“UNIVERSAL SALVATION?”

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Introduction

Universalism is the belief that everyone will ultimately be saved, that all people will eventually end up in heaven. The very idea of men and women living a life of “eternal torment” in hell is simply an irreconcilable doctrine to the universalist. Their argument goes like this — if you accept the assumptions that God loves all people and desires their redemption, and that He is truly all powerful, then by deductive reasoning you must believe that God is going to ultimately save all people. Furthermore, they maintain that if you reject universalism, you must reject at least one of these assumptions. Essentially, this is the universalist’s application of the Western “law of non-contradiction.” Let me illustrate the law — let’s suppose someone says they have a immaculate, cherry red 1960 Corvette in their garage (at a given location) — the law of non-contradiction says either that is statement is true or it is untrue, that both positions can’t be right. That is the way the typical logician argues. The problem with such logic is that it is somewhat narrow in scope, it disallows for any paradoxical truth-claims, and it rejects any consideration outside of the parameters they establish. Universalists like to use this law as the “final test of truth” — thus they “put God in a box” and make Him conform to human logic. Essentially, this is just another form of “circular reasoning” — you begin by stating presuppositions that you believe express absolute reality, and then you proceed to make all deductions from there.

Let’s examine the some of the truth-claims of Scripture that refute human logic. In Isaiah, the Lord says, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts” (Is 55:8-9). Writes Isaiah, “God’s understanding is inscrutable” (Is 40:28). Solomon writes, “There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death” (Prv 14:12; 16: 25). He writes in Ecclesiastes, “I tested [everything] with wisdom, and said, ‘I will be wise,’ but it was far from me. What has been is remote and exceedingly mysterious. Who can discover it?” (Ecc 7:23-24). The psalmist David said, “Great is the Lord, and highly to be praised… His greatness is unsearchable” (Ps 145:3). Job questions: “Can you discover the depths of God? Can you discover the limits of the Almighty?” (Job 11:7)… God’s ways are “unfathomable” (Job 9:10)… “God is exalted, and we do not know Him; the number of His years are unsearchable” (Job 36:26)… “God does great things which we cannot comprehend” (Job 37:5). And then there are the words of the apostle Paul at the end of his letter to the Romans when he bursts forth in a hymn of praise and worship saying, “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways; they are past finding out! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor?” (Rom 11:33-34).

The Root of the Problem

The three characteristics of God in the Bible that lay at the root of the problem are these: God is SOVEREIGN (that is, God is GOD)… God is HOLY… and God is LOVE. For the sake of argument let me just focus on the last two characteristics. Western Christianity today is increasingly
focusing on the love of God, and focusing less on the holiness of God. Why, you ask — because these two characteristics appear to be in juxtaposition to each other in the minds of men. They question: “How can a truly loving God execute eternal judgment on human beings?” That’s a fair question — it’s a question that has been asked since the beginning of time… we’ve all asked it. Once again, however, this philosophical proposition is trying to present itself as the “logical proof” that God, contrary to the teaching of the Church and Scripture, will not execute eternal judgment against sinners. It is somewhat frustrating to have to keep on reminding born again believers of the preeminence of Scripture when it comes to truth — Scripture is the final authority on doctrinal issues, not the narrow limited thinking of men. It must be remembered that our “minds” are very, very small in the final scope of things… so to insist on understanding the mind of God is not only farcical, it is absurd. Because of the import of this issue, however, I feel compelled to address it for the sake of those who continue to struggle with this concept.

Let’s return to the two characteristics of God that are a part of this discussion: the love of God and the holiness of God. Because of a serious lack of critical scholarship by many who profess to be reputable theologians, it is important to give clarity to these two characteristics. Let me begin by saying that the most emphatic statement in all the Bible is this: “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts” (Is 6:3). You’ll notice the word “holy” is mentioned three times — the Seraphim around the throne of God did not simply say, “Holy is the Lord of host,” but “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts.” By repeating a word in the biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek, the word or concept becomes emphatic — Jesus frequently used this method to give “emphasis” to certain truth-claims He made… numerous times He said to His listeners, “Truly, truly, I say to you” (cf. the following verses from John’s gospel — Jn 3:3; 3:5; 5:24; 6:47; 6:53; 8:34; 8:58; 10:1; 10:7; 12:24; 16:20; 16:23). By using redundancy, Jesus in effect was prefacing His remarks by saying something like this: “Listen very carefully to what I am about to say! May there be no misunderstanding as to what I am saying! I want to be perfectly clear!” “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God!” (Jn 3:3). By the way, the word “again” is also emphatic in that verse. In other words, Jesus was making the strongest statement possible about salvation with His speech — “unless one is born again, he will not see the kingdom of God!”

