

A Study of Universalism

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to reexamine the Reformed teachings regarding the ultimate destinies of persons with relation to faith in Christ. The resolution which called for this study was seeking a reinforced stand against universalism, advocating evangelism lest persons “suffer the consequences of eternal condemnation.” The final report advocates evangelism lest persons “suffer the consequences of being lost.”

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 - b. Universal passages emphasize God's intent while limiting passages allow for human freedom.
 - c. The universals are not to be taken at face value, but apply only to the elect, while the limiting are reserved for the non-elect.
 - d. The limiting are not to be taken at face value but are somehow subsumed under the universal.
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“Given the limitations upon our knowledge, it would seem presumptuous to attempt a final definitive answer.”

II. Conclusion

- A. “God's purpose for humankind and for his whole creation is gracious and loving.”
- B. “Salvation is God's gracious gift freely offered to undeserving persons.”
- C. “The motive and message of God's people in witnessing is God's reconciling love in Jesus Christ.”
- D. “God's grace is more powerful than any sin or evil.”

General Assembly Actions

Be it resolved that the 112th General Assembly [of the PCUS] adopt the following statement for publication in order that the church and the world may know without question the Assembly's conviction:

Statement

Recognizing that all men are lost apart from faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and that “faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God,” we the 112th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States call upon every minister, missionary, officer, and member of our Church, by every and any means available to present Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, calling persons to repent and believe in Him, lest they suffer the consequences of eternal condemnation.

Andrew F. McDonough

Be answered as follows:

Recognizing that all men are lost apart from the grace of God as Lord and Savior, and that “faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God,” we the 112th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States call upon every minister, missionary, officer, and member of our Church, to present Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, calling persons to repent and believe in Him, lest they suffer the consequences of being lost;

and that the Permanent Theological Committee be requested to study the subject of universalism and report to the next General Assembly.

The Permanent Theological Committee submits the following paper, A Study of Universalism, and recommends that it be received and adopted by the General Assembly for study in the churches.

A Study of Universalism

Background and Issues

The central theme of what is called the doctrine of universalism is *apokatastasis*, which means the restoration of all things or the ultimate salvation of all beings. Negatively this doctrine denies the possibility or reality of eternal condemnation or eternal punishment for anyone. The doctrine was advanced by Origen in the third century and espoused by some of his followers. In that form it was condemned in the sixth century. The doctrine appeared again at the time of the Reformation in the teaching of some of the Anabaptists, but was specifically rejected by both Luther and Calvin. In the eighteenth century universalism was again advanced under Enlightenment influences, and in the U.S. a denomination was formed around the centrality of this doctrine, but classical Protestantism rejected the position. Karl Barth, whose doctrine of election logically implies that all human beings are elected in Jesus Christ, the electing God and the elect man, specifically draws back from *apokatastasis*.¹

The chief passages for classical universalism are Ephesians 1:9,10: “For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, *to unite all things in him*, things in heaven and things on earth” (italics added); and Colossians 1:19,20: “For in him [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and *through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven*, making peace by the blood of his cross.” (italics added) Additional passages are Romans 5:18 and 1 Corinthians 15:22, which parallel the universal fall in Adam with universal salvation in Jesus Christ.

Those who oppose this view point to the many passages in both New Testament and Old Testament which affirm the reality of judgment and of condemnation. Among these in John 3:36: “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him,” and Matthew 15:31-46, especially this final verse: “And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” Western Christian thought generally and Reformed theology particularly have

¹For a brief history of the doctrine see Emil Brunner, *The Doctrine of God*, pp. 352, 353. Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxv.5, and Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2,p.417

rejected the classical doctrine of universalism because of its failure to deal adequately with the Biblical teaching concerning judgment and condemnation.

Nevertheless in theological discussion today and in the life of the church one still hears the charge of “universalism” made about doctrinal positions being advanced or doctrinal emphases being articulated. In the discussion of issues in theology, in Biblical interpretation, and about the mission and task of the church, some affirmations give rise to the charge of “universalism.”

One such issue is God’s purpose in relation to his creatures. Is it part of God’s purpose to condemn human beings? Or does he love all his creatures? What is God’s attitude toward sinners? Those who see God’s love as the key to his purpose are sometimes called universalists.

A second issue is whether faith is necessary for salvation. Must one believe in Jesus Christ in order to be saved? Or is salvation by grace? Does faith save one? Does the state of one’s faith at death determine one’s ultimate destiny? Those who affirm the primary of grace over faith are sometimes accused of universalism.

