

A Critique of William Barclay's "I am a Convinced Universalist"¹

By Chris Villi

Introduction

William Barclay (1907-1978) was Professor of Divinity and Biblical Criticism at Glasgow University. He has become well-known and highly regarded in the Christian community primarily through his biblical commentaries and books, including a translation of the New Testament (i.e. Barclay New Testament), many popular books, and the best-selling 17-volume New Testament commentary set called "The Daily Study Bible Series."

Although Barclay has been helpful in some areas, he propounded some serious theological errors, one of which is known as Christian Universalism or Trinitarian Universalism. Those who embrace Christian Universalism emphasize the unconditional parental love of God and believe that God will eventually reconcile all people to Himself. Barclay wrote, "*I believe that in the end all men will be gathered into the love of God.*" The proponents of Christian Universalism who believe in hell, such as Barclay, see it as merely a temporary place of restorative punishment that will eventually be emptied as those who occupy it ultimately decided to bow their knee to Christ and be reconciled to God.

In this article, I will refute Barclay's arguments for Christian Universalism and offer positive biblical reasons for the existence of an eternal hell.

The Nature of Hell

William Barclay wrote, "*Origen believed that after death there were many who would need prolonged instruction, the sternest discipline, even the severest punishment before they were fit for the presence of God. Origen did not eliminate hell; he believed that some people would have to go to heaven via hell...And so the choice is whether we accept God's offer and invitation willingly, or take the long and terrible way round through ages of purification.*" This teaching is very similar the Roman Catholic concept of Purgatory. In the Catholic construction, only believers will be purged and fitted for the presence of God; whereas in Origen's (and Barclay's) conception, it will be unbelievers who are purged, not in Purgatory, but in hell itself. Although it is good that Origen and Barclay do not deny hell's existence as do many of their universalist brethren, their particular depiction of hell raises several significant questions pertaining to the nature of hell as revealed in Scripture.

Christians must always remember their charge "*not to exceed what is written*" (1 Corinthians 4:6). Deuteronomy 4:2 states, "*You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it.*" Given these clear imperatives, we should always refrain from holding to doctrines and dogmas that result from extrapolating beyond what Scripture specifically reveals.

Does the Bible anywhere state that hell is only a temporary place? No, there is no indication anywhere in Scripture that this is the case. In fact, the very opposite is true. It is described as a place of "*unquenchable fire*" (Matthew 3:12, 9:43) and "*eternal fire*" (Matthew 25:41).

Does God's Word give any indication whatsoever that it is possible for those in hell to eventually leave and go to heaven? Again, this could not possibly be the case, since hell is a

¹ William Barclay, "I am a Convinced Universalist," <http://www.auburn.edu/~allenkc/barclay1.html>, (accessed September 2, 2010).

place, not of temporal punishment, but of “*eternal punishment*” (Matthew 25:46). Those who are thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone “*will be tormented day and night forever and ever*” (Revelation 20:10).

Are there any clear references to the possibility of being saved after death (i.e. post-mortem salvation)? This is actually a cornerstone question, because post-mortem salvation is *the key doctrine* for universalists. Christian Universalism either stands or falls on the veracity of this teaching. Those in the universalist camp who consider themselves to be evangelical, such as Barclay, agree that many people die each day as unbelievers who have not been reconciled to God. Therefore, Universalism can only be true if it is possible for people to be saved *after* death. It is important to note that there are no verses to which we can turn in order to prove this concept. There are a few vague, tangential verses to which universalists turn,² but no clear explicit teaching suggests such a thing. In fact, there are clear passages that teach the exact opposite. For example, Hebrews 9:27 states that “*it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment.*” This verse gives us no reason to believe that anyone can change his status before God prior to the final judgment. Furthermore, nowhere does the Bible ever indicate that God’s judgment, once rendered, can or will be reversed. On the contrary, “*the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind*” (1 Samuel 15:29). The account of the great white throne judgment (Revelation 20:11-15) gives no indication that anyone who is thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone will ever come back out. Luke 16:19-31 could possibly be the best passage for refuting the idea of post-mortem salvation. Here, in the account of the rich man and Lazarus, we can glean much about the nature of hell and judgment. First, we note that the rich man was “*In Hades...in torment*” (v. 23). Second, we see that hell is a place of horror, and those who are there are “*in agony in this flame*” (v. 24). Third, it is clear from the account that those in hell can never leave (v. 26). Fourth, we see some level of repentance in the rich man’s plea for someone to be sent to his father’s house to warn his brothers to repent and believe in Christ (vv. 27-28, 30). These two last points are especially significant, because the rich man is depicted as someone who had “*learned his lesson.*” He cries, “*please have mercy on me*” (v. 24), and begs that someone would preach the gospel to his five brothers. If hell was simply a place designed for remedial punishment aimed at purification, we would think that this man would be ready to leave. We would expect him to be allowed to cross over from hell to heaven, but he is not. In this writer’s opinion, Christian Universalism is destroyed from this short account alone, because in it we find that hell is not temporary, no one can leave and go to heaven, and post-mortem salvation is not an option.

