

The Habit of God's Heart

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In 1985, Robert Bellah *et al* published an in-depth study of individualism and commitment in American life under the title *Habits of the Heart* lifting that phrase from Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. Bellah described the mores of the American people as he analyzed the relationship between character and society in the nation. I borrow the phrase to describe the eternal, redemptive intention of the God revealed in the face of Jesus Christ, witnessed to in the Old and New Testaments. It is the habit of God's heart to save. That is the thesis of this essay.

The whole church will readily embrace such a thesis. The one story of the Bible is the story of the searching, seeking God whose intention is the salvation of people and nations and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. Raising the question of the scope of God's redeeming action, however, elicits differing views. Will God save all persons or will God save only some, the others condemned to eternal damnation or to simple annihilation?

The Reformed faith has historically held to the ultimate division of the saved and the lost, the distinction rooted in the mystery of God's electing grace behind which it is impossible to inquire. The saving grace of God draws the elect ones irresistibly, the rest remaining in their lost estate of rebellion. The former demonstrate the mercy of God; the latter, God's justice.

Scripture passages can be cited pointing to what appears to be an eternal distinction between the saved and the lost. The parabolic language of Jesus in Matthew 25:46 and the straightforward words of John 5:29 clearly make that distinction. Yet the issue is not easily settled by scriptural citation. There are equally clear biblical statements that point in the direction of universal salvation, the conviction that God will finally not only renew the whole created order but will redeem and reconcile every person. The apostle Paul in the Adam-Christ discussion of Romans 5 indicates that God's act of grace was out of proportion to Adam's wrongdoing. Paul wrote, "Then as one man's trespass led to

condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men." After wrestling with Israel's rejection of the Messiah in Romans 9-11, Paul wrote, "For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all." He then broke out into a magnificent doxology, an eruption of praise called forth by the contemplation of the triumph of grace of the faithful covenant-keeping God (11:33-36).

The universal reconciliation of all things is expressly stated in Colossians 1:19-20, reconciliation by God through Christ in whom by God's choice the complete being of God came to dwell. And the Christ-hymn of Philippians 2:6-11 concludes with the confident assertion that every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God.

These and other passages have been hotly debated and there has been no lack of wrenching of the plain sense of biblical passages on both sides of the issue. Exegesis alone will not likely settle the question since both particular and universal salvation come to expression within the canon of Scripture. This being the case, how may we come to some resolution of the question?

It should be said, first of all, that we ought not to seek closure on questions that Scripture leaves open. We often desire a finality that our limited knowledge and understanding cannot produce. Not infrequently in the history of the Christian tradition we have claimed to know too much. A proper humility before the mystery of God and grace, of life and death and beyond, becomes us all.

Nor should the question be settled by an anxious fear. Some Christians worry that the consequence of even contemplating the possibility of universal salvation would cut the nerve of evangelism and undercut the proclamation of the gospel. That simply need not follow; indeed, the very opposite could as well be the case, and the change in spirit and attitude with which Christ is offered might totally revolutionize the approach of the church to the world. With what contagious joy might not the gospel be proclaimed if the church executed its mission in light of a universal, redemptive intention and a certainty of the ultimate triumph of grace?

Throughout Christian history some have understood God's redemptive action in Jesus Christ to be universal in its scope. The early church was far more universalistic in its understanding of the radical renewal of reality, the radical alteration of the human situation through God's action in Jesus Christ, than was the church of subsequent centuries. Among the fathers of the early church we find statements pointing to the final conquest of evil and rebellion, if not within history, then beyond, through some kind of purgation process. Clement of Alexandria wrote,

Punishment is, in its operation, like medicine; it dissolves the hard heart, purges away the filth of uncleanness, and reduces the swellings of pride and haughtiness; thus restoring its subject to a sound and healthful state (Pedagog, 1.8).

Clement's more famous pupil, Origin, wrote,

...God is a consuming fire, what is it that is to be consumed by him? We say it is wickedness, and whatever proceeds from it, such as is figuratively called "wood, hay, and stubble" (1 Cor. iii), which denote the evil works of man. Our God is a consuming fire in this sense; and he shall come as a refiner's fire to purify rational nature from the alloy of wickedness... (*Contra Celsum*. Lib. IV. 13).

