

The Texts

Universalism and the challenging texts

SHARDS OF DESTINY

These are very important texts to seriously look into, in trying truthfully to engage biblically with an understanding that universalism is true. However, we want to avoid any kind of 'Houdini hermeneutics' where we are coming to each difficult text to see 'how we can get out of this one' in the light of universalism! Very grateful for the opportunity to engage with them, and reflect and learn with others about their significance and challenge.¹

Having grown up in a Christian community that has almost always started with the textual minutiae (usually read in a flat two dimensional way that ignored the most basic principles of both exegesis and hermeneutics), upon which it has then gone on to construct its 'monumental' theology; it is so obvious how flawed this approach has been and yet the terrible legacy it has left. Reviewing and reflecting again on these texts has been a reminder of how corrupted traditional theology has been in so many areas for so long:

- The deep instinctive reaction to many of these texts, to anyone brought up in traditional Christianity, reveals the extent to which they have been manipulated by both 'Christendom' and 'Calvinistic' thinking, with their subliminal (and sometimes overt) manipulation of guilt, shame, fear, for the purposes (conscious or unconscious) power and control; and has become the primary motivation for evangelism and mission.
- Detailed Bible interpretation must take place against a clear hermeneutic background, relying simply on the exegesis of certain texts is inadequate – this has been the problem with the recent debate about the 'atonement', the significance of hermeneutics has been all but completely ignored.

In approaching these (and many other!) texts several observations need to be suggested:

- In many cases, the historical context or reference, and / or the literary style, of these texts is ignored and so their significance and meaning becomes distorted as a consequence.
- As argued in the original paper on 'universalism', the overarching biblical understanding of ultimate destiny is seen in the vision of 'shalom', with the final and total integration of all things in wholeness and harmony (some of the key texts are presented again in the Appendix at the end of this paper). Such an understanding is completely absent from a traditional reading of these texts, added to which, the negative conclusions drawn from a misreading of these texts has directly (or indirectly) led to a distortion of the 'universalist' texts as well.
- Running parallel to the 'shalom' vision is the essential theme of 'judgement' (Heb: 'mishpat' – putting everything right):
 - This takes the horror of sin and evil seriously, and it engages with the present as

¹ In reflecting on these texts I also consulted with Lloyd Pietersen, a PhD New Testament theologian, who is also a passionate 'universalist'. I have incorporated his reflections, along with my own, into what is written in this paper; in a way that I hope does not misrepresent his views!



well as ultimately, finally and eschatologically. Most of the verses here relate to this issue.

- The Bible is in apoplectic outrage about sin and evil, its nature is death and if it is not dealt with it leads to death. However, we need to remember that however disturbing the language and experience of judgement (which we will all face), it does not mean a negative ultimate personal destiny.
- We want to argue that traditional Christian theology has almost totally failed to engage with a biblical understanding of judgement (the totality of putting everything right) – which is both terrifying and awesomely wonderful, at the same time, and most certainly universalistic!

In exploring the texts we will divide them into three groups:

- Those that refer to the Jewish War and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE;
- Those that are written in apocalyptic language;
- Those that have a more general theological reference.

GROUP 1: Texts relating to the Jews, Jerusalem and 70 CE.

Jesus comes bringing the opportunity of being part of (entering into) the kingdom of God (heaven), to his own people the Jews. Some respond while the majority refuses. He sees the path they have chosen will lead them inevitably into the tragedy that climaxes with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 CE. Had they responded to him that tragedy would have been avoided, he is heartbroken:

*"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem,
killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you!
How often would I have gathered your children together
as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!
Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate".
(Matt 23: 36-37)*

N T Wright in his book, *Jesus and the Victory of God (JVG)* has argued that many of the texts that have traditionally been used to argue for eternal condemnation, separation, destruction etc, actually refer to the Jewish nation and what it will experience in the decades following Jesus' death and resurrection; they were fulfilled by 70 CE. It is interesting to note that NT Wright is seen as an evangelical author, however he is not a 'universalist'.

Matthew 7 v13: 14

"Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few".