Let’s return to the words of the Seraphim — “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts!” (Is 6:3). Do you notice the difference? They repeated the word “holy” three times!!! Incidentally, this same triple usage is used by the angels (possibly a combination of the Cherubim of Ezekiel 10, and the Seraphim of Isaiah 6) before the throne of God in heaven, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord GOD, the Almighty!” (Rev 4:8). The living creatures (whoever they are) sing ceaselessly of the holiness and eternality of God. Before proceeding with our discussion, let’s first define the word “holy.” The words holy and holiness occur some 830 times in the Old Testament. The root idea of the Hebrew word, from a religious perspective, is that of separation and consecration — separation from what is common or unclean, and consecration to what is divine, sacred, pure. When it is applied to God, it signifies His separation from, and transcendency over all His creation (Ex 3:4-5), as well as the ethical perfection of His character (Lev 11:44; 1 Pet 1:16).

The point I want you to hear up front is this: Above everything else God is a HOLY GOD!!! Though God is a LOVING GOD… first and foremost He is a HOLY GOD!!! By the way, if you are interested in doing a study of God, you must start with the fact that GOD IS HOLY!!! The word theology literally means “study of God.” That God is holy is the very foundation of His character — therefore if you start anywhere else, you are not going to come up with an
accurate picture of the God of the Bible, the only Sovereign God of creation. What you come up with may be a “wonderful deity of sorts,” with all kinds of warm cuddly tendencies, but he is not the GOD who IS (“I am who I am”)!!! Contrary to the teaching of liberal minds, GOD is not this lovey-dovey grandfather of all, who only hands out candy and kisses!!! It should be noted, if you don’t like this assessment you are potentially in danger of abandoning the God of the Bible and placing your trust in a god who does not exist. If that statement offends you, so be it… my concern is that God’s children not embrace the teaching of heretics who “deceive” people with warm, fuzzy rhetoric. Quite frankly, these individuals need to cease and desist from declaring that which they “know not” — furthermore, and the truth of the matter, all teachers are going to incur a “stricter judgment” because of the authoritative platform from which they speak and write (Jam 3:1); the responsibility of teachers is to only propound the truths of Scripture (2 Tim 2:15). By the way, that has always been a frightening thought to me as a teacher — you don’t mess with Scripture, and you always do your homework!!! Hear me out on this — this is not an insignificant matter. Denying the primary essence of God is dangerous stuff!

The apostle Paul gave this solemn warning to Timothy: “The time will come when people will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled (they only want to hear doctrine that is gratifying, pleasing and comfortable), they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires” (2 Tim 4:3). He says the lust for inoffensive preaching will cause people to turn their ears away from the truth to myths (2 Tim 4:4) — to sacrifice truth for fables is a poor exchange. Those are very sobering statements. Don’t compromise with the truth. Remember, the church of the living God is “the pillar and support of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15) — that’s one of its primary functions. Stay away from men who teach “strange doctrines” (1 Tim 1:3-11)… their teachings contradict “orthodoxy” (literally, “right belief”). “Fight the good fight of faith” (1 Tim 1:18; 6:12; Acts 17:11); by the way, this is not easy stuff! It is an “intense fight!” Remember, over 43,000,000 believers have been martyred for their faith since the time of Christ! I don’t pretend to be the last word on truth — none of us have a monopoly on it… but I am all too aware that “it is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb 10:26-31; 3:12-14). If you mess with His word you’re going to make Him angry (Rev 22:18-19; Deut 4:2; 12:32; Prov 30:5-6; Deut 9:20; 1 Kg 11:9; Ecc 5:6; Ps 79:5; Is 12:1)… in short, your excuses for doing so aren’t going to fly with Him (Acts 17:11).

