

Finney on Universalism*

By Charles G. Finney

7. Universalism is another refuge of lies. This system varies in some of its minor points, but in one great leading feature it remains ever the same--it always denies the justice of endless punishment. However much the advocates of Universalism may differ from each other in the less important points, they all agree that all men will ultimately be saved; that sin does not deserve an endless punishment; and that it would therefore be unjust in God to inflict it. Hence, whatever modification this system may put on, it will practically make sin out to be a mere trifle. For example, they will tell you that men are fully punished for all their sin as they go along--that the evil necessarily incidental to sinning in this life is all the punishment it deserves. The slight compunction of conscience, more or less, that wicked men feel for sin, together with possibly some providential evils, is all that God can justly inflict upon them as a punishment! Think of this! Look at it! What sort of religion is this? To say that all the punishment which sin deserves is a little compunction of conscience, and perhaps some providential trials in this life!--a little trouble which some men have as they go along in consequence of sinning! I want to know if this is not blaspheming God in the worst possible manner! It lifts up its brazen front before heaven and tells God--"Thou great Jehovah--sin against Thee is a small matter--Thy laws are a mean affair--if I trample on them and roll them in the dust, and grind my heel upon them, what is that to Thee? Who art Thou that Thou shouldst take in hand to punish such things in Thy creatures with any positive inflictions of suffering? Dost Thou not know that the sinner's troubles in this life are full as much punishment as his sin deserves?"

Now see in this what Universalism is. See how it spits at God! Hear it proclaim, "Who art Thou that sin against Thee should be a thing of any account?" And what is this but an attempt to dethrone Jehovah? It would fain make sin the merest trifle in the universe. And shall not the hail sweep away this refuge of lies? If it does not, then God will have forgotten to sustain His own honor and His own glorious throne. But you say that you don't deserve any other punishment than the natural compunctions of your conscience, and the attendant troubles of sinning in this life! Indeed! all the time receiving good from the hand of God, cradled from your birth in His very arms--fed from His own table--every want supplied from His exhaustless bounty--and yet, though you scorn to remember God with gratitude, and though you trample His law in the dust, yet you don't deserve any other punishment for your sin than you get from your conscience and from providence, as you go along! O what outrageous abuse of God! And what a shameless perversion of human reason! I know not how to express the indignation I feel at such insults offered to God. O, to think how they are contemning their own most gracious Father! He is fattening them on the bounties of His providence, and yet they deserve, they say, no punishment for sin--no hell after death! What a ridiculous delusion is this! Was there ever a more striking proof afforded of the degree to which sin can stultify the human intelligence!

This doctrine of Universalism of course rejects salvation by Christ. Its advocates may sometimes talk about being saved by Christ; but they mean nothing by it, for they hold that men are punished all they deserve in this world as they go along. Of course if punished all they deserve in this world they are not pardoned at all. But salvation by Christ is pardon; if it mean anything it must include the idea of forgiveness, or pardon, so that the sinner saved by Christ is not punished, but pardoned. But Universalism punishes the sinner all he deserves, and yet pardons him too! It makes him suffer the full and utmost penalty of God's law, and at the same time saves him by Christ., so that he shall be pardoned, and not punished at all! What superb nonsense is this! And again, what curious ideas of law and government are these which make the penalty of sin only the slight evils endured here from an uneasy conscience, and from a disciplinary providence. Here, in this world, is the sinner's hell--here, where sinners are in the main happy in all their sins, and yet are suffering the full penalty of God's law! Ah, what notions of God's law must Universalists have!

This system strangely confounds justice with mercy. It punishes men to chasten and reform them, and this strange process is identical with forgiveness! Inflicting the penalty of law on principles of strict justice is with them the same thing as forgiveness and mercy! For here, in this world, on every sinner, precisely this development takes place--God punishes him all he deserves, in His justice; and yet pardons him most freely through Christ, in His mercy! Surely this is mixing up and confounding together justice and mercy--very much as if men had no just idea of either. Again, Universalists confound the benevolence of God with mere good nature. God is in their view so good-natured that He will make no discrimination as to character. O He loves all men most comprehensively and altogether alike! So pure good-natured is He!

The favorite term with them to designate their opponents is "partialists," assuming that it would be partial in God to save one and not another. This can appear plausible only to the most short-sighted intelligence. For, consider--Is a ruler impartial who treats the righteous and the wicked alike? Is this impartiality? Can justice treat men of opposite character and opposite merits, just alike? There is the case of Abraham's prayer for Sodom, "O Lord," he says, "wilt Thou destroy the righteous with the wicked?" Would that be right? That the righteous should be treated as the wicked are--"be this far from Thee, O Lord!" "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

Now here, with the best good sense and reason, Abraham assumes that God would be partial and unjust if He were to treat the righteous and the wicked all alike, and he pleads as if he felt most sure that the Judge of all the earth would do no such thing. Abraham was no Universalist. Impartiality implies dealing with men according to their deserts. Therefore if God saves all men, be they righteous or wicked, He cannot be impartial, but must be partial. Again, persons who hold this delusion must count Paul a madman. Hear him: "I say the truth in Christ; I lie not; my conscience bears me witness that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart for my brethren;" and why? He tells us, moreover, that in one city, "by the space of three years he ceased not to warn everyone night and day with tears."

But why is all this? If Paul really believed that all men will certainly be saved, what is he warning them against? And why those tears, and that continual heaviness and agony of spirit? Is he warning them to flee from the wrath to come? O no--no; but he trembles lest they should not all become Universalists. He finds that some of them are skeptical upon this doctrine, and hence are afraid of being finally lost, and he cannot endure that their minds should be disturbed by such fears for the few days of the mortal life. O he is in the greatest agony lest he shall not convert all his Jewish brethren and all the Gentiles of Ephesus to the belief of universal salvation!! He is in dreadful agony of soul lest they should be troubled with fears of being lost! Alas, lest they should never become Universalists! And this is the Universalist's version of the character of the great apostle of the Gentiles!

But what does Paul say of himself? Does he tell us that in his view of the matter, Christ saves all? Aye, he says, that for himself, "he becomes all things to all men if by any means he might save some." And this is the extent of his Universalism!

Again, this doctrine represents Christ as either full of deceit or void of sense. Hear its explanation of Christ's words: Christ says, "Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." Now look at the exposition put on this language by the Universalists. "Hell," he says, "means nothing but the grave. There is no other hell but the grave." Of course he makes Jesus Christ say this in the passage just cited--"Fear not the assassin or the executioner, who can only kill you; but I will forewarn you whom you should fear: fear him," who after you are dead can throw your soul and body into--the grave--aye, yes, fear the sexton!! Ah, consider--he has power to bury you after you are dead--I say unto you, fear him! Now if Universalism makes no other hell but the grave, then Universalism makes Christ either a consummately deceitful man, or a man sadly deficient of intellect!

I might pursue the follies and absurdities of this delusion much farther; but time forbids, and I must therefore forbear.

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