

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Number:	130		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	1 Timothy 2:3-4, 4:10		
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ON DEATH AND DYING (Part 4)

William Greenough Thayer Shedd (1820-1894) was one of the great Reformed theologians of the 19th century. You have seen me quote him over the years repeatedly. In a volume entitled “Theological Essays” he has a chapter titled *Hellphobia*, in which he writes: “A worldly and wicked man is afraid of the future life and of the future retribution, with that kind of perturbation which is of the nature of fright. The thought of sudden death produces consternation in his mind. The apprehension that after all there may be in reserve for him a searching examination into the deeds which he has done in the body, affects him very much as the cry of fire at midnight does. He is put into a panic. . . . The *looking for of judgment and fiery indignation* is native to man. The sceptic, notwithstanding his denial of immortality, sometimes fears that he may be an immortal being, and that there may be future punishment of sin. This fear worries him, and he takes every opportunity to ridicule and combat what he fears. He whistles to keep his courage up. He has hellphobia, and it shows itself in an irascible temper and an exasperated phraseology, whenever the frightful subject is brought to his mind. This same spurious and servile fear of hell is seen in some preachers. They take pains to sneer at the orthodox view of future punishment, to ridicule that religious experience which has solemnity in it, and to recommend a mirthful piety. From their manner of treating the subject, it is plain that they fear hell more than they fear sin. Hell, for them, is the most dreadful theme that can be brought before the human mind, and they too, like Taine, are made irritable by it. They, too, have hellphobia.”¹ If we believe the message sent by the contemporary media, the “new location” of everyone who dies is heaven. At first glance, popular polls seem to disagree with that conclusion, for they reveal that a large majority of Americans believe in the existence of hell. However, the same polls show that almost no one thinks that he or she is going there. Everyone hopes for heaven. Hell is under fire. In one sense that is nothing new. It has been the case ever since the Enlightenment, but the past fifty years have seen a noteworthy turn of affairs. Attacks on the historic doctrine of hell that used to come from without the church are now coming from within.² For example, M. J. McClymond noted, “A surprising sign of the times occurred during 2016, when forty-five traditional Catholic leaders and theologians from various nations addressed a list of *dubia* (questions calling for clarification) to Pope Francis, one of which was in response to the isolated statement contained in Francis’s apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (2016): *No one can be condemned for ever, because that is not the logic of the Gospel!* Read without regard to the context of the document, this sentence sounds like an affirmation of universal salvation. While the global media have widely reported on the *dubia* pertaining to eucharistic reception on the part of unmarried sexual partners or same-sex couples, the issue regarding Pope Francis’s possible adherence to or teaching of universalism has generally gone unnoticed. Even if those querying Francis have misinterpreted his statement in *Amoris Laetitia*, it is nonetheless remarkable to see Catholic leaders and teachers publicly asking the pope whether he is a universalist. It would be difficult to imagine such a thing happening at any point in church history prior to the last decade or so.”³ This, however, is not a new development. From the very beginning the doctrine of the eternal punishment of the wicked has been taught in the Christian church. Harry Buis, in his *Doctrine of Eternal Punishment*, quotes from a number of early church fathers to show that this doctrine was taught by them. He goes on to indicate that theologians both of the Middle Ages and of the Reformation period likewise believed in and taught the everlasting punishment of the wicked. Buis then shows that beginning with the eighteenth century a number of Christian theologians began to deny the doctrine of eternal punishment. This rebellion against that doctrine “swelled into a mighty revolt in the nineteenth century, a revolt

which continues to the present day.”⁴ “Universalism has a slender exegetical basis,” as Shedd pointed out. The Biblical data are found to be unmanageable, and resort is had to human feeling and sympathy. Its advocates quote sparingly from scripture. In particular, the words of Christ relating to eschatology are left with little citation or interpretation. . . . Some words of St. Paul, on the other hand, whose views upon sin, election, and predestination, however, are not especially attractive to this class, are made to do yeoman’s service. Texts like Rom. 5:18, *As judgment came upon all men unto condemnation, so the free gift came upon all men unto condemnation, so the free gift came upon all men unto justification*; and 1 Cor. 15:22, *As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive*; are explained wholly apart from their context, and by vocalization the word *all*. When St. Paul asserts that *the free gift came upon all men unto justification*, this is severed from the preceding verse, in which the *all* are described as *those which receive abundance of grace, and of the gift of righteousness*. And when the same apostle affirms that *in Christ shall all be made alive*, no notice is taken of the fact mentioned in the succeeding verse, that not all men are *in Christ* – the clause, *they that are Christ’s, at his coming*, implying that there are some who are **not** *Christ’s at his coming*. The paucity of the texts of scripture that can with any plausibility be made to teach Universalism sometimes leads to an ingenuity that is unfavorable to candid exegesis. The endeavor to escape the force of plain revelation introduces unnatural explanations.”⁵