God’s Revelation is Progressive

For the first 2,500 years of human history, God was primarily known as an all-powerful HOLY GOD. When Moses came along some 3,500 years ago, God said to him, “I am the LORD… I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty, but by My name, LORD / YHWH, I did not make Myself known to them…. I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. Then I will take you for My people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the LORD your God…. I am the LORD” (Ex 6:2-8). It wasn’t until the time of the Exodus that God finally revealed Himself as a loving, redemptive, compassionate God (see Jer 9:24); up until then God was only known as an all-powerful Holy God. The idea of a HOLY GOD rightly produces “fear” in us — “the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov 1:7; 9:10; 15:33; Job 28:28; Ps 111:10; Ecc 12:13)… whereas the idea of a LOVING GOD produces a deep, inward “peace” in us — “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts” (Col 3:15; 1Th 5:23). Some like to maintain that the “fear of God” is only an Old Testament concept — but that is not at all what Scripture teaches (note the following New Testament passages: Mt 10:28; Lk 1:50; 12:5;
The truth of matter is, all of us struggle with believing in a **HOLY GOD**… we just want to believe in a **LOVING GOD** — some of that is the work of Satan… he makes light of our sinfulness, and wants us to think that our sin really isn’t that big a deal… that in the end everything is going to work out just fine… “so don’t sweat the small stuff.” Let me remind you of the words of the apostle Paul to the Christians at Philippi: “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil 2:12) — he is describing here the believer’s present entire experience of deliverance from evil — it is no small matter to which we just give lip-service (1 Pet 1:6-7, 15-17; 4:1-2, 17-18; 5:8-10; 2 Pet 3:3, 7, 17-18).

It is also important to remember that God gave us the Law **after** revealing Himself as a loving, redemptive, compassionate God (cf. Ex 6 and Ex 19ff). I mention this because the “Law” contains some pretty profound judgments — including the execution of individuals by “stoning;” etc. (read the following: Lev 24:13-23; Num 14:11-13; 15:35; Deut 13:10; 17:5; 21:21; 22:21; 22:24; 28:1ff; 28:15ff; 1 Kg 21:10)… then there is God’s divine judgment against Pharaoh and the Egyptians (Ex 5-12)… and His oracles of judgment against countless nations (here are just a few from the prophet Isaiah: 10:5; 10:12; 10:24-25; chapters 13-23; 24:1-6; 24:17-23; 33:1; 34:1-2, 8; 37:36; 45:5-7; 47:1, 3, 6, 11, 15; 48:10-11) — those are just a few from one prophet! It was God Himself who said, “**Vengeance is Mine, I will repay**” (Heb 10:30; Deut 32: 35) — the word “**Mine**” is emphatic in that verse. Let me remind you, this is that same lovey-dovey God that many of you want to believe in, but you can’t define Him on your own terms — either you worship the God who “**IS**,” or you worship a god who “is not.” Just because you can’t reconcile how a loving God can punish people, doesn’t mean He doesn’t exist. “Death” entered the human family because of sin — think about that! — God doesn’t mess around with sin! By the way, some day you’ll have the opportunity to talk to Adam about “the fall,” and hear what he has to say. It should be noted, there are literally “hundreds of verses” in Scripture that refer to God punishing sin and iniquity — take your concordance and check them out. Listen to the words of the LORD to Isaiah: “I am the LORD, and there is no other, the one forming light and creating darkness; causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the LORD who does all these” (Is 45:7; Is 31:2; Jer 18:11).

Obviously the **holiness of God** is a concept that none of us can fully reconcile or understand… but to deny that God is holy is not only meritless, it is foolish. Trying to cram the infinite characteristics of God into a “fallen man’s mind” is absurd… and demanding that we be able to do so is sheer madness. Clearly, we do not have the capacity to “connect all the dots” — remember, we only have a 150 IQ at best… whereas God’s IQ is infinitesimal — it’s like trying to put all the water in the ocean into a thimble! At some point we just have to accept God’s written revelation (Scripture) as the one true picture of ultimate reality… by the way, when we do, God causes the truth to rest peacefully in our souls by the indwelling presence of His Spirit. There is no other answer. As Peter stated it — “To whom shall we go? You alone have the words of life” (Jn 6:68).