Gregory, bishop of Nyssa, declared,

All evil, however, must at length be entirely removed from everything, so that it shall no more exist. For such being the nature of sin, that it cannot exist without a corrupt motive, it must, of course, be perfectly dissolved and wholly destroyed, so that nothing can remain a receptacle of it, when all motive and influence shall spring from God alone (*De Anima et Resurrectione*).

Theodore of Mopsuestia held

That sin is an unavoidable part of the development and education of man; that some carry it to a greater extent than others, but that God will finally overrule it for their final establishment in good.

Among these early Christian thinkers there is no denial of evil and sin, but they seem to entertain no doubt that God will finally conquer the last vestige of evil and restore all things through remedial punishment.

It was not until 544 A.D. at a local council called by Justinian that the teaching of universal salvation was condemned.

John Murray is considered the father of Universalism in the United States. Born in England in 1741, he was a fervent Calvinist preacher who came under the influence of a Universalist preacher named James Rely. Murray became an ardent preacher of Universalist conviction, not forsaking the high Calvinism of his early training except to see in Christ's death an atonement not only universal in its sufficiency, but also in its application. He rejected the Arminian position that Christ died for the whole race but that only those who believed on him, accepting the gospel, would be saved. Salvation was all of God and all of grace. Following Rely, Murray taught that Christ died for all and therefore all would be saved. He accepted the orthodox, evangelical premises regarding human sin and need of redemption available through Christ alone, but he drew from them universalistic conclusions.

In 1899 Lyman Abbott, editor of *The Outlook*, representing Congregationalists, addressed the Universalist General Convention on the subject "Why I Am Not a Universalist." Agreeing with the universalist's position against eternal

punishment, Abbott yet denied that all would be saved, not because Christ's death did not provide the possibility of salvation for all. This he believed. However, he refused to go on to affirm that God would save all, for that would be to deny the creature's freedom to refuse the gift.

Abbott states bluntly: "I do not believe that some men are fore-ordained to everlasting death." Yet he declares, "I am not a Universalist." With precision, he states, "If I were a Calvinist, I should be a Universalist. If I believed that God could make all men righteous, I should be sure that he would make all men righteous; otherwise he would not be a righteous God."

In our century the question of universalism has surfaced in Reformed theology in the work of Karl Barth. Berkouwer's early study of Barth was entitled *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*. Barth's detractors labeled him a Universalist and wrote him off as dangerous. Yet the matter is not that simple. Barth resisted systematizing; he defied neat pigeonholing. In a lecture delivered to a Swiss Reformed minister's association in 1956, he reflected on those early, heady days and the theological ferment he fomented. He entitled his remarks "The Humanity of God." One consequence of the humanity of God, Barth maintains, is that the sense and sound of our word must be fundamentally positive. He writes:

To open up again the abyss closed in Jesus Christ cannot be our task. Man is *not* good: that is indeed true and must once more be asserted. God does not turn towards him without uttering in inexorable sharpness a "No" to his transgression. Thus theology has no choice but to put this "No" into words within the framework of its theme. However, it must be the "No" which Jesus Christ has taken upon Himself for us men, in order that it may no longer affect us and that we may no longer place ourselves under it. What takes place in God's humanity is, since it includes that "No" in itself, the *affirmation* of man (*The Humanity of God*, p. 58).

After developing that notion, Barth raises the question, "Does this mean universalism?" He then makes three observations "in which one is to detect no position for or against that which passes among us under this term" (p. 59).

Barth suggests one ought not surrender to the panic that that term seems to spread before informing oneself exactly concerning its sense or non-sense. One should, he contends, at least be stimulated by Colossians 1:19 and parallel passages to determine whether the concept could not perhaps have a good meaning. And he suggests finally that the "danger" with which universalism seems to be attended should be balanced by concern for an even greater danger: a theology that fosters suspicious questioning because of its own legalistic perspective and morose spirit.

Of this Barth is certain: we have no right to set limits to the loving-kindness of God which has appeared in Jesus Christ. Rather, he argues, it is our duty to see and to understand it as still greater than we have seen before.

