

Universalism

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Date: 28 August 2022

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[0:00] Good evening, everybody. Good to see you. Hello, hello. Hi, everybody watching online. Glad that you're with us as well. We are concluding today our series. We've been talking for the past.

This is week eight, talking about beliefs, theology, doctrine. Everything that we've been talking about is all at sermons.thetablechurch.org, so you can catch up there.

Last week, we talked about death and rising and resurrection and what the church has historically taught about that. And this week, we're continuing on with that sort of topic, talking about hell and universalism and all those sorts of things.

Anybody grow up going to youth group? Anybody grow up going, oh, wow, look at all those hands. Okay. So youth group, you know, I'm sure we all have some stories that we could tell, good or bad, about youth group.

If you were part of youth groups like mine or like camp revivals, or maybe you got dragged into your parents' or your grandparents' church, inevitably, there would be some sort of message talk about hell. All right?

[1:07] I'm glad our kids are in the table, kids. So it's just us girls tonight, okay? So we can talk honestly about this. Now, there was a story. I'm like a pretty good Googler.

So I was Googling around for a version of the story. I could not find it. So I think it was a story that was only told in like my little denominations circles.

And it was told multiple times at youth group preaching and retreats and camp revivals, all that sort of thing. And it was this story about some kids in high school who were messing around like at a bonfire or something with pure sodium.

Does anybody remember their chemistry class? What is the unique thing about pure Na sodium? Anybody remember? It explodes with water. Yes. Yes, it's highly explosive.

So this is not sodium as in the thing on like the back of the cracker packet that you eat too much of. This is not just table salt. This is pure sodium. And when you mix it with a little bit of water, it explodes.

[2:13] So apparently like in this story, there was a kid and maybe his like parent was like a science teacher, like a Breaking Bad situation. I don't know. And the kid was like, oh, let's play with the pure sodium.

And so they would like put their little bit of water on it and explode. And then the story kind of goes on until eventually they get this like whole block of sodium. And they're going to like put it in a tub of water.

But the kid trips and falls into the water with the sodium like all over his face. And so they rush this kid to the ER. And the kid's screaming and like depending on the preacher telling the story, all sorts of different gory graphic details.

But inevitably like the youth pastor gets called in. And it's like they are comforting the kids about, you know, this kid who is messing around with sodium and it explodes on his face. And the thing that he tells the kids is hell will be worse than that.

Right. Yeah. I heard somebody over here be like, Jesus Christ. Like, yeah, it's an intense story. And that was the kind of attitude that at least in my kind of growing up talking about hell was given to us as kids and teenagers.

[3 : 26] That we were taught about the nitty gritty gory details of hell so that we would be afraid of it. So that we would turn to God. Now, I don't want to disparage what was happening here because these folks really, truly, literally believed in this idea of hell.

And they wanted to save kids, save teenagers, save congregations from it. Because if it is real, it is something that you would want to convince people to stay away from.

But inevitably it was a fear-based sort of preaching and teaching. That's even worse than that. Now, last week we talked about Christian hope.

That Christian hope historically has not merely been going to heaven when you die, but rather heaven coming down to earth. That God is in this grand project to remake all of creation.

And that includes our physical bodies. And so, yes, when we die we will end up in heaven in the presence of God. But God will recreate our physical world, our physical bodies.

[4 : 34] It will be the end of death and decay and creation will be restored. And we were taking a look at 1 Corinthians chapter 15 as Paul lays out this theology of the end.

Of our eschatology. Of what happens when we die. What happens to creation. But I left you all on a cliffhanger. Because we were going through this basically verse by verse.

But there was one verse that I skipped. And it's 1 Corinthians chapter 15, 22. And it says this. This is Paul writing to the church of Quorum. He says, In the same way that everyone dies in Adam.

So, what Paul is doing is he's using this story about Adam. And because of Adam's mistake, the first human's sin, all of us, all of humanity, every person that comes out of that model, that type called Adam, every human dies.

Okay? So, Paul says, So, if you believe some theology, and this is what Paul was trying to say, everyone dies in Adam, everyone because of the fact that they are human, is going to experience death.