There are countless reasons one can concoct to “reject” believing in the God of the Bible — How can a loving God “kill Adam and Eve” for simply eating an apple (or whatever) that He Himself put there in front of them, and then placed Satan in their midst to entice them to do so? How can a loving God demand the “stoning to death” of people who really aren’t that bad? How can a loving God allow suffering? starvation? disease? child abuse? rape? war? evil to prosper? Let me remind you of the words of the Lord to Moses: “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute or deaf or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?” (Ex 4:11). Yet in our heart of hearts, we all have a tendency to respond, “**We would never do that!”** Think about that arrogant response!
In effect we are actually concluding that we are more loving than GOD!!! How diabolical can we get?? Never fail to forget that we are diabolical, brain-dead sinners!!! That’s why our brains come up with such non-sensical reasoning! Never take God’s Word and twist it around to make it say what you want it to say! And never read something into it that is not there! Let it simply say what it does and leave it at that!!! Just because you don’t fully understand it, or like it, doesn’t invalidate it! By the way, the only reason any of us ever challenge God (in any way) is because of our diabolical, blind, proud hearts! And it is only after reflecting upon our madness that we eventually and rightfully conclude that “we have spoken of things we know not! and of things too wonderful for us to know! and as such we repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:3-6).

The Dark Side of God

When “bad things” happen, our faith (so firm and certain in good times) becomes fickle and shaky, and we begin to question — “Why?” and “Where is God?” Some people try their best to refrain from asking such questions… and even try to pretend the issues really aren’t there. The Bible is clear, however — pain and suffering, violence and evil, are all a part of the reality of life… though the principal part of our lives is often one of peace and harmony, there are times when that is simply not the case. Such experiences are commonly referred to by theologians as the “dark side” of God and faith; that is, the more obscure, incomprehensible, and inscrutable aspects — numerous passages in Scripture describe these experiences in an effort to bring a measure of understanding to them.

For the most part we have been taught that God is a “one armed” or “one handed” individual. In Scripture we find the “right hand” of God mentioned numerous times, while the “left hand” is only mentioned a few times. The word “right” in Hebrew (yamiym) when used with “hand,” generally means the stronger more dexterous (skillful and competent) hand… conversely, the “left” (smowl) means dark. So God’s right hand refers to His strength and dexterity, or His wonderful ability to do all things. The psalmist David writes, “At Thy right hand are pleasures for evermore” (Ps 16:11)... and “The right hand of the Lord is exalted; the right hand of the Lord does valiantly” (Ps 118:16). In Isaiah the Lord tells His servant Israel, “I will uphold you with My righteous right hand” (Is 41:10). That the “left hand” refers to that which is dark can readily be seen in the parable Jesus told of the sheep and the goats; in it He said “He will put the sheep on His right and the goats on His left… those on His right will be blessed of His Father… and those on His left He will say, ‘Depart from Me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Mt 25:31-46). In this parable “His right” refers to the place of favor and blessing… and “His left” to the place of disfavor and rejection. In ancient biblical times, a father’s blessing was extremely important, because it determined who would receive the major part of the inheritance. When Jacob was about to bless his two grandsons, Ephraim & Manasseh, he was careful to place his “right hand” on the one who would receive the inheritance. The blessing was suppose to go to the eldest son Manasseh, but Jacob crossed his hands so that his right hand was on Ephraim’s head instead. Against Joseph’s objection, Jacob insisted on giving the major blessing to Ephraim, because God had chosen him over his older brother (Gen 48:8-20). Obviously, God had His reasons… and we must just leave it at that.
The Reality of Hell

Last year, Rob Bell, the evangelical pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Michigan, caused a firestorm of controversy when he released his new book, “Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived.” The book questions much of the traditional Christian teaching on hell… denies the existence of eternal punishment… says that “Jesus is bigger than any one religion”…. and suggests that good people from across the cultural spectrum (religions of the world) ultimately will enjoy the benefits of salvation without even knowing that they are coming exclusively through Jesus. He essentially says, “As long as your heart is fine or your actions measure up, you’ll be ok.” Bell’s book managed to make its way on to the cover of Time Magazine with the cover headline: “What If There’s No Hell?” Well-known liberal theologian Brian McLaren sympathizes with Bell’s view saying, “It’s very hard to square the idea of eternal conscious torment with a just or holy God.” Obviously, syncretism abounds even in professing evangelical churches today, as they compromise their values by embracing doctrines and practices that are contrary to Scripture.