Barth declares that the Christian witness cannot allow people to remain entrenched in their darkness. Those whose eyes are not yet open to the truth of the gospel must be questioned, encountered, shaken, by addressing and treating them as those who are really and directly called already to a knowledge of what God has done for and to them and who therefore stand in the light of life even if they resist it or are unaware of it. The towering movement of the saving God in Jesus Christ effecting reconciliation and fulfilling the covenant with the human creature determines the outcome.

The practical implication of such a conviction is that one can never view any person simply in the light of his or her sin, corruption, mode of life, perverted nature, and evil actions. All this must be taken seriously and will be true perhaps for a large majority of people, Barth acknowledges. To be indifferent to the unchristian state of those yet uncalled has always spelled the death of Christian responsibility in relation to others. But there is something else that has to be taken more seriously, and indeed infinitely more seriously from the qualitative standpoint, than their blatant non-Christianity. Their vocation is before them no less surely than that Jesus Christ has died and risen again for them. This is something of unconditional significance.

Such a confidence will determine the Christian's posture toward others, insuring an openness, an unlimited readiness to see in the aliens of today the brothers and sisters of tomorrow and to love them as such.

Because every person stands in the light of life through what God accomplished through Jesus Christ, the called are free and responsible to address every person and all people in light of that reality; it is our obligation to do so. In being faithful to the call to witness, the one in whom the work of grace has been effectual experiences again and again the graciousness of God's call.

One cannot fail to be impressed with the grandeur of God's grace, rooted eternally in the habit of God's heart, the determination to reconcile all things, or with God's gracious election in Jesus Christ, the alteration of reality through God's action in history in Christ. One cannot fail to be impressed by the sense of awe and humility experienced by the one in whose life the miracle occurs, and by the spirit of openness, sensitivity, and confidence with which the church bears witness to the world.

The nerve of evangelism is not only not severed, for the impulse to witness is grounded in and motivated by the magnificence of God's saving intention and action. Rather than betraying an adversarial relationship, an over-againstness from which the witness is given, those consciously in Christ, the light of life, stand

in solidarity with all brothers and sisters, witnessing to what is not yet apparent, but what is nonetheless the real situation—all of God, all of grace.

It ought also to be clear that an openness to the possibility of universal salvation is posited on the triumph of the good and gracious God and not at all on human worthiness or human potential. Further, it must be recognized that a conviction about the universality of God's saving grace in no way eliminates the wrath of God against all unrighteousness and the seriousness of the judgment of God. In reality the conviction of God's determination to redeem all people is a catalyst to reckon honestly and freely with the righteous judgment of God before whom no untruth or injustice can stand.

Hendrikus Berkhof gives a full discussion to the question before us in *Well-Founded Hope*, the chapter entitled "The Double Image of the Future," reprinted in *Perspectives* (January 1988, pp. 8-9). He deals seriously with the biblical witness but concludes, as was stated above, that Scripture leaves us with a double track. Countless attempts have been made to subsume one track of texts under the other by ingenious "exegetical tricks" but, Berkhof concludes, "we cannot smooth out this contradiction in the New Testament." All that we read about the future, texts offering consolation and texts of warning, do not "fit together like a jigsaw puzzle." In the case of the passages giving warning, these present the gospel in its nature as a call to decision; the passages offering consolation give hope and the promise of eventual salvation of all.

We must hear both witnesses; we must not reduce one to the other. But we cannot simply allow them to stand with no link between them. Berkhof suggests we pronounce them "one after the other," for "only the person who has learned to tremble at the possibility of rejection may speak about universal salvation."

It is the believing church, declares Berkhof, that can confess the last secret. In the end it is the power of God's "yes" that triumphs over the recalcitrance of the human "no." This is our last word but a last word that must be spoken if we believe God is ultimately not powerless or cruel or arbitrary, but rather infinite in mercy through Jesus Christ.