[5 : 54] Because of the fall, because of sin, because of Genesis 3 type of stuff. Everyone will experience death. But, because of Jesus, everyone will also experience new life.

To which, those of us who grew up in youth group and were told stories about sodium exploding in your face, but it's even worse than that, we ask, But Paul, what about hell?

So, I'll go ahead and kind of end the cliffhanger and say this is about something called Christ-centered or Christological universalism. Tonight's sermon.

And for every one word that I'm going to preach tonight, there's a hundred words that are left on the cutting room floor of this sermon. All right? So, I'm also going to teach a class, three weeks long, starting, not next week, but in two weeks, on universalism.

I'm going to spend three weeks on Sunday mornings, on Zoom, kind of pulling this all out. Because I realize theologically, I'm going out on a limb, and we're going to talk about that. About this idea of universalism.

[6 : 56] Universalism. I preached a sermon back in like February 2021, about this topic. And I don't think a lot of people were watching online that day, because I was nervous as hell about it.

And then like, when I started talking to people about it, like, oh, I missed that one. I'm like, oh my gosh, come on. So, I know there's more people here. There's some people watching online. There's no excuse. So, I'm going on this limb. We're going to spell this out over the next three weeks.

But, I will give sort of a short definition, short explanation of what I'm talking about. Now, last week, we talked about beliefs, doctrine. This is not a, everybody who goes to the table church must believe the same way that Pastor Anthony does.

That is not what we are about. We're not about that sort of uniformity. But, we meet, when me, Tanetta, Pastor Tanetta and I were designing the series, we thought it was an important enough topic that we would spell it out for you all.

So, because it's going to come up again and again in the way that Pastor Tanetta and I sort of approach these sorts of conversations. So, short definition of universalism is that everyone, I think this is on the screen behind me, everyone will eventually, freely choose to be healed from the world.

[8 : 10] from the corrosive effects of sin and reconciled to a right relationship with God, humanity, and creation. Everyone will someday, eventually, over time, freely, not coerced, not forced, but by their own free will, choose to be healed from the corrosive effects of sin and be reconciled to a right relationship with God, humanity, and creation.

If you remember about seven or eight weeks ago, I preached a sermon called The Gospel on Chairs. We talked about two different approaches to the gospel. One is that God is always turning away from us as an angry judge who can't bear to be in the sight of sin.

And then we talked about a gospel of God as a good doctor or a good parent who is always chasing and coming after us, not because sin is something that needs to be judged, but sin is something that we need to be healed from.

So that's our short definition. Now, last week, I talked about how I was doing my best to present this idea of an orthodoxy, a little Catholic faith, meaning what has been believed by most Christians in most places at most times.

And if you hear a phrase like universalism, your little antenna may start going off saying, but Anthony, this does not fit that definition. This has been believed by some Christians in some places at some times.

[9 : 41] So Anthony, what are you doing on this topic? So, how do you know when to go off the beaten path theologically? And I would dare to say that most of us, if you are calling the Table Church or Resurrection City Church your church home, you've probably gone off the beaten path theologically in some way or another.

Maybe you've been pushed out of churches because you've gone off the beaten path. Maybe you have experienced the destructive effects of, you know, fear-based theology that makes you feel like God has to be better than this, right?

But how do you know when to do that? And there's this irony, I think, in the Evangelical Church, where at least I came from. I know a lot of us came from, not all of us.

But there's this irony in conservative churches that basically say, you must never go off the beaten path. If you do, then we will punish you in some way.

And they use it as a form of control that if you leave this well-worn theological path, then you're not a part of us anymore. And the irony in that sort of approach is that that's not how the church actually has taught theology historically.

[11 : 00] historically, historically, there's always been some latitude, and not just latitude, but expectation that our faith will mature and grow. The buzzy word in this decade is deconstruction.

And we needed a word like deconstruction because it was so uncalled for, unexpected, that Christians may grow beyond the faith of their parents or grandparents.

But over the centuries, over the millennia, over time, the expectation has been, well, yeah, of course you're going to. Let me show you what I mean. So, there's this guy named Vincent of Lorenz, and he lived in the 400s CE.