Darwinian evolution has had a powerful syncretistic impact on organized Christendom. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, it played a key role in the development of “liberal theology” in numerous churches that originally were biblically sound. Since then it has radically changed society’s moral compass. Darwinian evolution impacted pastors and teachers who were fairly sound biblically, except in their interpretation of Genesis 1 — it was here that they caved in to the dogmatic claims of evolutionary scientists. A highly significant study recently revealed that by capitulating to the evolutionary voice, it had a negative, tragic impact on young people who had grown up in Christian homes and attended churches that were otherwise biblically sound. Large numbers of youth ultimately concluded that if the “Genesis creation account” was not literally true, then maybe other portions of the Bible were not true either.

Here are a few thoughts on what the Bible teaches about “hell” — it is referred to in Scripture as “eternal punishment” (Mt 25:41); “everlasting destruction” (2 Th 1:9); “everlasting contempt” (Dan 12:2); “unquenchable fire” (Mt 3:12; 5:22; 18:9); “damnation” (Mt 23:33); “fiery furnace” (Mt 13:42, 50); “blackest darkness” (Jude 13); “fiery lake of burning sulfur” (Rev 21:8); and a place “prepared for the devil and his angels” (Mt 25:41). Jesus was probably the most prolific teacher on the doctrine of hell. The word “hell” occurs twelve times in the Gospels, and eleven of them are from the lips of our Lord. So the doctrine of hell is central to the Christian faith and always has been. Historic Christian orthodoxy has always maintained the doctrine of hell. If you go back to the earliest creeds — the Apostle’s Creed, the Nicene Creed — they all talk about Christ returning to judge the living and the dead.

The orthodox position affirms an “eternal, conscious torment” for all those who reject Christ and reject the gospel message — the important word in that statement is “reject.” The historic Christian faith has always affirmed the “eternity of life” for those who believe in Christ, and the “eternity of death” for those who disbelieve or reject Him — by the way, “ignorance” is never implied — the idea of “unbelief” is to have knowledge of something, and to “disbelieve” or “reject” that knowledge, in spite of the testimony of God’s Spirit to one’s heart. It should be noted, God is the one who determines the genuineness of a person’s faith. In the parable of the sheep and the goats (Mt 25:31-46), you’ll notice that Jesus uses the “same adjective” to talk about eternal life and eternal punishment. — so if “life in Christ” is going to be eternal… then “life
without Christ” is also going to be eternal. Note Jesus’ words: “And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Mt 24:46). Though Rob Bell argues that the word “eternal” does not necessarily mean “time without end,” there is plenty of evidence in Scripture that argues to the contrary. Bell not only uses a very selective way of reading the text (Scripture), but he also uses a very selective way of exegeting and interpreting the text. He likes to refer to the first chapters of Colossians and Ephesians, where God talks about reconciling all things. But if you look at the writings of Paul, you’ll see that he also talks about the “wrath of God” coming upon the disobedient. Paul is very clear about his teaching on hell. When the Bible talks about reconciliation in those contexts it is talking about all of creation submitting itself to the lordship of Christ — the obedient for His blessing and the disobedient for His curse. Jesus came as a Savior to offer salvation the first time around… when He returns He is going to come back as a King and Judge. That is the “context” of Eph 1 — by the way, “context” is almost always the problem with inaccurate interpretation… lazy, inept scholars almost always ignore it, thus demonstrating a very poor understanding of Scripture… that is the essence of “cultic” theology. By the way, the Bible say nothing about God giving people “second chances” after they die, and Scripture is very clear on this — the writer of Hebrews says, “It is appointed once for man to die, and after that, judgment” (Heb 9:27).

