

Universalism

The Doctrine that Says Everybody Goes to Heaven

By Dave DeWitt

Thesis: The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the Bible does not support the universalist idea that all people eventually go to heaven.

Definitions

Gotquestion.org says, “Universalism is the belief that everyone will be saved...that all people eventually end up in heaven. [gotquestions.org/universalism.html]

This is the most basic definition of universalism. But it should be noted:

- Christian Universalism is not annihilationism, which teaches that unbelievers in hell are eventually (or immediately) burned up, i.e., annihilated.
- Christian Universalism is not inconsistent with exclusivism, which says Jesus is the only (exclusive) way to God. Christian universalists are saying all people will eventually be in heaven, not that there are many ways to get there (that is called dualism).
- Christian Universalism does not necessarily exclude repentance. Otis Ainsworth Skinner reported, “... we do not expect any man will be saved while he continues in sin. The reason why we hold to universal salvation, is, we expect all men will repent.” [A Series of Sermons in Defence of the Doctrine of Universal Salvation, p. 209 (spelling and emphasis theirs)]

The “Christian Universalist Association” publishes this definition:

The CUA is an association of churches, along with individuals, and other ministries. We teach the overwhelming historical and scriptural evidence that all are reconciled to God; as revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Like the early Church, we spread this message with an emphasis on how it positively impacts and motivates people to love in action (James 2:8). [christianuniversalist.org]

Universalism is an old idea. Roman Catholic author Trent Horn (in criticism of universalism) reported this historical note about Origin, writing in the third century:

...it was his view that all human beings would eventually be drawn to God and all things will be reconciled to God and no one would be in Hell...the church condemned Origin’s views and they condemned the doctrine of universalism, I think around the year 543. [catholic.com/audio/cot/what-is-universalism.]

Keith DeRose, Professor of Philosophy at Yale University, says,

... “universalism” refers to the position that eventually all human beings will be saved and will enjoy everlasting life with Christ. [campuspress.yale.edu/keithderose/1129-2/]

Professor DeRose makes (in my opinion) the most thorough case in favor of universalism. So, for the most part, I will be evaluating his explanations.

Some Basic Bible Passages that Deny Universalism

- **Daniel 12:2**, *Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt.*
- **Matthew 7:13-14**, *Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.*

- **Matthew 7:21-23**, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. “Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ “And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness.”
- **Matthew 25:41**, “Then He will also say to those on His left, ‘Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels.’”
- **2 Thessalonians 1:8-9**, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.
- **Jude 7**, ...just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them, since they in the same way as these indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh, are exhibited as an example in undergoing the punishment of eternal fire.
- **Revelation 20:10**, And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

Also, throughout the Bible, we see God’s wrath against those who sin. And they are never described as those who will one day repent (Psalm 2:4-6; 5:4-6; 7:11; 11:5; 89:46; 90:7-11; Proverbs 6:16-19; 12:22; Ezekiel 36:16-21; Hosea 5:10; 9:15; Nahum 1:2-6; Zephaniah 3:6-8; Malachi 1:3; Matthew 21:40-45; 23:29-39; John 3:36; Romans 1:18; 9:22-24; 2 Thessalonians 2:11-12; Hebrews 10:30-31).

For example, **Nahum 1:2** says,

A jealous and avenging God is the LORD; the LORD is avenging and wrathful. The LORD takes vengeance on His adversaries, and He reserves wrath for His enemies.

Bible Passages Used In Support of Universalism

1 Corinthians 15:22, “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.”

Professor DeRose says this:

It’s very clear, I think, that those who are “made alive” in Christ are, as it’s often put, “saved.” The question is, To whom will this happen? This passage’s answer: All! ... The passage doesn’t say, “...so also shall all who are in Christ be made alive.” If it said that, I wouldn’t be so cheered by the passage. Rather, “in Christ” is an adverbial phrase that modifies the verb “shall be made” or perhaps the whole clause, “shall all be made alive.” Thus, this passage says that all shall be made alive. How? In Christ. [DeRose paper referenced above]

Answer: The passage is about the bodily resurrection of believers. It is not about salvation. Believers are *made alive*, raised from the dead and given their resurrected bodies, at the Rapture (2 Corinthians 4:14). [Unbelievers are also bodily resurrected. In their case it is to the Great White Throne Judgment (Revelation 20:11-15). But this passage is not about that.] First Corinthians 15:22 is about the bodily resurrection of believers. *All*, everyone, died in Adam but concerning everyone *in Christ*, *all will be made alive*, raised from the dead. The context clarifies this.

Consider the verse before and the verse after 1 Corinthians 15:22.

1 Corinthians 15:21, *For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead.*

1 Corinthians 15:23, *But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ’s at His coming,*

Verses 21 and 22 tell us, just as it is certain that all died in Adam, it is also certain that all in Christ will raise from the dead. Verse 23 gives the order of resurrection as first Jesus Christ and second those He comes for at the Rapture of the church (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

Colossians 1:19-20, "For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven."

