

Free Will, the *Nous* and Divine Judgment A Critical Analysis of Three Visions of Universalism

I'll say it again at the outset. I'm not a *universalist*. But some of my friends are ... some of my evangelical friends, some of my Orthodox friends. So I ask them questions about that. This is not *flirting* (as Lewis and Barth were accused of), but simply being *fair*. In the name of 'discernment,' I've encountered a LOT of name-calling, dismissiveness, intentional misrepresentation and caricaturing. "Earth to Matilda!" – that's *not* discernment. We can and must do better than that. Surely we could at least build bridges (from both ends of the chasm!) long enough so that listening could displace lobbying.

In this article, I'm trying to address fairly and critique carefully three brands of universalism, which I'll call popular universalism, Reformed universalism and *apokatastasis*. Although I personally self-identify as a 'hopeful inclusivist' (cf. Kallistos Ware and Hans Urs Von Baltasar), I think it's important to fairly distinguish and assess these points on the universalist spectrum, for they represent quite a broad range and some extremely different convictions about Christ, redemption and human response.

It's also an important exercise for me: can I fairly represent a view to which I don't hold with both enough charity and accuracy such that the universalist (in this case), can say, "Yes, that was fair." Or at least, "not exactly, let me explain."

Popular Universalism

When asked if I'm a universalist, my short response is *no*, because of the sloppy or pejorative assumptions so often attached to the label. Specifically, the pop-universalism so often assumed by the populist left and held in derision by the Christian right imagines that:

- everyone is "in" without reference to Christ or his redemptive work;
- everyone is "in" without regard to their personal response in this life or the next;
- no one needs to hear the Good News of Christ, since their ultimate destiny is assured.

To these assumptions, we must say an emphatic NO! Any genuine *Christian* universalism completely depends on the inclusion of all *in the work of Christ*. That is, if all are saved, all are only saved because of what Christ alone accomplished through his incarnation, death and resurrection. Apart from Christ, all are 'in Adam' and all are perishing ... but 'in Christ,' all will be made alive. So say the Christian universalists, citing the Apostle Paul.

Further, Christian universalists agree that a *personal response* to the love of God is absolutely necessary. However, because of Christ's victory over the grave—because he now holds the keys of death and *hades*—a response to the Good News may, for many, await the next life when the deception of the world, flesh and devil cease to veil hearts and blind eyes to the love of God. When the book of Revelation seems to imply, in chapters 21-22, that postmortem entry into the New Jerusalem is possible, it specifies: only by having one's robes "washed in the blood of the Lamb."

And third, the idea that Christian universalism renders sharing the Good News of Jesus unnecessary is ludicrous, given the depth of suffering in this world and the opportunity to know Christ and taste eternal life now. Perhaps the greatest missionary movement in history—the Moravian Brethren—gave themselves (even into voluntary slavery) to sharing the Good News on every shore. Yet many of their bishops were universalists. Then why bother risking life and limb to share a Gospel of inclusion? To ask that betrays a tremendous oversight: Jesus is the best thing that's every happened to us and to know him is a greater reward than heaven itself ... indeed, to know him *is eternal life*. Do we respond to the Gospel just to attain heaven or avoid hell? Is Christ *himself* not worthy of our love and worship?

Reformed Universalism

Beyond the popular Jesus-free universalism that overlooks these points, I find two different types of Christian universalism, both of which lay out the logic of ultimate redemption simply and powerfully. First, what I'll call *Reformed Universalism* argues that if God is all-powerful and all-loving, then all must be saved. That is, if God *can* save all (since he is all-powerful) and if he *wants to* save all (since he is all-loving), then he most certainly *will* save all. Since God is not willing that *any* should perish, but that *all* should come to Christ, he has done everything necessary to see his loving will fulfilled. On the face of it, this logic seems airtight.

However, both its proponents and detractors do seem to bring an assumption to the table ... that salvation is a unilateral act of the Father's will, regardless of the will of the one saved. To be fair, a spectrum of opinion exists, but in general this type of *election* to salvation rides on Calvin's *irresistible grace*. John Calvin taught that the elect are chosen to salvation and that when God regenerates the elect, the grace of God is irresistible. A Reformed Universalist merely adds that since it is not God's will that *any* should perish, then obviously *all* are elect 'in Christ,' just as *all* had been damned in Adam (citing Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15).

The difficulty for many is that universal election attributes an absolute will to God that appears to negate the free will of humankind. That is, if God willfully saves and humanity somehow submits to that will ... doesn't this violated the whole notion of free will? A softer version of this sees God's love in eternal pursuit of his wayward children, until their resistance is finally 'worn down'—again, one might question whether wearing down the resistant will is a genuinely free will response.

