

Is Universalism Compatible With The Bible? – Chris Surber

(The following is presented here in essay form. It was originally prepared and preached as the first sermon in a series on the Lord's Prayer. It was entitled "Living the Lord's Prayer, Part-1, Mathew 6:6-13, Our Father in Heaven.)

There's a wonderful story about a Chicago bank that once asked for a letter of recommendation on a young Bostonian being considered for employment. The Boston investment house could not say enough about the young man. His father they wrote, was a Cabot; his mother was a Lowell. Further back was a happy blend of Saltonstalls, Peabodys, and others of Boston's finest families. His recommendation was given without hesitation. Several days later, the Chicago bank sent a note saying the information supplied was altogether inadequate. It read: "We are not contemplating using the young man for breeding purposes. Just for work."

We too are part of a family but it is one of even more great namesake than the finest families in all of the finest cities in the world. We are the children of God and He is our Heavenly Father. As we examine the first portion of the Lord's Prayer, our focus will be to learn to understand God as Heavenly Father. We will focus on two things : the intimacy of God our Father and the holiness of the incomprehensible God of the universe .

Our Father who art in Heaven: I have invested much personal energy in recent years exploring the biblical motif of God as Heavenly Father. Indeed, the realization of the depth of the Father's love for me and for you individually, has so arrested this sinner's heart that it has become the foundation for my teaching and preaching and for living the Christian life. Everything in the Christian life flows from the reality that God has adopted you and I through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The foundation of our faith is the fact that we are children of God . Faith begins with God loving us. "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children." (Romans 8:15-16 NIV) Who are God's children? Who are the "we" that the Apostle Paul is referring to?

In answering that question I wish to address a great injustice, a great perversion of biblical doctrine, a great tragedy which I believe has arisen primarily from the grace mishandling of the word of truth by many would be teachers in our day. We, usually and largely unknowingly, are eating the fruit of the growing decay of truth in our society, purity in biblical preaching, and common sense in Christian thought, family life and social structure. Often it seems that in every direction I look I see the glaring evidence that society has abandoned even the notion that absolute truth exists and that the Christian Church, rather than lovingly confronting the dismantling of truth, has embraced it, right along with the rest of the brokenness that the post modern mind offers.

Consider the insanity that is accepted, even seemingly promoted, in the mainstream culture. Consider how that affects us as our minds are bombarded with myths, lies, and half-truths. Without the shield of the truth of the word of God, our minds in this post-modern culture are like the face of the moon, which bears the evidence of the countless foreign bodies which have struck its surface for lack of an atmosphere to shield it. What I wish to address specifically within the context of this discussion is the rising tide of universalism. What is universalism? It is basically the belief that all truth claims are equal. Truth is relative. What is true for you may not be true for you and conversely that which you find true can be rejected by me completely without necessarily detracting from the truth value of my or your position.

It is the highest state of lunacy . Wearied by the constant pursuit of truth, our postmodern culture has simple redefined truth to the category of personal preference. In so doing, they have destroyed truth in the modern mind. With regard to faith, it has asserted that the core essence of all religion is faith, therefore the differences between a particular set of religions is inconsequential. Since all affirm faith in some way, the argument goes, then faith is the highest form of religious truth and the details are disregarded. In 1899 a German theologian named Adolf Von Harnack wrote a book which was based on a series of theological lectures entitled "What is Christianity." This was the age which gave rise to so called "higher critical" and liberal humanistic Christian theology. In reality, this was the age when the modern church was infected by the virus of disbelief and it became tolerable for subtly professing agnostics to be granted the right to preach in Christian churches.

This was the age which gave rise to the modern tendency on the part of many in our Congregational Churches and beyond to pay homage to the teachings of Christ while denying his divine origins. I take this issue rather personally because it affects all of us and limits our ability to fully realize life in Christ. This is the era, the 19th and early 20th century which spawned the language of the retired Christian minister who said to me, "I am not saying that the virgin birth could not have happened, just that it is not an important part of the story." In this book, Von Harnack argued that the essence or *wesen* (German for essence) of Christianity is twofold (here is the connection with Romans 8:15-16): the universal fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man.

Upon hearing these two conclusions of Von Harnack you no doubt, as I first did, say well that sounds nice. God is everybody's father and I am everybody's sister or brother. This is the lure of liberal theology. It appeals to our sentimentality at the outset but after eating its fruits we are left empty, sickened. You see, moving from this foundation, Von Harnack and those who have followed him in our day, have concluded that since God is universally father and we (the world) are by implication universally brother and sister, then it stands to reason that God is like a father who sits enthroned high upon a mountain and we all, regardless of religious belief are like his children making many paths up this mountain, ascending to God. The idea goes that some may get there more directly while some meander, but we all will eventually get there in the end.

