

## 1. What is Universalism?

I should be clear at the outset about what I'll mean -- and won't mean -- by "universalism." As I'll use it, "universalism" refers to the position that eventually all human beings will be saved and will enjoy everlasting life with Christ. This is compatible with the view that God will punish many people after death, and many universalists accept that there will be divine retribution, although some may not. What universalism does commit one to is that such punishment won't last forever. Universalism is also incompatible with various views according to which some will be annihilated (after or without first receiving punishment). These views can agree with universalism in that, according to them, punishment isn't everlasting, but they diverge from universalism in that they believe some will be denied everlasting life. Some universalists intend their position to apply animals, and some to fallen angels or even to Satan himself, but in my hands, it will be intended to apply only to human beings. In short, then, it's the position that every human being will, eventually at least, make it to the party.

## 2. Some Universalist Passages

Contrary to what many would suppose, universalism, understood as above, receives strong scriptural support in the New Testament. Indeed, I judge the support strong enough that if I had to choose between universalism and anti-universalism as the "position of Scripture," I'd pick universalism as the fairly clear winner. But more on that later. For now, here's three passages which support universalism.

I Corinthians 15:22

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.

Note the "all." I guess there can be some question about what it means to be made alive in Christ. A cynic might suggest that some might be made alive in order to stand judgment and be tortured forever. But that's very strained, especially after one's read the surrounding context of this passage and has also discovered what's usually meant by such phrases. 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! A point of grammar, which holds for the Greek as well as our English translations: The grammatical function of "in Christ" here is not to modify or limit the "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. This last point -- that it's through Christ that all will be saved -- will be important in section 6, below.

Colossians 1:19-20

19For in him [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

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.

Romans 5:18

18Then 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. 19For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous.

It's verse 18 that I'm mainly appealing to. For whom will Christ's act of righteousness lead to acquittal and life? Answer: "all men." (So at least we guys will be OK!) Show me someone who

never enjoys acquittal and life, and I'll show someone for whom Christ's act of righteousness didn't lead to acquittal and life, and thus someone who gives the lie to this verse.

Though I'm appealing mainly to v. 18, I've included v. 19 here as well partly because some may think it casts doubt on the universalist implications of 18, since in 19, it's only said that "many," (rather than "all") will be made righteous. But 19 doesn't really take away the pro-universalism power of 18. First, a point of logic: 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. It may sound strange to say that many dogs are mammals, but it's true for all that: It's even stranger to deny that many dogs are mammals. "Many" and "all" don't logically exclude each other. But this point of logic is pretty barren. To say that many dogs are mammals, while it doesn't strictly imply that fewer than all dogs are mammals, it does suggest that fewer than all are -- which probably explains why saying that many dogs are mammals sounds so strange. ("Why did he say 'many' rather than 'all'? Wouldn't he have said 'all' if he thought they were all mammals?") Likewise, one could plausibly claim that while v. 19 doesn't strictly imply that fewer than all will be made righteous, it does strongly suggest this. Reply: But even the suggestion of fewer than all disappears when we look at the NIV's translation of v. 19. (Above is the RSV translation.) The NIV translates as follows:

19 For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

The key difference, for our present purposes, between the translations is between the RSV's "many" and the NIV's "the many." To say that the many will be made righteous, while it doesn't imply that all will be made righteous, neither does it imply, nor even suggest, that fewer than all will be. In fact, v. 19, translated the NIV's way, especially following on the heels of 18, seems to suggest, if anything, a positive answer to the question of whether all are covered, turning v. 19 from something that counts a bit against a universalist reading of v. 18 to a verse which, if anything, reinforces the universalist implications of v. 18. My experts have informed me that the original Greek here is like the NIV, and unlike the RSV, in that there is not even a suggestion carried by 19 that fewer than all will be made righteous. It's no doubt in response to such considerations that the revision of the RSV, the NRSV, follows the NIV in using "the many" rather than "many." (But it was worth first presenting the RSV translation because many use English translations of the Bible, which, like the RSV, employ the inferior translation of this phrase.)

[A discussion of this last passage that has come out since I posted this page, and which I find very helpful, is Richard H. Bell's "Rom 5.18-19 and Universal Salvation," *New Testament Studies*, Vol. 48 (2002), pp. 417-432. Those interested in a better and more careful look at this last passage would do well read Bell's paper. To quote Bell's own summary, he argues "that Paul does in fact support a universal salvation in Rom 5.18-19. Such an understanding is supported by both the context and by a detailed study of these verses" (p. 417). 9/11/2005]

### 3. "All"

A key word in the above passages is "all". Here's one more universalist passage featuring that wonderful word:

Romans 11:32

For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

For various reasons I won't go into here, though I think this is a good universalist passage, I don't think this passage is quite as strong as some of the passages we looked at in section 2. I bring it up because it's in response to this verse that I've found a commentator making a move I've heard many times in conversation. About this verse, the end of which he renders, "that he may have mercy upon all", F.F. Bruce writes: "That is, on all without distinction rather than all without exception" (*The Letter of Paul to the Romans: An Introduction and Commentary*, Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity

Press, 1985; p. 211). Several people I've spoken with about our universalist passages had apparently been taught that "all" can mean "all without distinction" rather than "all without exception". What exactly is "all" supposed to mean when it carries the former ("without distinction") sense? Some seem to hold that it then means "some from each group", and where it's people that are involved, each group seems to mean each nation. For others, it means something a bit more: That every person, regardless of which group she's in, has a chance.

But it's clear that "all", at least when used properly, never means anything like that. Suppose some slippery character is being investigated, and hands over to investigators several files relating to the case under consideration. The slippery character then says that he's handed over all the files about the case. It later turns out that, as the slippery character knew full well at the time of his statement, he's held on to over half of the files. Suppose his reaction to this revelation is: "Well, I handed over several files from each of the 10 major categories into which they fell. And I didn't just pick the least damaging files to hand over. Rather, I picked in a random fashion the files I would hand over from each category, so that each file, regardless of its category, and regardless of how damaging it was to my case, had a chance to be handed over. So, you see, I really did hand over all the files -- all without distinction, that is; not, of course, all without exception." This won't fly, precisely because "all" just can't mean anything like what the "all without distinction" crowd says it sometimes means. My reaction, at least, is not that this fellow was being deceitful merely in using one sense of "all" while it has another good sense. He's worse than that: There's no good sense of "all" that would make true his miserable lie. No, "all", when it's used properly, always means all without exception. Quite simply, "all" means all. [For more on this matter, see my blog post: ["All".12/24/2011](#)]

But wait! When I say, quite properly, "All the beer is warm", I don't mean that all the beer in the whole universe is warm, but rather something like that all the beer in this room is warm, as is seen by the fact that I can continue the sentence by saying something that implies that there is cold beer elsewhere: "All the beer's warm, so let's go to the kitchen and get some cold beer." So how can it be suggested that "all" always means all? (But how can it be that "all" could fail to mean all?)

