God's presence might well seem worse than living in God's absence. Allowing them to live forever in hell is simply God's continuing to grant them the freedom that they enjoyed in this life to say yes or no to God. I nevertheless suspect that people in hell are deeply remorseful. Can people both freely choose hell over heaven, knowing they would be unable to endure heaven, but still be full of remorse that they cannot happily choose heaven? I believe this is quite possible.

Is the existence of hell consistent with God's love and power? Yes, it is. Some Christians try to justify the existence of hell by speaking of it as the "natural consequence" of a life of sin. I accept the notion that hell is the natural consequence of a life of sin (and it is in this sense that hell is a punishment). But this in itself does not justify God in sending people to hell, for it does not justify the divinely-ordained laws of natural necessity that make hell sin's natural consequence. I claim, then, that the people who are in hell are there because they freely choose it, i.e., freely choose not to live in God's presence. If so, then hell can be an expression not only of divine justice but of divine love.

Response to philosophical objections to separationism.

I have been replying to the biblical argument of the universalist. Now I must comment on the others.

How can God's purposes be frustrated? I agree that God desires the salvation of everyone; thus separationism implies that at least one of God's desires is not satisfied: some people will be lost. How can this be, if God is sovereign? The answer is that God created us as free agents; God gave us the ability to say yes or no to God. One of the risks God ran in so doing was precisely that God's purposes would be frustrated, and this, sadly, is exactly what has happened. God's will is flaunted whenever anyone sins. It is just not true that "God's will is always done."... Furthermore, it seems that sovereignty entails only the power to impose one's will, not the actual imposition of it.

How can a just God condemn someone to eternal torment? In the first place, as already noted, I believe the citizens of hell are there because they freely choose to be there; they have hardened their hearts and would be unable to endure heaven. Unless one bows to God and makes the divine will one's own, heaven is too much to bear and one chooses hell. Thus, as I noted, it is not only just but loving that God allows them to live forever in hell. Second, hell may have the effect on many of strengthening their resolve never to repent; sin may voluntarily continue; and if it is right for evil-doers to experience the consequences of the evil deeds they do here and now, this will be true of the evil deeds they do after death. Third, Christians believe their salvation is a matter of grace alone; we deserve to be condemned, but out of love rather than sheer justice God forgives us and reconciles us to God. The notion of grace, then, is at the heart of the Christian good news. God loves us though we are unlovable; God accepts us though we are unacceptable. But the thing to notice here is that if separationism is inconsistent with God's love, i.e., if a loving God cannot condemn anyone to hell, then our salvation (i.e., our rescue from hell) is no longer a matter of grace; it becomes a matter of our justly being freed from a penalty we don't really deserve. In the end, universalism overturns the Christian notion of grace.

How can the Blessed be joyous if friends and loved ones are in hell? I do not know an adequate answer to this question. I expect that if I knew enough about heaven I would know the answer, but I know little about heaven. The problem is perhaps less acute for me than for those separationists who believe hell is a place of permanent torture. If I am right, the Blessed need not worry that loved ones are in agony and are allowed to hope (see below) that God's love can even yet achieve a reconciliation. But there is still the question how, say, a wife can experience joy and happiness in heaven while her beloved husband is in hell. And that is the question I am unable to answer satisfactorily. It would seem to be unjust for God to allow the wrong choices of the damned—i.e., their rejection of God—to ruin the joy of the Blessed, who have chosen to love God. But how God brings it about that the Blessed experience the joy of the presence of God despite the absence of others, I do not know.

The fate of the ignorant.

What about the fate of those who die in ignorance of Christ? The main point to note here is that the Bible does not speak in any connected or clear way on this question. Biblical Christians must take seriously those exclusivistic sayings of Jesus and the New Testament writers ... that create for us this problem. As an orthodox Christian, then, I do believe that salvation is to be found only in Christ. If any person at any time in this life or the next is ever reconciled to God, it is because of the saving work of Jesus Christ. His life, death, and resurrection made it possible. If I am somehow to be reconciled to God, if our imaginary friend Oohku is somehow to be reconciled to God, it is only through Christ that it happens. [5]

Some Christians have taken to heart the Bible's exclusivistic sayings and have concluded that people like Oohku must be lost, that their eternal destiny is hell. But this is to confuse the claim that the Bible is authoritative on matters of faith and practice with the claim that the Bible authoritatively tells us everything we might want to know about Christian faith and practice. It doesn't; I believe the Bible tells us enough so that we can read it, be convicted of sin, and learn how to come to God through Christ. But it does not answer all the questions we might want to ask it and it certainly does not say or imply that those who die in ignorance of Christ are lost. The Bible simply does not in any direct or thorough way address itself to the precise issue of the fate of people like Oohku. The Bible tells us what we need to know, not all that we might want to know.

