

7 MYTHS ABOUT CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALISM



BY ROBIN PARRY

Editor's Note: Dr. Robin Parry is a speaker, the author of numerous books and an editor at Wipf and Stock Publishers. In this article, Robin addresses persistent misconceptions about what Christian universalists (not to be confused with Unitarians) actually believe.

When discussing “eschatology”—the doctrine of future things—feelings often run high and a lot of strong language gets used. If the church is to have a fruitful discussion rather than bad-tempered battles, it is essential that we have a clear understanding of what “Christian universalists” actually believe. A lot of myths inform the current debate and I want to briefly explore seven of them.

“Christian Universalism”—A Definition

In a nutshell, Christian universalism is the view that, in the end, God will redeem all people

through Christ. Christian universalists believe that the destiny of humanity is “written” in the body of the risen Jesus and, as such, the story of humanity will not end with a tomb.

Christian universalists are (mostly) orthodox, Trinitarian, Christ-centered, gospel-focused, Bible-affirming, missional Christians. What makes them *universalists* is that they believe that God loves *all* people; God wants to save *all* people; God sent Christ to redeem *all* people; and God will achieve that goal.

But seven myths cloud this definition.

Myth 1: “Universalists don’t believe in hell.”

This is too simplistic. Historically all Christian universalists have had a doctrine of hell and that remains the case for most Christian universalists today.

The Christian debate does not concern whether hell will be a reality (all agree that it will) but, rather, what the nature of that reality will be.

Will it be eternal conscious torment? Will it be annihilation? Or will it be a state from which people can be redeemed? Most universalists believe that hell is not simply retributive punishment but a painful yet

corrective/educative state from which people will eventually exit (some, myself included, think it has a retributive dimension, while others do not).

So it is not hell that universalists deny so much as certain views about hell.

Myth 2: "Universalists don't believe the Bible."

One does not have to read the detractors for long before coming across the following sentiments:

Universalists are theological "liberals" that reject the "clear teaching of the Bible."

Surely all good Bible-believing Christians will believe that some/many/most people are damned forever, right? Concerned about universalist claims, David Cloud writes, "It is evil to entertain questions that deny Bible truth."

So, are Christian universalists really Bible-deniers? No.

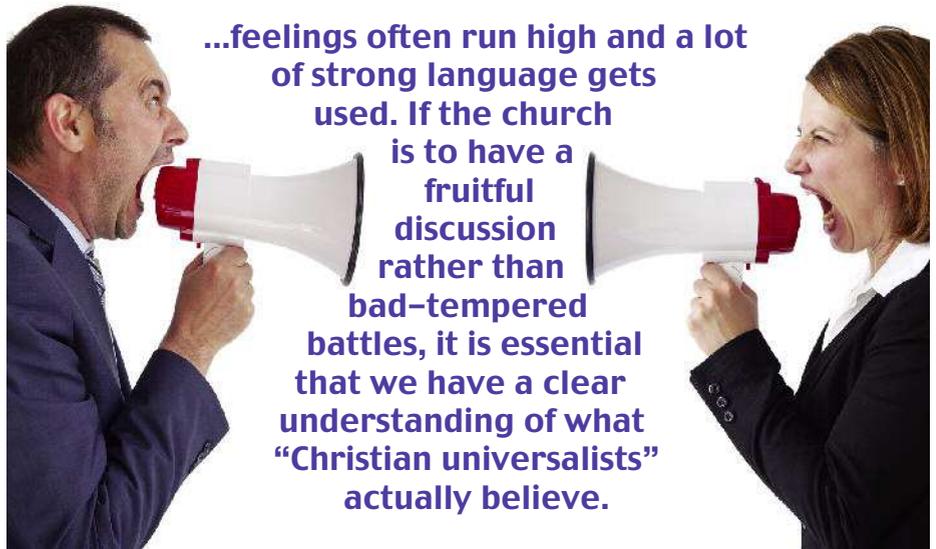
Historically, Christian universalists have been Bible-affirming believers and that remains the case for many, perhaps the majority, today. The question is not "Which group believes the

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The root issue is this: some biblical texts seem to affirm universalism (e.g. Romans 5:18; 1 Corinthians 15:22; Colossians 1:20; Philippians 2:11) but others seem to deny it (e.g. Matthew 25:45; 2 Thessalonians 1:6-9; Revelations 14:11; 20:10-15).

