

Review: JAU450

A SUMMARY CRITIQUE

UNIVERSALISM ISN'T FOR EVERYONE

a book review of

If Grace Is True: Why God Will Save Every Person

by Philip Gulley and James Mulholland

(HarperSanFrancisco, 2003)

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"Probably no invention came more easily to man than when he thought up heaven." Georg Christoph Lichtenberg's aphorism about heaven is cynical and misguided, but it is fitting when applied to the doctrine of *universalism* — the wistful notion that, one way or the other, everyone eventually will be saved.

Universalism is an ancient distortion of the Christian doctrine of salvation going at least as far back as Origen (c. AD 185–254). It has become popular again among today's pluralists (i.e., those who believe Jesus is not the only way of salvation) and has been freshly expounded in a book called *If Grace Is True: Why God Will Save Every Person*. Authors Philip Gulley and James Mulholland, as their book's title suggests, exploit the familiar concept of divine grace, the centerpiece of the Christian gospel, to support the doctrine of universalism. Unlike some universalists, however, the authors do not presume to find uniform support for the doctrine in the Bible.

They do, of course, make whatever use of the Bible they can. The book concludes with 10 pages of Scripture quotations that they argue suggest "universalist themes." These biblical texts also appear throughout the book, but when they do, there is little exegesis and no effort at harmonization with the rest of Scripture. Gulley and Mulholland, emboldened by their conviction that the Scriptures err in many respects, favor an approach to biblical interpretation wherein experience, intuition, and sentiment trump the clear teaching of Scripture regarding the nature of grace and the conditions for salvation.

Gulley and Mulholland, Quaker ministers, wrote their book somewhat awkwardly, in the first person singular — using *I* instead of *we* — as if there were only one author. The first chapter is a brief introduction to the theme of universalism and a statement of the authors' succinct creed: "*I believe God will save every person*" (p. 8, emphasis in original). Each of the five remaining chapters discusses a particular aspect of this creed.

The Experience of God. Chapter 2 describes the theological method that leads Gulley and Mulholland to believe as they do. Their ultimate authority, they state, is their experience of God as the one who will save all persons: "*Why* we believe is every bit as important as *what* we believe....As my faith has matured I've become more willing to examine not only what I believe, but why I believe it, and to regularly test whether my beliefs match my experiences with God. 'I've experienced it!' is the most compelling response to 'Why do you believe that?'" (31). It is not clear how experience could ground, or even produce, the belief that God will save every person. To understand the authors' method and argument, however, we must understand what they mean by an "experience with God."

Their frequent anecdotes, mostly autobiographical, provide the clue. They recount experiences that were accompanied by a powerful feeling of God's overwhelming love for His creatures, such as conducting the

funeral service of a young woman who died searching for God, sitting alone in a rundown Volkswagen Beetle as an indigent college student, or listening to a sermon preached in a small inner-city church as a teenager. “These experiences,” they say, “have become the bedrock of my faith. I trust them” (21).

The authors argue that these experiences are evidence of God’s love toward the people involved. This conviction is then generalized to include all persons. Finally, the authors leap from this generalization to the conclusion that a loving God effectually intends to save every person. This conclusion, however, is a bold extrapolation from the meager data of warm and fuzzy feelings encountered at odd times during people’s lives.

An early Roman official named Lucius Flavius Arrianus (c. AD 87–145) remarked, “When men are in doubt, they always believe what is most agreeable.” Gulley and Mulholland artfully insinuate that the Scriptures are an unreliable record of the fallible experiences of others; thus, they seek to cultivate doubt about its authority. They then narrate experiences “that [call] into question what we’ve accepted and believed about God” (30). Into the vacuum of depleted confidence fostered by this method, they introduce a conception of God’s love and salvific purpose that is more agreeable to their universalism — based on the fallible experiences of themselves and others!

The Primacy of Love. German poet Heinrich Heine once declared, “God will forgive me; that’s His business.” This sentiment that God will save me as a matter of His job description is developed and defended in chapters three and four. “Love is the core message of the Bible,” they say, and “if God is a loving father, His love will persist until every one of His children is reconciled to Him” (53, 60).