Allow me to make a very plain statement: Universalism, the belief that all roads lead to the father, is not compatible with biblical Christianity and those who teach it as such are liars or are themselves deceived. "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life and only a few find it. "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?" (Matthew 7:13-16 NIV) "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6 NIV)

The universal fatherhood of God is not biblical. God did create all things and yes in a sense He is the father of all that has been propagated. However, not all people have the same access to God as Father. When we pray to God "Our Father who

art in Heaven” we are declaring not that He is generally a father, but that He is Our Father ! We are affirming that we have been adopted by the most high. “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.” (Romans 1:18-24 NIV)

Who are God's children? Who are the “we” that Paul referred to earlier?

In Romans chapter 1 we read of those who have perceived God and yet have rejected Him for their preference of sexual immorality, prideful lusts; selfish wickedness which does what? It suppresses the truth. We are God's children not simply because He created us. Though, for simply doing that we would have responsibility to respond to Him if beckoned. We are God's children because He sought us out and loved us completely.

We are not universally brothers and sisters because we have all been created by God; we are universally neighbors, with responsibility toward one another. Followers of Christ have a great responsibility to the world around them to be sure! We should lead the way with regard to all of those things which Jesus teaches us to love by His great and divine example and through the teaching of the Bible. Our lives should so consumed by the love of God that we love the world around us radically.

Because we are not universally brothers and sisters in Christ we have a far GREATER responsibility than that which those who espouse Universalism would have us believe. We not only are called to love the world around us but to win it (them) to Christ! We are able to cry out, as the Scripture declares, Abba Father, only and completely because we have been reconciled to God through the

finished work of Jesus Christ on the Cross! If we are to experience the Christian life in the manner intended by God, we must move far beyond barren generalities and into the personal knowledge of the God to whom we pray; who calls us child; who knows us personally.

Conclusion

I find it fascinating that in the Old Testament there is no word which corresponds precisely to the English word “family.” The closest equivalent is the word *bet ab* which literally means father's house. In the patriarchal society of Old Testament Israel the father had not only a great deal of authority but also responsibility. It was his responsibility to teach, protect, provide, train, and pronounce the blessing upon his children. When we call upon God as Father, we affirm the intimacy of the relationship which we have with the one who protects and nurtures His children.

We go to Him reverently, but not as servants to a master, employees to a CEO, or serfs to a tyrannical king. We go as sons and daughters to “ Our Father.” For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” (Romans 8:15 NIV) Amen.

Note (1): There was in his day looming and there is in our day present, a takeover of pulpits of Christian teaching and a departure from the Bible in Christian thought. There are a great many fathers in this world that I know of but do not know. There are a great many great men who someone knows as father because his children are his but whom I do not know as father because I am not his son. Is God vaguely your father only in the sense that he created all that exists in the universe? Or is He YOUR FATHER because He has called you by name and you have responded in faith?! IS HE YOUR FATHER because your heart cries out “Abba! Daddy!” or is He distant, somewhere, out there.

Don't be fooled. Not everyone who appreciates the Father is the Father's child. Don't be misled. Not everyone who claims to teach in His name intends for His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Note (2): If believers would learn to see themselves as God sees them, if we would learn that we are His children, then our lives would be transformed. If we

would then learn to engage the world in the manner in which Christ prescribes, we would transform the world.

Note (3): Do we preach Christ alone in order to puff ourselves up with pride as the only true practitioners of religion? Forbid that the uniqueness of Christ and His sacrifice should do anything but drive us to serving mankind all the more because of our inherent belief that His beauty must be shared! In 1858 Universalist preacher S.J. Morris delivered a message entitled "Fifteen Reasons for Preaching Universalism" In it he wrote this: "But to proclaim a universal Saviour, and an impartial God to make Christ the Saviour of sinners, was intolerable to the notions of those who wished and expected to be exalted above their neighbors, and whose vanity was wounded by the idea of all being saved and made heirs of heaven."

We preach Christ alone as savior because He either is who He said that He is or He is not. We preach Christ alone because He is the sweet perfume of salvation. Universalism is the outright abandonment of the search for truth which in turn leads to the dismantling of truth itself.