The Baptist Universalist: Elhanan Winchester (1751–97)

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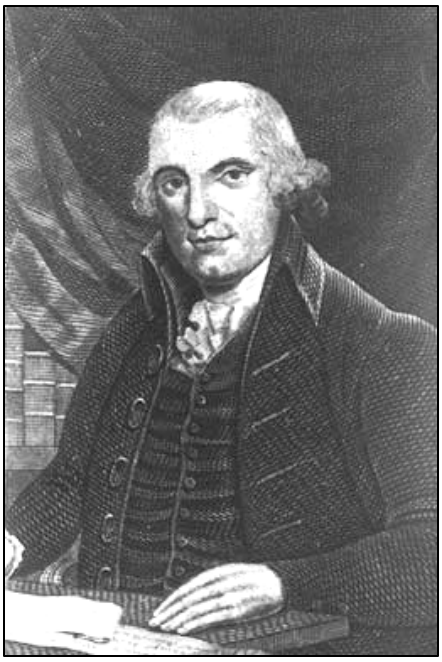
Introduction

Baptists are not known for their universalism. With a few notable exceptions it is fair to say that Baptists have maintained the traditional mainstream rejection of universalism. And it has always been thus; or, perhaps more accurately, it has *mostly* been thus. When we look back to the eighteenth century we find that, in fact, universalism became quite a dividing issue within the Baptist movement, both in Britain and in America. We discover several Baptist ministers embracing universalism and several Baptist churches becoming overtly universalist in sentiment.

The movement towards universalism was eventually diverted out of the Baptist mainstream. In America the universalist congregations moved to set up their own independent denomination and thus effectively flushed themselves out of the Baptist movement—although, to be more precise, the move was a combination both of jumping after being pushed. In Britain universalist congregations were almost all associated with the General Assembly, a prominent part of eighteenth-century Baptist life, but during the nineteenth century it faded in significance and the future Baptist movement was to flow from the New Connexion of General Baptists and the Particulars, both streams of which explicitly resisted universalism. Thus the Baptists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were, with only a few exceptions, non-universalists. And the exceptions that we do find, such as Rev. Samuel Cox (1826–93)[2]—author of *Salvator Mundi; Or Is Christ the Saviour of All Men?* (1877) and *The Larger Hope* (1883)—do not appear to have drawn inspiration from their universalist Baptist predecessors.



Thus it was that the universalist stirrings within the eighteenth-century Baptist movement ceased to trouble the waters of subsequent Baptist life. But the story is interesting and worth being told. This paper does not aim to tell it but rather to offer a window on it through the story of one of its most significant figures, Elhanan Winchester (1751–97). Winchester served as a universalist preacher in Baptist contexts in both America and Britain. As such he provides an interesting case study through which we can gain some insight into this transatlantic controversy.

Early Life and Ministry (1751–74)

Elhanan Winchester Jr. was born in Muddy Water village (later renamed Brookline), just outside Boston, Massachusetts, on 30 September, 1751. His family were

[1] A considerably shorter version of this paper can be found in Macdonald, ed., *"All Shall Be Well."*

[2] Cox was a Baptist minister in Southsea, Hyde, and Nottingham, president of the Baptist Association in 1873, and founder and first editor of *The Expositor*.

fifth generation American colonists of Welsh descent. Elhanan was the eldest of fifteen children.[3]

According to his biographer, Edwin Martin Stone, while Winchester did not have a university education, he avidly devoured books—most especially the Bible—and taught himself Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and French.[4] He was, from childhood, of feeble constitution, contemplative nature, and mild temperament.[5]

Raised as a Congregationalist of moderate Calvinist sentiments, at the age of nineteen (1769) he experienced "conviction and conversion" in a New Lights revival and made "a public profession of religion."[6] The following is his own account of his conversion:

> It pleased God, by an incident far too trifling to mention, to bring me to seek earnestly for an unfading treasure; and by a train of circumstances, fixed the concern deeply upon my mind; and I labored night and day, but could obtain no rest till one morning—a time never to be forgotten! As I was walking on a journey, under great distress, and when deliverance seemed farther from me than ever, all at once I was brought to resign my soul into the hands of God, and thus I expressed myself: "Lord, here I am: a poor helpless sinner: I resign myself into thine hands. Take me, and deal with me just as thou pleasest. I know thou canst do me no injustice." Immediately these words came into my mind with great power and sweetness: "In an acceptable time have I heard thee; and in a day of salvation have I helped thee." Isa. xlix: 8, and I had such a view of CHRIST, as to make me cry out, "Glory to God in the highest! This is salvation; I know this is salvation . . . I saw the fullness, sufficiency, and willingness of Christ to save me and all men, in such a manner as constrained me to venture my soul into his arms; and if I had ten thousand souls, I could have trusted them all into his hands. And O how did I long, that every soul of Adam's race might come to know the love of God in Christ Jesus! And I thought I could

[3] His mother died on Jan 7, 1760, aged thirty-one.

[4] It appears that he learned French after being inspired by the daughter of Col. Samuel Aborn, who lived south of Providence, during one of his visits there in the mid-1780s. During this six-week visit he learned enough French to read and translate it with some ease. He later translated and published the testimony of George De Benneville, which was written in French.

[5] It seems that he also had a slightly odd dress sense. Benjamin Rush wrote, "he has a few oddities in dress and manner" (Letter to Richard Price, dated 29 July 1787). [I found another ref to his slightly odd dress sense but cannot locate it now.]

[6] At this time he joined a separatist evangelical church in his hometown, of which Rev. Jonathan Hyde was pastor. His father also joined this church before becoming a Baptist then a Shaker, in Mother Ann Lee's community.

> not be willing to live any longer on earth, unless it might please God to make me useful to my fellow creatures. (*UR* III.A2)[7]

Thus it was that Winchester began preaching. It is worthwhile stopping at this point to note the universalist instincts inherent in his initial conversion experience. He soon came to suppress these so as to conform to the Calvinist theology he had been raised with, a theology that he was later to transform into a hard-line hyper-Calvinist mode. He says that he laboured with all his might to maintain this Calvinistic system in order, as he was later to see it, to suppress his own experience.

Hearing of a revival in Canterbury, CT, he visited and was baptized by Elder Ebenezer Lyon and joined the Free Will Baptist Church of which Lyon was the pastor. In Spring 1771 he moved to Reheboth, MA, and spent a year there preaching. A revival followed from which a church of about seventy members was started. Elder Lyon ordained Winchester as the pastor of the new church. But within a year Winchester became persuaded that the open communion model on which his new church had been set up was wrong. So he changed it to a closed communion model. A great controversy erupted over this change and Winchester was deposed by the church council for breach of covenant. So he joined the Calvinistic Baptist church in Bellingham, MA, of which Elder Noah Alden was the minister. He renounced any remnants of Arminian sentiments and embraced the Calvinism of Particular Baptist John Gill, the well-known London minister. With Bellingham as his base he went on successful preaching tours of Grafton (1772), Hull, and other places (1773–74). One such tour in 1774 was the lead into the next major change in his life.

Baptist Church, Welsh Neck, SC (1774/75–79)

In the Autumn of 1774, while on a visit to Charleston, SC, Winchester received an invitation from a Calvinistic Baptist church in Welsh Neck on the Pee Dee river to be its pastor.[8] He agreed and returned to Massachusetts to fetch his wife, Alice, but by the time they reached Fairfax County, VA, she had become too ill to proceed.[9] He left her in the care of a friend and continued to Welsh Neck where he ministered over the winter of 1775.[10]

Winchester's call was renewed for a second year on March 8, 1776, after receiving a letter of recommendation from his previous pastor, Elder Noah Alden of First Baptist Church Bellingham, MA, who vouched for Winchester's credentials as a

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[7] To explain the in-text reference system: *UR* = *The Universal Restoration*; III = Dialogue III; A2 = The answer to the second question posed in the dialogue.