Dealing with Logical Arguments for Christian Universalism

Barclay wrote, “*Gregory of Nyssa offered three reasons why he believed in universalism. First, he believed in it because of the character of God. ‘Being good, God entertains pity for fallen man; being wise, he is not ignorant of the means for his recovery.’ Second, he believed in it because of the nature of evil. Evil must in the end be moved out of existence...Third, he believed in it because of the purpose of punishment. The purpose of punishment is always*

² For example, universalists argue on the basis of logic and implicit inference that it would make no sense for people to be baptized for the dead (1 Corinthians 15:29) if the dead could not be converted. Of course, there are many problems with this argument, such as: (1) the passage does not teach that the dead can be converted; (2) it does not teach that people are converted through baptism (i.e. baptismal regeneration); (3) it does not teach that people can be converted through someone else’s baptism. All of this is nothing but pure speculation beyond what the text actually states. Therefore, creating doctrine and dogma on the basis of this passage and others like it should be avoided.

remedial.” All three of these arguments are logical, not scriptural, arguments. Nevertheless, I will comment on each.

The first logical argument offered in this section pertains to the character of God. Although everyone from Calvinists to Arminians to Open Theists have argued for their opposing views on the basis of the character of God, Christian Universalists feel justified in asserting that their logic in this area is more consistent than their opponents. They lean on the goodness, wisdom, and love of God, but they do so while overlooking two key concepts, Scriptural revelation and God’s other attributes.

We must always remember that God attributes, including love, goodness, and wisdom, are never to be defined by man. Instead, we are constrained to understand God on the basis of His own self-revelation in the Bible. Many atheists make the same mistake while arguing that it is impossible to have the existence of both evil and a wholly good God. On the basis of human logic and reasoning, some may be inclined to think that their arguments are meritorious, because their arguments seem to make sense. However, the fatal flaw in their argumentation is that they begin with a false premise (i.e. the wrong definition of God). They take it upon themselves to define God’s goodness; then they proceed to prove it to be incompatible with natural disasters and other matters that are considered to be evil. It is my contention that proponents of Christian Universalism do the same thing. They self-define God’s love, goodness, and wisdom; then, they argue that an eternal hell is incompatible with an eternal God. Is this the correct approach? Absolutely not! Paul argued, “*Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR? Or WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN?*” (Romans 11:33-35). Anytime man attempts to define God on the basis of logic, he will fail and, the result will be some level of error. As God’s only self-revelation, the Bible alone must be the starting and ending point for understanding the character of God. Since the Bible clearly states that hell is eternal and that God is love, we are to believe both without hesitation. Whatever level of incompatibility we perceive in the marriage of these two truths, we must understand to correspond to a flaw of our own, not of God or the Bible. It is the height of arrogance to think that we have a perfect understanding of God’s nature. Could God not be both perfect love and eternal punisher of sin if the Bible clearly states this to be the case? Could God’s goodness co-exist with His wrath? Could it be possible that God’s wisdom necessitates eternal justice meted out to those who have hated Him all their lives? We must be willing to accept the clear teaching of the Bible, even when it does not make logical sense to us. I fear that proponents of Christian Universalism see the need to re-interpret the clear passages about eternal hell due to incompatibility with their preunderstanding of theology.

