

Adam PRYOR

Am I Going to Hell?

Universal Essentialization and its Implications as Applied to the Problem of Soteriological Eschatology

“Are you saved?!?” I could hear the man shouting at me from the street corner. Amidst the beauty of the blue sky and the warm Louisiana summer, the shouts of clattering evangelists fill the air. As I look around from my car that idles at the red light, I see at least twenty people standing around this busy intersection. They all have cans that they are shaking, and the cacophony of questions rushes toward me like the clattering of church bells. “Have you been saved?” “Are you and your loved ones going to Heaven?” “Are you a true Christian?” “The end is near!”

Finally, one of the members of this zealous group knocks on my window. I roll down my window and he tells me, “Please give a donation for the construction of the new sanctuary for New Hope Baptist Church, and in return we will pray for the salvation of your soul.” Just at that moment, the light turned green and I sped off.

However, as I reflect back upon this isolated incident, I have begun to realize that these few Christians standing on the side of the road were asking some profound questions. It makes me question: have I been saved? Are my family and friends actually going to heaven? What happens to us after we die?

What is Eschatology?

All these questions deal with the broader topic of *eschatology*. George FORELL defines eschatology as the study of “the ultimate destiny of humanity and the world.”¹ The “ultimate destiny of humanity” is certainly not a small topic; in this regard, eschatology deals with questions about death, resurrection and eternal life. However, as Jürgen MOLTSMANN says, “The real heart of

¹ FORELL George W., *The Protestant Faith*. Philadelphia, 1960. 228.

eschatology, and the basic concept which constantly employs with varying content, is doubtless to be found in the promise and expectation of what is known as the ‘Kingdom of God’ and the ‘lordship of God.’”² This essentially means that the most central concept of eschatology is salvation through Jesus Christ.

Theologians’ opinions about salvation throughout history are both varied and divided. However, out of the plethora of thoughts that theologians have raised with reference to salvation and eschatology, one point remains clear within all Christian eschatological hopes: the only way to achieve salvation is through Jesus Christ. As Gregory BOYD puts it so clearly, “There is no salvation outside of Christ.”³

Past the point that we can only achieve salvation through Christ, though, theological thought on the matter of salvation is a diverse subject. When we think about salvation, the first question that comes to our mind is, whom does God save? This is certainly not an easy question to answer. However, when we try to answer this question, only two responses come to mind: God only saves some people, or God saves everyone.

Conflict in Scripture

At this point, we have reached the central question of salvation in regards to eschatology, and we have found the two answers that can resolve it. However, each of these answers leads to radically different points of view. Although both of these answers are viable, I believe there is more Biblical and logical support for the concept of universal salvation.

This is not to say that it is impossible to support the concept that God saves some people while some people are damned. We see many passages throughout Scripture that could support this point of view. For example, in Mark 9,43 Jesus says, “If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.”

There are examples like this one from Mark throughout the New Testament of the bible. Another example can be found in Matthew 7,13–14 where Jesus says, “The gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the

² MOLTSMANN Jürgen, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*. Minneapolis, 1967. 216.

³ FORELL, 237.

gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it." A final example comes from Revelation 14:11, "And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever. There is no rest day or night."

All of these passages seem to suggest a dichotomy within a person; they suggest that some people will achieve eternal salvation and reach the Kingdom of God, while others will not. The concept that some people are saved and some people are damned makes sense logically as well. After all, God did give us the free will to accept or reject God's love for us. If we say that God saves everyone, does this not undermine a person's free will and the importance of the choice that this person must make to either accept God and salvation or reject it?³ Certainly all of these questions and points are valid concerns in opposition to a universal homecoming for humans. However, I believe there is a stronger case that we can make for universal salvation.

Direct support for universal salvation in Scripture is not easy to find. We see the actual term *apokatastasis panton* (which is the Greek term for the idea of universal salvation) once in the New Testament. However, the reference to the idea of universal salvation in this particular passage in Acts is only referring to the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.⁴

Yet, there are passages in the New Testament that do make a more sound case for universal salvation. We can find a Biblical example supporting this concept in 1Corinthians 15,24–28. In the passage, Paul writes that God will reign over the world until a time when "all God's enemies are under God's feet," and God will be "all in all." This passage is clearly referring to a universal homecoming that is not limited to any particular group of people; rather it is a universal homecoming that describes the salvation of all things at a time when God is in all things.

There are other passages throughout the New Testament that support the idea of universal salvation as well. One such passage can be found in John 17,22–24. In these verses, John is quoting Jesus as he is in prayer to God. In the passage, Jesus is asking that God show all the people of the world God's love for them.

⁴ SCHWARZ Hans, *Eschatology*. Grand Rapids, 2000. 338.

Traditional Concepts of Universal Salvation

Since we can interpret scripture in so many different ways, it is difficult to justify a soteriological issue, much less universal salvation, without the aid of theology and reason in addition to Biblical interpretation. Many theologians over time have both proposed the concept of universal salvation and questioned the concept of a final judgment, in the sense that it results in eternal damnation or eternal salvation. One such theologian is Jürgen MOLTSMANN. He states, "It is essential to take the universal horizon of hope and promise embracing all things."⁵ He also shows us that we can relate the concept of salvation in the Greek, to the Hebrew concept of *shalom*. Although this does not seem particularly significant, this connection asserts that salvation is not just something related to the soul, but it relates to all creation.⁶

Karl BARTH also makes an interesting plea for universal salvation. BARTH emphasizes the grace of God that is upon everyone. In this way, he argues that each person is predestined toward grace.⁷ Although both of these theologians make interesting arguments in favor of universal salvation neither one seems satisfactory. Both seem to fall into the classic pitfall that I described earlier: if we say that everyone is saved, does this not undermine a person's free will and the importance of the choice that one must make to either accept God and salvation or reject it? For both BARTH and MOLTSMANN the answer to this question must be yes. Both men are promoting a theology that is inadequate in its preservation of a person's freedom.