- These words refer to judgment on Jerusalem if Israel persisted in pursuing the present path and their refusal to respond to the message of the kingdom of God (see *JVG 182-6*).



Matthew 7: 19

“Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

- These words are to be taken in a thoroughly historical sense as referring to fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE (see JVG, 328). This is referring to an immanent historical trauma not their eternal destiny.

Matthew 7: 21-23

"Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. **On that day** many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.'"

The fate of Jews who have rejected the kingdom, the reference to "on that day" = the 'day of judgment' on Jerusalem in 70 CE.

Matthew 8: 11-12

"I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth."

- This shows a contrast between those, including Gentiles, who responded to the offer of the kingdom and the experience of Jews in the Jewish War (see JVG 328).

Matthew 10: 15

“Truly, I say to you, it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomor'rah than for that town.”

- Again the reference is to the impending Jewish War 66-70 CE (see JVG, 252-3).

Matthew 10 v 22 -23

*“Brother will deliver up brother to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. **But he who endures to the end will be saved.** When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel, before the Son of man comes.”*

- A graphic picture of the situation that will be faced during the Jewish War.

Matthew 13:3-9

"A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they had not much



soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched; and since they had no root they withered away. Other seeds fell upon thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.”

- An illustration of how people respond to the message of the kingdom, but not saying anything about their ultimate destiny;
- It is telling the story of Israel, the consequent judgment of her refusal to respond to the message of the kingdom, but the promise of renewal the other side of judgment (see *JVG* 230-9).

Matthew 13:40-42 (Interpretation of the parable of the weeds)

“Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. The Son of man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.”

- When God acts, as he will in the near historical future, judgment will come upon Israel (see *JVG* 328-9). It is also using apocalyptic imagery.

Matthew 21: 40-43 – (conclusion of the parable of the wicked tenants)

“ ... When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” They said to him, **“He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.”** Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes’? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it.”

- *The imagery and ideas all resonates with Isaiah 5:1-7 where again the setting is historical judgment upon Israel, which the listeners would have understood.*

Matthew 22: 11-13 – (conclusion of the parable of the wedding banquet)

“... But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment; and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.’”

- Here Israel (religious leaders) think they are entitled to the kingdom and their unworthiness is exposed, so again the events of 70 CE will show Israel excluded.

Matthew 24: 12-13

“ ... And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because wickedness is multiplied, most men’s love will grow cold. But he who endures to the end will be saved...”

- Cf. 24:34 which speaks of “this generation” = the generation contemporary with Jesus. This so called “eschatological discourse” is all to do with judgment on Israel within one generation of Jesus, which was fulfilled in 70 CE.



The next four passages all need to be interpreted in the light of Israel rejecting the kingdom Jesus' brings and the impending disaster at the hands of Rome:

Matthew 24: 48-51 – (conclusion of the parable of the unfaithful servant)

*... But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed,' and begins to beat his fellow servants, and eats and drinks with the drunken, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and **will punish him** *, and put him with the hypocrites; there men will weep and gnash their teeth."*
[cf Lk 12:42-46]

* The Gk may read 'cut him off' or 'cut him in pieces, it certainly implies punishment of some sort!

Matthew 25: 10-12 - (conclusion of the parable of the bridesmaids)

" ... And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast; and the door was shut. Afterward the other maidens came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.' Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

Matthew 25: 29-30 – (conclusion of the parable of the talents)

*" ... For to every one who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness; **there men will weep and gnash their teeth.**"*

Luke 13: 1-5

*There were some present at that very time who told him of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered thus? I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen upon whom the tower in Silo'am fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, No; but **unless you repent you will all likewise perish.**"*

Luke 19: 26-27

"I tell you, that to every one who has will more be given; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. But as for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them before me."

- The 'ruler' in this story is not Jesus (or God), or anything to do with him, quite the opposite. It is a veiled reference to Archelaus, who after the death of his father Herod went to Rome to be confirmed as ruler in his father's place. A Jewish delegation pleaded for a lesser role as he was a cruel man. The parable reveals and challenges political and social exploitation (see Herzog 'Parables as Subversive Speech' p155-167).