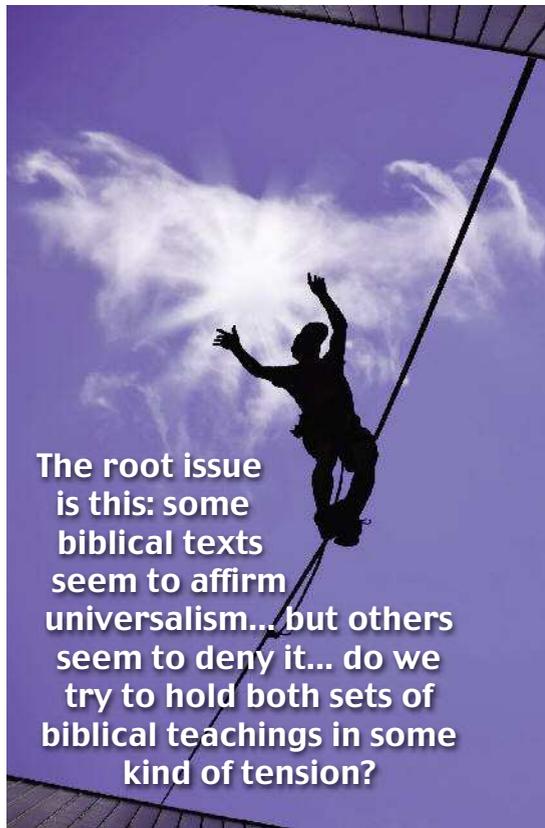
At the heart of the biblical debate is how we hold these two threads together. Do we start with the hell passages and reread the



universalist texts in the light of them? That is the traditional route.

Or, do we start with universalist passages and reinterpret the hell texts in the light of them? That is what many universalists do. Or, do we try to hold both sets of biblical teachings in some kind of tension?

There is also the question of wider biblical-theological themes. For instance, how might reflection on the Bible's teaching about God's love, justice, punishment, the cross-resurrection, etc. influence our theology of hell?



This is not just about finding "proof texts" with which to whip your opponent (both sides are capable of that), but about making best sense of the Bible as a whole. When we follow the big plotline of the scriptures, which ending to the story has the best "fit"? Universalists believe that the ending in which God redeems his whole creation makes the most sense of the biblical "metanarrative" (the big story). Traditionalists disagree.

So, this debate is not between Bible-

believing Christians (traditionalists) and Bible-denying “liberals” (universalists). It is largely a debate between two sets of Bible-believing Christians on how best to understand Scripture.

Myth 3: “Universalists don’t think sin is very bad.”

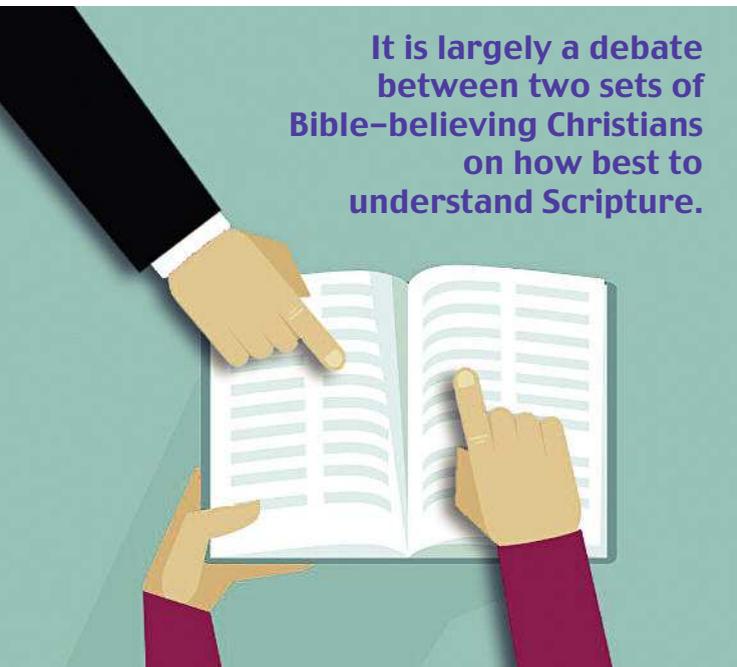
Denny Burke (a New Testament lecturer) thinks universalism’s “weak” view of hell is based on a “weak” view of sin which, in turn, is based on a “weak” view of God: “Sin will always appear as a trifle to those whose view of God is small.”