Although this seemingly supports an eschatological outlook that promotes some sort of final judgment, this is not necessarily true. In refuting the eschatological perspective of BARTH and MOLTSMANN, we reach a stumbling point in the ideas of theologians like FORELL who believe that there is a final judgment. Who are we, as persons, to limit God's love for us? We have no right (in a theological sense) to dictate to God how God may or may not love us.

However, in asking this question we seem to be right back at the point where we started. Since there is so much contradiction in Scripture and diversity of theological thought that leaves unresolved questions, it seems that we cannot say there is a better argument for either eschatological outlook in regards to final judgment or universal salvation.

⁵ MOLTSMANN, 220. / ⁶ MOLTSMANN, 329. / ⁷ SCHWARZ, 345.

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Dichotomy and Universal Essentialization

Yet Paul TILLICH, in his *Systematic Theology*, presents an argument for universal salvation that makes it a far better eschatological outlook than the alternative. TILLICH asserts it is illogical that a loving God would send only some people toward eternal salvation. Rather than accepting a straight salvation for all people, TILLICH describes salvation through his concept of “essentialization.”⁸

TILLICH describes essentialization as “profoundly dialectical.”⁹ When referring to this term, TILLICH means “a creative synthesis of a being’s essential nature with what it has made of it in its temporal existence.”¹⁰ Now, what does that mean in English?

Essentially, TILLICH is explaining the problem with the traditional concept of universal salvation. As MOLTSMANN, BARTH, and others before them have described, we see that God saves us in our entirety. In the eschatological perspective of a final judgment the same issue is raised, although it can be seen in the negative: one is either wholly saved or wholly damned. However, this concept of total salvation or total damnation is not a factor for TILLICH, since he describes this type of holistic view as “making the finite infinite.”¹¹

Rather than saying that God either completely saves or completely condemns a person, TILLICH proposes his concept of essentialization. This concept is an attempt to undercut the stigma of absoluteness that we traditionally apply to salvation. It is showing that one is neither completely saved nor completely condemned.

Perhaps an example will help to clarify this point. Imagine that there is a candle in a long dark hallway. At the point where the candle is sitting, there is a point of pure light. However, as you move away from the candle, the amount of light that the candle is emitting grows less and less, and the darkness that surrounds you is ever increasing. Eventually, you will reach a point where the light of the candle cannot reach anymore and complete darkness envelops you. Now, if we imagine that the light represents goodness and the dark represents evil in our lives, then we have just described TILLICH’S concept of essentialization.

For TILLICH (and the Christian faith), everybody is both righteous and a sinner; no one is completely good nor completely evil.

⁸ SCHWARZ, 344.

⁹ TILLICH Paul, *Systematic Theology*. Chicago, 1963. Vol. 3. 406.

¹⁰ SCHWARZ, 344. / ¹¹ TILLICH, 3:407.



According to TILLICH, at the time of judgment all of the good things, the light, in a particular person are subject to eternal salvation. Conversely, all of the bad things that exist within our lives are subject to eternal damnation. Since one is neither completely condemned nor completely saved, the concept of essentialization is, as TILLICH said, “particularly dialectical.”¹²

From this eschatological perception, universal salvation still exists without undermining human freedom. The eschatological view of a two-fold outcome for eternity is ever present in Jesus’ urgency for all people to “make an immediate decision here and now.” to follow God.¹³ We see this urgency expressed in passages throughout the Gospels, such as Matthew 8,22 where Jesus says, “Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead.” However, TILLICH’S universal essentialization does not undermine one’s free will or the urgency of Jesus’ call in the gospels. One is still free to make choices either for or against God. However, because of God’s unlimited love for us, we are all, to some extent, saved.

In addition to the apparent logical sensibility of universal essentialization, we can also support the concept through Scripture. For instance, Genesis 1 states that as God created all

¹² TILLICH, 3:406.

¹³ BRAATEN Carl E. – JENSON Robert W. (eds.), *Christian Dogmatics*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984. 491.

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things God considered them good, and since God created all of the things on the earth this means that all things that God created are in their most basic sense good. When we extend this concept to eternal damnation, we realize that God would be damning something that God already had deemed good!

“Even the saint remains a sinner and needs forgiveness and even the sinner is a saint insofar as one stands under divine forgiveness.” is an example TILlich himself used to describe his eschatological perspective.¹⁴ Yet, no matter how we describe it, universal essentialization is certainly the best eschatological perspective with regard to universal salvation; it promotes the ideals of universal salvation without undermining the importance of one’s decision to accept or reject the love and grace of God.

Suggested Reading

BOYD Gregory A. – BOYD Edward K., *Letters from a Skeptic*. Colorado Springs, 1994.

FORELL George W., *The Protestant Faith*. Philadelphia, 1960.

MOLTMANN Jürgen, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*.

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SCHWARZ Hans (BRAATEN Carl E. – JENSON Robert W., eds.), *Christian Dogmatics*. Philadelphia, 1984.

SCHWARZ Hans, *Eschatology*. Grand Rapids, 2000.

TILlich Paul, *Systematic Theology*. Chicago, 1963.

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¹⁴ TILlich, 3:408.