A third issue revolves around the mission of the church. Is it the task of missions and evangelism to save the lost? Or is our task to bear witness to the loving purpose of God toward everyone? Do we act toward people of other religions as if they were lost? Or do we simply bear witness to the reality of the liberating power of Jesus Christ? Those who stress the message of God’s love for all, especially sinners and non-believers, are often criticized as universalists.

Finally, there is the issue of ultimate destiny. Is it not correct to affirm that some people will finally be condemned? Or is the matter of ultimate destiny to be left entirely in God’s hands and beyond our finding out? Does not judgment really mean that some people who do not believe will be eternally condemned? Those who say, “We cannot know but can only entrust all human destiny to the God who is the father of Jesus Christ,” are suspected of universalism.

This paper seeks to recognize these issues and to clarify them in terms of the Biblical teaching and our confessional standards so that the church may understand the issue of “universalism” as the term is used among us.

1. The Purpose of God for Humankind

The key to understanding the purpose of God is Jesus Christ. “For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to the purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.” (Ephesians 1:9,10). In Jesus Christ we see the purpose of God to bring the created order, and especially his human creatures, into unity with himself.

The covenant history of the Old Testament is the expression of this purpose, recognized by Israel in the often repeated words of Exodus 6:7: “I will take you for my people, and I will be your God.” Jesus Christ is the bearer of the new covenant exhibiting the steadfast love and faithfulness of God. (Romans 8:31-39) The Westminster Confession of Faith presents the one covenant of grace as God’s free offer of life and salvation (WCF VII.3,4)

In his faithfulness to his purpose, God deals with his creatures both with gracious acts and with judging acts, for his purpose is at once both loving and holy. In bringing the created order into relationship with himself, he

is the righteous judge who will judge the whole earth. He hates iniquity and punishes wrong-doing. Sin is an affront to him, and his holy presence calls forth an awareness of guilt and unworthiness. So the Westminster Confession speaks of his decree of dishonor and wrath as well as his decree of gracious election. (WCF III)

What we experience is that God “does not deal with us according to our sins nor requite us according to our iniquities.” (Psalm 103:10) His grace is for us who are undeserving of love and who deserve only judgment and condemnation. This is the good news of the Gospel. Yet the good news exposes our sinful rebellion and disobedience, and not only offers us the grace of God in Jesus Christ, but also calls us to repent. It is in the very love and grace of God that his holiness and justice are exposed to make us aware of our sinfulness and the costliness of God’s love exhibited in the cross.

Although theological exposition has tended to deal with sin preceding grace, putting justice before love, judgment before redemption, there is Biblical warrant for asserting that grace and redemption are the first clue to the purpose of God, and that judgment follows. Israel is brought out of Egypt and then given the law. (Exodus 20:1-7) Jesus Christ, the Crucified and Risen Lord, is the one who will judge all human creatures. (Matthew 25:31-46) The covenant relationship does not offer an escape from judgment, for those whom God loves he disciplines. (Hebrews 12:6)

In the doctrine of the decrees of God set forth in the Westminster Confession Chapter III, the decree of salvation is clearly prior to the decree of condemnation. They are not equal decrees in terms of the purpose of God, for the predestination to life flows from “God’s free grace and love alone,” taking account of no human condition. The ordination “to dishonor and wrath” is the expression of his justice in response to human sin. Difficult as the doctrine of the decrees is, it can only be interpreted in terms of the covenant and of the gospel (WCF VII, X), and affirms the primacy of God’s loving purpose.

Finally, the purpose of God cannot be properly viewed as a limited rescue operation on the part of God. The fact that the Westminster Confession speaks of the predestined as “a fixed number” and of the reprobates as “the rest” tempts some to interpret salvation as provided for a relatively few. The Biblical understanding of Israel and the church, however, includes no numerical limits. Indeed the promise to Abraham is of numberless offspring (Genesis 15:5), and to Mount Zion the whole world is to come (Psalm 47, 48). Similarly the gospel is always inclusive in terms of “whosoever” and “into all the world.” In Revelation 7 the 144,000 of Israel, representing Abraham’s numberless offspring are joined by another “great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues.” As Charles Hodge puts it: “We have reason to believe...that the number of the finally lost in comparison with the whole number of the saved will be very inconsiderable” (*Systematic Theology*, pp. 879f.)