So, 400 years after Jesus. And he defined something called Catholic consensus. Catholic, not meaning the Catholic Church, but Catholic meaning universal. How do you define consensus theologically?

And Lorenz believed in this everywhere, always, and by all. This most Christians, most places, most times. But he didn't stop there. He also taught about something called this principle of *Adfantes, Apostoloris*.

[12 : 12] Go back to the apostolic sources. Go back to the first century church. Yes, there's tradition, but what did the first Christians believe? And that's what we have our Hebrew scriptures and our New Testament scriptures for.

Yes, we look at tradition, what's been believed in most places, most Christians, most times. But we also look at what's been believed by the first Christians, the apostles.

And then he also had this principle of *semper referendum*. Anybody know the phrase *semper fi*? What does it mean? Right? What? I'm sorry, it's hard to hear.

Like, stay true, right? Stay faithful. Keep staying faithful. *Semper referendum* means keep changing, keep reforming, keep growing, stay reforming.

And Vincent of Lorenz understood what he called the improvement of our religion. That what was going to be handed down to us through the tradition, through our parents and our grandparents and the church that came before, we had an obligation and responsibility to keep reforming it, to improve our religion was his words for it.

[13 : 23] The Roman Catholics actually have this document from 1965 that said, there is growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down.

And the Puritan pastor back in the 1600s said, God always has new light to shed upon his word. So yes, you begin, at least the way I build my theology with this most Christians in most places at most times.

But you don't stop there. We have this need, this obligation, this responsibility of receivers of our faith to also improve upon our faith.

Go back to the apostles, go back to scripture, go to God in prayer, understand, oh, if my faith actually has destructive, corrosive effects on the world, then maybe something about me or my understanding needs to change.

So, what did the first Christians believe about heaven and hell and the fate of all humanity? So in the first four centuries of Christianity, there were these things called catechetical schools or theological schools, and they were built in major cities, major metropolises of the Roman world where Christians would gather and learn the faith.

[14 : 48] The faith would be passed on to them in this formal, educational way. And there were six main theological schools. Four of them, Alexandria, Antioch, Caesarea, and Edessa, taught this idea of universal reconciliation or universalism.

It was the majority view for the first 400 years of church history. The majority view was universalism. There was one school in Ephesus that taught something called annihilationalism, and I'll define these in a second.

And then one school, Rome, taught eternal conscious torment, that those who die apart from Jesus will go to hell and suffer consciously forever.

So the majority believed in universalism and then a minority believed in other things. Now, eternal conscious torment, and man, I tell you what, when I was looking for a job a couple years ago, one of the first places I'd go is the church website to read through the belief statement.

And so many have this paragraph on the bottom of their belief statement of, we believe in the realities of heaven and hell that those who die apart from Jesus will suffer for eternity. I'm like, man, that's a heck of a way to advertise yourself.

[16 : 05] But, it's the one we're most familiar with because it grew to be the standard belief when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

For the first three or four hundred years, though, it was the minority. In short, eternal conscious torment holds that those who are not Christian will be consciously, they're awake for it, tormented for all eternity.

And the reason is that God's justice demands that any offense committed against an infinite God deserves infinite punishment. It comes with assumptions.

Those assumptions about Bible passages about hell, Sheol, the lake of fire, or Gehenna refer to an everlasting without-end afterlife for those who don't accept Jesus.

Another minority position was annihilationism, or you might sometimes see this called conditionalism or conditional mortality. And it holds that humans, left to themselves, are not naturally immortal.

[17 : 12] God has to, in order for somebody to be immortal, to last forever, God would have to take action to make sure that happens. So there are people who are going to reject Jesus, so God, in his mercy, allows their existence to end, so that they don't need to be tormented by their separation from God forever.

It prioritizes scripture and Bible verses that talk about people being utterly destroyed, and their punishment is eternal, in the sense that once they're gone, they can't ever come back.

And then there's universalism, which was the majority tradition of the early church. It was believed by many, if not most, of the church fathers and mothers who ended up composing these things that we call creeds, the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed.

There's a guy named Gregory of Nazan, Nazan, I knew I was going to mess this up, Gregory N., let's call him that, who presided over the council that drafted the Nicene Creed and affirmed some form of universalism.

