

Towards a biblical view of universalism

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‘There are two Biblical ways of looking at salvation. One says that only Christian believers will be saved: the other says that all men will be saved. Since the

latter is more loving, it must be true, because God is love.’ This argument (though the words are mine) is regularly used by university teachers of my acquaintance to persuade undergraduates to accept ‘universalism’ in its most common form—the belief, that is, that God will save all men individually. It explicitly plays off passages of scripture which appear to support it (Romans 5: 12–21, 11: 32, 1 Tim. 2: 4, 4: 10, John 12: 32, etc.) against those which quite clearly do not (Romans 2: 6–16, Matt.

25: 31–46, John 3: 18, 36, 5: 29, etc.). I have argued against this view elsewhere, at a more systematic level.¹ Here I want to look in more detail at the biblical evidence.

The proponents of universalism admit very readily that their doctrine conflicts with much biblical teaching. What they are attempting, however, is *Sachkritik*, the criticism (and rejection) of one part of scripture on the basis of another. We leave aside the implications of this for a doctrine of scripture itself. More important for our purpose is the fact that the great majority of the 'hard sayings', the passages which warn most clearly and unmistakably of eternal punishment, are found on the lips of Jesus Himself. This is the point at which the usual argument comes dangerously close to cutting off the branch it sits on. It says 'God is love': but we know that principally (since it is not self-evidently true) through the life and death of Jesus Christ. We cannot use that life and death as an appeal against itself—which is precisely what happens if we say that, because God is love, the nature of salvation is *not* as it is revealed in the teaching of Jesus and in the cross itself, the place where God has provided the one way of salvation. (If there were other 'ways of salvation', the cross would have been unnecessary.) I begin here because we need to be reminded of the uncompromising warnings which the evangelists place on the lips of Jesus Himself (and if they were creations of the early church, they are quite unlike anything else that the early church created). Nor is there any tension between statements of God's love and warnings of God's judgment. If this is a problem for us, it certainly was not for them: compare John 3: 16–21. Perhaps this is why many advocates of universalism abandon the attempt to argue their case from the Bible at all.

The attempt is still made by some, however, usually on the basis of certain passages in the Pauline corpus (an odd inversion, this, of the old liberal position where Jesus was the teacher of heavenly truths and Paul the cross-grained dogmatic bigot). But at the same time most exegetes would agree that one of Paul's foundation doctrines is justification by faith, which has its dark side in the implication: no faith, no justification. There are no problems of salvation (leaving aside for a

moment the few passages in dispute) for those outside the believing community.

We will return to Paul in a moment, but before that we must look at a passage which has sometimes been used to get universalists round the awkward corner thus created—namely, 1 Peter 3: 18–22, which has sometimes been interpreted as offering a 'second chance' to people who do not have faith in this life. But, as has been argued at length by commentators of various outlooks, the writer is most probably referring simply to Christ's proclamation to evil spirits that their power had been broken.² In any case, the next chapter (1 Peter 4, especially vv. 17–18) rules out any possibility that 'those who do not obey God's gospel' will be saved. The 'second chance' theory must look outside the Bible for support: though there, too, it is open to attack.³ We might note at this point that, though many profess to believe in a 'second-chance' universalism, they do not usually enjoy 'assurance' in the old-fashioned sense. Hence the revival of interest in praying for the dead (which does not, except in rare cases, spring from a return to the classical doctrine of purgatory, but rather from a vague general uncertainty about the way of salvation itself). Universalism of this kind, therefore, has the worst of both worlds: no clear doctrine of justification by faith, and hence no assurance of salvation. It neither has its cake nor eats it.

What then of the texts which are cited as positive evidence for universalism? The most popular occur in Romans (5: 12–21, 11: 32) and 1 Timothy (2: 4, 4: 10). We must take them in order. As always, the context must be the main factor in determining the meaning. And the context of Romans is the Gentile mission of which Paul speaks continually: the gospel is for all, Jew and Gentile alike, who believe (Rom. 1: 16–17). Jewish particularism is Paul's chief enemy, and the one way of salvation (eg Rom. 4: 9–17, 10: 12–13) one of his main emphases. It is in this context that the two Romans passages in question occur.