Professor DeRose says this:

Note again the "all." Show me someone burning in hell, and I'll show you someone who's not yet been reconciled to God. So, show me someone who's under divine punishment forever, or who is simply annihilated, and I'll show you someone who's never reconciled to God through Christ, and thus someone who gives the lie to this passage. [DeRose paper referenced above]

Answer: It seems that Professor DeRose does not understand the doctrine of reconciliation and its role in salvation. Every human being is reconciled by the cross. The cross of Christ accomplished:

- Propitiation (satisfying God's wrath against sin – 1 John 2:2)
- Reconciliation (changing mankind so all people are savable – 2 Corinthians 5:19)
- Redemption (paying for all our sin – 2 Peter 2:1)

Reconciliation means "change." The cross reconciled every human being to God. All people are changed in that they are now savable. In 2 Corinthians 5:19, Paul said, *namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them.* The whole world has been changed so that their sin is no longer the issue that separates them from God. Consider two questions:

- Why do unbelievers go to hell? Answer: because they are sinners. They are *dead* in their *trespasses and sins* (Ephesians 2:1).
- Why do unbelievers not go to heaven? Answer: because they have not received Jesus Christ as their Savior. Their sin is no longer the issue. Christ paid for their sins, so faith in Jesus Christ Himself is the only issue (John 1:12; 3:16; 5:24; 14:6; Acts 4:12). Colossians 1:19-20 teaches a universal reconciliation, not a universal salvation.

Romans 5:18-19, "So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous."

Professor DeRose writes this:

For whom will Christ's act of righteousness lead to acquittal [common word for *justification*] and life? Answer: "all men." ...Show me someone who never enjoys acquittal [*justification*] and life, and I'll show someone for whom Christ's act of righteousness didn't lead to acquittal [*justification*] and life, and thus someone who gives the lie to this verse.... That many will be made righteous is perfectly compatible with all being made righteous. All dogs are mammals. True or false: Many dogs are mammals? True, of course... "Many" and "all" don't logically exclude each other. [DeRose paper referenced above]

Answer: The "Expositors Bible Commentary" has this note:

... if the doctrine of universalism were being taught here, Paul would be contradicting himself, for he has already pictured men as perishing because of sin (2:12; cf. 1 Cor 1:18). Furthermore, his entire presentation of salvation has emphasized the fact that justification is granted only on the basis of faith. [EBC commentary on Romans 5]

Romans 5 is about imputed sin. We are all sinners because we were born into Adam's sinful human race. Romans 5:18 tells us that, in spite of our position of *condemnation*, Christ's act of righteousness made justification available to all men. Professor DeRose equates "all" with "many," using the logic: "All dogs are mammals. True or false: Many dogs are mammals? True, of course." But that does not make his case. No one who is intending to say that all dogs are mammals would say "Some dogs are

mammals.” And if they said “many dogs are mammals,” we would assume they meant some dogs are not mammals, but a lot of them are. The *all* vs. *many* conflict is resolved by simply saying “many” means a large number. A large number of people were condemned in Adam, and a large number *will be made righteous* in Christ.

Romans 11:32, “For God has shut up all in disobedience [literally, unfaithfulness] so that He may show mercy to all.”

Professor DeRose says this:

What’s going on here is that the quantifier phrases of natural language (“all”, “most”, “some”, etc.) are to be understood, on an occasion of use, relative to a contextually determined domain. Thus, when I say, “All the beer is warm”, the contextually determined domain is the things in this room, so “All the beer”, in context, means all the beer in this room. So there is some sense in which “all” doesn’t always mean all ... But when the domain is limited, there has to be some fairly clear clue as to what the limited domain is. When “all” is used in the New Testament, as in “For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God,” and similar passages, the “all”, I take it, refers to all people. [DeRose paper referenced above]

Answer: It is true, and a very good point, that quantifier phrases must be understood “relative to a contextually determined domain.” But what is that contextual domain in this verse? Who does God show mercy to? The contextually determined domain of Romans 11 is about God including the Gentiles as benefactors of His revelation. God has shut up all in unbelief so He may show mercy (unmerited compassion) to all races of people. The verse says all races (Jews and Gentiles) have been unfaithful, yet all races (Jews and Gentiles) will mercifully be given an opportunity to believe.

Summary and Conclusion

There is definitely a universal component to the biblical doctrine of salvation. The universal accomplishments of Christ’s death on the cross include:

Universal Propitiation (satisfying God’s wrath – 1 John 2:2)

Universal Reconciliation (making mankind savable – 2 Corinthians 5:19)

Universal Redemption (paying for all our sin – 2 Peter 2:1)

But not universal Justification.

Justification (being declared right – Galatians 2:16), which results in our salvation, requires faith in Jesus Christ (John 1:12; 3:16; 5:24; 14:6; Acts 4:12). There is no indication in Scripture that everyone will exercise that faith. The problem the universalists have is there is no passage in the Bible which says what they claim.

No passage says all people will eventually repent.

No passage says people go to hell for a while, until their sins are paid for and then go to heaven.

No passage says sinners have an opportunity to come to Christ after their death.

The reality is, unbelievers do not want to go to heaven. They may want to avoid suffering in hell, but that does not mean they want to be with God. Unbelievers love sin and hate God, His holy character, and its righteous applications. C. S. Lewis, in his 1945 book “The Great Divorce,” tells the story about people in hell who take a bus ride from hell to heaven. After learning what heaven is like, they all voluntarily get back on the bus to return to hell.