[8] The previous pastor, the Revd. Mr. Nicholas Bedgegood, had died on Feb 1 1774. "Records of the Welsh Neck Baptist Church Society Hill, S.C." The call was officially agreed on March 12 1775, when the "Church at the Welsh Neck on PeeDee" unanimously agreed to give Winchester a call to be their minister for "one year fixed."

[9] Winchester married Alice Rogers of Rowley, MA, in the autumn of 1769.

[10] "While at Welsh Neck Church his accomplishments included playing a prominent role in the development of religious liberty in South Carolina. He drafted the 'Dissenters' Petition' that the General Assembly enacted that disestablished the Anglican Church in South Carolina. He also helped to establish St. David's Society, a literary society, and St. David's Academy, one of the first private schools created in the South Carolina backcountry in 1777." Lloyd Johnson, "Elhanan Winchester and his Influence on early Universalism and the Anti-Slavery Movement in England and America."

Christian of "sound principles" and "orthodox sentiments."[11] Further renewals were dated May 3, 1777, March 28, 1778, and July 3, 1779.

In April 1776 Winchester returned to pick Alice up from Virginia, where he had left her, only to discover that she had died. Instead of returning to Welsh Neck he proceeded to Massachusetts where he supplied the pulpit at First Baptist Church in Boston. Over the summer he married Sarah Peck of Reheboth, MA, returning to Welsh Neck in the autumn after several months of absence.

Elhanan's new wife, Sarah, was baptized—apparently, after a local revival—and received into membership on May 4, 1777 but, after less than a year of marriage, on July 3, 1777 she too died and was "much lamented."

Soon after, according to Winchester's biographer, he was "attacked by a fever which brought him to the verge of the grave."[12] This is confirmed by a note in the records of the church, dated November 1, 1777. It records that "our minister is about to leave us in the Spring, on account of his health." Plans were put in place to invite a Mr. Furman at the church in High-Hills of Santee to come and be the pastor but were subsequently dropped in favour of a Mr. Gano.[13] However, "after some debate" Winchester's call was again renewed for another year on March 28, 1778. The *unanimous* support he received in March 1775 was clearly wavering, perhaps in part due to his ill health and perhaps also due to his long absences on ministry trips. The summer of 1778 saw him on another such trip to Virginia.

In early 1778 Winchester married again, this time to a Sarah Luke of South Carolina. By all accounts he was especially find of her.[14] On March 15, 1778, she "gave in her experience and was baptized" and was received as a member on March 28, 1778.[15] Sadly she too sickened and died at Welsh Neck on January 23, 1779, less than a year after their marriage.

The summer of 1779 was significant for Winchester. He was well known as an opponent of slavery. Indeed, he had received his call to be a minister at Welsh Neck

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[11] The letter, dated Aug 14 1775, is in the "Records of the Welsh Neck Baptist Church Society" for March 8 1776. At this meeting on March 8, 1776, Winchester also was received into membership at the church in Welsh Neck. The call was *publicly* renewed on March 17.

[12] Stone, *Biography*, 24.

[13] The plan was agreed to on Nov 1, 1777, and dropped on Dec 6, 1777, because it was felt that there was no chance that Furman would accept. On Jan 3, 1778, it was agreed to invite a Mr. Gano to be the minister. This plan was also presumably dropped because Winchester's call was renewed again on March 28, 1778.

[14] See Stone, *Biography*, 26.