John 8: 21-24

Again he said to them, "I go away, and you will seek me and die in your sin; where I am going, you cannot come." Then said the Jews, "Will he kill himself, since he says, 'Where I am going, you cannot come'?" He said to them, "You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins, **for you will die in your sins** unless you believe that I am he."

- As in the synoptic gospels the understanding is again historical judgment not eternal damnation; they will be caught up in the horror, but if they had responded to Jesus' that would not happen for them.

Philippians 3: 18-19

*For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, live as enemies of the cross of Christ. **Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.***

- Here Paul is speaking about his Jewish opponents, therefore consequences of their behaviour and the destruction he speaks about is similar to the ideas seen in the synoptic gospels.

When reading these passages we need to bear in mind prophecies, like Amos and Hosea for instance, where the most terrible predictions of destruction are both made and ultimately experienced, yet there are the most astonishing promises of hope and restoration beyond destruction and judgement. (cf Amos 5:18-27 with 9:11-15; Hosea 5:8-15 with 14:4-9 also 2:14-3:5).

GROUP 2: Texts that are apocalyptic in style.

Matthew 25: 32, 41, 46 – (the parable of sheep and goats)

"Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats ... Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ... And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

- The word 'eternal' (Gk: 'aionios') refers to God, it expresses God's eternal character and eternal purpose rather than referring to 'an unending temporal experience'
- The word 'punishment' (Gk: 'kolasis') originally referred to pruning trees to make them grow better and became the standard Greek word for 'remedial punishment' and is used in no other way (see W Barclay 'A Spiritual Autobiography' pub Eerdmans Publishing Company 1977 page 66).

Luke 16: 24-26 – (part of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus)

And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy upon me, and send Laz'arus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in anguish in this flame.'



Abraham said, 'Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Laz'arus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.'

- This is not a description of the afterlife, but a parable based on a well-known folk tale that in Jesus' format of it is making a point about the rich at the present moment and how God feels about their exploitation (see *JVG*, 255-6).
- The setting of the 'afterlife' is actually 'pre-resurrection' and so 'pre-judgement' and nothing about ultimate destiny.
- The parable has a second purpose, which is to make the point that even if someone comes back from the dead people will not necessarily take any notice of them!

Revelation 20: 13-15

And the sea gave up the dead in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead in them, and all were judged by what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. **This is the second death, the lake of fire; and if any one's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.**

- This is high-energy apocalyptic imagery about the total and final destruction of evil (emphasizing that certainty). But notice:
 - 4:6 - sea of glass, like crystal, before the throne;
 - 14:10-11 - that the lake of fire burns in the presence of God;
 - 15: - the sea of glass is now mixed with fire;
 - 20:15 - this fire is purificatory not eternal judgment. Once again it depends what one means by the Day of Judgment. And the nature of judgement.

The whole issue of apocalyptic imagery needs much discussion. It is very exciting. Revelation has a primary message of non-violence, the image of 144,000, multitudes without number etc all speak of universalism.

GROUP 3: Texts of general theological reference.

Matthew 12: 31-32

"Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever says a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come."

- Failing to recognise the work of the Spirit is to remain in Exile. The forgiveness of sins brings an end of Exile; however, Exile continues for those who continue to refuse to recognise the Spirit (see *JVG*, 272-3).

Matthew 18: 12-13

"... And if he finds it (lost sheep), truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish".



- This is total universalism as everyone is saved! It does not imply that any are lost, God is going out of his way to see that that is not the case.

Mark 16: 16

“He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.”

- The simple answer is to see Mark’s gospel ending at v 8!
- However, like all sin, unbelief will be confronted (and dealt with - judgement), but this does not mean their final and eternal destiny cannot be with God.

John 3: 16-21

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God.

- The fact that you have to be ‘born again’ (v3) to enter the kingdom does not imply here that the opposite is eternal damnation. Yes, Jesus comes that those who believe might not perish, but v17 goes on to say ‘that the world through him might be saved’. Verse 19 goes on to show that the judgement is the light revealing the truth so that evil might be dealt with – this is exactly the biblical understanding of judgement – revelation, confrontation and cleansing! (see 2 Peter 3:10). The ‘condemnation’ (v18) here is not eternal damnation.