As mentioned, universalists, in favor of God’s love, goodness, and wisdom, also overlook other attributes of God, namely His justice and wrath. The Bible never indicates that there is any tension between God’s justice and goodness or His love and wrath. Passages like Revelation 11:18 place them side by side in perfect harmony. The Bible gives many warnings about the wrath of God. We are told that there is “*wrath to come*” (Matthew 3:7); the unbeliever will never see life; instead, “*the wrath of God abides on him*” (John 3:36); there will be a “*day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God*” (Romans 2:5); and the only ones who are safe from God’s eternal wrath are those who have been “*justified by His blood*” (Romans 5:9). We also see that there are “*vessels of wrath prepared for destruction*” (Romans 9:22) who will “*pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the*

glory of His power, when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day” (2 Thessalonians 1:7-10).

The second logical argument offered in this section pertains to the nature of evil. The idea espoused is that evil will be completely moved out of existence. Again, why does such an idea necessarily prevent God from punishing evil? Do universalists also believe that Satan and the fallen angels will ultimately be reconciled to Christ? If they do not, they are inconsistent with their own argument at this point. Again I ask, “Where is the clear, explicit teaching in Scripture that this will be the case?” One could just as easily make the logical argument that complete removal of evil requires the existence of an eternal lake of fire, and this one would be standing firmly on biblical soil.

The third logical argument offered in this section pertains to purpose of punishment. The unwarranted assertion is that the purpose of punishment is always remedial. Really? Was God seeking to remediate Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu when He struck them dead for offering strange fire (Leviticus 10:1ff)? How about Uzzah (2 Samuel 6:1ff), Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1ff), or those who were taking the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner (1 Corinthians 11:20)? If these folks were arguably all believers, and God did not attempt to remediate them, what shall we think of God’s judgment on unbelievers? Again, this argument is logical and makes some sense when defined and understood from a human perspective, but we are to understand punishment on the basis of how it is defined and illustrated in Scripture.

Dealing with Scriptural Arguments for Christian Universalism

Up to this point, Barclay had only summarized arguments offered by his predecessors. For the remainder of the article, he offers four arguments of his own, which are at least partially based in Scripture.

Barclay writes, “*First, there is the fact that there are things in the New Testament which more than justify this belief.*” He then proceeds to give five of what he believes to be the strongest passages that support his position.

He begins with John 12:32 and argues that Jesus’ words, “*And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself*” provide evidence for universal salvation. Calvinists have understood the phrase “*all men*” to be a contextual reference to all people groups, Gentiles as well as Jews, because Christ “*purchased for God with [His] blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation*” (Revelation 5:9). Arminians take this phrase further. To them, “*all men*” is a reference to every person alive. Universalists, like Barclay, take it even further. Due to their acceptance of post-mortem salvation, they argue that “*all men*” refers to every person alive *or dead*. Interestingly, they believe, as Calvinists do, that the drawing indicated here points to irresistible grace. If we grant that this is correct and believe that He is indeed referring to salvific grace, then we must question whether Jesus was including dead people in His reference to those whom He will draw to Himself. Is there any reason to see post-mortem salvation here? Is there really a valid reason to believe that “*all men*” here extends even to those who have died? Certainly not! If one does a word study on this phrase, he will not find any example in Scripture where this phrase is used in such a manner. For example, when the apostle Paul was told, “*For you will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard*” (Acts 22:15), he certainly did not think that he would preach to the dead, and when he said, “*To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some*” (1 Corinthians 9:22), there is no reason to think that he had the dead in view.