There was a set of siblings, an older sister named Nacrina and her brothers Basil and Gregory who helped form much of what we call Christian orthodoxy in the fourth century and all of them held to this idea of universal reconciliation.

[18 : 31] And it's important to note that if you go to read the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, these early creeds composed by the early church didn't include a line about hell or the eternal fate of those who didn't believe.

And this was in part because they understood that the scriptures are actually not completely clear on the subject. All three schools could make a clear biblical argument that theirs is the correct position.

Now, what does the Bible actually say? Anybody here like visual and audio illusions? Can you put up that?

Put up the, yeah, yeah. What color is that? Simple question, right? How many see black and blue? I don't know how this works on the projector.

How many see the other one? I can't see the other one. Yeah, okay, okay. Yeah. So, like, audio, visual illusions just fascinate me because we can be looking at the same thing but see differently, right?

[19 : 38] Now, it's the hearing ones that blow my mind. So, go ahead and turn on that sound and play the video. and I think you have to hit play. What do you hear?

All of them? Yeah, as you read it, you hear something different. And by the way, anybody know what it actually is? It's a football, soccer, yeah, yeah, English football saying, that is embarrassing.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Now, why do I bring this up? When we look at Scripture, we come with different perceptions, different lenses.

We hear things differently based off of our preconceived notions or what has been handed down to us. So, as you read the lines, you hear different things.

So, there's this passage in Philippians 2 that says, at the name of Jesus, everyone in heaven, on earth, and under the earth will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

[21 : 03] Now, some people hear this. This is what was handed down to me. Yes, they're going to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, but it's at gunpoint, basically. It doesn't mean that they get to go to heaven when they die.

It means that, yes, now they're burning in hell and they have no choice but to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, but God's not going to forgive them now. It's too late. That's what was passed down to me.

But now, I've got this different set of lenses that understands 1 Corinthians 15, 22. As in Adam everyone died, so in Christ everyone will be made alive.

And there it is. It's as plain as can be when I look at this. At the name of Jesus, everyone on earth and heaven will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Not at gunpoint, but joyfully confess.

They will say it because they're happy about it. They say it because they're in the presence of God. You put this next to Romans 10. Romans 10.

[22 : 02] It says, If you confess with your mouth Jesus is Lord and in your heart you have faith that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. Put Romans 10 next to Philippians 2.

It's hard not to come up with a universalistic sort of approach that at the end everyone will freely choose to be reconciled to God and be healed from the corrosive effects of sin and reconciled to their neighbor, to their enemy, to creation itself.

But, I know many of us bring a lens that says, no, no, no, no. Romans 10 is about people before they die, when they have a chance. Philippians 2 is about everyone after they die, not everyone will have a chance.

They're going to confess and it will be too late for them. We bring these lenses to Scripture. And so, that's part of what I'm going to do in the class is sort of asking what are our lenses, what do we bring when we read Scripture.

And that's why I know I'm not going to convince everybody just by reading a bunch of Scripture, a bunch of Bible passages, that universalism must be the one true way of understanding things because it's hard to see outside of our perception.

[23 : 13] But, I do think that when I think about the character of God, what God is like, what Scripture says, it leads me to believe that God ultimately will be victorious.

and that when Revelation says that death and Hades themselves will be destroyed, God means it. Jesus, book of John, chapter 6, says, no one can come to me unless they are drawn to me by the Father who sent me and I will raise them up on the last day.

So, surface level reading, this sounds like a pretty anti-universalistic text. No one can come to Jesus unless they're drawn by God, God's self.

Calvinist, reformed people love to use this verse as proof of predestination or the elect that only some people are drawn to God. But wait, keep reading.

John chapter 12, Jesus says, when I am lifted up, which means crucified, I will draw everyone to me. So, Jesus says, no one can come to me unless they're drawn and when I am lifted up or crucified, I will draw everyone.

[24 : 29] Which one do you hear? Do you hear Bart Simpson bouncing or lactates in pharmacy? John 17, Jesus continues, he's praying to the Father and Jesus says, Father, you gave me the authority, gave me authority over everyone so that I could give eternal life to everyone you gave me.