It is odd to find this remark about reconciliation in the book. Gulley and Mulholland never explain how such reconciliation occurs, why it is even needed, or what it amounts to. The need for reconciliation, of course, is revealed in Scripture, and it is grounded in the biblical portrayal of God’s holiness in contrast with human sinfulness. This portrayal includes the idea that God confronts evil without violating the requirements of justice. Elaborating on the significance of divine holiness, the apostle Peter wrote that God “judges impartially according to each one’s deeds” (1 Pet. 1:17).¹ That should be for us a terrifying prospect. Matthew Henry got it right when he said, “No attribute of God is more dreadful to sinners than His holiness.” Peter added, however, that we were “ransomed...with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Pet. 1:18–19).

Gulley and Mulholland also address the significance of God’s holiness when it comes to our salvation, but they define His holiness as “God’s ability to confront evil without being defiled” (73). This means that “the Holy One will never come in wrath. The Holy One always comes in love” (75). God’s holiness, in other words, should not inspire dread.

It is not true, however, that God’s holiness is His “ability to confront evil without being defiled.” Recall Paul’s comment about Jesus’ crucifixion: “For our sake [God] made [Christ Jesus] to be sin..., so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). Jesus, “who knew no sin,” became sin for us. If that isn’t defilement, I don’t know what is. God’s holiness does entail His ability to confront evil. God’s love entails that in confronting evil He does not require sinners to pay the terrible cost of their sin — *if there is some other way*; but, His love does not cancel His commitment to justice.

If reconciliation is needed, it is because God takes sin seriously and holds sinners accountable; otherwise, there would be no need for reconciliation. Gulley and Mulholland, however, abuse the term “reconciliation.” In their view it stands for God’s loving overtures toward confused individuals who have lost their way and would not reject God’s grace if they truly understood it (107). That is “ingratiation,” not “reconciliation.” God is not seeking our approval; indeed, such flattery toward us is an affront toward God. The authors assume that God must choose between exercising love or justice. The Bible, on the other hand, showcases God’s loving exercise of justice. There is a vast difference between these two conceptions of love. It is the difference between God’s turning His face and God’s showing us grace.

We need salvation because we are perishing, and we are perishing because of sin. Gulley and Mulholland say nothing about why we need to be rescued or what it is we need to be rescued from.

Salvation without Atonement. According to Gulley and Mulholland, neither the sacrifice of Christ nor the faith we have in Christ is needed for reconciliation between us and God. It is all taken care of very neatly by God's simple desire to save every person. Paul, on the other hand, emphasized the need for a mediator and a ransom when he taught, "There is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all" (1 Tim. 2:5-6). It is true that Paul said in the same passage, "God...desires all people to be saved," but this salvation involves coming to "a knowledge of the truth" (v. 4), something Gulley and Mulholland find unnecessary.

The authors of this book are also disenchanted with the New Testament idea of atonement — that Jesus' death covers our sin with His righteousness. They consider this doctrine to be morally offensive. Chapter 5 is peppered with distorted representations of the doctrine, trying to make it appear ridiculous:

Salvation was a cosmic negotiation between Jesus and God. I'd been convinced only those who practiced my faith pleased God. (126)
I regret being taught that Jesus died in order to save me from the hands of a wrathful God. (128)
God was angry. My sin offended Him. He demanded justice. My debt had to be paid. God sat in heaven, scales in hand, scowling as my sins tipped the balance closer and closer to wrath. God was bent on my destruction. (130)
Rather than emphasizing the love of the Heavenly Father, early Christians portrayed God doing precisely what He forbade Abraham to do: God sacrificed His son. (131-32)
Traditional Christian theology has argued that God is grieved He made us, seeks our destruction, and forgives only after the debt is paid. Jesus saves us from God. (132)