It is important to remember that “God’s character” is reflected in all of His Laws; therefore all of His Laws reflect His infinite goodness, holiness, love and mercy. So when people break one of His Laws, they are breaking the “very moral code of God,” which is a reflection of His infinite goodness (in contradistinction to “badness”) — there is nothing bad or evil in God (1 Jn 1:5; 1 Tim 6:16; Jam 1:17). “God dwells in unapproachable light” (1 Tim 6:16); as such, “He cannot even look on sin” (Hab 1:13) — incidentally, that is why He turned His back on His Son when the sin of the world was placed on Him (Mt 27:45; 1 Pet 2:24). Scripture very clearly says that when the law is broken, the penalty must be paid — the soul that sins must die. God did the most “loving thing” possible when He sent His son to pay the penalty of our sin and offer us salvation — In effect, His message was this: “Here is My Son — receive Him, so that you might have life and not enter into hell!” Hell brings glory to God because it is the ultimate condemnation of sin and evil — basically it is a reflection of the fact that God takes sin/evil seriously — He cannot tolerate it. By the way, how can we impugn God’s righteousness because of His intolerance of evil? Such judgments really reveal how sick we are — remember, there is absolutely “no good” in sin… it is one hundred percent corrupt… there is not an ounce of good in it… it is rotten through and through. The problem with man is that he doesn’t see or understand how diabolical sin is… it just doesn’t seem that bad to him, because his own core is “totally sinful” (his mind is totally corrupt). There isn’t a man on the planet who does not think that he is actually a “pretty good person;” that’s why the Lord said, “The heart is more deceitful than all else; it is desperately sick; no one can understand it!” (Jer 17:9).

After years of struggling to be good, the apostle Paul finally came to this conclusion of himself: “I know that nothing good dwells in me; that is, in my flesh; the wishing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not” (Rom 7:18). The problem with the vast majority of Christians is that they have not yet been convinced of the depth of their depravity or how the invasive sin is in their hearts. If the truth be known, even Satan probably thinks he’s a pretty good guy; remember, he is an angel of light! Because our flesh is fully corrupt (there is not a single ounce of good in it), we frequently arrive at completely wrong conclusions. The fact is there is nothing “righteous” in us to help us make righteous judgments. On the other hand, there is nothing “unrighteousness” in
God that cause Him to make *unrighteous judgments*. Sin is not just a small, insignificant negative that any loving, holy God can tolerate — it is filthy rags… rotten stench… and deadly poisonous! So why do we accuse God of being an “ogre” because He refuses to tolerate it? It is because we are so full of sin that we don’t recognize how corrupt and hideous it is — remember, we actually think “we are pretty good!” None of us see ourselves as being totally evil. The fact is, *God’s holiness* demands that He judge evil for what it is — a cesspool of filth. Again, how can we impugn God’s character (which is perfectly holy) for calling sin what it is — poisonous filth? Obviously, a holy God cannot overlook sin or simply ignore it — as such, He is committed to eliminating it from all creation. Judging sin for what it is actually brings glory to God because it reveals how majestic, holy and loving He is — He is committed to having all of us as His children live in a “*sin-free universe*?” Why is that unloving? Remember, God is not sending “reasonably good or decent people” to hell (contrary to what you might think). God doesn’t punish reasonably good people! The problem with our inability to “reconcile the truth,” is that there is so much “untruth” in us. The truth of the matter is we can’t fully appreciate the integrity of truth! And we “refuse” to accept the fact that that indeed is the case! So we respond by “twisting the truth” to make it more acceptable — thus making “ourselves” the final authority of truth.

**Concluding Remarks**

*Thomas Talbott*, a professor of philosophy at Willamette University in Salem, Oregon, says in his book *The Inescapable Love of God* — “If love is a part of God’s very essence, then He cannot act in unloving ways towards anyone; not even His enemies” (p.108). Though that may sound profound and logical to the unsuspecting, undiscerning mind, it is actually a very shallow and unsubstantial philosophical proposition. All Talbott offers us here is another liberal attempt at trying to justify universal salvation. His simplistic argument rests upon the assumption that his narrow definition of love is accurate, and from that he then arbitrarily concludes that anything outside of that definition is fallacious and wrong. The problem with Talbott, Bell, and others like them, are their definitions of sin and love — essentially, that is the problem all individuals have who hold to a divergent or cultic orientation of Scripture. Sin is not just a moral indiscretion as many would define it… it is the *refusal* of the individual to submit to the lordship of GOD… it *demands* its own way… it is not “*Thy will*” be done, but “*My will*” be done (Mt 26:39)… essentially, it *insists* on being the god of its own life (the final authority in life), which was precisely the problem of Satan. By the way, many universalists believe that God will ultimately even bring Satan back into the fold — after all, if God is truly loving and is all powerful, then to remain consistent with their own argument, what else can they conclude? The truth of the matter is, the sinful heart refuses to bend the knee to God, though Scripture tells us in the end it will be compelled to do so — “every knee in all creation will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is LORD (emphatic!) to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:10-11; Is 45:23; Rom 14:11).