What then must the separationist say about the fate of those who die in ignorance of Christ? Again, there is no clear or connected teaching in the Bible on this question; what we find are some vague and unformulated hints which can perhaps guide us but which cannot be used to justify a dogmatic position.... I am quite convinced that this much is true: God can

indeed make us in any way God pleases and we have no authority over God to challenge this decision. But this by itself does not answer the question of the fate of those who die in ignorance of Christ....

[Let me make] a theological conjecture: that there are ways those who are ignorant of Christ can be reconciled to God through Christ. In other words, if redemption is to be found only in Christ, and if the atoning work of Christ was intended for all people, and if God is loving and just, then it seems sensible to suppose that it must be causally possible for all people, wherever or whenever they live or however ignorant they are, to come to God through Christ. (I would like to stress that this is a conjecture, not a dogma or a teaching or even a firm belief.)... As long as it is recognized that these are conjectures without systematic or clear biblical warrant, we might even suggest that Christ has the power to save human beings wherever they are, even in hell. I recognize some will resist this suggestion. It is one thing, they will say, to suggest that the ignorant after death receive a chance (their first) to respond positively to the gospel. But it is quite another to suggest that those who have been condemned receive other chances to respond positively. But a question must be asked here: Is it possible that there are persons who would respond positively to God's love after death even though they have not responded positively to it before death? I believe this is possible. In fact, one reason for this latest conjecture is the observation that some who hear the gospel, hear it in such a way that they are psychologically unable to respond positively. Perhaps they heard the gospel for the first and only time from a fool or a bigot or a scoundrel. Or perhaps they were caused to be prejudiced against Christianity by skeptical parents or teachers. Whatever the reason, I believe it would be unjust of God to condemn those who did indeed hear the good news but were unable to respond positively. This is why I suggest that even in hell, people can be rescued.

Conclusion.

Does this bring in universalism by the back door? Certainly not. I have little doubt some will say no to God eternally (the Bible predicts this, in fact), nor do I see any need for a "second chance" for those who have freely and knowingly chosen in this life to live apart from God. Perhaps God never gives up on people, but some folk seem to have hardened their heart to such a degree that they will never repent. For such people, hell as separation from God exists forever, just as it exists for them now. But perhaps some who die in ignorance of Christ will hear the good news, repent, and be rescued. Perhaps even some citizens of hell will do so too. Again, the key word is perhaps. We have no ground to dogmatize here. I do not think we know the fate of those who die in ignorance of Christ. All I am sure of is that God's scheme for the salvation of human beings will turn out to have been just, perhaps in ways we cannot now understand.

Notes

1. First point: see Romans 11:32; I Timothy 2:4-6; II Peter 3:9.
Second point: II Corinthians 5:14, 15; Titus 2:11; Hebrews 2:9; 1 John 2:2.
Third point: see I Corinthians 15:22; cf. 23-28; II Corinthians 5:19; Colossians 1:19.
Fourth point: see Romans 5:18; Philippians 2:9-11; John 1:29; 3:17; 12:32, 47.
2. See Mark 9:43-50; Matthew 25:41, 46; II Thessalonians 1:7-9; Jude 6; Revelation 14:11; 19:3; 20:10.
3. Respectively: Matthew 25:41, Revelation 9:2, Matthew. 8:12, Matthew. 8:12, Revelation 14:11, Matthew 5:26.
4. It must be admitted that there are New Testament texts that can be taken to imply that hell is an act of vengeance or retribution on sinners. See Matthew 5:22, 29; 8:12; 10: 15; II Thessalonians 1:6-9; Hebrews 2:2-3; 10:28-31; II Peter 2:4-9; 12-13. Some even seem to suggest degrees of punishment corresponding to degrees of guilt. See Matthew 11:22-24; Luke 12:47-48; 20:47.
5. A suggestion also perhaps made (in literary form) by C.S. Lewis in *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 120-24.