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: On some occasions of use, "all", or "all the F's" means all (or all the F's) within a limited domain. But, relative to that domain, "all" really does mean all (without exception): My sentence "All the beer is warm" turns out to be false if there is some cold beer that I failed to notice in the room.

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. It could possibly refer to some restricted class of people, but that suggestion is to be rejected, b/c (a) there is no such restricted class that clearly presents itself (all the people in this room?), (b) it's incumbent on a speaker to make clear what the class is if he means for it to be specially restricted and no specially restricted class clearly presents itself given current conversational intents and purposes, and (c) the NT doesn't specify any such specially restricted class. So, "All have sinned" means that all people have sinned, as almost all would agree.

But similarly for the "all's of the universalist passages. No restricted class of people clearly presents itself, and the Biblical writers aren't so incompetent as to mean some specially restricted class of people that doesn't clearly present itself without specifying or somehow making it clear which class they mean. Indeed, in I Corinthians 15:22 and Romans 5:18, each of the relevant "all's occur in the very same sentence (and a fairly short sentence, to boot) as an occurrence of "all" that seems to refer to the whole human race (given that it's the whole human race that died/was condemned in Adam), so it would have been especially misleading or even incompetent for Paul to mean

something less than the whole human race there, since that would involve switching the domains relative to which his claims should be interpreted without warning in the middle of a single sentence -- and a sentence that seems to be stressing the parallelism between its two clauses, for that matter. So I see no reasonable alternative but to conclude that these "all"s refer to all people.

Could they mean even more than that? Could they be including angels, including fallen angels, and maybe even Satan himself? My reason for not going out on that limb -- besides passages like Rev 20:10, which reports that the devil is "thrown into the lake of burning sulphur", where the beast and the false prophet (who's not clearly human) were previously thrown, and where "they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever" -- is that most of the universalist passages don't go that far. Some, like I Corinthians 15:22, write simply of "all", and, as I said, I think the most natural way to understand the scope of the "all" is as referring to all people. Indeed, it's difficult to construe that particular passage more broadly so as to include Satan, for there seems to be no good sense in which Satan died in Adam, and the passage reads: "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive." And some of the universalist passages explicitly limit themselves to humans, like Romans 5:18, which says that Christ's act "leads to acquittal and life for all men."

The only universalist passages that we've looked at in section 2 which seems to carry any suggestion of a broader scope is Colossians 1:20, the "reconciling all things" passage. (There are other passages in the Bible carrying similar suggestions -- see, for instance, Ephesians 1:10.) How to square that with Rev 20:10, I don't know, though I am in general far more cautious about my understanding of Revelation than of any other book in the Bible. In general, I find it unwise to take much of Revelation literally, and so, in questions of what will actually happen, tend to take fairly minimalist interpretations of the events John relates from his vision -- or at least not to be confident of anything beyond a minimalist reading. So, for instance, though John reports in 6:13 that "the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree," I'd be disinclined to think that stars will literally fall to earth. That this is not to be taken literally is now confirmed by our current knowledge of the relative size of the earth and the stars (together with the fact that, in John's story, this event does not completely obliterate the earth; the story goes on), but even without such knowledge, based merely on the genre of that part of Revelation -- John's reporting a vision he was given -- I would be disinclined to take such a passage as a literally correct description of what will actually happen in the future. How exactly to interpret such a passage as to what will really happen is a controversial matter. But I tend toward this minimalist reading: All that's meant about what will really happen -- or, at the very least, all that we can be reasonably certain is meant -- by this report of stars falling to earth is that very, very bad things will happen. Given the abundance of events reported in John's vision that must, I think, be read in such a minimalist way, I'm very cautious about taking very literally the report of Satan's doom in Revelation 20:7-10. Shall we now suddenly start taking these events as literal reports of what will actually happen? The minimalist reading here is that evil and deception will be decisively defeated. And, though I don't want to dogmatically declare that no more than this is meant to be a prediction of what will actually happen, I certainly don't see any grounds for being at all confident of anything beyond such a minimalist reading. So, I don't think a strong reading of the "reconciling all things" in Colossians 1:20 must in any obvious or automatic way be shot out of the water by what's to be found in Revelation. In fact, given the nature of the two books, if anything, it's our understanding of Revelation that should be guided by the teachings of the likes of Colossians, rather than the other way around. Our understanding of the straight teaching of doctrine in an epistle certainly should not automatically give way to an interpretation of what in John's report of his vision is to be taken as a literally accurate description of what will actually happen. On top of all that, even if you do take Revelation 20:10 to be a literal description of what will actually happen, the phrase that gets translated here in popular English translations as "for ever and ever", needn't be translated as implying endless duration; in fact, if you insist on literalness, more literal translations render this phrase "unto the ages of the ages" or "for the eons of the eons." Literally, while this perhaps can, it certainly needn't, mean forever, though it does seem to indicate at least a very long time.

Thus, though I don't find nearly as much scriptural support for a more thorough-going universalism that includes even Satan (Origen, one of the early universalists, held to such a more thorough-going universalism) as I do for the more modest form of universalism I'm here defending, and though I don't find enough support to advocate such a more thorough-going position here, at the same time, I certainly do think the more robust universalism is worthy of serious consideration.

#### **4. "Interpreting Scripture by Scripture"**

I believe the above pro-universalist passages, and, as you've seen, take them quite literally. (I should note here that there are several other universalist passages I didn't utilize above. The above, though, I think, give you a good idea of the type of passages that can be marshaled in favor of universalism.) I wouldn't say that they constitute an overwhelmingly strong case for universalism (see sections 5-6 below, for a view -- exclusivism -- the support for which I am willing to call overwhelming), but it is pretty strong, and stronger than any case I've seen for anti-universalism.

But some would urge me to interpret these passages in the light of other scripture. (Many of these people seem never to even recognize the possibility of interpreting the other scripture in light of these universalist passages.) I must admit I have some difficulty in construing myself as "interpreting" these passages. I do place interpretations on some passages in the Bible: When I glean a particular message for us from one of Jesus' parables, for instance, that's an interpretation. But am I "interpreting" these passages in a pro-universalist way? Calling this "interpretation" seems strained to me. I often quote the above passages, not just to support, but actually to express my universalism, and such quoting seems only in a strained sense a case of interpreting. (Once, when someone asked me whether I thought anyone would be denied everlasting life, I replied, "I believe that as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive." My questioner, not realizing I was quoting Scripture, accused me of taking an unbiblical position!)

Still, if there are passages which teach that universalism is false with anything close to the force that the above passages carry in favor of universalism, we're going to have to consider re-adjusting our understanding of the above passages. Maybe they really don't mean what they seem to. And, indeed, most who write against universalism, when they urge an understanding of the above passages which strips them of their universalist implications, do so largely on the grounds that other passages of the New Testament teach even more clearly that universalism is false. Indeed, many write as if the Biblical case against universalism is overwhelming. But this confidence is badly misplaced. As we'll see in sections 5, 6 and 8, below, it's mainly due to a confusion of universalism itself with certain unbiblical versions of universalism.