Because of an errant definition of sin, universalists view the God of the Bible (as literally described) with a jaundice eye — they see the God of the Bible as an *unloving tyrant* because He is a God who punishes sin and demands submission (Gen 3:5; Is 14:14; Ezek 28:2, 12-17)… and that is simply not acceptable to the universalist — therefore, they “*redefine God.*” Just as Satan flatly contradicted God about the inevitability of judgment on those who disobeyed (Gen 3:4), so also his followers still deny the facts of hell and eternal punishment. Satan misrepresented God as seeking to
withhold from Adam and Eve something that would have been beneficial to them. Someone has said, “The wreckage of earth and a million billion graves attest that God is true and Satan is a liar.” Universalists and secular humanism continue to perpetuate Satan’s lie: “You will be like God” (that is, the one who calls the shots in your life). The sinful heart simply refuses to submit to the lordship of God — as such it naturally rejects the fullness of the cross and its redemption, because it simply does not see itself as “that sinful;” sinful, yes, but not totally sinful. The cross to the liberal mind is simply God’s way of expressing His affection for the human family… His way of letting man know that He loves Him… His way of letting man know that all is really well with the human family… that in the end, all creation will enjoy His presence forever. Another problem with the universalist’s premise is his definition of love — anything that is not perceived as positive, warm and fuzzy is simply deemed “unloving” and “unacceptable.” By the way, the cults are particularly adept at using “biblical words” with non-biblical definitions — it is essential for them to reject the lexical meanings in order to maintain a consistent internal theology.

Helmut Richard Niebuhr, the renowned neo-orthodox theologian and professor of Christian ethics at Yale University from 1931 to 1962, summarized the gospel message of liberal Christianity as one that preaches “a God without wrath, brought men without sin, into a kingdom without judgment, through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross” (the “commas” are mine in that quote). Essentially, liberal Christianity stresses a basic continuity between man and God, emphasizing the immanence of God rather than His transcendence. It tends to see religious knowledge emerging from research and the use of reason, as superior to biblical revelation. Liberal theologians seek to reconcile Christianity with secular science and modern thinking — therefore, they reduce the early chapters of Genesis to poetry having a message, but not one that is to be taken literally. Being saved from sin and its penalty in hell is not the issue for the liberal; the main emphasis is on how man treats his fellow man. “Love” for one’s fellow man becomes the defining issue. I find it very interesting that the “second great commandment” (as opposed to the first) is front and center in the liberal theology. So liberal theology does not concern itself with sin… as such, it downplays or completely neglects the cross and looks to humanistic thinking for its ethics and moral compass. Such churches embrace a theology of “standing on the side of love,” furthermore, they insist that science and faith can be reconciled, and that “society,” not just the “individual,” is integral to salvation. I mention the foregoing regarding liberal Christianity, because universalism has been strongly influenced by liberal theology — it is only a matter of time until it fully abandons orthodoxy. Such is the testimony of history.