Barclay then turns to Romans 11:32 as support for his universal view. Here, in this verse, we have a contrast between the “*all men*” who have been consigned to disobedience and the “*all*” who are the recipients of God’s mercy. Although at first blush, this verse appears to teach universal salvation, the careful reader will observe that this was not Paul’s intention at all. When reading through the immediate context of the passage, we see that the “*all men*” and the “*all*” have been defined for us. In verses 30-31, Paul argues that just as the Gentiles were once disobedient and have been shown mercy, the Jews will also be shown mercy. Thus, the phrases “*all men*” and “*all*” do not refer to every single person but to all categories of men. In other words, Paul is pointing out that God’s plan includes showing mercy to both Jews and Gentiles. The context of chapters 9-11 of Romans speaks to the salvation of Jews. Does Paul state that every single Jew will be saved? No, he makes it clear in 9:1ff that only the children of the promise (i.e. the elect) will be saved (v. 8). If Paul believed in universal reconciliation, he would have no need to wish that he were accursed for the sake of his brethren (vv. 2-3). Furthermore, Paul did not argue that God’s promise was fail proof because everyone will eventually be saved; instead, he argued that God had always preserved “*a remnant according to God’s gracious choice*” (11:5). Notice also that the grafting into the olive tree (i.e. a picture of salvation) happens in this life, not after death. This is clearly seen in the fact that their grafting in depends on faith (11:20, 23). Those who are grafted in are brought back into a covenant relationship with God (9:4), which is Israel’s “*own olive tree*” (11:24).

A similar argument is made regarding 1 Corinthians 15:22. Here the argument is made that the “*all*” who die in Adam and the “*all*” who will be made alive in Christ are the same people. Of course, we know that every single person dies in Adam. Why then should we not believe that everyone will be made alive in Christ? Again, we must allow the context to define each occurrence of “*all*” for us. In this case, as in Romans 11, the context is quite clear. The “*all*” who will be made alive in Christ are “*those who are Christ’s*” (v. 23). The entire context of chapter 15 is about the gospel and faith. In verses 1-8, Paul argues that only those who “*hold fast to the*” gospel are saved (v. 2). He then makes a critical connection between resurrection to life and faith in the gospel (vv. 14, 17-19, 23).

Barclay again argues that the word “*all*” implies universality in 1 Timothy 2:4-6. However, proper evaluation of this text yields five clear reasons why we should understand this phrase as a reference to categories of men, not individuals. For an analysis of this text, including an explanation of these five reasons, please see “Does God Desire Every Person to be Saved? A Brief Exegesis of 1 Timothy 2:4” (http://jesuspaidinfull.com/Documents/1_Tim_2_4.pdf). Even if one argues, against clear reasons to the contrary, that “*all*” implies universality in this passage, it is untenable to think that the “*all*” is inclusive of dead people. When taken in context, the “*all men*” in verse 4 are also in view in verse 1. Surely Paul was not urging for “*entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men,*” including dead men! All of the categories of men listed as examples were alive at the time of writing (v. 2).

Barclay’s second argument for Christian Universalism hinges on Matthew 25:46. He argues that the phrase “*eternal punishment*” ought to be understood as nothing more than “*that kind of remedial punishment which it befits God to give and which only God can give.*” Here we find a few more exegetical fallacies at work. With regard to the Greek word for punishment, Barclay commits to the etymological fallacy in his appeal to the original meaning of *kolasis*. He then argues that the word is only used in secular Greek literature to refer to remedial punishment. Even if this were so, does this necessarily indicate that the Bible writers used it in the same manner? He also argues that the Greek word for eternal does not mean everlasting. Again, he

does not make any appeal to the usage of the term in Scripture. The most interesting point of consideration is that the same term is used to describe “*eternal life*” in the same verse. Shall we argue that eternal life is also temporal? Since the context treats these two options in a parallel manner, we must understand eternal life and eternal punishment to be of the same nature. In other words, both must be everlasting or both must be temporal.

Barclay’s third argument is purely logical and lacks scriptural support. Essentially, he asserts that idea of eternal punishment would limit the grace of God. Since God’s grace is unlimited, it is only logical to conclude that He will still exercise it by saving people in the afterlife. This argument is tremendously weak for a multitude of reasons. As argued above, we must not allow ourselves to blaze trails where Scripture does not take us. Judgment language in Scripture is very strong and leaves no room for a change of verdict. The idea of post-mortem salvation flies in the face of the emphasis of Jesus and the apostles of calling people to repentance because the time is near and the kingdom is at hand.