John 5 v 27

“Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment.”

- Remember that the biblical understanding of judgement is ‘to put everything right’, not eternal damnation! Yes, evil is condemned, and judgement is the process of putting things right, beyond which there is hope.

Romans 2:6-10

*For he will render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be **wrath and fury**. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for every one who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality.*



- 'Wrath and fury' are the proper and natural responses of God and his people to sin and evil – the wrath of God is essential and leads to the experience of judgement, but through judgement it is dealt with and beyond is reconciliation.

1 Corinthians 1: 18

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

- The fact that people are described as 'perishing' (or in other contexts 'lost') does not mean they are damned, something has to happen and it has happened in Jesus!

Ephesians 5: 5

Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure man, or one who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

- This is a simple truth, so something will have to happen to those who are like this for them to be part of the kingdom; it is called judgement, which involves putting everything right. This text possibly raises the interesting topic of 'inheritance and reward', which is another issue.

2 Thessalonians 1: 9

"... when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction (and exclusion) from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at in all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

- Tom Wright takes this as similar language to Mark 13 (see *JVG*, 359) where the true God vindicates his people and judges their enemies; God is the God who judges and saves.
- It should read 'eternal destruction from the presence of the Lord'; the word 'separated' should not be included for grammatical reasons;
- The word 'destruction' does not suggest annihilation, cf 1Cor 5:5 where the 'destruction of the flesh' is for the redemption of the person. Note that in that in that 1 Corinthians passage: -
 - The sin is heinous, 'of the kind not even found among the pagans' (v1);
 - The punishment sounds like retribution, 'let him ... be removed from among you' (v2) and, 'delivered to Satan for the destruction of the flesh' (v4), but in fact it is all about restitution.

This passage in 2 Thessalonians 1:9 is about the process towards the fullness of all things in Christ.

2 Thessalonians 2: 9-12

The coming of the lawless one by the activity of Satan will be with all power and with pretended signs and wonders, and with all wicked **deception for those who are to perish**, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends upon them a strong delusion, to make them believe what is false, so that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

- As above, as in Mark 13, it is presented as a historical trauma where the wicked perish (as in 70 CE), but it is all pre-judgement, where everything will be put right. This is a statement of historical encounter not eternal destiny. But it makes the important and constant statement that evil and wickedness neither wins nor goes un-dealt with. But scripture goes on to show (see below) that beyond all this there is the reconciliation of all things!

APPENDIX

Vision of shalom

The Bible presents us with a vision of future hope expressed in an understanding of the cosmic manifestation of shalom; the wholeness, peace and integration in complete harmony of all things. We are *not* going to heaven, but will be part of the resurrection community in the new heaven and earth. Here are just a few sample scriptures: -

- 'Of his all embracing kingdom and of his peace there shall be no end' [Isa 9:7];
- 'They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea' [Isa 11:9];
- 'For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating...' [Isa 65:17-18 cf 66:22];
- '... the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; and his dominion shall be from sea to sea ...' [Zec 9:10];
- 'Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven' [Mt 5:9];
- '... at the *renewal* of all things' [Mt 19:28];
- 'Jesus, who must remain in heaven until the time of *universal restoration* that God announced long ago through his holy prophets' [Acts 3:21];
- 'The creation itself will be set free from its bondage and decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God' [Rm 8:21];
- The peace of God, which surpasses understanding [Phil 4:7];
- 'But in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home' [2Pt 3:13];
- '... for the Lamb at the centre of the throne shall be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes' [Rev 7:16-17].

God's character is love

The primary biblical character of God is love: -



- ‘... for God is love ... God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them’ [1Jn 4:8,16].

This truth is built on a solid foundation from the Hebrew scriptures; for example: -

- ‘The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; ... For the Lord will not reject forever. Although he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone’ [Lam 3:22,31-33];
- ‘As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live’ [Ezk33;11];
- ‘But God will not take away a life; he will devise plans so as not to keep an outcast banished forever from his presence’ [2Sam 14:14].