2. The Role of Faith in Salvation

Since in Biblical theology the end is consistent with the beginning, salvation is the fulfillment of God’s purpose in creation, which is fully revealed in Jesus Christ. He is the one in whom creation finds its original meaning and in whom the *telos* toward which all things are directed is manifest. The meaning of past, present and future is found in God’s act of redemption in Jesus Christ: “through him God chose to reconcile the whole universe to himself...whether on earth or in heaven...” (Colossians 1:20) The Christian hope may be summed up in the words, “...when he appears we shall be like him...” (1 John 3:2) Jesus Christ is the image of God in which Humankind was created and to which we are being restored by God’s active work of salvation in the present and future. That restoration involves the removal of the conditions which have led to our condemnation and death and the reestablishment of peace in its broadest sense of complete well-being.

Faith is the appropriation of God's saving activity. Since salvation involves a person's relationship to God, and since faith is the proper human attitude toward God, there can be no salvation (in the sense of restoration to wholeness of life) without faith. Faith is the acknowledgement and the believing reception of God's grace in Jesus Christ; it is the affirmation of the covenant relationship; it is holding fast to God, confidently relying on him and thereby becoming his reliable servant; it is entrusting oneself to God in the firm confidence that he is trustworthy; it is the commitment of the self to Jesus as Lord.

But while faith can legitimately be spoken of in this way as a human activity in response to God, faith is not to be regarded as a "work" for which we can take credit, nor as the condition we must fulfill to obtain salvation, nor as the essential human part of the work of salvation. Rather, faith is a gift of God in the sense that it is a believing response to God's gracious offer in the good news. His saving act in Jesus Christ includes the proclamation of the good news and the "believing obedience" which it elicits. This is expressed in the New Testament and in the Westminster Confession: "...this [faith] is not by our own doing, it is the gift of God..." (Eph. 2:8) "The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their soul, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts..." (WCF XVI.1).

To speak of faith as a gift is not to deny the importance of human response to God, but rather to affirm the priority of God's grace. To claim that one is saved by faith as one's won achievement is to claim to be self-grounded, which is self-idolatry, a persistent temptation of every person.

Salvation as the deliverance from sin and death is an eschatological occurrence, that is, a present reality to be fulfilled at the end. Our experience of faith in the present, which includes the process (partially completed) of overcoming sin and death, enables us to be more confident of God's assurance of salvation in the future. But neither the proclamation which elicits faith nor the eschatological consummation is dependent upon faith or upon the experience of salvation in the present. Final deliverance is assured to those of present faith not on the ground of their faith but on the ground of God's faithfulness. God's final victory over evil and death is not dependent upon us, not even upon our faith, but is assured because of God's power and purpose.

3. The Role of the Church in God's Action for Salvation

The church, as the community of those in whom the reality of God's salvation has been appropriated by faith, is called to share the good news of Jesus Christ. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..." (Matthew 28:19) "...you shall be my witnesses...to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8) The commission is a universal one in its extent; no one is excluded from our task to bear witness and make disciples.

The message we bear is that in Jesus Christ God has revealed his reconciling love for the world and has declared his lordship over all the world. All are called to receive the love and live under the lordship of Jesus Christ. The good news is that: "...God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." (2 Corinthians 5:19,20)

Our motivation for evangelism and missions is grateful and obedient response to God, who offers salvation freely in Jesus Christ, who sends his followers out with that good news to be witnesses to all the earth and to make disciples of all nations. It is not that we who have heard and believed are saved while all others are lost until they hear and believe. Rather we share the good news of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, in whom people have life, and apart from whom people are perishing.

The church and all believers have a message and an obligation to share it. How great is our responsibility? If people can only believe and be saved if they hear, are they lost if they never hear? Our answer to this question must neither relieve us of the responsibility of the task of bearing witness nor elevate our responsibility to the level of God's. Our indolence in bearing witness and our lack of support of witness is not only ingratitude to God but irresponsibility for those who, like us, are perishing apart from Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit, not our

witness, brings salvation, and the Spirit may work when, where, and how he pleases even apart from the Church's proclamation of the gospel. (WCF XII.3)

What of those, who having heard, apparently fail to respond? Ultimate rejection of the gospel is of terrible consequence as Jesus said in speaking of the sin against the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 12:22-32) We are not to take the rejection of *our* proclamation as ultimate. Though Paul recognized that his gospel was hidden to those who were perishing, he remained under obligation to them for the continued witness to the good news of life in Jesus Christ and never abandoned hope for them. (2 Corinthians 4)

What is the mission of the church to people of other religions? The Bible itself gives us clues to understand the task of proclamation of the gospel in the midst of a religiously pluralistic world. Israel was chosen and commissioned in the midst of many religions to proclaim in word and above all in life the kingship of the Lord. The Christian church was called to bear witness in the midst of many religions to the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ and to his lordship over all the world. Both Jews and Gentiles were called to freedom from the compulsion to save themselves by their religious practices and beliefs.