Well, okay, are you paying attention to the first everyone? You gave me authority over everyone. Or the second everyone? Well, everyone you gave me, which is a smaller set. We come at these scriptures with different expectations.

And my question, my challenge, is why not choose the more hopeful expectation? Romans chapter 5. Romans chapter 5 says, Therefore, just as one man, we're talking about Adam again, one man's trespasses, sin, mistake, led to condemnation for all, so one man, now Jesus, one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.

For just as through the one man's disobedience, the many were made sinners, so through the one man's obedience, the many will be made righteous.

this is where we get the idea of universal justification, that it's not that Jesus saved some, that Jesus justified only a few.

[26 : 00] If you believe that everyone is part of humanity and humanity as a whole is kind of messed up, then Paul argues in Romans, then you have to believe that through Jesus, everyone will be saved.

saved. Think about Colossians 1. Colossians 1 says, For in the Son all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Which set of lenses do we bring? Well, the reconciliation to all things is only those who profess the name of Jesus, which Philippians 2 says will be everybody, but whatever.

It will only be just a certain few, or does all things mean all things? Now, the way I answer these questions myself is I think about what I know about the character of God.

The first thing I know is that God does not want people to die or be destroyed. And Scripture makes this about as clear as could be. 2 Peter 3, The Lord is not willing for any to perish, but for all to come to repentance.

[27 : 18] And this is a passage that explains why it's taking Jesus so long to come back. Because God wants everyone to know. God wants us to proclaim this more beautiful gospel that we don't have to fear God, but rather that God is one who wants to love us.

Ezekiel chapter 18 is not just a New Testament thing. This is what the prophets were proclaiming as well. I take no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies. Therefore repent and live.

And further in Ezekiel chapter 33, As I live, I take no pleasure at all in the death of the wicked, but rather that they would turn from their way and live. If this is true of God, if God desires that no one should perish, how will God then set up the universe to make sure that that doesn't happen?

What else do I know about God? I know that God does not rule by fear, that God would not preach a sermon about a kid with sodium exploding in his face. 1 John chapter 4 says there is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear because, listen, listen, because fear expects punishment and the person who is afraid has not been made perfect in love.

So many gospel presentations hinge on you being scared of what God will do to you if you don't say the right thing, if you don't pray the right prayer.

[28 : 46] And the author of 1 John is like, what are you doing? This is not the gospel that I handed on to you. A gospel that hinges on fear expecting punishment is not the good news.

I received a lot of messages over the past couple weeks from people who heard so many of these messages, these gospel presentations that use fear as their primary motivator.

Turn to Jesus, lest you burn in hell forever. And so, Jesus turns into a form of fire insurance or Jesus, to quote Dallas Willard, we become vampire Christians, meaning that we want a little bit of Jesus' blood to protect us from hell, but we don't want to deal with the rest of what Jesus had to say about pursuing justice for all, about seeking the common good, just keep me away from that fireplace.

But this does not square with no fear in love. Now, some of you may hear this and think that sounds great, wonderful, but there are still a bunch of hell passages in the Bible too, Anthony.

What are you going to do about those? So, a couple things I'll say, and then again, I'm going to go more into this in my class. There's also an older video from a couple years ago where I go into some of this if you want to go into more detail.

[30 : 15] But when you think about some of the hell passages, a lot of what comes up is what Jesus said. And you'll hear this in churches or church websites will say that, you know, Jesus talked about hell more than anything else.

I'm like, well, that's kind of true. But there's something we have to remember about Jesus. Jesus was a first century prophet to his people, the Galileans and the Judeans, the Israelites, the children of Abraham.

And yes, Jesus came to proclaim the kingdom of God. Yes, Jesus had the entire ministry of dying on a cross and being resurrected and so much of what goes over our head when we read the Gospels that Jesus was prophesying about the imminent destruction of Jerusalem about 40 years after his death in 70 AD.

And so many of the passages that we have been taught to read, at least I have been taught to read, that are about the future, the end of the world, were for first century Jews about the destruction of Jerusalem, which was going to happen within a generation.

And this includes Jesus' passages, stories about hell. King James Version, back in 1611, took all of Jesus' messages about a valley called Gehenna and translated it into a word that we call hell.