These disingenuous comments seek to drive a wedge between God the Father and God the Son. New Testament salvation, however, is not a matter of "cosmic negotiation between Jesus and God," but of reconciliation between God and people *through* Jesus (1 Tim. 2:5). God's love matches God's wrath (1 Thess. 5:9). The sacrifice of God's Son was a demonstration of the Father's love for us (Rom. 5:8; John 3:16). God does not seek our destruction but asks rebellious creatures to be reconciled to Him, and He forgives *us* when the debt is willingly paid by *another* (2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Tim. 2:6; Mark 10:45). The offense of the cross is not that Jesus died but that our sins are regarded as so heinous an offense against a holy God that death itself is the only proper penalty (1 Pet. 2:8; Rom. 6:23). Gulley and Mulholland can't believe that sin is as bad as all that. They think they know what sin means to God by consulting their feelings; thus, they deny the need for a revelation from God. They also suggest that the traditional view, which holds that God's Word corrects our fallible feelings and intuitions, is arrogant and dishonoring to God (155).

Heaven Is Compulsory — Hell Does Not Exist. In chapter 6, the authors describe "the persistence of God" and argue that eventually all men and women will respond to God's persistence since God will "wear them down with love." The authors say, "I believe God will save us all. We will all repent and be transformed" (162). This means, of course, that there must be opportunities for salvation after death; however, if this were true, even eternity would not be enough time to guarantee that all will repent, as the authors argue. This is something Gulley and Mulholland do not address directly; if men and women can resist salvation in the here-and-now, what assurance is there that they will repent in the by-and-by?

In the authors' view, every divine overture, intended to woo an unrepentant person, must be expressed with love that is in no way qualified by judgment against sin. God, therefore, cannot resort to any sort of severe discipline in order to get the attention of unreconciled sinners and wear down their resistance.

God, the authors tell us, is infinitely patient. They speak glibly of "having eternity" to get things settled (192). They say, "The triumph of grace...cannot be complete until every last person has been redeemed" (196). If you are not yet reconciled to God and have no plans to be reconciled during your life on earth, do not worry, "the party will not start without you" (191).

Suppose, however, that just one person tests God's infinite patience and refuses redemption for all eternity. That one person will have single-handedly frustrated God's gracious intentions and vetoed the possibility of full enjoyment of salvation for the rest of humanity. If the triumph of grace depends on the

eventual acquiescence of even the worst of human beings, then I'm not at all optimistic about the prospects of triumph, and I wonder about the love of God if this is truly His design. It does not seem just that God should postpone eternal glory until all who resist His grace are finally ready to repent and be reconciled.

Hitler, it is said, once asked, "Who says I am not under the special protection of God?" This haughty remark acquires an altogether terrifying complexion in light of the theology of universalism espoused by Gulley and Mulholland. Adolf Hitler, Genghis Khan, Saddam Hussein, and their kind, do not seem to be the sort of persons who can be worn down with love. Ambrose Bierce defined the universalist as "one who foregoes the advantage of a Hell for persons of another faith." I would add that the universalist may also forego the advantage of a heaven for *anyone* if God's infinite patience with those who refuse salvation means the infinite postponement of the very glory that the universalist would procure for all by means of his sentimentalist theology.

If the universalism promulgated in this book is true, then heaven may be little more than a pipe dream, even for those who welcome God's salvation. It is an ironically cruel doctrine that gives primacy to the love of God and leaves open the possibility that God's love might never be fully experienced by anyone.

The authors say "salvation is not the hope of a few; it is the destiny of all" (160), but they have not reckoned with the very real possibility that if it is to be the destiny of all, it must be the destiny even of those who do not hope for it because they do not desire it. If God is love, however, salvation cannot be the destiny of those who do not desire it *on God's own terms*; for salvation is nothing — heaven is nothing — if not the welcome fulfillment of God's will for our lives. Heaven, moreover, would not be what it is unless there was also the possibility of hell; and since God is love, there would not be a hell unless there was a way to avoid it.

— reviewed by R. Douglas Geivett

NOTES

1. All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version.