This commitment to honoring and retaining human free will in perpetuity is what led me to opt instead for hopeful inclusivism. That is, while the love of God endures forever, so does the *possibility* that some may willfully resist God's mercy forever. While God is relentless in his grace, in light of his observable commitment to free will, our inclusivism can only be hopeful ... so we hope and pray for the redemption of all while stopping short of invalidating the human freedom, even if that freedom is employed to resist God.

Moreover, the gravity with which the Bible warns readers of this possibility—the weightiness it gives to the reality of divine judgment (even if redemptive)—should hardly leave us shrugging, “No big deal.” Christ treats sin and judgment as very big deals, and the lengths and depths he endured to overcome them (crucifixion and death at our hands) cannot be regarded as trivial. I would point out that my Reformed Universalist friends would agree,

That said ...

I'd propose that the problem with irresistible grace and also its counterpart—the free will objection—is that both sides of the coin mistakenly elevate the faculty of the will to primacy in the work of salvation. Irresistible grace elevates God's will to that which cannot be resisted, thus undermining something essential to authentic humanity. And the free will objection elevates man's will in the work of redemption, making our salvation completely conditional on our willing response to or willful rejection of grace. I'm not sure this problem occurred to early proponents of *apokatastasis* (universal restoration – Acts 3:21) like Clement, Origen or the Cappadocian Gregorys because, for them, the will was *not* the primary faculty—either for divine nature or human nature. So how did they see it?

***Apokatastasis* – Ultimate Redemption**

For the church fathers—and arguably Christ and Paul—a higher faculty than will reigns in both God and his children. The Greek word for this was *nous*. The Greek *nous* on the God-side is similar to the idea of *logos*—the ordering principle of the universe, the divine mind, but not as it so often mistranslated, mere ‘reason.’ This is to read the Greeks through the rationalist lenses of the Enlightenment, as if Plato et al were pre-incarnate Cartesians (i.e. disciples of Rene Descartes).

Rather, the Apostle John and St Paul, along with their disciples, especially in the Alexandrian school, regarded *love* as the very essence of God's nature. I.e., “God is love”—in and by and through this love, the *logos/nous* created, ordered and permeates the universe. Then, of course, this same divine *logos/nous* became flesh to reveal God as love and love as God's primary disposition to the world.

Corresponding to the divine *nous*, church fathers like Gregory of Nyssa taught that the image of God in every human being—the thumbprint of his God's *nous*—establishes the human *nous* (sometimes translated mind, heart or spirit). This *nous*

is the spiritual organ that turns towards and receives the overtures of divine love. That is, God created each of us with a human *nous* that *naturally* corresponds, responds and interacts with God's *nous*. In other words, God has given us hearts that respond *by nature* to His Heart for us. He has planted within every one of his children a capacity for love that is perfectly designed to respond to God's love when we encounter it. This is the default mode of the true humanity: not a *neutral* freedom of will to respond to or reject God, but a responsive propensity—a willingness of heart—to love the Lover when we see that Love for who and what he is.

The biblical metaphors for the *nous* are either the heart that loves or the eye that sees—these are one and the same. Seeing is not only believing: for Paul (as for Plato before him) *seeing is finally loving*. For Paul, conversion is *turning* to see and thus, to love. Repentance isn't just re-thinking, but re-seeing and therefore, re-loving. When the *nous* is freed (unchained) to turn and behold, it does *not choose*—does not *will*—to believe or to love. It just *does* what it was always created to do: it sees, it believes, it loves.

Of course, in this epoch, there's a problem. In New Testament literature, the eyes of the heart are variously described as 'veiled' so that we *cannot* believe; or 'blinded' so that we *cannot* see; or diseased such that we need 'eye salve, so that we *can* see.' Elsewhere they are gazing in the wrong direction and need to turn (repent, convert) in order to 'behold' the glory of God in the face of Christ, who says 'Let there be light' in our hearts so that we 'see'—we love and respond.

When the God-given eyes of the *nous* are unveiled, healed and turned toward the Sun of Love, we do not merely revert to a state of immature innocence like Adam and Eve. Rather, we are empowered to see the truth of Love without the delusions and illusions that formerly distorted our vision. We aren't merely restored to some kind of neutral 'free will' that comes or goes as it desires, but rather, to a native state of desire fulfilled in the One whom our hearts were created to desire.

Taking Paul as our model, I see very little 'will' at play in his conversion. When he 'saw the light,' God did not *make* him believe (overriding his will), nor did Paul *choose* to believe (exercising his will). The entire conversion transcended the faculty of will—Paul simply saw, and seeing, was transformed. He went from hating to loving, from willful to willing, and from unbelieving to believing.