If we were to maintain, on the basis of the word 'all' in Romans 5 and 11, that Paul was a universalist, we would do so in the teeth of (eg) Romans 2: 6–16, 14: 11–12 and such other passages as 2 Thessalonians 2: 7–10.⁴ Nor will it do to say that Paul had not thought through the implications of Romans 5: the epistle is far too tight-knit for that.

¹ See my 'Universalism and the World-Wide Community', in *The Churchman*, vol 89, no. 3, July–September 1975, pp. 197–212, and (with Michael Sadgrove) 'Jesus Christ the Only Saviour', in *Obeying Christ in a Changing World*, vol. 1 (*The Lord Christ*), ed. J. R. W. Stott, Fountain Books, London, 1977, pp. 61–89. I refer below to these as 'UWWC' and 'JCOS' respectively. References will be found in both to articles and books presupposed here.

² See, e.g. J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude* (Black's NT Commentaries), London, 1969, pp. 152–158.

³ Cf. 'UWWC', p. 204f.

⁴ This is now increasingly being recognized by Pauline scholars; cf., e.g., E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, SCM, London, 1977, pp. 472–474.

Chapter 5 as it stands is flanked by the long section on justification by faith (3: 21—4: 25) and the presentation of 'being in Christ', of baptismal participation in His death and resurrection, and its results (chapters 6–8). On the one side, faith as the *sine qua non* of justification: on the other, membership of the professing community as the assurance of salvation. Nor can Romans 5 be detached from this context, as though it (or at any rate vv. 12–21) were a separate *excursus* put in here but unrelated to the context. It is a careful bridge-passage, taking up and making more precise the themes of chapters 1–4 (universal sin: the law: grace: the righteousness of God seen in the obedient life and death of Jesus Christ: the resultant justification and life which, in chapters 1–4, are for *believers*) and so arranging these themes that they can be used again throughout chapters 6–8, in the anthropology which leads from man-in-the-flesh to man-in-the-Christ, man-in-the-Spirit. Man-in-Christ enters the sphere of Christ delineated precisely by 5: 12–21: indeed, 6: 15–18, with its personifications of 'obedience' and 'righteousness', can *only* be understood if 5: 12–21 is presupposed. Whatever 5: 12–21 is asserting, it simply cannot contradict chapters 1–4 and 6–8.

But if that is so, 'all' in this passage simply cannot mean 'all individual human beings without exception'. If Paul had meant that, he should have torn up the letter and begun again from scratch. We can, however, find an alternative explanation without either forced exegesis or special pleading. Again the context is the clue. The point Paul has been making all along since 1: 5 (see particularly 1: 16–17, 2: 9–11, 3: 21—4: 25) is that all men, Jew and Gentile alike, stand on a level before God. All alike are in sin; all alike can only be justified through faith. Chapter 4 in particular stresses that Abraham's true family are not just Jews according to the flesh, the possessors of circumcision and the law, but the worldwide community of the faithful. That point being established, Paul can move on in 5: 12 ff. to show how Christ's faithful people enjoy the blessings that flow from Jesus' undoing of the sin of Adam. But his eye is still on the difference between Jew and Gentile—or rather, on the fact that this distinction has been done away in Christ. That is the significance of the references to the law in 5: 13–14, 20. Within this context, the correct gloss to put on 'all men' in vv. 12, 18 is not 'all men individually' but 'Jews and Gentiles alike'. If further definition is required, it appears in v. 17: 'those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness through the one man Jesus Christ'.

Closely related to Romans 5 is 1 Corinthians 15: 20–28, which is sometimes also quoted in this

connection. Much of what has been said above applies here too, with the following additional points being necessary. First, the 'all' of v. 22 clearly has the same general sense as in Romans 5, as can be seen from v. 23: those who will share Christ's resurrection are οἱ τοῦ χριστοῦ, those who are Christ's. Second, in view of such other passages in the letter as 6: 9, the triumphant eschatology of vv. 24–28 cannot be seen as implying universalism. God will be all in all, yes, and every knee will bow at the name of Jesus (Phil. 2: 10): but Romans 14: 10–12, which like Philippians 2 quotes Isaiah 45: 23 at this point, makes it clear that this will take place before the judgment seat, where (2 Cor. 5: 10) each one will receive those things done in the body, whether good or bad. So-called 'sovereign grace universalism', whether Barthian or otherwise, fails because it lacks a biblical theology of judgment.