#### **5. Universalism and Exclusivism**

Many of the passages that are typically utilized to attack universalism teach exclusivism -- which here refers to the doctrine that it's only (exclusively) through the saving work of Christ that any can be saved. I agree that exclusivism is clearly taught in the New Testament, so I won't bother to cite the supporting passages. But the universalist needn't deny exclusivism. The biblical universalist will accept exclusivism; she'll just disagree with the non-universalist about the scope of who will be saved by Christ's saving work -- the universalist exclusivist holding that, eventually at least, through Christ, all shall be made alive. And now that I've echoed I Corinthians 15:22, it's worth noting how this verse, as well as the other passages discussed in section 2, highlights the compatibility of universalism with exclusivism, since this universalist passage insists that it is in Christ that all shall be made alive.

#### **6. Universalism and Strong Exclusivism**

But perhaps we should distinguish between two types of exclusivism. Let's label as strong exclusivism the position that adds to exclusivism the further claim that, in order to be a recipient of the salvation Christ makes possible, one must in some way explicitly accept Christ and/or the

salvation he offers. (Different versions of strong exclusivism with differ as to the exact nature of this requirement of explicit acceptance.) Weak exclusivism, then, will be the position that combines the exclusivist thesis that Christ's saving work is necessary for the salvation of any person -- so that were it not for Christ, none could be saved -- with the position that one needn't explicitly accept or acknowledge Christ in order to receive the salvation his saving work makes possible.

The scriptural basis for exclusivism is overwhelming, I believe; the support for strong exclusivism is not nearly so conclusive. It's not that there's any strong basis for weak exclusivism. It's rather that the scriptural basis for deciding between the two versions of exclusivism is not nearly so great as that supporting exclusivism itself. Still, the suggestions of strong exclusivism found in the New Testament are strong enough that, for complicated reasons I won't here go into, though I'm far from certain about the matter, I tend to lean toward strong exclusivism.

And some might think that strong exclusivism is incompatible with universalism, so that whatever evidence there is for strong exclusivism will also be evidence against universalism. For strong exclusivism, combined with the observation that some resist Christ all the way to their dying moment, can seem to spell the doom of the universalist position.

But only if death is the end of one's chances to be saved by explicitly accepting Christ. And I haven't seen anything close to a strong Biblical case for the position that death is the end of one's chances for salvation. (We'll look at the typical argument mounted for the doctrine of no further chances a few paragraphs below). Many, in fact, content themselves with arguing that the scriptures typically used to support the position that some will get further chances after death are far from conclusive.

What passages are these? Well, many friends of the doctrine of further chances cite I Peter 3:19-20 and I Peter 4:6 as supporting their position.

[Note: The NIV scandalously translates the beginning of I Peter 4:6 as "For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead," confessing in a study note to the NIV Study Bible -- users of NIV's other than the NIV Study Bible don't get this warning -- that "the word 'now' does not occur in the Greek," and explaining that the reason they've added it is that, for reasons coming from another part of the Bible, not even in the book of I Peter, they believe that there are no further chances after death. Now, the case they give in that note for the doctrine of no further chances is hopelessly weak. (We'll encounter it below.) But put that aside for the moment. The more pressing point here is that this practice of doctoring a translation to protect the theological positions that the translators happen to hold on controversial issues is deplorable. The much more responsible NRSV, true to its general character, more reliably translates this passage as, "For this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead." This better translation leaves the matter of whether "the dead" refers to people who were dead when they were preached to or rather to those who were dead at the time of the writing of I Peter about as open as it is in the original Greek. The NIV translators, on the other hand, for no respectable reason, add a word to close down the reading, left open in the Greek, that doesn't best serve their own theological purposes, though it seems the more natural of the two readings.]

Now, the issue of how to understand these passages from I Peter is as difficult as it is controversial. I won't get into it here, except to register my opinion that it isn't wise to lean on these passages; they're far too inconclusive to inspire any reasonable confidence in the doctrine of further chances after death.

But the case typically mounted in favor of the opposing doctrine of no further chances after death is at least as inconclusive. The only passage cited in favor of this dubious doctrine of no further chances in the notorious NIV Study Bible note to I Peter 4:6 is Hebrews 9:27, which reads: "Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment," with the sentence being completed in v. 28. But the universalist who believes in further chances needn't deny that people die once. I'm such a universalist, and I don't deny that, nor do I see any reason why I should have to. And, as I

noted in section 1 and as we'll see in section 8, the universalist, including the universalist who believes in further chances, needn't deny that after that death one will face judgment. So there isn't anything in Hebrews 9:27 that should even begin to produce any discomfort in the universalist who believes in further chances.

The other passage that's commonly cited in favor of the doctrine of no further chances is Luke 16:26. This is a bit stronger than the Hebrews passage. But that's not saying much, and there's very little, if any, ammunition to be found here for the doctrine of no further chances. This passage occurs in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, and, as such, appeals to it suffer from all the limitations inherent in attempts to extract theological doctrines from the details of parables, especially when the doctrines in question are not the main point of the parable. In this parable, the rich man, now dead and suffering in hell, asks Father Abraham to "send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue" (v. 24). v. 26 is the second part of Abraham's explanation for why this request won't be granted; it reads, "And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us." But again, the universalist needn't deny that there will be punishment, only that such punishment will last forever. And there's no reason at all for her to have to hold that, while the punishment is still going on, those suffering from it can end it at will any time they want, and cross freely from hell to heaven, nor that those in heaven (in this parable, Lazarus is "at Abraham's side") will be allowed to visit hell. So even if we made the mistake of trying to extract from the details of this parable a position on the issue of whether there will be further chances, there still wouldn't be much cause for taking this passage as supporting the doctrine of no further chances with any force at all. For as long as the universalist who believes in further chances sensibly allows for the possibility that, while punishment is occurring, those suffering from it can't just end it any time they want, she can make perfectly good sense of the words this parable puts into the mouth of Father Abraham. After all, if a road has been covered with deep enough snow drifts, we'll tell someone who must drive on that stretch of road to get to where we are, "You cannot cross over from there to us." We'll say this quite properly and truthfully, even if we know full well that the road will be cleared in a few days, or that, in a great enough emergency, a helicopter could be used to get across to us even today, if, say, we're at a hospital. [But doesn't that show that there is a sense, then, in which they can cross over to us? Yes, there's a perfectly good sense in which they can, and a perfectly good sense in which they cannot. For enlightening and accessible explanations of the meaning of "can" and related words, I recommend Angelica Kratzer's "What 'Must' and 'Can' Must and Can Mean" (*Linguistics and Philosophy* 1 (1977): pp. 337-355) and example 6 ("Relative Modality") of David Lewis's "Scorekeeping in a Language Game" (*Journal of Philosophical Logic* 8 (1979): pp. 339-359.)]