Now imagine this: at the coming of the Lord, Isaiah says 'every eye shall see him!' Not the physical eyes gazing at a literal Warrior flying across the sky overhead or across our flat screen TV's on cable news. But rather, what if the eyes of every heart (*nous*) shall be opened, unveiled and healed to see Christ as Paul saw him? What would happen? Wouldn't every knee bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, just as Paul did? In such an encounter, would God violate our wills and force us to our knees? NO. Or would we *choose* whether or not to bow the willing knee in worship? I doubt it. Paul himself imagines us all falling to our knees as he did,

because we too will *see* the truth, and in *seeing* the truth, our spiritual eyes (our hearts), finally free, will do what they were created to do—they will respond in love.

This implies that our resistance to the Gospel now is a failure of—or damage to—our eyes/hearts/*nous* to perceive the truth of the love, truth and beauty of our Saviour. When the love of God removes the veil over our hearts, when his love heals our diseased and blinded eyes—we shall see him, love him and remarkably, 'become like him, for we shall see him as he is.' As author Caleb Miller pointed out to me from 1 John 3, *beholding is becoming* and *theosis* is realized.

This, then, is how someone like Paul the Apostle or Gregory could imagine universal redemption (*apokatastasis*) without stumbling over the issue of free will. They saw the *nous* enlightened by Love to love – as a result of a revelation of Jesus, as opposed to coercion by election. In this model then, the will is secondary to love and serves love, rather than choosing to love or not to love.

This latter view appeals to me. For both biblical and ecclesial reasons, I still personally still hold to my hopeful inclusivism. Yet I feel it's important to recognize an important truth here: that some universalists, especially some of the early fathers, predate our obsession with the primacy of the will. They taught an ultimate reconciliation that circumvented the problems associated with unilateral election. For this reason, I believe we can affirm them as conversation partners without assuming the problem of the will must be a deal-killer in our discussions with universalists.

Post-script on Eschatological Judgment (for nerds)

I've made the claim that Christian Universalists, as I know them, do not trivialize sin, the Cross or divine judgment. In fact, both the work of the Cross in redemption and the process of judgment (*krisis*) for our glorification (*theosis*) are critically important.

How then does this work? As if we know! As if conflicting interpretations of competing texts saturated with symbolic descriptions of contradictory revelations could lead us to *know* what no one has yet experienced ... well.

But for those who care to speculate about eschatology without going all "Left Behind" obsessive, here's a brief primer in *apokatastatic* eschatology:

When I was a young Protestant undergrad, my dispensationalist prof (bless him) taught us there were three possible approaches to eschatology and only one of them is right. Here were the bare bones:

Premillennial eschatology (the 'right' one):

Previous ages, <incarnation>, Church age, <parousia>, millennium <final judgment>, New Heavens and New Earth (or eternal state).

Amillennial eschatology:

Previous ages, <incarnation>, Church age (i.e. millennium), <parousia / final judgment>, New Heavens and New Earth (or eternal state).

Post-millennial eschatology:

Previous ages, <incarnation>, Church age > millennium, <parousia / final judgment>, New Heavens and New Earth (or eternal state).

These were the only options, which would have been news to some in the early church. Some of these categories of thought are themselves problematic. But for those like me, whose neurons were shaped to think that way, the following might help make sense of eschatological judgment in the *apokatastasis* camp.

Apokatastastic eschatology:

Previous ages, <incarnation>, this age, <parousia>, the age(s) to come (including judgment by the fire of God's glory), <end of the ages>, *telos* (when God is all in all).

Of course, verses like Heb. 9:26 and 1 Cor. 10:11, throw a wrench in all of these systems, by proclaiming that in some way, the 'end of the ages' *has* happened, *has* come. So don't get too attached.

But as I understand the teachers of *apokatastasis*, the *parousia* will launch the purifying judgment of the coming age, through which death and *hades* are eradicated in fire, and humankind and indeed the cosmos are purified through fire (that fire being the glory of God himself). The *telos* marks the completion of all God's judgments because no enemies remain (every knee bows, not only in submission, but also salvation). While some may have experience judgment for 'ages of ages,' the *telos* signals the end of all ages, when 'time is no more' and 'all is restored' to God's alpha and omega design. Now God is all and in all (cf. 1 Cor. 15).

I find this interpretation of 1 Cor. 15 natural and compelling. Chronologically, 1 Cor. 15 looks further ahead into the future (to the end) than Rev. 21-22 (still a process). What I find helpful is this idea that the *age-ending* or *age-lasting* or *ages-of-ages* (all better translations than 'eternal', which in the NT is reserved for God alone) all refer to a moment or period of judgment through which *all* must pass. And then ... the *telos* is the *end-of-ages*, the *end* of time, the *end* of enemies, and God is *all in all*. This means that even the New Heavens and New Earth of Rev. 21-22 are still only a prelude to the end, since as long as there are *any* wicked outside the gates, we have simply not yet arrived at the *telos* of 1 Cor. 15.