Inclusive love and atonement

The Augustinian (Calvinistic) view is that Jesus only died for the elect, known as ‘particular redemption’ or ‘limited atonement’. However, the text of the New Testament makes it quite clear that God’s love and Jesus’ atonement is in fact inclusive and universal in its effect: -

- ‘God so loved *the world* ... God sent his son that *the world* might be saved through him’ [Jn 3:16-17];
- ‘And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, *will draw all things* to myself’ [Jn 12:32];
- ‘...God was in Christ reconciling *the world* to himself’ [2Cor 5:19];
- ‘... through him (Jesus) to reconcile to himself *all things* ... making peace (shalom) by the blood of his cross’ [Col 1:20];
- ‘God desires *all people* to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth’ [1Tm 2:4];
- ‘We have a hope set on the living God, who is *the saviour of all people*, especially those who believe’ [1Tm 4:10];
- ‘He is the expiation of our sins, and not ours only *but also for the sins of the whole world*’ [1Jn 2:2];
- ‘The Lord is not willing that any should perish but that *all* should come to repentance’ [2Pt 3:9].

There is also the image and language of the ‘two Adams’ in Paul’s writings: -

- ‘... for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ ... The first man, Adam, became a living being, the last Adam became a life-giving spirit’ [1Cor 15:22,45; but see also v20-28; 42-49];
- ‘Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all’ [Rm 5:18; but see also v12-21].

The impact of Jesus’ death and resurrection overturns completely the impact of Adam’s rebellion and sin; just as *all* have been affected by sin, in the same way *all* will be saved.

It is interesting that the Calvinist (Augustinian) theologian Daniel Strange says, "It is indeed correct that *if* Christ died for everyone *then* everyone will be saved" (his italics).² In the light of the scriptures quoted above I think little more needs to be said!

Reconciliation of all things

Building on the cosmic wholeness of the shalom vision and the inclusiveness of God's love and atonement in Jesus, scripture is quite clear that the 'finished work of Christ' is the total reconciliation of 'all things'. This phrase 'all things' means the totality of everything without exception.

- '... so that at the name of Jesus *every knee* should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and *every tongue* should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father' [Phil 2:10].

The verb translated 'confess' is used in the LXX to imply not just confession but praise and thanksgiving. This passage clearly has links with Isa 45:22-23:

'Turn to me and be saved all the ends of the earth! For I am God and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth righteousness a word that shall not return: "To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear."

This cannot be forced, but is rather the free spontaneous confession from a heart of praise, reinforced by these scriptures: -

- '... if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart God raised him from the dead, you will be saved' [Rm 10:9];
- '... no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit' [1Cor 12:3].

The theme of the complete cosmic reconciliation of all things continues: -

- 'For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all' [Rm 11:32];
- '(God) has made known to us the mystery of his will ... set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth' [Eph 1:9-10];
- '... for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible ... all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things and in him all things hold together ... and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven by making peace (shalom) through the blood of his cross' [Col 1:16-20];
- 'When all things are subjected to him, then the son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all' [1Cor 15:28 but see also v20-27].

² Daniel Strange: 'A Calvinist Response to Talbott's Universalism', in 'Universal Salvation? – The Current Debate' Ed R Parry & C Partridge pub Patternoster 2003 page 160. However, Strange makes it very clear that he is in fact completely convinced by the doctrine of 'particular redemption' or 'limited atonement'!



It is quite clear that the language of 'bending', 'bowing', 'confessing', 'swearing', and 'subjecting' is not coerced, but rather the free joyful, worshipful expression of the heart like that of Jesus the Son towards God the Father.

Reading and Resources

Key books:

R Bauckham & T Hart '**Hope Against Hope**' Darton, Longman & Todd 1999
JB Green (Ed et al) '**Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels**' IVP 1992: article: 'Kingdom of God' / Heaven by CC Caragounis p 417-430
G MacDonald '**The Evangelical Universalist**' SPCK 2008
NT Wright '**New Heavens, New Earth: The Biblical Picture of the Christian Hope**' Grove Books 1999
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