Romans 11: 32 occurs, like 5: 12–21, within the wider context of Paul's discussion of God's dealings with Jews and Gentiles. God's purpose is being worked out through the hardening of the majority of Jews, which is designed (9: 19–24, 11: 11–15, 25, 30) to spread the gospel worldwide. But, Paul argues, this cannot be used by Gentile Christians as a reason for a theological inverted snobbery in which Jews would be regarded as unconvertible, as undoubtedly excluded from God's salvation in Christ. This is the whole thrust of chapter 11: Paul is not looking forward to a distant future in which there will be a final and unprecedented large-scale conversion of Jews, but to the present continuous effects of his own ministry (cf. 11: 14 and 11: 31; they have now been disobedient, so that because of the mercy shown to you they may also *now* receive mercy⁵). Jews, he is arguing, are still firmly within God's saving purposes, and a Gentile-dominated church cannot afford to ignore the fact. And within that context comes the summary in 11: 32: God has shut up all men in the prison of disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. Once again the context demands the gloss 'Jews and Gentiles alike' beside both occurrences of 'all men': that is what the argument is all about. If any doubt remains, it is dispelled by 11: 23: Jews can be grafted back into the olive tree *if they do not remain in unbelief*. There is no thought of salvation apart from faith. And Paul knew, as 11: 14 indicates ('that I may save *some* of them'), that faith would

⁵ $\nu\upsilon\nu$ is absent from a few MSS, and replaced by $\upsilon\sigma\tau\epsilon\rho\nu$ in others. But it should certainly be retained, with Nestle and Kilpatrick. As B. M. Metzger argues (*A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*. UBS, London and New York, 1971, p. 527), it is easier to envisage the deletion or replacement of $\nu\upsilon\nu$ than its insertion *de novo*. Compare RV, RSV mg., against AV, RSV, NEB.

not extend to all without exception. Romans 11 is no more a promise of universalism than Romans 5.

What then of 1 Timothy 2: 4 and 4: 10? Again the context is important: the 'proof-text-without-context' method, for which evangelicals are so often criticized, is the regular ploy of the universalist at this point. 1 Timothy 2: 1-7 is about prayer, and the need in particular to pray for all men, especially those in authority. Lest readers should think this is a counsel of folly, advising them to pray for people who are hardened and reprobate persecutors of the church, vv. 3 and 4 emphasize that God's grace knows no human barriers. Universal prayer must be made because man cannot tell whom God will save, and must realise that human and fleshly categories of who may be eligible for grace are just the sort of thing that the gospel shatters. This is further supported by reference to the Pauline Gentile mission and the universal gospel preached therein (2: 5-7), based on the fact that there is one way of salvation for all men (see below). And again the wider context reveals a doctrine of final judgment quite irreconcilable with 'universalism': compare 1 Timothy 1: 6-11, 4: 1-2, 5: 24, 6: 9-10. This also sets the scene for the other problematic verse in this letter (4: 10): though some have seen this as universalistic, it is in fact best taken as a cautious statement aimed against those who thought that salvation was the prerogative of one small racial or doctrinal group.⁶ This, too, is a note to be struck firmly when writing on this subject: it is no part of Christian duty to set bounds to God's grace, to dictate whom God may bring to faith and whom He may not. All we can do is observe what scripture teaches clearly and consistently: that there will be no salvation (in the fullest sense) without faith.

The same is true, finally, of the various Johannine passages (John 10: 16, 12: 32, 1 John 2: 2, etc.) sometimes quoted as universalistic. In many the context indicates that the meaning is similar to Paul's: the gospel is not for Jews only, but for Gentiles also (cf., e.g., 12: 32 in the context of 12: 20 ff.). In addition, some of the starkest of the Johannine judgment-sayings are found, as we saw earlier, right beside the richest promises of salvation for those who believe (John 3: 14-17, 18-21).

⁶ See J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (Black's NT Commentaries), London, 1963, p. 102. For the other possible interpretations of the verse, cf., e.g., W. Hendriksen, *Commentary on I and II Timothy and Titus*, Banner of Truth, London, 1957, pp. 153-156, and D. Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale Commentaries), Tyndale Press, London, 1957, p. 96 ('saviour' used in a double sense). We should also remember that, unlike Romans 5 and 11, 1 Timothy 4: 10 is not part of a doctrinal argument.