In our day we must remind ourselves that the word of God judges all human piety and tradition and calls us to be free for faith in Jesus Christ. We learn from the experience of both Jesus and Paul that religious tradition can hinder not only the reception of the gospel but also its proclamation. We need to be reminded that we are not called upon to spread Christianity but to proclaim the gospel. The gospel and the faith which it elicits are universal, and we have an obligation to proclaim it to people of all religions, both Christians and non-Christians. In doing so we are to bear witness not to our own religion but to the good news that Jesus Christ is the savior of all people.

4. The Ultimate Destiny of Believers and Non-Believers

The assumption in all the Biblical language of salvation is that human beings (individually and collectively) may and do confront situations in which they are impotent, but none in which God is impotent; as Lord he is powerful to do what he chooses to do. This point is especially applicable to people confronted with death. Death is the end of a person; any hope beyond death is based on God, not on our inherent capacity to survive death in any aspect of our being. Faith does not give us the capacity to survive death; rather it gives us the confidence to trust in that same God whose grace has already reached us in Jesus Christ.

The gospel proclaims God's victory over death, and tells us that death, which brings to an end all of our being and doing, is the point of a new beginning of God's gracious activity in our salvation. Faith anticipates God's final victory over death on the basis of past and present experience of the power of salvation in the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus.

In facing the issue of the ultimate destiny of individuals and their participation in God's victory over death, we must attempt to do full justice both to those passages of Scripture which speak of judgment and condemnation and to those which speak of the triumph of God's purposes. To eliminate either for the sake of

logical consistency or because of personal predisposition to particular views would be unwarranted. Rather, we must reflect seriously upon all the relevant Biblical teaching, attempting to perceive what the Spirit is saying through each part as well as in the whole. It is not possible in this paper to examine all relevant texts; but it is in order to examine passages which have been the basis of the respective teachings that some will never experience life and that all will eventually be transformed by God's grace.

God's judgment is presented as a terrible reality in the Bible, whether it is judgment which occurs through the historical process or that which awaits all persons at the end of the age or at death. In the Old Testament God's judgment is a means of his maintaining the covenant, by delivering Israel from her enemies or by punishing her for her own sins; in either case, the primary function of judgment is the fulfilling of God's purposes for his people. In apocalyptic thinking, those forces which prevent the fulfillment of God's purposes are regarded as supra-historical and of cosmic proportions, and judgment is regarded correspondingly; the "war in heaven" results in the defeat of God's enemies, who are also the real enemies of God's people.

Judgment, however, is not seen in the Bible as falling merely upon nonbelievers or upon the "wicked." Judgment begins at the household of God, with those who confess his name. How God judges people is made clear in Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats, where both the "cursed" and the "blessed" are surprised by the basis of his judging them. (Matthew 25:31-46) Statements concerning judgment are frequently made in contexts which show that the purpose is to remind God's people that they are to live responsibly and obediently, not taking his grace for granted.

There are some passages in the New Testament which portray condemnatory judgment against some as being decisive, final, irreversible:

(1) In Jesus' parable of the final judgment (Matthew 25:31-46), the "cursed" are told to depart "into eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels..." The parable is directed primarily to those who affirm allegiance to Christ, and is a warning that allegiance must be affirmed in action, not merely in words. The word "eternal" refers here to the decisive, awesome activity of God's judgment at the end-time. It is not specifically stated that the punishment is endless, though that possibility should not be excluded.

(2) In Jude 6-7 we read of some disobedient angels who "have been kept by him in eternal chains in the nether gloom until the judgment of the great day" and of Sodom and Gomorrah serving "as examples by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire." Nothing is said specifically about what will happen to these past figures when the final judgment occurs, but verses 10-13 state that others will join them, presumably for an endless punishment. The primary purpose of the passage is encouragement of the faithful, and a warning of the seriousness of faithlessness.