Universalists “obviously” think sin isn’t something to get too worked up about. After all they believe that God’s job is to forgive people, right?

Once again we are entering

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the realm of mythology. Propose as strong a view on the seriousness of sin as you wish, and you’ll find universalists who affirm it.

Does sin affect every aspect of human life? Is it an utter horror that degrades our humanity and warrants divine wrath? Does it deserve eternal punishment?

Universalists could affirm all of these things so long as they believed that God’s love, power, grace and mercy are bigger and stronger than sin. Universalists do not have a low view of sin; they have a high view of grace: “Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more” (Romans 5:20).

Myth 4: “Universalists believe in God’s love but forget his justice and wrath.”

We hear, “God is love. But, He is *also* just. God pours out His mercy, but He *also* pours out His wrath.” The implication is that

universalists overplay divine love and forget that God is also holy and just. Right? Wrong. Christian universalists have a lot to say about God’s holiness, justice, and even his wrath. Typically, they think God’s divine nature cannot be divided into conflicting parts in such a way that some of God’s actions are loving (e.g. saving sinners) while others are just and full of anger (e.g. hell).

They see all of God’s actions as motivated by “holy love.” Everything God does is holy, completely just and completely loving.

So whatever hell is about, it must be compatible not simply with divine justice, but also with divine love. This means that it must, in some way, have the good of those in hell as part of its rationale.

Universalists feel that one danger in conventional theologies of hell is they make much of God’s justice and anger, but appear incompatible with his love. Thus, traditional theologies divide the unity of God’s nature.

Myth 5: “Universalists think that all roads lead to God.”

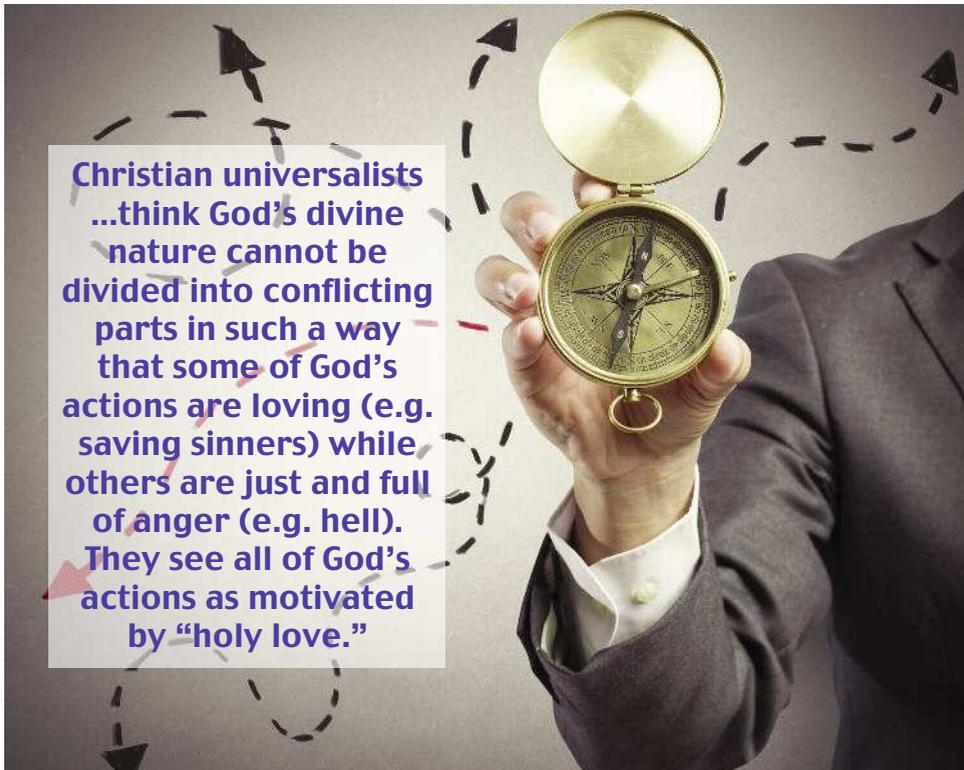
Here is Kevin Mullins’ definition of universalism: “Universalism is the belief that everyone, regardless of faith or behavior, will be counted as God’s people in the end. All roads lead to Him. All religions are just different expressions of the same Truth.”

