

The Silent Majority or Sheep in Wolves Clothing

Conservative, evangelical Christians are among the most loving and forgiving people on the planet, yet it seems that, at least publicly, they view God as unwilling to ever forgive the majority of people on this planet and instead punishes them in Hell for all eternity. The traditional view of Hell over the past few hundred years, however, has changed for the better, at least in the view of the majority of those sitting in the pews.

Liberal, or progressive, Christians have a very different view of Hell. Most of them view Hell as self-imposed and temporary. They tend to view Hell not as a literal place of torture or punishment, but as a temporary state of mind in this lifetime or the next, from which we will all eventually escape by the grace of God.

Surprisingly, many conservative evangelicals view Hell in the same way. When asked if they believe in Hell, most of them will say yes. But if you define Hell as a literal place of eternal fiery torment, only a minority will still say yes.

The traditional view of Hell, as described in Dante's *Inferno*, has for the most part gone by the wayside. It has been replaced with some by Annihilationism, including all Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses. Others regard the flames of Hell as metaphorical and symbolic of mental suffering and regret. Christian Universalists regard the flames as symbolical of cleansing and purification, after which all are eventually redeemed by Christ.

In my view, Christian Universalism most closely aligns with the Biblical view of God as loving, just, and forgiving. Very strong support for this view can be found throughout the Scriptures, even when interpreted literally rather than metaphorically.

I believe that many, perhaps most, of the members of conservative evangelical churches support a somewhat benign view of Hell, and would embrace Christian Universalism if given the chance. Unfortunately, they are never exposed to it, and the Scriptural support for it has never been shown to them. Why do I believe this? First of all, as a conservative evangelical most of my life, I held to this more benign view of Hell and would have eagerly embraced Christian Universalism if presented with convincing proof of it from the Scriptures. Unfortunately, this never happened until I was over 60 years of age.

Here are some other reasons I believe that the conservative evangelical church will eventually publicly embrace a more benign view of Hell, even Christian Universalism.

First, many of the fastest growing evangelical churches almost never mention the word Hell in their sermons or worship. Many of them don't mention the word Hell in their public statements of faith. It seems that there is much truth to the statement that you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.

Secondly, most people belong to and attend a particular church for social, rather than doctrinal reasons. They love church because they have many good friends and family there and because they are uplifted by the positive messages given in the sermons and Bible lessons. If you ask most professing Christians about doctrinal matters, they will agree with you that the "finer points" of doctrine are not nearly as important as the practical aspects of the Gospel and those points of doctrine on which most Christians agree. A negative view of Hell as a place of eternal torture and torment is not one of those consensus doctrines.

Most Christian Evangelicals are deeply disturbed by the negative aspects of the traditional doctrine of Hell. When confronted with it they will almost always attempt to minimize the severity of Hell and will very awkwardly try to rationalize God's role in sending people there. It is very uncomfortable for them to talk about Hell, because, I believe, they do see the contradiction between the traditional view of Hell and God's loving, just, and forgiving nature.

I firmly believe that if the leadership of a typical conservative, evangelical church were to miraculously embrace Christian Universalism, they would have little trouble in converting a large percentage of their membership to this position. Unfortunately, this would come at great cost, because in addition to converting, let's say half, of the congregation to Christian Universalism, they would lose the other half who would be leaving the church. In the event that fewer than half of the congregation were converted to Christian Universalism, then, by a vote of the church, the ministerial staff would most certainly lose their jobs.

Obviously, the situation would be especially dire if a single pastor, without the support of those around him, were to publicly endorse Christian Universalism, or even suggest that it would be an acceptable position for a minority of the members to hold. In this case, the pastor would immediately lose his job.

So, in view of this, what would be the best way to proceed, if the goal were to "reform" Christian Evangelicalism and create an atmosphere where Christian Universalism would, at the very least, be acknowledged as an acceptable minority view in the Church?

The best way, in my view, would be to just let the trends follow their current trajectory. Currently, in most of the highly successful, fast-growing, churches there are many closet Universalists, including many pastors. In addition, there is a huge percentage of each congregation who would endorse Christian Universalism as an acceptable minority view.

Jesus warned us, in Matthew 7:15, to "*Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves.*" Well, eventually those wolves did take control of the Church, beginning mostly around the 5th Century AD, when Christian Universalism was officially declared to be heretical. Prior to that, during the first five centuries of the Church's existence, Universalism was the prevailing view of the Church Fathers and the rank and file church members. It was only after Christianity became the state religion of Rome that everything began to "go south," so to speak, or should I say "go West." Part of the reason was that the Bible was translated into Latin and the church lost touch with the original meaning and intent of the original Greek texts which clearly support the doctrines related to Christian Universalism.

It is now time to replace the 5th Century "*wolves in sheep's clothing*" with 21st Century "*sheep in wolves clothing.*" I believe, these sheep will grow in number, and eventually they will comprise a majority. The changes need to be slow and gradual. A sudden, confrontational, approach would undoubtedly be counterproductive, even disastrous. What the sheep need to realize is that none of the wolves remain, only well-meaning, but ill-informed, people who need to be gently encouraged to take a fresh look at the Scriptures in order to find support for a more inclusive theology, support that has always been there, just overlooked and misunderstood.

By Richard Goyette