- I. **DOES “ALL” MEAN EVERYONE WITHOUT EXCEPTION?** Universalists read texts like 1 Timothy 2:3, 4 and 4:10 as teaching their doctrine. David Bentley Hart, one of their leading advocates, declares, “If God is the good creator of all, he must also be the savior of all, without fail, who brings to himself all he has made, including all rational wills, and only thus returns to himself in all that goes forth from him. If he is not the savior of all, the Kingdom is only a dream, and creation something considerably worse than a nightmare. But, again, it is not so. According to scripture, God saw that what he created was good. If so, then all creatures must, in the ages, see it as well.”⁶ This is a classic example of a *non sequitur* i.e., a statement that does not follow from a previous argument. The passage in 1 Timothy, universalists conclude, that the little word *all* must mean everyone without exception. “This conclusion,” writes Gomes, “is unwarranted. When verse 4 speaks of God desiring *all* people to be saved, many commentators believe that Paul is speaking of all kinds of classes of people – i.e., people from every race, nation, and station in life, rather than *all men individually, one by one*. This would make sense especially in light of Paul’s opponents, who argued that salvation was only available to certain groups, specifically to law-keeping Jews. At the same time, it is also true that God does delight in the salvation of sinners without qualification (John 3:16), as a thing pleasing in itself. That some fail to attain it through nothing other than their own willful obstinacy does not take away from the fact that God would delight in their salvation if they would but choose it (Luke 15:10; Ezek. 18:32; 33:11). On either understanding, this text does not support universalism. As for Christ giving himself as a *ransom for all*, if *all* refers merely to all kinds or classes of people, then this passage would in no way imply universalism. However, even if one took the *all* to refer to all without exception, it is certainly true that Christ’s death is in and of itself a complete satisfaction of justice for sin, sufficient to redeem all humankind from all of their sins. However, as the Bible makes clear repeatedly, in order for this entirely sufficient redemption to discharge the debt of any particular sinner, the sinner must receive it by faith (Acts 13:39; Rom. 3:26, 30, 4:5, 5:1, 10:10; Gal. 2:16, 3:8, 11, 24)⁷ Thomas Schreiner likewise notes, “The phrase *God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved* (2:3b-4a) shares the same conceptual horizon with *the living God, who is the Savior of all people* (4:10b-c) and refers to God’s salvific desire toward all kinds of people – in this sense God avails himself as Savior to all kinds of individuals from diverse people groups. The phrase *to come to the knowledge of the truth* (2:4b) mirrors *especially . . . those who believe* (4:10d), showing that salvation is a reality only for those who come to the knowledge of the truth through faith. It seems, then, that Paul is saying here that God is *potentially* the Savior of all kinds of people – in that, as the living God there is no other Savior available to people – but that he is *actually* the Savior of only believers. The additional comment, *especially of believers*, intensifies the meaning of salvation. The possibility of God being a Savior for all kinds of people exists because there is only one living God (4:10b) and one Mediator available to people (2:5-6), but this possibility becomes a *reality* for those who believe. The phrase

clarifies that believers are a subset of all people; they are a special category because they are actually saved.”⁸

CONCLUSION: The great B. B. Warfield, a contemporary of W. G. T. Shedd, wrote concerning Universalism, “the Scriptures are too clear to the contrary to permit the indulgence of this pleasant dream; it is all too certain that all men are not saved, but at the last day there remain the two classes of the saved and the lost, each of which is sent to the eternal destiny which belongs to it. The great problem requires to be faced by universalizing evangelicalism, therefore, of how it is God and God alone who saves the soul, and all that God does looking towards the saving of the soul he does to and for all men alike, and yet all men are not saved.”⁹

ENDNOTES

¹ W. G. T. Shedd, *Theological Essays* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1981), p. 190. He goes on to say, “We remark, in conclusion, that the sceptic’s hellphobia is far more to be dreaded than the Christian’s fear of hell. Fright is the worst form of apprehension. It is useless, besides being tormenting. It does not deliver from peril, or in any way help to do so. A frightened child or man is almost certain to be lost. He is too much excited to use his limbs and sinks under the waves as helpless as a paralytic. In like manner, that man who is in a constant panic about hell and is irritated by the mention or preaching of it, will make no efforts to be saved from it. He will experience all that is wearing and depressing in the doctrine and will feel none of those salutary influences that may be made to issue from it. He will die of hellphobia, as one is sure to die of hydrophobia.” P. 192.

² As cited in C. W. Morgan and R. A. Peterson, *Hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment* (Zondervan, 2004), p. 11.

³ M. J. McClymond, *The Devil’s Redemption: A New History and Interpretation of Christian Universalism* (Baker Academic, 2018), p. xx. This volume is destined to be the defining work on the subject.

⁴ As cited in A. A. Hoekema, *The Bible and The Future* (Eerdmans, 1979), p. 265.

⁵ W. G. T. Shedd, *The Doctrine of Endless Punishment* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1980), p. 9. Earlier Shedd noted, “The denial of endless punishment is usually associated with the denial of those tenets which are logically and closely connected with it – such as original sin, vicarious atonement, and regenerating. Of these, vicarious atonement is the most incompatible of any with universal salvation; because the latter doctrine, as has been observed, implies that suffering for sin is remedial only, while the former implies that it is retributive. Suffering that is merely educational does not require a vicarious atonement in order to release from it. But suffering that is judicial and punitive can be released from the transgressor only by being inflicted upon a substitute. He, therefore, who denies personal penalty must, logically, deny vicarious penalty. If the sinner himself is not obliged by justice to suffer in order to satisfy the law he has violated, then, certainly, no one needs suffer for him for this purpose.” P. 5.

⁶ D. B. Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, & Universal Salvation* (Yale University Press, 2019), p. 90.

⁷ A. W. Gomes, *40 Questions About Heaven and Hell* (Kregel Academic, 2018), p. 301.

⁸ T. R. Schreiner, “Problematic Texts for Definite Atonement in The Pastoral and General Epistles” in *From Heaven he Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological and Pastoral Perspective*, eds. D. Gibson & J. Gibson (Crossway, 2013), p. 385.

⁹ B. B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation* (rpt. Simpson Publishing Company, 1989), p. 74.