So to hold that this passage establishes, not only that those suffering from punishment can't just end it any time they want, but that it can never, not even by the saving power of Christ, happen that they're released from this punishment, is surely a very desperate stretch.

In fact, I think no other doctrine can even compete with "no further chances" in terms of the following three factors. No doctrine even comes close to a) being so strongly believed by so many evangelicals despite b) being so utterly disastrous in its consequences and c) having so little by way of Scriptural support.

Still, as I admitted earlier, the case for the opposing doctrine of further chances, based on the I Peter passages, is also inconclusive. But I never intended to use the I Peter passages as part of my positive support for universalism. My universalism is founded on passages like the ones we looked at in section 2. I find them far more forceful in their support for universalism than anything I've ever seen adduced in support of anti-universalism. But some will disagree, and claim that a powerful case for anti-universalism can be mounted from strong exclusivism, together with the very plausible observation that some never accept Christ in this life. I have merely been pointing out that that line of thought supports anti-universalism only insofar as the doctrine of no further chances can be established. And, as we've seen, that's not very far at all. Certainly nothing even approaching the

power of the universalist passages. If, on top of all that, there actually were -- against my own best judgment about the matter -- some significant positive support for the doctrine of further chances to be gleaned from the I Peter passages, that would be argumentative over-kill.

Do I, then, believe in further chances after death? Yes, but not because of anything to be found in I Peter. My belief in further chances is rather grounded in my beliefs that (a) there are fairly strong grounds for universalism provided by the likes of the passages in section 2, (b) there are fairly strong grounds for strong exclusivism in passages we haven't looked at here, (c) the only way (at least the only way that I can see) to reconcile universalism with strong exclusivism is if there are further chances, and (d) there's next to nothing in the way of good reasons for denying that there are further chances. Thus, though there's perhaps not much of a direct case that can be made for further chances from the likes of the I Peter passages, in light of (d), the indirect case for further chances provided by (a)-(c) proves decisive. I stress, then, that my belief in universalism is not based on my belief in further chances; rather, it's the other way around.

### **7. Two More Passages and a Dangerous Line of Thought**

Since we're on the topic of further chances, let me here, in a brief digression from the main line of argument, introduce two more passages which together have some universalist tendencies in a way that involves the doctrine of further chances. I present them not primarily because of the added support they might provide for universalism, but because they'll help to illustrate a dangerous line of thought which explains much of the resistance I had to the doctrine of further chances. Insofar as others resist the doctrine of further chances for the same reason I used to, they may wish to check this dangerous line of thought. Consider, then:

Romans 10:9

If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

This raises the question: Who will so confess and so believe? This is one of those questions, at least with respect to the confession part, that gets answered in the Bible, for, as we read in Philippians 2:11 and elsewhere, every tongue shall confess that Jesus is Lord. Maybe some of these confessors will fail to believe in their heart that God raised Jesus from the dead, and thereby fail to be saved. But I always imagined this confession taking place at a time when it had become painfully obvious that the whole Jesus story was true -- perhaps at judgment -- so I've never really thought that these confessors weren't believing.

To be honest, the real reason I never thought of the Philippians passage as having universalist implications in conjunction with the Romans passage is that I thought that such a confession would be "too late" and so wouldn't count. Why did I think that? Romans 10:9 includes no fine print to the effect that the confession must take place prior to death to be effective, and, as we've seen, there's next to no good Scriptural reason to deny further chances. Well, there are many reasons one might think this confession is too late, but, unfortunately, in my case, the line of thought was roughly as follows: "Of course they'll confess then. It'll be so obvious that Jesus is Lord at that point. There's no merit to confessing at that point."

Yikes! I had always been taught, and had always thought I believed, that salvation came through God's grace alone, and not at all through the merit of the one being saved. One just had to accept this grace, by confessing, etc. But the above line of thought shows that the tendency to understand rewards in term of merit was so strong in me that I had taken the confession and acceptance part of the above story and turned them into matters of merit -- to the point that I wouldn't let them count if they didn't strike me as sufficiently meritorious. This is surely a dangerous line of thought.

Three reactions: First, we don't know enough about the circumstances under which such confessions will take place to judge their merit. But, second, should that matter? And, third, just how wonderfully meritorious was my confession and acceptance?

Insofar as any others find themselves engaging in the dangerous line of thought I was subject to, they may wish to re-think the role of merit in salvation, and how that relates to the doctrine of further chances. But perhaps I was unique in thinking along those lines, and this whole, thankfully short, digression was for nothing.

## **8. Universalism, Judgment and Punishment**

Many of the passages that are typically utilized in attacks on universalism teach that, after death, God will judge people and punish many of them. Indeed, many who write as if the case against universalism is overwhelming list scores of such passages -- which looks very impressive -- in their long lists of what they claim are anti-universalist scriptures.

Many of the passages typically cited in this connection are the endings of parables in which the unprepared or otherwise naughty are cast off to weep and wail and gnash their teeth. (It's usually in Matthew's presentation of parables that such an ending is included.) To get eternal punishment from such a parable is quite a leap. Some read many of these passages as Jesus predicting the suffering incurred during the destruction of Jerusalem. It was apparently a big issue in the Jewish community around the time of the writing of the book of Matthew whether this truly horrible and gruesome event was due to the Christians following a false Messiah (as some non-Christians claimed) or rather because the non-Christian Jews had failed to recognize the hour of their visitation (as some Christians held). Parables in which those not prepared for the coming of the Christ-figure are thrown out to weep and wail, etc., can easily be read as coming down on the Christian side of this debate. But even if one dismisses such an interpretation (though it's difficult to see the grounds for such a dismissal), one should begin to appreciate the tenuousness of drawing a particular theological conclusion from such a parable.

But the above is a secondary point, especially since many of the passages which teach that there will be punishment are not from parables. The main point to be made is that, as I pointed out already in section 1, universalism as I understand it -- and, more importantly, as it's supported by the universalist passages like those in section 2 -- is perfectly consistent with the belief that there will be judgment for all and punishment for some. So, unless the universalist goes overboard and claims that there will be no punishment at all -- an extension of universalism not licensed by the passages of section 2 -- these passages teaching that there will be punishment won't even begin to hurt her position. So, like the anti-universalist argument from exclusivism and the argument from strong exclusivism, this anti-universalist argument, now from punishment, has no force against the universalism that's supported by the universalist passages, but only against the unwarranted extensions of universalism that some unwise universalists might make.

## **9. Universalism and Eternal Punishment: A Collision?**

But among the many passages that teach that there will be punishment, a few (a very few, it turns out, but see also Matthew 25:46) specify (or seem to specify) that the punishment will be "eternal." By far, the strongest of these passages is:

II Thessalonians 1:9

They shall suffer punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.

