

Grace Church
Roanoke, Virginia
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Elementary Apologetics
Lesson #19

WHY I BELIEVE

Universalism Is Not Biblical

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Universalism is the teaching that all men without exception are saved now or will ultimately be saved in eternity. The great majority of universalists are not within the sphere of the Christian religion, for the great religions of the world are committed to some form of universalism. However, there are many in Christendom who are blatant universalists and claim to go to the Bible for their position. It is to refute these false teachers within the church that this message is directed, for universalism and Biblical Christianity are diametrically opposed and do not mix. Christian-universalism and real Biblical Christianity are two separate religions based on two totally different sets of presuppositions. NOTE: One of the great tragedies of modern day evangelicalism is that many are bordering on universalism and do not know it. They are ignorantly propagating universal tenets, believing that they are teaching the true gospel.
- B. Universalism is based on an unbiblical concept of God, an unbiblical understanding of the nature of man and an unbiblical viewpoint of Christ's atonement. Universalists believe that the basic nature of God is love and deny or ignore all the other attributes of God as stated in the Bible. They are persuaded that God loves all men indiscriminately and all men are basically good; therefore a loving God would not throw any of His creatures into an eternal hell. They are also convinced that the specific design of Christ's atonement was the redemption of all men. They reason that if God loved the world so much that He sent His Son to die as a substitution for the whole world, He certainly is not going to punish them for all eternity. NOTE: Any person who begins his theology with a God of love only will never come to the truth of the Bible on salvation, for God is declared to be all-powerful, all-knowing, everywhere present, eternal, holy, just, good, merciful, gracious and love. Eternal punishment springs from the holiness of God, for He hates sin and His justice demands that sin be judged. God's eternal wrath burns hot against sin and sinners, but God's eternal love, mercy and grace are the basis for salvation of men in Christ.
- C. Universalists appeal to the Bible as a proof text for their beliefs, and there are some verses when taken out of context or when not compared with other scripture that seem to teach universalism. A case must be made against universalism, not from a few isolated verses, but from a total Biblical theology. Universalism

cannot stand when one sets forth a Biblical approach to sin, judgment and eternal punishment (cf. Lesson #17-18) and has a God-centered approach to salvation.

II. UNIVERSALISTS BELIEVE THE BIBLE DOES NOT TEACH THE ETERNAL PUNISHMENT OF THE WICKED

- A. Universalists believe in the eternal salvation of all men but reject the concept of eternal punishment for the wicked (those who have no Savior for their sins). They say the word “eternal” (aionos) does not mean eternal in duration but is limited in duration (Gen. 49:26 – “everlasting hills”; II Chron. 6:2 – a temple “forever.”). NOTE: Some universalists believe that there is a future judgment and a place of punishment for men who have not received Christ on this earth. This, however, will be a “short hell” and ultimately men will be released from this place by a loving God. Hell is a place to undergo remedial punishment and when one has learned his lesson he is let out and goes to heaven. NOTE: This is very closely related to the Roman Catholic concept of purgatory.

ANSWERS:

1. The word “eternal” is used figuratively at times in the Bible but it is almost always in a context that is dealing with poetic language.
2. The word “eternal” is used of all three members of the Trinity – Father (Rom. 16:26), Son (I Tim. 1:17), and the Holy Spirit (Heb. 9:14). God is certainly eternal with no end, for if God has an end, He is not God. If God is not eternal, then there is no eternal salvation for any man.
3. The destiny of lost men is bound up with the destiny of evil angels (Matt. 25:41). Surely the Devil and his angels deserve eternal punishment. If the forces of hell are lost, then men are also lost. NOTE: Consistent universalists must believe that even the Devil and his angels will experience ultimate reconciliation to God.
4. Matthew 25:46 the word “eternal” is used of both the bliss of the saints and the misery of the wicked. We conclude if there is no eternal punishment, neither is there eternal life. If there is no eternal life, then universalists have no basis for their convictions.
5. There are other expressions to describe the eternality of hell – “unquenchable fire” (Mark 9:43) and a place where “the worm dieth not” (Mark 9:48).

III. UNIVERSALISTS BELIEVE THAT GOD DESIRES TO SAVE THE WHOLE HUMAN RACE

- A. II Peter 3:9: Universalists say that it is not God's will (sovereign will) that any man should perish but that all men should come to repentance (if not in this world at least in the next world).

ANSWERS:

1. One possible view is that this verse deals with God's benevolence towards all men and speaks of God's desire for all men to be saved. A distinction must be made between God's decree and God's desire. While it is God's emotional will for all to be saved, it is not in His secret will for all to be saved, for all men obviously do not receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This view demands that the word "willing" (boulomai) be taken to mean "desire," and it does mean this in a few places in the N.T. However, boulomai generally speaks of God's deliberate, sovereign will.
 2. Another possible view which seems to fit the context better is that the "any" refers back to the "usward" (3:9) and the "beloved" (3:8). Boulomai ("willing") is given its full force. Therefore this verse refers to Christians or potential Christians. It may be looking at the total community of God's elect who shall be saved and kept before the second advent, or it may refer to Christians who were going into false teaching, denying the second advent. If it is the last possibility, it was not God's sovereign will that any of these Christians should perish by falling into this heresy and all would come to repentance by changing their minds on the matter.
- B. II TIM.2:4: Universalists say that this is a specific wish and desire of God to save all men and God can and does bring about all His wishes and desires.