The fourth and final argument offered by Barclay is that God will ultimately triumph. Again, this argument is cast from the seat of logic, not Scripture. He assumes that all things being in subjection to God (1 Corinthians 15:27-28) means that there can be no one remaining in hell. This is quite a logical leap. He then states, “*If one man remains outside the love of God at the end of time, it means that that one man has defeated the love of God - and that is impossible.*” Really? Where does Scripture state this? As we have seen time and time again throughout this article, this is the type of reasoning that is used. Begin with human logic and make an assumption, then subject Scripture to that assumption, and the end result is perceived verification of the presupposed assumptions. This is a prime example of circular reasoning built on top of false premises. Actually, the very passage cited states the exact opposite of Barclay’s claim. The enemies of God will be definitively defeated (1 Corinthians 15:24-25), and the final enemy to be defeated is death (v. 26). If we argue that the defeat of God’s enemies is only temporary and that the enemies are eventually turned into friends, then to be consistent, would we not have to argue the same for death? Shall we believe that death will also serve a temporary sentence and will eventually be made a friend as well?

In the final thrust of his final paragraph, Barclay wrote, “*But God is not only King and Judge, God is Father - he is indeed Father more than anything else. No father could be happy while there were members of his family for ever in agony. No father would count it a triumph to obliterate the disobedient members of his family. The only triumph a father can know is to have all his family back home.*” Again, this sounds nice from a human standpoint but is laden with problems. First, who said that God is a Father *more* than anything else? Why should we assign more weight to His fatherhood than his kingship, or any other attribute for that matter? Second, God is not even the Father of unbelievers. Although all people are His offspring through creation (Acts 17:28), Jesus told unbelievers that their father was the devil (John 8:44; cf. 1 John 3:10). Only through faith does a child of wrath (Ephesians 2:3) become a child of God (John 1:12-13). This tendency to argue on the basis of a universal fatherhood of God is a major problem among universalist writers, Barclay included. We need to begin with the Bible’s definition of God’s fatherhood, not our own. Given the Bible’s definition of his words, what Barclay said is true, and God’s true family (i.e. those who believe in Jesus Christ before they die and are judged) will be home with their heavenly Father. When we are careful not to stray from Scripture, we find that those who have not repented prior to death will find their eternal home in the lake of fire with their father, the devil. According to Barclay’s definition of God’s fatherhood (i.e. universal fatherhood of God), his own words do not make any sense, even when

viewed from a purely logical standpoint. He argues for universal salvation on the basis that “*No father could be happy while there were members of his family for ever in agony,*” yet he believes that hell exists. So, is it ok to believe that God the Father could be happy with members of His family in agony for days, weeks, years, centuries, millennia, or eons as long as it is not eternity? How long shall we believe that God can stay happy while His family receives punishment in hell? Once again, we find this type of emotional argument to be extremely arbitrary, weak, and unconvincing.

Summary and Conclusion

In summary, the Christian Universalism that William Barclay espoused is laden with problems and inconsistencies, including the following:

- It begins with false premises rooted in human logic and subjects Scripture to these false premises so that it appears to yield what the false premises demand
- It employs erroneous exegetical methodology such as:
 - The etymological fallacy – allowing the original meaning of a word to dictate interpretation without consideration of the change in meaning over time
 - Assuming that biblical writers always used terms exactly the same manner as secular writers
 - Ignoring the context of passages
 - Appealing to and relying on tangential passages that do not prove or disprove the doctrine
 - Ignoring clear, explicit Scripture references in favor of an over-reliance on human logic and reason
 - Extrapolating beyond what Scripture clearly reveals and assuming something in a text where there is no specific mention or allusion

The aforementioned problems are grave errors in methodology which lead to grave errors in theology. Although many proponents of Christian Universalism likely have good intentions, their methodology and resulting theology should be rejected by Bible-believing Christians. The Bible clearly teaches that those who die without faith in Christ will be righteously judged as God-haters and thrown into the lake of fire, where they will suffer under God’s wrath for all eternity.