

ANOTHER GOSPEL

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"Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God was making an announcement through us: we tell you on Christ's behalf, you are reconciled to God." No, that's not simply a different translation, but a different gospel, and a widespread one at that.

Essentially, that's the way the new universalism would write 2 Corinthians 5:20. And that's the message being preached from many pulpits and by many missionaries around the world. Not CAM missionaries (and never, we pray), but by many.

I say the new universalism, although the belief that all will ultimately be saved (usually after a temporary period of punishment) has been around since the second century. But the new universalism declares that all men are now saved though some do not realize it. So the job of the preacher and the missionary is to tell them that they are already saved.

Fantastic? Yes, but true. One universalist entitles the chapter in his theology which deals with the subject "Universal Homecoming." Another talks about God's radical love that pursues men until all are saved. Still another sees all elected in the elect man Christ.

But, you ask, can these people give any scriptural proof for such a doctrine? Some of the verses commonly appealed to are John 12:32 ". . . will draw all men unto me;" 1 Corinthians 15:22 ". . . in Christ shall all be made alive;" Philippians 2:10-11 ". . . every tongue shall confess . . .;" and 1 Timothy 2:4 "who will have all men to be saved. . ." Universalists insist that these verses teach that all people will ultimately be saved, but they do not teach that. The first says that the cross makes possible the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles; notice in the same passage the Lord warned of judgment on rejectors (v. 48). The second is a statement that all who are in Christ (that is, Christians) will be raised from the dead. The third assures that all people

will some day acknowledge Jesus as Lord, but it does not say that all will have received Him as Savior. The last expresses God's desire that all be saved, but it is not a declaration that all will be saved.

But these verses must not be considered in isolation. They cannot contradict other verses which universalists conveniently overlook. Consider, for example, some of the Lord's own words. "He that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him" (John 3:36). "These shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal" (Matt. 25:46). The word for everlasting and the word for eternal are the same; therefore, it is impossible to argue that eternal punishment is not unending in the same way that eternal life is.

Paul said the same thing declaring that those who "obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord" (2 Thess. 1:8-9). He also distinguished between two groups of living people and called one "lost" and the other "saved." All men, he said, are in one or the other condition in this life (1 Cor. 1:18; 2 Cor. 4:3). The writer to the Hebrews warns that no one shall escape if he neglects so great salvation (2:3).

The Bible is perfectly clear, then on two points: every living person is either saved or lost, and if a person dies without receiving Christ as his personal Savior from sin he will be eternally condemned.

While some universalists do appeal to the Bible for support of their teaching, some prefer to argue theologically. They appeal to the nature of God as being totally love. How, then, they ask, could such a God condemn anyone either in this life or in the one to come? God is too good, they add, to reject anyone. But, of course, God's character is not only love and goodness (it certainly does include those characteristics), but it also involves righteousness, holiness and wrath. Love and righteousness are equally ultimate in God, but when righteousness is sacrificed to love (as universalists do), then

one is no longer describing the God of the Bible

What practical difference does it make whether universalism is right or wrong? All the difference in the world to missions. If the task of the church is merely to announce to men and women that they are already saved, there is little motivation to do much about sacrificing to make such an announcement. True, if people knew they were saved, this life might be a bit happier; but whether they know it or not would make no difference to what happens to them after death. All will eventually end up in heaven. So while I might be motivated to get the announcement out, getting it out is no longer a life or death matter; it's just a life or life matter! But if I believe that the Scriptures teach that some people are lost now and some will be eternally separated from God unless they believe before they die, then preaching the gospel does become a very urgent life or death matter.

Universalism also makes praying for the unsaved unnecessary, for people really are not lost. Furthermore, it opens the way for shifting priorities so that evangelism is superseded by social action.

The history of the Universalist church in the United States demonstrates this lack of urgency. The first congregation was founded shortly after independence, in 1779. After almost 200 years history there are about 200 congregations and about 200,000 members. This does not demonstrate much of a missionary interest. And why should it? If I believe that all either are or will be saved, why be concerned? Why give any money? Why pray? Why send my sons and daughters? But if I believe otherwise, why am I not more concerned? Why don't I give and pray?

The universalist says: Jesus Christ is like a light that is on in a room. The people in that room are sitting there with their eyes closed. We would do them a favor if we would tell them the light is on and get them to open their eyes. If they do, fine; if they don't, fine. Eventually everyone will see the light.

The Bible says: Jesus Christ is the light of the world. But in order to see Him, one must have new eyes, for all are blind from birth and incapable of seeing

God. Those who believe will see and live forever. Those who reject will also live forever but in the outer darkness of the lake of fire.

In a word, universalism is a modern version of Satan's lie to Eve, "Thou shalt not surely die." And today it is still what it was then--a lie.