The message of universalism reminds us of the sober words of Jesus in His sermon on the mount — “Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it. Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves…. for not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast our demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And I shall declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness [that is, anything outside of what I have declared]” (Mt 7:13-23). It should be noted, all of the italicized words in those verses are emphatic — so read them as such.
With regard to the plight of individuals who die without ever having heard the gospel — what happens to them? We have all asked that question; obviously, it can be a very confounding one. I don’t pretend to be the “end all” as to the answer, but I do believe our answer must be consistent with what the Bible teaches. I have personally reconciled the argument this way — God has placed in every human heart a degree of truth (Rom 1:18-32; Job 12:7-10; Ps 19:1-6; Jer 5:21-29); according to Scripture it is incumbent upon each individual to respond to the amount of truth he has received… if he decides to “suppress the truth in unrighteousness,” God will judge him accordingly (whatever that may be). So one of the questions at the root of this issue is this — “How much truth does each person have?” Scripture does not fully expand upon the amount of truth each individual has, only that every one has been give some truth, and that every one is responsible to respond according to the degree of truth he has received. As stated earlier in this study, God does not judge us for that which we do not know (ignorance), but for rejecting and not believing the knowledge that He has given to us. There is an interesting passage in the Acts of the apostles (19:1-7) that helps shed a little light on this subject — it says that when Paul came to Ephesus in Asia minor, he came upon a group of disciples (believers), and said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” These men responded back saying that “they had not heard of the Holy Spirit… that they had only been baptized into John’s baptism” (that is, John the Baptist’s baptism). Well when Paul told them about “Jesus” they believed in Him also and were baptized in His name. The point here is this — these disciples of God had responded to the truth that God had given to them… and then when that degree of truth was significantly expanded upon (to include Christ), they believed that aspect of the truth as well. The argument goes like this: these disciples (followers) of God had responded to the degree of light (truth) that had been given to them… even though at that point the degree of light did not yet include the “cross of Christ” — the reason they accepted Christ when He was presented to them, is that it was simply “more truth” (it did not conflict with the truth they had already believed). I believe each of us as human beings have been given a degree of light, and that God honors that degree of faith we exercise in the truth that He has given to us… that it is only when we “suppress the truth in unrighteousness” that He judges us — hence, He only judges us for disbelieving the truth and for rejecting it. It should be noted, Christians are called “believers” because they believe the truth!

I fully recognize that there are a number of individuals in the Christian community who do not fully agree with me on this subject (and I wouldn’t rest my salvation on it)… I respect those who are not of the same opinion, because this is one of those difficult issues that is hard to understand. Somewhere along the way, however, we each must let God be GOD, and trust that in His goodness and wisdom His judgments will be perfect and just — that is the testimony of Scripture. One thing is very clear, we do not have to worry about God dispensing injustice. The entire world can be grateful that I am not GOD, because I would eradicate an awful lot of people from the earth if I was — by the way, I am well aware of the small degree of love that inhabits my soul… at times that really grieves me and causes me great consternation… the truth is very humbling… the good news is God gives grace to the humble. Though I struggle with the concept of “eternal damnation,” as all of you do, I cannot discount it simply because I’m not thrilled with the doctrine — that is not place; nor is it yours. To do so would clearly violate the teaching of Scripture. Just because you and I cannot fully understand a concept, does not mean that we are free to reject it… to do so, is to make ourselves the “final authority” of truth.
In closing let me say this: though belief in universalism, in and of itself, does not void salvation (from my perspective), it does have the potential danger of allowing false teachers to abide alongside true believers and corrupt their faith… and that is serious stuff (cf. Gal 1:6-10; Phil 3:2; 1 Tim 1:3-4; 6:3-5; 2 Tim 2:14-19; 4:2-4; Tit 1:7-16). For the local church to allow individuals to move around within the body freely, dispensing “contrary messages” to its adherents, is completely unaccept-able according to God’s divinely appointed authors. By the way, if you are fully convinced that the “orthodox teaching of Scripture” is without merit, and you are attending a church that teaches “orthodoxy,” you need to leave that church (without tooting your horn and causing injury to others), and find yourself a church that concurs with your position. If you believe you are “mature” enough to have unequivocally decided upon a contrary theology, please be respectful of your present church and exit quietly.

Let me conclude this study by encouraging you to read the last chapter of my book “Soul Trans-formation” — I believe it will help bring considerably more clarity to this issue. The chapter is titled, “Sin and Man’s Eternal Purpose.” The study can be found under the “Additional Studies” link on my website: TheTransformedSoul.com — I am reminded of the words of the apostle Paul to his young friend Timothy: “Some men… want to be teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions” (1 Tim 1:7).

Don’t sacrifice the truth on the altar of a warm, fuzzy, feel good theology.