ANSWERS:

1. One view is to take this as God's desire but not His decree, and this fits the word "would" for it is the Greek word Thelo which often means "desire." This verse does not say it is God's design to save all men but it points to His benevolent desire towards the human race in that He has provided a redeemer and makes the offer of salvation to all. NOTE:

The problem with this interpretation is that thelo quite often means God's sovereign will (cf. John 1:13; 17:24; Rom. 9:18). Furthermore it is difficult to conceive of a sovereign God who cannot bring about His own wishes and desires (cf. Job 23:13; Psa. 132:13-14).

2. Another view is to give the word "all" a limited meaning, for this word is used in a restrictive or relative sense over 500 times in the N.T. In this context, it means that God desires to save all kinds of men, for it says in II Tim. 2:1-2 that prayer is to be made for "all men" and then it is qualified by the words "king" and "all that are in authority." Therefore it is perfectly legitimate to limit the word "all" in II Tim. 2:4 to all kinds, types and classes of men.

- C. I Corinthians 15:22: Universalists say that all men are made alive in Christ just as all men died in Adam.

ANSWERS:

1. The very context limits the meaning of "all" for I Cor. 15:18 says, "Then they which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished." It is a specific "in Christ" relationship that keeps men from eternal judgment.
2. The meaning is "In Christ all (all who believe, the elect) shall be made alive (spiritually)."

IV. UNIVERSALISTS BELIEVE THAT GOD DESIGNED TO SAVE THE WHOLE HUMAN RACE

- A. John 12:32: Universalists teach that because of Christ's death (lifting up) all men indiscriminately are drawn to Christ and saved.

ANSWERS:

1. The first thing to note is "men" is in italics and was added by the translators to get a better sense of the passage, but is not part of the Greek text. The text literally says, "I will draw all to me." Therefore the context must determine who the "all" are. The context is about judgment (12:31), and those who lose their life for Christ shall have eternal life and those who do not receive Christ will not have eternal life (12:24-25). The "all" of John 12:32 refers to true believers and followers of Jesus Christ.

2. This verse must be compared with John 6:44. Here the word “draw” is the same as in John 12:32. John 6:44 says men cannot come to Christ except the Father draw them first and it is these that Christ will raise up in the resurrection unto life in the final day (cf. John 5:28-29). Therefore the “all” of John 12:32 must refer to all who trust in Christ or all the elect.

B. Acts 3:21: Universalists hold that there will be a time of “restitution of all things”; therefore all men someday will be saved.

ANSWERS:

1. The context is about judgment (3:23) and the necessity of repentance to be saved (3:19-20).
2. The “restitution of all things” may refer to the millennium which will come when the Jews as a nation turn to the Messiah and Christ sets up His kingdom over this earth.

C. Romans 5:18: Universalists teach that through the work of Christ all men indiscriminately will be justified (declared righteous).

ANSWERS:

1. The context indicates the justification of life is for the “many” who are made righteous through Christ (5:19). There the “all men” refers to all who believe in Christ or the elect of God.
2. It is obvious that not all men are justified (declared righteous before God) because justification is by God’s grace (Rom. 3:24) and is appropriated through faith in Christ (Rom. 3:38). One cannot be declared righteous until he trusts in Christ and not all men have or will trust the Savior (II Cor. 5:21).

D. Philippians 2:9-11: Universalists believe that some time in the future all men will confess Christ as Lord. Perhaps God will give men a second chance and, of course, all will recognize the error of their ways and turn to Jesus Christ and acknowledge His Lordship.

ANSWERS:

1. It is in the Father’s plan that the whole body of created intelligent beings will one day acknowledge Christ’s Lordship. Those in heaven as well as those in hell shall

confess that Jesus is Lord. Though the damned will recognize that Christ is Lord, there will be no repentance on their part.

2. In Philippians 3:18-19 it is asserted that the end of those who are enemies of the cross of Christ shall be “destruction.”

V. UNIVERSALISM AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

- A. Destruction of Biblical Christianity: Any man who holds to any form of universalism is not in accordance with the Apostle’s doctrine as it is recorded in the Bible and has rejected true Christianity. If all men are going to be saved, this destroys all particularism of real Christianity – particular grace, redemption, election, love and mercy. Universalism is just another religion of good works.
- B. Destruction of Evangelism: A person who is a universalist will feel no real burden or urgency to spread the gospel, for he believes all men will be saved. Universalists within Christian circles stop preaching redemption of the individual soul from sin and preach redemption of society from its social evils. Universalists teach a social gospel.
- C. Destruction of Missions: Universalists usually send no missionaries to foreign lands because they feel all will be saved sometime. They feel the heathen are not on the best road to heaven, but they are on a road to heaven. If universalists do send missionaries, it is to bring the heaven civilization not the gospel of redeeming grace in Christ Jesus.