That idea is what underlies C.R. Parke’s comment that, “If Rob Bell denies hell then he denies the need for a ‘savior’ and makes the sacrifice of Jesus irrelevant.”

Here our conversation partners have confused universalism (the view that God will one day save all people through Christ) with *pluralism* (the view that there are many paths to God and that Jesus is simply one of them).

But Christian universalists deny pluralism. They insist that salvation is found only through the atoning work of Christ. Without Jesus nobody would be redeemed!

Now there is a disagreement between Christians about whether one needs to have explicit faith in Jesus to share in the salvation he has bought. Some Christians, called exclusivists, think that only



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especially worried that if the fear of hell were reduced, people would have little to constrain their sinful behavior. Thus universalism, they feared, would fuel sin.

But the fear of punishment is not the

only motive for avoiding sin. Far more important for holy living—indeed, the *only* motive for heartfelt holy living—is the positive motivation inspired by love for God.

Who, after all, would reason, "I know that God created me, seeks to do me good, sent his Son to die for me, and that he will always love me—so I must hate him!"

On the contrary, the revelation of divine love solicits our loving response (1 John 4:19).

Clearly there is an important debate to be had. But if we desire more light and less heat we need to start by getting a clearer understanding of the view under discussion. □

¹ Adapted from Robin Parry, 'Bell's Hells' in the Baptist Times, 17 March 2011. <http://www.baptisttimes.co.uk/bellsells.htm>.

Robin Parry is the author of The Evangelical Universalist (under the name Gregory MacDonald) and co-author of Four Views of Hell (2016).

those who put their trust in the gospel can be saved. Others, called inclusivists, think it is possible to be saved through Christ even without explicit faith in him.

But we need to be careful not to confuse that discussion with the issue of universalism. The former debate concerns how people can experience the salvation won by Christ. The latter concerns how many people will finally be saved. Two different questions.

Thus, some universalists are inclusivists and others are exclusivists, but neither relegates Christ to the sidelines.

Myth 6: "Universalism undermines evangelism."

One author writes, "I do think the Scripture is clear that salvation at least has some limits. If it doesn't, then preaching and evangelism are ultimately wasted activities."

Why, after all, would anyone bother to go through all the

effort and struggle of evangelism if God is going to save everyone in the end anyway?

Must universalism really undermine evangelism? Not at all. There are many reasons to engage in mission and evangelism, not the least of which is that Christ commands it. And it is a huge privilege to join with God in his mission of reconciling the world to himself. The gospel message is God's "foolish" way of setting the world right so, of course, universalists will want to proclaim it.

Fear of hell is not the only motivation for mission. And, what is more, the majority of universalists do fear hell. While they may not view it as "the end of the road," they still consider it to be a dreadful state to be avoided.

Myth 7: "Universalism undermines holy living."

During the 17th to the 19th centuries many Christians were