[31 : 40] Jesus was talking about a literal, physical valley outside of Jerusalem, where in about 40 years, bodies were going to go and be burnt because of Roman anger and fury at Israelite Jewish rebellion.

And Jesus was giving a warning. Jesus does this in the book of Luke. He says, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, if only you knew the ways of peace. He was warning his people, his kinmen, you don't have to go to war with Rome, it doesn't have to be this way.

So we read passages about hell, thanks King James Version, and it's Jesus' warnings about what's going to happen to his people in a valley outside of Jerusalem. So that's the first thing I'll say.

There are other passages about hell as well, not just the words of Jesus. But the ancient church, some of those church fathers and mothers I was mentioning earlier, did not take these to be descriptions of an eternal or everlasting or time without end fate, nor did they understand it to be a place where God gave out punitive, violent punishment and retribution.

Rather, they understood hell as a place of healing and the removal of the effects of sin on our souls. As anyone who has ever had surgery or broken bone knows, healing often hurts.

[33 : 08] Healing often hurts. But the point of the healing is not the pain. The point is the wholeness on the other side of the pain.

And so the early church, when they read these passages about hell or fire, they understood it as a purifying fire, not a destructive one. In the ancient Christian imagination, hell was a place of healing.

The place where we could go without the evils of the fallen creation still chasing us and be cured of our emotional and spiritual ills.

But what about justice? This is one of the most formidable arguments against universalism. But what about justice? What about those who did great evils and harm here on earth?

What about the Hitlers and the plantation owners and the people who stand left on the escalator? What about them? First, even if one assumes that retribution is the point, why does that retribution have to be eternal in order to be just?

[34 : 18] And second, is retribution the point? Or is it healing and recompense and reconciliation? If you talk to people who work in prison abolition, they well know that prisons, torture, solitary confinement are like some of the least effective ways to bring about transformation or to repay someone's debt to society.

So why do we think that God is interested in using some of these same failed methods? Or that God, who desires the end of pain, the end of suffering, the end of death, is then somehow also going to lock people into a place of continual suffering and pain and death and make sure that it lasts for eternity.

That there's always going to be this corner of creation where death does have the last say, where sin and evil have been victorious, where even those who confess Jesus is Lord are perpetually unable to experience salvation.

my belief that God's justice is more like a doctor or a good parent than a vindictive judge.

The book of Revelation promises a new heaven and a new earth whose gates will never be shut. It's one of the deep ironies of like you'll see conservative memes about building the wall and like even Jerusalem had walls.

[35 : 53] like no, its gates will never be shut. And there's this fascinating image that John in the book of Revelation gives us that yes, it says that there is going to be this lake of fire and that people are thrown into it.

And we'll go into this in the class, but there's good reason to believe this is a reference to the Dead Sea. And so it says the kings of the nations will be in this lake of fire to suffer for eternity, which okay.

But then you flip the page and it says that same phrase, the kings of the nations will then bring themselves into the new Jerusalem whose gates are never shut.

Where the leaves of the trees will be for the healing of the nations. Where as 1 Corinthians 15 says, God will be all in all.

The early church was hyper-focused on that passage, that God may be all in all. Because if we take that double all to mean what Paul meant it to mean, I think all means all.

[37 : 13] Or as one of the saints of past said, next slide, all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.

So what is a more beautiful gospel? A more beautiful gospel is one that has its foundation in love and not fear. That understands that God is not primarily against you, but eternally for you.

That God will always be the one who chases after you. That there is, as the Psalms say, no place in the mountains or in the depths, in the sea or in the grave, where we can escape the spirit of God.

A more beautiful gospel says that God is not an angry judge that needs to have someone die so that God is been able to forgive, but rather that God has always been the forgiving sort, and that we just didn't understand that for a long time.

A more beautiful gospel is not about evangelizing so we can get people out, fire insurance from sodium hell, but rather evangelism is about inviting people to know heaven on earth today and for forever.

[38 : 43] A more beautiful gospel understands and minds for all eternity the goodness of the truth that God is love.

And that's what we give our lives to. and that's who is the want to love.