(3) According to 2 Thessalonians 1:8,9, when Jesus returns to save his suffering people, he will inflict "...vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might..." The punishment which accompanies Jesus' return is either annihilation or continuing existence apart from Christ. These words are addressed to a persecuted congregation, and affirm God's righteousness in the face of conditions which might appear to deny it.

(4) In Revelation 20:10,14,15 we read that "the devil...was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone...and...will be tormented day and night for ever and ever...Then Death and Hades were thrown into

the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; and if any one's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire." Here the author encourages the persecuted church with a vision of the destruction of those forces which thwart God's purposes for his people. The "second death" is evidently after the final judgment, and refers to continued punishment in the lake of fire.

Such passages as these have exerted a controlling influence on Reformed eschatology, so that the Westminster Confession shows no hesitancy in affirming that "the wicked who know not God, and obey not the gospel of Jesus Christ shall be cast into eternal torments, and punished with everlasting destruction..." (WCF XXXV.2).

On the other hand, the Westminster Confession is little controlled by those New Testament passages which affirm the ultimate working out of God's purpose to reconcile, unite, and restore all things to himself through Jesus Christ. Chapter III of the Confession affirms the "double decree" whereby the ultimate destiny of every person is determined by God from eternity. Chapter X affirms that the response of persons to the gospel affects their ultimate destiny. The latter would appear to have more scriptural warrant. But neither chapter expects God's grace to work beyond the point of the individual's death for that person's salvation.

There is nothing in scripture which expressly says that a person who dies without having faith in Jesus Christ will be saved, but there is sufficient evidence for hope to caution us against closing the door on God's possibilities.

The Psalmist is confident that God's Spirit is so omnipresent that even in Sheol one is not separated from him. (Psalm 139:8) The Apostle Paul, in the only place in which he really discusses the theoretical problem of the fate of a group who have not responded in faith to the gospel (Romans 9-11), concludes that even they are not outside God's gracious concern, and hopes that eventually they, too, shall be saved through God's grace.

There are some passages in the New Testament which speak of all human beings as experiencing the grace of God as ultimate destiny:

(1) In Romans 9-11, Paul speaks of God's "hardening" some people for the accomplishment of his purposes, and he speaks metaphorically of God as a potter who makes some vessels "for destruction." This activity of God is presented as part of his plan of salvation which he is working out through historical persons and events. The end result of the process is stated in Romans 11:32: "For God has consigned all men in disobedience that he may have mercy upon all." This leads Paul into a doxology celebrating God as the "Source, Guide and Goal of all that is." (Romans 11:33-36 NEB) If any conclusion concerning the ultimate fate of all humankind is warranted from this passage, it would be that all people will eventually experience the grace of God for salvation in the way the person of faith has now begun to experience it.

(2) Jesus promises, "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." (John 12:31) While this passage probably has more to do with the universal significance of Christ's saving death and resurrection and points to the affirmation that "no one comes to the Father but by me" (John 14:6), one has little justification of placing limits upon the "all."

(3) In Romans 5:12-21 Paul contrasts the universal impact of Adam's act and that of Jesus' act. If the parallelism in 5:18 is exact, the eventual salvation of all would be derived from the words "...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." There is no basis for seeing the "all" differently in the two phrases. Paul seems to be more interested in

stressing the power of Christ to overcome human sinfulness than Adam's power which leads to it. Both here and in other places Paul is convinced that God's grace is ultimately more powerful and more successful than human sinfulness. "But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many." "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more." (Romans 5:15,20)

It is doubtful that Paul here means to assert that all persons *will* be saved, but his stress on God's superabounding grace should caution us not to limit God's possibilities.

(4) In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul speaks of the resurrection of Christ as the ground and assurance of the believer's resurrection. Again he contrasts the effects of Adam's and Christ's acts: "As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive." (1 Corinthians 15:22) He goes on to speak of the ultimate destruction of all God's enemies and the subjection of all things to God in Christ, so that in the end God is "all things to every one." (15:28) If these enemies are persons, their end may be destruction rather than salvation; but the only enemy specifically mentioned is "death" (how does one destroy death except by life?), which suggests that Paul has in mind not human enemies but rather such "supernatural" enemies as those which in Romans 8:36 he says will never "be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus."