Here, finally, we have something which really has the potential to cut against universalism. (Matthew 25:46 is weakened by the fact that it's part of a parable. In fact, many who cite this parable as a good source as to the duration of punishment don't take seriously its teaching as to the grounds of the distinction between those who are rewarded and those who are punished. It's quite clearly said that those who are rewarded are rewarded for their good actions and those who are punished are punished for a lack of such good actions (see verses 34-36 and 41-43, paying careful attention to the word "for" or "because" (depending on your translation) in each). But most who cite

this parable as a good source on the duration of the punishment don't accept salvation by works -- perhaps because it's taught in a parable, all the details of which needn't be taken to reflect the actual world? At any rate, if you are inclined nevertheless to give this feature of the parable great weight as an indication of the duration of actual punishment, the below discussion of the meaning of "eternal" will apply to this Matthew passage as well.)

Now, as I've noted, there are only a few passages that specify that punishment will be (at least for some) eternal. And the universalist passages are quite strong, tempting one to "interpret" these eternal punishment passages away. But this II Thessalonians passage looks very clear; I used to call it the "killer text". It looks like it collides with the universalist passages. For a long time, I feared that just such a collision occurs here in Scripture. I tried to "interpret" the universalist passages away, and then to do the same to this eternal punishment passage. But all such "interpretations" seemed very strained -- they seemed more like denials, or at least revisions, of what was said in the relevant passages being "interpreted."

#### 10. "Eternal in the New Testament

Fortunately, this is only an apparent collision. The appearance of a collision is produced by a problem arising with our English Bibles' translation of "eternal".

The Greek adjective (and its cognates) that our English Bibles translate as "eternal" or "everlasting" (and their cognates), literally means "age-enduring" or "pertaining to an age", and can be used in such a way that it does not imply endless duration. This opens up a way around our collision: If the "eternal" in the "eternal" punishment passages is understood as not implying an endless duration, there's no conflict between these passages and the universalist passages.

What makes this a very comfortable, and not a strained or desperate, way around the collision is that, not only can the Greek word mean something that doesn't imply endless duration, but it often does get used with such a meaning -- including in the Bible itself, and even in the Pauline corpus. Consider Romans 16:25-26, which, as our translations have it, speaks of "the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed." Here, the Greek that gets translated as "for long ages" includes the very Greek work that is translated as "eternal" or "everlasting" elsewhere, including the "eternal" punishment passages. But in this Romans passage, Paul seems not to mean "eternal" by this word, for he immediately goes on to say the secret "is now disclosed", so of course it wasn't kept secret eternally. That's why our translations don't translate it as "eternally" here.

[For more on this Greek term, as well as on the Greek term used here for "punishment," which, apparently, was usually used for remedial punishment(!), see the final section ("Punishment in the Coming Age," pp. 89-92) of Thomas Talbott's "Three Pictures of God in Western Theology," Faith and Philosophy 12 (1995): pp. 79-94). More extensive commentary on this matter of translation, which is also more convenient for those with access to the internet, because the good folks at the Tentmaker site have made it available on line, is Rev. John Wesley's Hanson's treatise on [THE GREEK WORD ΑΙΩΝ -- ΑΙΩΝΙΟΣ](#). Talbott now has a book, The Inescapable Love of God, which incorporates much of his earlier prouniversalism work; for information and for some parts that are available on-line, click [here](#).]

Incidentally, I've heard it argued by some who emphasize the parallelism in Matthew 25:46 between the fate of the damned and of the saved -- "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life" -- that if you deny that punishment lasts forever, then you must also deny that the "eternal" life of the saved is unending. But, of course, that doesn't follow. Where the Greek word that gets translated as "eternal" doesn't imply endless duration, it also doesn't mean anything that implies less than endless duration. It can mean "in the age to come," or "for long ages," or, perhaps, if another of Talbott's suggestions is right, it can mean something like "having its source in the eternal God"; at any rate, all of these are neutral with respect to the question of whether what's called "eternal" will last forever. So taking such a reading of "eternal" here does not imply that the "eternal" life of the saved will come to end; the most that can be gotten out of the parallelism of

Matthew 25:46 is that we can't confidently base our belief that the "eternal" life of the saved will last forever on that passage. Hopefully, though, we have bases for that belief other than that detail of this parable! (For much more on this passage in Matthew, see the section entitled "THE PRINCIPAL PROOF-TEXT" (which contains several numbered subsections) of the Hanson treatise, to which there's a link above. For Greek words which do teach endless duration and which do get applied to the blessed life of the saved, but which are not applied to punishment, see the section of Hanson entitled "WORDS TEACHING ENDLESS DURATION.")

That Paul himself uses the relevant Greek term in such a way that it doesn't imply endless duration makes the possibility that he's using it the same way in the "eternal punishment" passages a very live possibility. By comparison, all the attempts to get around the universalist implications of the likes of the passages we saw in section 2 that I've encountered seem very strained, even desperate. (Example: "Here where it says that God through Christ will reconcile all things to himself, it really means (not what it says but rather?), at least as it's applied to people, that God, through Christ, will give all an opportunity to be reconciled to him, and where it says that in Christ all shall be made alive, what it really means (is not what it says but rather?) that in Christ all will be given an opportunity to be made alive, or that all will be made alive to the possibility of salvation.") At the very least, those who think it's clear that the strongest scriptural case on the question of universalism goes against the view, and that it's therefore clear that it's the apparently universalist passages which must be interpreted away, have a lot of explaining to do.

## 11. Conclusion

If I'm right that Romans 11:32 is a universalist passage, it's the thought of universalism that inspires what directly follows that verse -- Paul's wonderful doxology of Romans 11:33-36, the penultimate line of which takes on added significance in a universalist context:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!  
How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!  
For who has known the mind of the Lord?  
Or who has been his counselor?  
Or who has given a gift to him  
to receive a gift in return?  
For from him and through him and to him are all things.  
To him be the glory forever. Amen.

Universalism is far from a mere doctrine of barren theology; many, like Paul, find great joy in the belief. Part of the joy some find is in the thought that not only they, but their fellow humans, will, eventually at least, experience everlasting life with Christ. But, like Paul, you may find the joy is focused rather on God, and on how wondrous and complete a victory will be won by the God "who desires everyone to be saved" (I Timothy 2:4). And, on the other side, the non-universalist picture may come to look strangely dim, not exclusively because of the awful fate that awaits some of your fellows on this picture, but because God is deprived of such a complete victory, and, in winning only a partial victory, his desire that everyone be saved will ultimately be frustrated.

For myself, it's hard to even imagine going back to my earlier way of thinking about God, according to which it's only the case that:

God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he might have mercy on some of them

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall some be made alive

For in Christ, all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself some things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross

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 some men.



THE END. YOURS TRULY, HUCK FINN.

