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Origen - The Great Controversy Is Ended

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« [Origen "On The Restoration of All Things"](#) | [Main](#) | [Augustine and the Nature of Divine Love](#) »

November 05, 2010

Origen - The Great Controversy Is Ended

There is a tension that arose clear back in the second century between the justice of God and the eschatological restitution of all things, which is the final state of atonement. The apologists Tatian, Irenaeus and Theophilus of Antioch all insisted on the dependence of the human on God (i.e., there is no natural immortality of the soul) and also on the God-given freedom to choose between obedience and death. This strong free agency demanded a robust judgment of those who choose disobedience, tending toward unending punishing of the wicked. Tatian called this a deathless death (immortal mortality). This conception of eternal punishing mitigated against the sovereignty of God in restoring all things (the final state of Irenaeus' recapitulation and Theophilus of Antioch's *apokatastasis*). You can't have all things set right when some remain in punishment for rebellion.

From Universalism To Dualism

Tertullian and Origen, in the next generation, posited an effective immortality of the soul. This released some of the tension from the robust punishment (Tertullian's concept of hell) but created an even stronger tension between this judgment and God's final restoration of harmony. Origen solved the problem through universal salvation: if the soul cannot die, and Eph. 1:23 insists that Christ must be the all in all (= *apokatastasis*, the setting of all things back to their original harmony), then all must be saved, including the Devil and his angels. As time went on, this universalism was rejected as untenable with biblical representations of few rather than all choosing the narrow path to salvation and the finality of the punishment of the wicked, especially the Devil.

By Augustine's generation (late fourth, early fifth century), especially in his arguments with Pelagius, the continued assertions of the sovereignty of God and the depravity of humans led to the understanding of a limited atonement through a select predestination. This hardened into a double predestination and the near eradication of the human will to choose. Gregory I interpreted Augustine as joining ecclesiology and soteriology by having the Church be the surety of salvation for the weak, embattled, depraved humans almost totally lacking in will. Mass and penance, purgatory and indulgences became normal means of access to grace, with hell as the eternal alternative. In this system, God's final harmony looked more like dualism than restoration.

Luther and the reformation rediscovered the Augustine of strong grace and justification, attempting to overturn the system of overdependence on the Church as the conduit of grace, but Luther and Calvin both

continued to clutch a low view of human will and of God's final restoration. These tended to lock in double predestination and the immortality of souls. God's justice overshadowed his mercy and his sovereignty seemed absolute over human will yet subject to human natural longevity, very much damaging to the harmony of the restoration: judgment trumps atonement, hell defies total restoration.

I'd like to focus a little closer on Origen's solution to the problem. Not that I agree with his universal salvation, but because I agree with him that judgment should not trump atonement. Also, it is a great foil against which to see why annihilation of the wicked makes sense of both judgment and atonement.

The Reconciliation Of All Things

The great controversy is ended.
Sin and sinners are no more.
The entire universe is clean.
One pulse of harmony and gladness
beats through the vast creation.
From Him who created all,
flow life and light and gladness,
throughout the realms of illimitable space.
From the minutest atom to the greatest world,
all things, animate and inanimate,
in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy,
declare that
GOD IS LOVE.

[*\(The Great Controversy, p.678\)*](#)

When Ellen White penned these words she suggests that there would be no wicked beings continuously burning in a never-ending and never-consuming hell. She believed that the "one pulse of harmony" would be achieved through the annihilation of all beings who insisted on holding to rebellion against God. She clearly thought and taught that there could be no eternal peace and harmony while evil and sin continued within any being, even if, or maybe especially if, they remained in the punishment phase of justice. Pain and agony are not compatible with peace and harmony. This is a familiar understanding within Seventh-day Adventist thought. What is not much known in Adventist circles is that in the third century of the Christian era there lived a prominent Christian theologian who agreed that pain and agony could not coexist in the universe with true peace and harmony. Origen held such a belief.

For Origen, [Ephesians 1:18-23](#) described most clearly the state of God's universe at the conclusion of the sin problem. This is what Adventists sometimes call the final atonement. Origen called it *apokatastasis* or the reconciliation of all things (See Peter's reference to the second coming of Christ as the time for God to restore everything recorded in [Acts 3:21](#)). Ephesians 1:23 refers to the "fullness" of Christ "who fills all in all." This notion of Christ filling all in all is what Origen focuses on as the final description of circumstances in the age to come. In the [quotation posted from *De principiis*](#) or On First Principles 3.6.6 (which can also be found in the Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 4, p. 346, 7, or at [ccel.org](#)), Origen uses terminology to further describe this final state of the universe. He calls it a "state of unity, when God shall be all in all," in which "all rational souls" "who had been formerly sinful" have been "reconciled to God from a state of enmity" and into a "state of happiness."

Universalism And The Reconciliation

There is much debate over whether Origen actually taught universal salvation [See Mark S. M. Scott, "Guarding the Mysteries of Salvation: The Pastoral Pedagogy of Origen's Universalism, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 18.3 (Fall 2010), 347-68.]. This is largely because Origen has seemingly contradictory

statements on the subject, especially on the salvation of the devil. [See, for example, Origen's Commentary on Romans, 8.9.4 where he denies an end-time conversion of the one fallen from heaven.] Yet in *On First Principles* (*De principiis*) 3.6.5, the chapter which precedes the quote I posted, Origen speaks of the last enemy, death, being destroyed and then generalizes that there will be no enemies at all. However, the destruction of the enemies whose substance was created by God would be a destruction of the hostile will, not an annihilation of the being. He thus opens the way to an eradication of evil that restores the devil from an evil being back to what God created: "Its destruction, therefore, will not be its non-existence, but its ceasing to be an enemy.... For nothing is impossible to the Omnipotent, nor is anything incapable of restoration to its Creator: for He made all things that they might exist, and those things which were made for existence cannot cease to be." Indeed, in his *Commentary on John*, 32.33, Origen argues that "he of whom it is said 'he exalted himself before the Lord almighty' ([Job 15:25](#)) will belong to those things subjected to Him." I think it is clear that Origen taught, at least to his most "spiritual students" that salvation was to be universal, even including the Devil and his angels.

Why? Because he did not think that things made for existence can cease to be, and because he did not think that the restoration of all things could be complete while there was still judgment going on. Therefore, Origen did not believe in a hell that would never cease.

Annihilationism And The Restoration

Ellen White, also did not think that all could be "one pulse of harmony" while any evil or rebellious being existed, even in punishment. Therefore, she did not believe in a hell that would never cease. However, she also did not believe in universal salvation, but in the universal offer of salvation. She believed in annihilation of all who refused the free gift of salvation. She believed that in the end, God's universe would ring with peace and harmony for all time.

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