Again the position is quite clear: God in His great love has made one way of salvation for all men without exception. Those who refuse this way have no alternative left to them. And accepting the way of salvation, for John as for Paul, is bound up with faith in Jesus Christ.

Before moving on to a positive conclusion, we need a short excursus. There are some passages in the New Testament—I think particularly of Acts 10: 2, 4, 27, 30-35 and (on some interpretations) Romans 2: 12-16—which seem to allow for the fact that some people are saved without actually hearing and confessing the name of Jesus Christ, since in this life they had, as it were, possessed a Christ-shaped faith. They had been genuinely dissatisfied with their surrounding religion and humbly seeking to serve God in prayer and good works as best they knew how. As I have argued elsewhere,⁷ I believe that Scripture leaves this possibility open while giving us no encouragement to think that the category of people involved will be large. There are no promises of salvation for those who neither believe nor are baptized.

I want now to conclude by pointing up another, and more biblical, 'universalism'. This is the doctrine, which is in fact totally opposed to the usual 'universalism', that there is one God and one way of salvation for all, Jesus Christ. This is, of course, assumed and referred to all through the NT. Acts 4: 12 ('no other name . . . in which we must be saved') is perhaps its classic expression: compare John 10: 10, 14: 6, Romans 10: 12-13, and many other passages. We may trace the different biblical elements of this 'universalism' as follows.

It begins with God's promise to Abraham, that in him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. God has chosen to save the world through Abraham's family, and supremely (of course) in the true seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ (see Galatians 3 and Romans 4). For Paul, the cardinal sin of the Jews was that national pride and 'boasting' which turned the vocation of being a light to the Gentiles into a racial privilege. This universal promise is based on the fact that God is one, as was (and is) confessed daily by the pious Jew in the 'Shema' (Rom. 3: 29-30; cf. Deut. 6: 4 ff.). Thus, any suggestion that there is more than one way of salvation is not merely an attack on the uniqueness of Jesus Christ (as we see, for example, in the work of John

⁷ Cf., more fully, 'JCOS', pp. 77-79, 'UWWC', p. 208. Perhaps the best known and most appealing presentation of this view is that of C. S. Lewis in *The Last Battle* (Penguin Books edn., Harmondsworth, 1964), pp. 102-104, 144-150.

Hick), but also contains the implication that there is more than one God.⁸

The universal promise is fulfilled, not in Israel according to the flesh (because of her national pride and consequent failure to accept her suffering Messiah) but in her anointed representative, Jesus. In His death and resurrection He put to death 'fleshly' Israel and brought her to life again as a worldwide community. This is why the resurrection and the Gentile mission are so intimately connected.⁹ Over against the Jewish exclusivism attacked in Romans 2: 17 ff, stands the Christian assurance of Romans 5: 1-11: *we* (the worldwide, believing, missionary church) boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have received the reconciliation.

Biblical 'universalism', therefore, consists in this, that in Christ God has revealed the one way of

⁸ See my review of two books by Hick in *Third Way* vol. 1, no. 25, December 1977, p. 21; and Lewis, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-36, 92-106, 117.

⁹ See W. Pannenberg, *Faith and Reality*, Search Press, London, 1977, pp. 58-62; and my lecture (forthcoming in *Tyndale Bulletin*) entitled 'The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith'.

salvation for all men alike, irrespective of race, sex, colour or status. This biblical 'universalism' (unlike the other sort) gives the strongest motives for evangelism, namely, the love of God and of men. (This itself is evidence that we are thinking biblically here.) This view specifically excludes the other sort of 'universalism', because scripture and experience alike tell us that many do miss the one way of salvation which God has provided. This is a sad fact, and the present writer in no ways enjoys recording it, any more than Paul in Romans 9-11 looked with pleasure on his kinsmen's fate. Yet it cannot be ignored if we wish either to remain true to scripture or really to love our fellow men. If the house is on fire, the most loving thing to do is to raise the alarm.

I frequently meet people who tell me that they are 'universalists' in the usual sense while in no way thinking the Bible supports their view. This position is perfectly clear: I simply disagree with its view of scripture, of God and of Christ. What is not even clear is the position of the person who maintains that universalism finds support in the Bible. It might be more comfortable if it did: but we are in this business to discover truth.