### [About the image](#)

Last modified 24 January 1999

### [Keith DeRose](#)

Please note: This web page has generated a tremendous amount of e-correspondence. I'm very pleased that it has caused some to consider the important issues addressed, and am especially gratified that it has caused some to think so carefully about the issues that they have crafted very thoughtful responses. You are welcome to write me about these ideas, but please understand that I simply cannot respond to all the communications -- even all the thoughtful communications -- that I receive, and please don't take it personally if I do not respond. Often, it will just be that you contacted me at a particularly busy time. And even in the best of times, I can respond only to a very small percentage of the messages I receive. --KDR

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### **Appendices**

All of the above remains basically unchanged in content since I wrote it for an adult Bible study in early 1998. (The only changes, I believe, are a couple of references and links to other web sites that I added to section 10 later and a reference added and marked as an update at the end of section 2.) Since I posted the above on the internet in the Winter of 98-99, I have received a lot of feedback on it. Some of the e-mail I have received has raised substantive points. Below I briefly address two of

the areas that I have been very frequently asked about. The first area concerns the danger of believing and promoting universalism, and the second concerns philosophical issues that arise in reconciling universalism with free will. So in neither case do the concerns very directly involve the Biblical case for or against universalism. Thus, addressing them moves us beyond the topic of my original post. Nevertheless, since these are two of the areas of concern that have been most often raised about the above, it is worth addressing them here.

#### **A. The Danger of False Belief on this Matter**

Many have e-mailed to warn me of the dangers of believing and promoting universalism. Two closely related dangers have been stressed. Some focus on how important Christians will think it is to spread the gospel if they accept universalism, and warn that belief in universalism would undercut evangelism. Others focus on the potential detrimental effect of promoting universalism on potential Christians themselves, supposing many will think something along the lines of, "Well, I'll be OK anyway, so why bother to accept Christ?"

I do not think that belief in universalism should have the above effects. Here it is important to note that universalism -- at least the position I've been referring to by the term -- does not imply that it is unimportant whether one accepts Christ in this life, or sooner rather than later. All that universalism per se rules out here is the "infinitely big stick": that one will be eternally barred from heaven (and perhaps consigned to hell) if one fails to accept Christ in this life. As I've stressed, universalism itself does not rule out that there will be punishment for some after death. Indeed, it does not rule out that there will be a lot of punishment for some. So it's not only consistent with the existence of sticks, but with very big -- indeed, immensely huge -- sticks, though of course universalists will disagree amongst themselves about the nature and size of whatever sticks there are. Universalism does rule out the infinitely big stick. But it would indeed be very sad if Christians believed that there is strong reason or motivation for accepting Christ in this life only if one faces an infinitely big stick if one fails to do so. Universalism also guarantees that all humans will eventually attain the tremendous carrot. But does the fact that things will eventually be OK for someone remove the motivation -- for herself and for others -- to improve her lot in the meantime? Those who believe they are going to heaven, whether they're universalists or not, believe everything will eventually be OK for them, but few lose all interest in their well-being in the meantime. And those who believe that certain other people (say, loved ones) are destined for heaven don't lose interest in promoting their well-being in the meantime. Why, then, should accepting that everyone will eventually be OK sap all motivation for promoting their well-being in the meantime -- especially since it's at least consistent with universalism that that "meantime" can be a very long time?

It's also worth pointing out that though the universalist believes all will attain heaven, it's consistent with universalism that what one's heavenly existence is like may depend on one's earthly life. Thus the universalist may hold (though perhaps some will not) that how one lives one's earthly life -- perhaps crucially including whether one accepts Christ in this life -- will have eternal significance, even if it doesn't determine whether one (eventually at least) attains heaven.

But even if I'm right that belief in universalism should not have the bad effects described above, I don't doubt that belief in universalism will have such bad effects, at least on some. After all, some people claim that belief in universalism would have such a bad effect on themselves, and I'd be a fool to suppose I can judge better than them what the effect of the belief would be on them.

But those who press the potential dangers of belief in universalism seem to neglect the corresponding potential dangers of their own position. Indeed, many who press the concern about the detrimental effects of accepting universalism go on to explicitly state that there is no danger on the other side as part of their case for resisting the promotion of universalism.

But they are wrong. There are dangers on the other side. I have received many e-mails from those

who have related that the doctrine of eternal hell was the biggest stumbling block to their accepting Christianity, and many others said that believing that doctrine interfered greatly with their ability to love God. Now, one doesn't have to accept universalism to avoid the doctrine of eternal hell -- one can accept some view on which those who don't make it to heaven are (eventually or right away) annihilated. But, for many, universalism is the view that rings most true, and the version of Christianity they'd be most likely to accept.

Suppose for a minute that universalism is correct, and suppose that these people are right to think that there is no way that God would allow some people to be forever excluded. In that case, promoting the false view that God will allow such exclusion is doing great harm. Indeed, many universalists, myself included, believe that non-universalism is one of the most harmful falsehoods ever promoted in the Christian church.

There is danger on both sides. Either way, if one is wrong, one may be doing harm to people by advocating one's false view. Indeed, either way, even if one is right, one can do some harm to others by advocating the truth one believes. (Even if universalism is true, my promoting that truth may cause some to lose their faith, and may thereby harm them. Likewise, if universalism is false, those who declare it false may thereby harm some people.) One possible response to these dangers, whichever side one is on, would be to remain silent on the issue. [But there is also grave danger in remaining silent if you could have spoken up, since your speaking up might have helped someone! 8/6/2010] Another response is to present one's thinking on the issue for others' consideration. That is the path I have chosen -- as have those who write to oppose me. If I have caused you think about the issue, to study the Bible (especially important here is reading not just the passages for and against universalism that have been presented, but also the material that surrounds them and gives them their context), and to prayerfully consider the issue, then I am happy, even if I haven't convinced you of my position.

#### **B. Free Will and Universalism 6/13/2003**

Many who have e-mailed me have been concerned about free will. Doesn't one have to freely accept Christ in order to be saved? This is an extension of strong exclusivism. Strong exclusivism, as I have used it above, says that in order to be saved, one must somehow explicitly accept Christ. Now, we're adding to this that the accepting must be free. Let's call this new position fervent exclusivism. If we accept fervent exclusivism, how can we say that universalism is true?

I don't know of any serious scriptural support for fervent exclusivism itself. Still, it's worth taking seriously and thinking about, because it is, for those who think human freedom is very important, the natural extension of strong exclusivism, for which there is in my view significant scriptural support. If you think that one must accept Christ to be saved, and if you think that human freedom is important, you're likely to think that the free acceptance of Christ is very valuable and important -- perhaps important enough that one's ultimate destiny might ride on it.

So, for those who are attracted to this fervent variety of exclusivism: First note that even fervent exclusivism is compatible with universalism. The first of these says that to be saved one must freely accept Christ. The second says that, eventually at least, all will be saved. It's easy to see how these can both be true: If all will eventually freely accept Christ.