The eschatological teaching of the Bible does not answer all our questions about the events or the conditions of the "end-time": what is the nature of heaven and hell? what is the judgment like, both for the believer and for the unbeliever? what is the ultimate fate of those who die apart from faith? If everything is subject in the end to God's victory, does his reign allow some things (e.g. death) and some persons (e.g. devil and unbelievers) to remain only grudgingly under his control? If so, will he really be "everything to everyone"? (1 Corinthians 15:28)

The fact that such questions have no completely clear answers in the Bible suggests that it was not the purpose of the eschatological teaching to answer them. The accounts of last things do not give us a literal description of the great end events and the conditions that follow. Rather the purpose of teaching about the future seems to be directed toward the present existence of believers (to give hope, to encourage faithfulness, to affirm the ultimate significance of present experience of grace, to warn against apostasy) and occasionally towards the conversion of unbelievers. The specific content of future hope seems less important than the reason for hoping--God's faithfulness.

While the Bible does not give us complete answers to the questions we might ask, it does give us adequate guidance both for our faith and life. It provides us both with warnings of judgment which tell us of the ultimate consequence and significance of our deeds in the present, and with promises of God's eternal purposes which are not ultimately thwarted by our rebelliousness and disobedience so that we may live in hope. Even if these--judgment and hope--seem to be in tension or even in paradox, it would be unwise to fail to heed the voice of either.

How we are to relate those "limiting" passages which portray hell as ultimate destiny for some beings to those "universal" passages which point to the ultimate redemption of all creation? Our options include the following:

- (1) The two are simply contradictory and cannot be reconciled.
- (2) The universal passages emphasize God's intention for his creatures while the limiting passages show the restrictions which human freedom has been allowed to place upon God's action.
- (3) The universal passages are not to be taken at face value, but apply only to the elect, while the limiting are reserved for the non-elect.

(4) The limiting passages are not to be taken at face value but are somehow subsumed under the universal, as a stage along the way to the ultimate renewal of all things; even judgment is ultimately the instrument of salvation.

(5) None of the passages is to be taken literally as portraying the final status of particular groups of people; both the language of judgment and the language of final redemption should be interpreted as an urgent summons to receive and participate in the new life which is given through Jesus Christ.

Given the limitations upon our knowledge, it would seem presumptuous to attempt a final definitive answer. That does not mean, however, that one view is as good as any other. The weight of Biblical teaching as a whole does not support any view which: (a) does not emphasize the priority and finality of God's grace; (b) assumes that a person's final destiny depends upon his own meritorious works (including faith); (c) discounts the importance of personal faith in Jesus Christ as savior and personal obedience to him as Lord; (d) denies the urgency of proclaiming the good news of God's grace in Jesus Christ to all; (e) places limits upon God's freedom to save persons when, where, and how he will.

Conclusion

We affirm in accord with the clear evidence of Scripture and our Confession:

1 That God's purpose for humankind and for his whole creation is gracious and loving.

God's love is universal. God hates evil and wills its defeat. Evil and the rejection of his love are subject to judgment and condemnation. How his loving and holy purpose is ultimately to be realized is beyond our comprehension or understanding. We must not seek to resolve that mystery by the assertion of universalism, or in the fear of universalism deny the universal love that is undeserved by us as sinful creatures.

2 That salvation is God's gracious gift freely offered to undeserving persons. Nothing we do, not even our repentance and faith, has any claim upon God. His gift of life is pure grace. Our proper response is faith, and the realization of salvation in our own existence requires faith. How grace and faith relate is mystery, and we must neither deny that faith is real and necessary for us nor so elevate our believing that it conditions the offer or the completion of God's gracious will.

3 That the motive and message of God's people in witnessing is God's reconciling love in Jesus Christ. We are sent to the world with that good news, and the Holy Spirit works through our proclamation to bring people to salvation. How the Spirit uses our witness to bring people out of sin and into new life is a mystery. We must neither distort the good news of God's love by our words of judgment nor act as though the good news were so evident that our witness is not needed.

4 That God's grace is more powerful than any sin or evil. Our hope rests solely on this confidence. That sin is terrible and subject to God's judgment is also clearly evident from Scripture and the confessional statements. How God works redemption and judgment in the end is the great mystery. Before that mystery of the ultimate future we can live now only in obedience, patience, and hope, believing that sin and death in Adam have been overcome by life and grace in Jesus Christ, the new beginning and the final end.