Summarizing his conclusion on the issue in *Christian Faith*, Berkhof writes,

We know that the covenant means that God's faithfulness ever and again does battle with man's unfaithfulness. What ultimately will be forced to yield: divine faithfulness or human unfaithfulness? Paul raised that question with respect to Israel, as the trial grounds of God's relationship to man; and he ends with the confession: "God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all" (Rom. 11:32). These considerations compel us, not to detract from the gravity of the human "No" against God and its consequences, but to think just a little more of the divine "Yes" to recalcitrant humans. God is serious about the responsibility of our decision, but he is even more serious about the

responsibility of his love. The darkness of rejection and God-forsakenness cannot and may not be argued away, but no more can and may it be eternalized. For God's sake we hope that hell will be a form of purification (Rev. ed. p. 536).

Gabriel Fackre comes to a similar conclusion. After surveying the various positions taken in the course of the Christian tradition, he sides with the position he calls "Light Overcoming Darkness," which he says, "...is not a disclosure of what shall be, but a hoping for what *might* be. All our ruminations here about the destiny of the faithless and loveless must be put in this context of *Christian hoping*" (*The Christian Story*, p. 237).

Fackre expresses his hope in these words:

The judgment on that Day in which the sun of Shalom rises over all is one in which the fires of liberation and reconciliation refine and its light so burns away the shadows that the last darkness is overcome. The God whose "will it is that all men should find salvation and come to know the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4) has the power of the Holy Spirit to keep that promise and accomplish that Dream. The agony of this final contest of light and darkness cannot be understated.... There is hell and judgment. But the last word in the Christian Story is not that of a half-accomplished purpose, but of a promise kept and a Vision that becomes Reality (p. 240).

One would look far to find Calvinistic universalism set forth more clearly and winsomely than was described by Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. in a *Banner* editorial entitled "Who Is Saved?" (Aug. 24, 1987). Plantinga acknowledges it is "a glorious picture." Yet he settles finally for the traditional, orthodox position which he calls "a painful scheme." He writes:

In Calvinist orthodoxy God wants to save everybody (1 Timothy 2:4). And God can save everybody: God arranges for the death of Christ to radiate sufficient power for the salvation of all. God also orders the gospel preached to all. But, at the end of the day, God abandons some. God wants everybody saved but never intends to save all. God wants everybody saved but doesn't plan on it. The reprobates are heartbreakingly, finally, disastrously lost. God could save them, but he doesn't. And nobody knows why.

The practical, existential fallout of such a system is brought home poignantly by Plantinga as he goes on. "Probably none of us needs reminding that this is a painful scheme. The awfulness of it comes home to us when we look at the spiritual rebellion of a son or daughter. Could it possibly be that God has *never intended to save this precious person?*"

At the risk of presumption, I, as parent and theologian, must respond: No! That could not possibly be!

William Barclay, whose New Testament studies have opened the Scripture to so many, wrote near his life's end a *Testament of Faith*. After confessing his belief in life after death, he writes, "But in one thing I would go beyond strict orthodoxy—I am a convinced universalist. I believe that in the end all men will be gathered into the love of God." Barclay gives a fourfold basis for his conviction, the first being that there is enough evidence in the New Testament itself to justify it. He cites John 12:32, Romans 11:32, 1 Corinthians 15:22, 28, and 1 Timothy 2:4-6. Secondly, he argues against the eternalizing of punishment on the basis of the Greek word *aionios*. Thirdly, he denies the possibility of setting limits to the grace of God—in this world or any other world there may be. "I believe," he declares, "that the grace of God is as wide as the universe." Finally, Barclay believed "implicitly in the ultimate and complete triumph of God, the time when God will be everything to everyone" (1 Cor. 15:24-28). He contended,

If God was no more than a King or judge, then it would be possible to speak of his triumph, if his enemies were agonizing in hell or were totally and completely obliterated and wiped out. But God is not only King and Judge, God is *Father*—he is indeed Father more than anything else...The only triumph a Father can know is to have all his family back home. The only victory love can enjoy is the day when its offer of love is answered by the return of love. The only possible final triumph is a universe loved by and in love with God (p. 60f.).

In light of God's gracious election in Jesus Christ, of God's steadfast love and covenant faithfulness, of God's infinite power and patience, we have good reason to trust and confidently hope that the habit of God's heart will finally heal every wound, overcome all opposition, and gather all God's children safely home.

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