But even if it is possible for both positions to be true, is it all plausible to suppose they will be? Supposing there is nothing barring further chances -- that the free accepting may take place after death (see sections 6 and 7 above) -- I don't see why not. After all, there is an omnipotent and infinitely resourceful God, whom we know "desires everyone to be saved" (I Timothy 2:4), and has as much time as He needs to bring everyone around. I certainly wouldn't want to bet against Him! We know that some in this life have been only been moving further and further away from accepting Christ. And some people can be very obstinate. And some have become incredibly evil in this life. But, on the other hand, even in this short life, we all know of instances in which people having all three of these problems to a great degree who were brought around and were saved. So,

again, I see no grounds for pessimism that an infinitely resourceful God, who is able to take as much time as He needs, will be able to win over everyone eventually.

(If you think that the most dramatic turn-arounds in this life have involved an infringement on the freedom of the people involved, but agree that they were saved nonetheless, then you are not a fervent exclusivist, and you should have no objections to such non-free savings taking place after death. I am here addressing only fervent exclusivists.)

But some seem to have a different worry -- not that fervent exclusivism is incompatible with universalism, but that, if fervent exclusivism is true, then nobody, not even God, can know (or at least know for certain) that all will be saved, since nobody can know what people will freely do. So, even if universalism will turn to be true, we cannot know that now, and God would not have revealed that to us already. According to this worry, fervent exclusivism doesn't show that universalism won't be true, but it does undermine the position that universalism is revealed in the scriptures.

This new worry, then, is based on the assumption that free will is incompatible with foreknowledge: that it is impossible, even for God, to know (or at least to know for certain) ahead of time what someone will freely do. Note that God can still be omniscient despite not knowing what we will freely do. Omniscience is a matter of knowing all truths. And if you deny that God knows what creatures will freely do, you're likely to also believe that there aren't now any truths to be known about what creatures will freely do in the future. God's "failure" to know what you will freely do then would count against his omniscience no more than does his "failure" to know that  $2+2 = 796$ : In neither case is the proposition in question (now) true and so in neither case is it the kind of proposition that can (now) be known. But while the assumption that freedom is incompatible with foreknowledge doesn't undermine God's omniscience, it is highly debatable. In fact, my sense is that most theists reject this assumption. Indeed, traditionally, many theists have supposed that free action is not only compatible with foreknowledge, but also with divine determinism: That one can be free even if God's decrees causally determine you do the action in question. How can one be free if divine decrees, issued long before one is born, causally determine what one does? I don't know. That position -- compatibilism about freedom and determinism -- has always seemed very implausible to me. But even among those who join me in rejecting compatibilism about freedom and determinism, many (and I think most) accept the compatibility of freedom and foreknowledge.

If you believe that God knows ahead of time who will freely accept him in this life, then you must not really be an incompatibilist about freedom and foreknowledge, and you should have no objection to supposing that God can know ahead of time who will freely accept Him in the life to come. Thus, this objection will have carry no weight with you.

If, on the other hand, you hold that foreknowledge is incompatible with freedom, and thus hold that God does not know what people will freely do even in this life, then you should be aware that you are holding a minority opinion (at least among Christians, but I think also among philosophers, both Christian or non-Christian), and if you use this incompatibilism -- let's call incompatibilism regarding freedom and foreknowledge zealous incompatibilism, to distinguish it from the milder view that freedom is incompatible with pre-determination --, together with fervent exclusivism, in objecting to the universalist stance, then you should be aware that your argument is resting on an assumption that is highly debatable, to put it rather mildly. So it certainly isn't anything of a "killer" objection to the universalist stance. As far as assessing the strength of the objection to universalism that can be obtained by these worries about freedom goes, that's the important point: There is no strong objection here, since the objection is based on such a controversial position -- indeed, on two highly debatable positions: fervent exclusivism and zealous incompatibilism.

Nevertheless, I myself am somewhat attracted toward these controversial views. For those of you who join me in finding these positions appealing, despite their zealous/fervent nature, here are a couple of options for how to put zealous incompatibilism together with fervent exclusivism (or at least something close to it), and universalism (or at least something close to it) into a coherent

package of views. A way to think about these two options is that one (perhaps) compromises a bit on universalism, the other on fervent exclusivism.

1. **Option 1:** Holding very firmly to both zealous incompatibilism (freedom is incompatible with foreknowledge) and fervent exclusivism (in order to be saved, one must freely accept Christ), one can hold that, while it may not be absolutely certain, it is **OVERWHELMINGLY** probable that all will eventually accept Christ and be saved, and the probability that any will resist forever is **VANISHINGLY** small. After all, God will be on the case, and will have as much time as He needs. While it is true that some are heading in the completely wrong direction, and give no sign that, left to their own devices, they will do anything but accelerate their progress in that wrong direction, they will not be left to their own devices. There are actual instances in this life of breathtakingly dramatic turn-arounds, and God does intervene to bring people around in this life (without violating their freedom, according to the fervent exclusivist). So once we jettison that disastrous and quite unsupported view that death is the end of one's chances, there's no reason to doubt that such divine activities will continue in the life to come, nor that they will (eventually, at least) be successful in yielding free acceptance.

If one takes this option, I think one can still be counted as a universalist. After all, you believe it is overwhelmingly probable that all will be saved, and in contested theological matters, we can't expect to reach beyond that level of certainty anyway. (Indeed, due to the usual causes -- human fallibility on such tough questions -- we're not even going to get up to that level of certainty, nor even close to it, on this or any other tough matter, anyway.) But this does seem to compromise on universalism a bit, because one is not only admitting that one could (of course!) be wrong about the matter in question, but also that according to the position one holds (however firmly or tentatively), there is some (**VANISHINGLY** small, but still existent) objective chance that not all will be saved. Not even God knows absolutely for certain that all will be saved.

And this gives rise to a sticky question about whether God would have revealed that all will be saved if He was not absolutely certain that this would be so. It's easy to feel uncomfortable about saying that's what God did -- even if He was amazingly close to being absolutely certain that what we was revealing to us is true.

2. **Option 2:** God could pick some time in the distant future -- a time far enough off that it is overwhelmingly probable that all will have freely accepted salvation by then, given the (non-freedom-violating) means of persuasion God intends to employ -- and resolve to at that time compel acceptance of any hold-outs that are then left. These would then be saved by their acceptance, though their acceptance might not be as valuable, given that it was not free. Thus, God can be absolutely certain, and can therefore responsibly reveal to us, that all will be saved. (There are many variations of this story that you might think up and think about for yourself. For instance: God could pick different times for different individuals, etc. Of course, any such story will be highly speculative, and so one probably shouldn't invest any confidence in any such tale. Still, these can be helpful stories in that they show various ways that certain combinations of views can be made true, and thus can show the views themselves to be compatible, even if one can't be certain of the details of just how it will be worked out. In this case, these stories illustrate ways that zealous incompatibilism and universalism -- and even foreknown universalism -- can both be true even while the value and importance of human freedom is respected to a great degree.)

Now, this position does give up on fervent exclusivism (though not on strong exclusivism or exclusivism simpliciter), since it holds that one can be saved even if one does not freely accept Christ. Nevertheless, it does go a fair way toward accommodating the motivation behind fervent exclusivism -- the importance of human freedom -- in that it has God adopting a plan by which He goes to tremendous lengths to attain free acceptance from

every person. And those who hold this view can still maintain that it is far better and more valuable for a person to freely accept than for this acceptance to be coerced in a freedom-negating way. But it does deny that one must freely accept in order to be saved, and thus it does deny fervent exclusivism. Still, it's worth considering, for it gives those who might otherwise insist on fervent exclusivism a compromise position which doesn't simply write free acceptance off as unimportant. This potential compromise position is especially valuable if I'm right about how one would likely come to be a fervent exclusivist in the first place: That there's no substantial scriptural support for fervent exclusivism itself, but that fervent exclusivism is the likely result of combining strong exclusivism (for which there is significant support) with a belief one might have that human freedom is important. Since the compromise position respects the importance of human freedom, it is likely to be an attractive compromise.

[Some fine print about a very tricky matter I just skated over above: It is worth noting that this view does depend on God's being able to foreknow with complete certainty what He Himself will do. Many who hold that God cannot foreknow what we will freely do seem to suppose that He can know what He Himself will do. This gets too complicated for me to go into in detail here. But whatever else you believe, if you think that God cannot know with complete certainty what He Himself will do, then, so long as you think that God will always have the power to make us miserable (which His omnipotence seems to assure), then you will be stuck with thinking that God cannot know with certainty that we won't be miserable at some later time. Thus, even those who hold that God cannot foreknow with complete certainty what we will freely do are very strongly motivated to hold that He can foreknow what He Himself will do. This can be because God's freedom is in important ways different from ours. In any case, when I speak of "zealous incompatibilism," I mean the position that God's certain foreknowledge is incompatible with human freedom.]

The above options are sketched out as potentially helpful guides for those who are attracted to certain combinations of views involving freedom, foreknowledge, and salvation. It's important to reemphasize in closing the important point reached several paragraphs above: that there is no strong objection to universalism that can be squeezed out of these thoughts -- at least not in any way that I can see.

### **Further Reading**

The following materials are recommended by Keith DeRose for further reading on the matter of Universalism and the Bible. --ZDR

#### **Recommended Books on Universalism**

- [The Inescapable Love of God](#), by Thomas Talbott. An excellent defense of universalism by the philosopher, Thomas Talbott.
- [Universal Salvation?: The Current Debate](#), edited by Robin A. Perry & Christopher H. Partridge. Part I is a defense of universalism by Thomas Talbott; Parts II-V are "Biblical Responses," "Philosophical Responses," "Theological Responses," and "Historical Responses" to Talbott from a variety of evangelical writers; and Part VI is Talbott's Replies to these Responses.
- [The Evangelical Universalist](#) by Gregory MacDonald (pseudonym). I still haven't read all of this book myself, but what I have read of it is very promising, and it comes highly recommended by some folks who really know what they're talking about.
- [If Grace Is True: Why God Will Save Every Person](#), by Philip Gulley and James Mulholland.  
Though I found this book quite valuable, I do disagree strongly with parts of it. Most of my

strong disagreement is with the material in Chapter 5. Most relevant to the concerns of this web page, Guley & Mulholland seem to reject the position I've been calling "exclusivism" -- the view that it is only through Christ that people are saved. They seem to think that the denial of exclusivism follows directly from universalism [see pp. 124-5] and in any case give no other reason I can see for their denial. As I've been at great pains to stress here, universalism can co-exist with what I'm here calling exclusivism, and even with strong exclusivism -- and perhaps even with fervent exclusivism. Perhaps G&M would agree that universalism is compatible with exclusivism. Perhaps their claim would be that while universalism is compatible both with exclusivism and with non-exclusivism, it fits in better with non-exclusivism. They write [they adopted the literary device of writing in the first person singular, though there are two of them]: "When I became convinced God would save every person, I tried to hold on to traditional Christian formulas -- the trinity, the incarnation, and atonement theology. I wanted to pour this new wine into old wineskins. I quickly learned why Jesus recommended against this: the old wineskins always burst. Just as fermenting wine causes old leather to rend and tear, my expanding view of God strained the credibility of my childhood theology" (pp. 125-6). Perhaps exclusivism, too, is part of that old wineskin that G&M now find not to fit in well with the new wine of universalism -- maybe they even intended to include exclusivism in the quoted passage, as part of the "atonement theology" of their childhood. If so, my experience has been completely different. The Christian theology I grew up with seems quite similar to what G&M were taught. But I had always found it puzzling, given the relevant elements of this theology, why some would not be saved. If salvation is won through Christ's sacrifice, and is then God's free gift to us, why would this gift be given only to some? Of course, there were answers that were typically given to this question, but with one exception they struck me as implausible. (The one reason that seemed plausible was that only some accept the gift, but that raised the question, at least in many cases, some of which made the question quite urgent, of why the offer wouldn't be made under more favorable circumstances.) When I accepted universalism, I found it to fit in better with the other relevant elements of the theology of my childhood than did the denial of universalism. So far from being new wine that strained and burst an old wineskin, universalism seemed to me like something that made a lot of previously puzzling elements of my childhood theology finally come together and make sense.

- [Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived](#), by Rob Bell. 12/23/2011 There was a lot of controversy about whether this book espouses universalism, with Bell himself, in interviews given around the time of the release of the book, denying that it does. Though Bell's denials seemed to me to be based on an overly stringent account of what it takes for a position to count as universalist, in the end, I accept his denial (even if not the reasons he gives for it). Still, this book provides a nice and sympathetic exposition of the universalist position. (The view was presented not as Bell's own, but as a view to be discussed. That he presented it so nicely and compellingly is part of what got him ID'd as a universalist, I think.) This is a very accessible book that will appeal to many Christians who are chafing under traditional doctrines of hell, and who are hungry for alternative visions. I suspect it has been and will be literally a Godsend for many readers. I recommend Tom Talbot's short but nice review of the book [here](#).

#### Recommended Blog Posts on Universalism

I have discussed some issues surrounding Christian universalism (not the scriptural case for & against the view, though that does come up in some of the comments to the posts), in these posts to the "Generous Orthodoxy Think Tank" group weblog.

- ["The Problem with Universalism"?5/27/2006](#)
- [Hoping that Universalism Is / Will Be True6/6/2006](#)

- [Underground Universalism?](#)6/8/2006

I have also posted at "Generous Orthodoxy Think Tank" a paper sent to me by Gregory MacDonald (ppseudonym), author of The Evangelical Universalist (see above, under "Books").

- ["Can an Evangelical Be a Universalist?" by Gregory MacDonald](#)11/21/06

Some related posts I've done for "[The Prosblogian](#)"12/2011

- ["All"](#)3/7/11
- ["Leads to"](#)3/11/11
- [Hope and the "Hitler Types"](#)5/15/11