[15] She is listed as a church member on April 5, 1778.

while on a visit to the Southern Colonies during which he had delivered a blistering critique of the slave trade in Fairfax County, VA, on Dec 30, 1774. That sermon, entitled "The reigning abominations, especially the slave trade, considered as a cause of Lamentation," was subsequently published by him in London in 1788.[16] "There is [an] abomination . . . that prevails in this country, that calls aloud not only for sighing and crying, but for a speedy reformation and turning therefrom, if we desire to prevent the destruction [i.e., divine punishment] from coming upon us; I mean, the SLAVE TRADE. A trade conceived in iniquity [i.e., avarice], carried on in the most base and barbarous manner, productive of the worst effects, and big with the most horrid and dangerous consequences."[17] Slavery, said Winchester, dehumanizes slaves—because of the appalling way in which they are treated—and brutalizes those who own them. He warns that "This abomination is sufficient to make the land desolate and waste, it is a national sin, and will bring down national punishment, unless it is repented of."[18] That he was so outspoken on this issue in slave states such as Virginia and South Carolina was sure to cause some disturbance. And so it turned out.

He says that in 1779 "I began to find uncommon desire for the conversion and salvation of the poor negroes," who had been completely ignored by the previous ministers.[19] No slaves had ever been baptized in the whole parish, which, given the large size of the parish and the large number of slaves, was clearly not right. The problem was not simply that the white ministers had no interest in reaching out to the negroes but that the negroes had understandable prejudices against Christianity because of the way that they were treated by professing Christians. "But they had no prejudices against me on this score, as I never had any thing to do with slavery, but on the contrary condemned it; and this being pretty generally known, operated so upon the minds of those poor creatures, that they showed a disposition to attend my ministry, more than they had ever shewed to any other."[20] The breakthrough came one evening, when:

> seeing a number of them at the door of the house, where I was preaching, I found myself constrained as it where, to go to the door and tell them, that Jesus Christ loved them, and died for them, as well as for us white people, and that they might come and believe in him and welcome. And I gave them as warm and pressing an invitation as I could, to comply with the glorious gospel . . . There were about thirty from one plantation in the neighborhood present; (besides others) these returned home, and did not even give sleep to their eyes, as they afterwards informed me, until they had settled every quarrel among themselves, and according to their form of marriage, had married every man to every woman with whom he lived; had restored whatever one had unjustly taken from another; and

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[16] This sermon is fascinating on many counts but it does show that Winchester was well acquainted with the cruel treatment of slaves. On the general issue see John H. Y. Briggs, "Baptists and the Campaign to Abolish the Slave Trade."

[17] Winchester, "The Reigning Abominations," 15.

[18] Ibid., 31. Winchester was aware that there was a practical problem—it was *against the law* in some of the states to free slaves. His advice to Christian slave owners who are forbidden to release their slaves is to lament slavery, to pray for its demise, to treat slaves well, and to set them free as soon as it becomes legal to do so (ibid., 31–32).

[19] "Preface" to the 1792 edition of *The Universal Restoration*, ix.

[20] Ibid.

> determined from that time to seek the Lord diligently. From that very evening they began constantly to pray to the Lord . . . I continued to instruct them, and within three months from the first of June, I baptized more than thirty blacks belonging to that plantation, besides as many others, as in the whole made up one hundred, of which sixty-three were men, and thirty-seven were women . . .[21]

This was not a universally celebrated event. Winchester wrote, "Many of the white people were exceedingly averse to the slaves being Christianized; many would not suffer those belonging to them to come and hear me, though the poor creatures begged it upon their knees . . . My life was sometimes threatened, but, by the grace of God, I feared not the menaces of men, nor the rage of devils."[22]

During the same period many white people, stirred by Winchester's preaching, were also baptized upon profession of their faith—about one hundred and thirty-nine persons. It was, he wrote, "a summer of great success, and I shall remember that happy season with pleasure while I live."[23] The church records from June 9 1779 to September 5 1779 record this great flurry of baptisms. Interestingly, most of those recorded were white. Only twenty-four black servants are named as being baptized (on Aug 8, 1779) and twenty-six (unnamed) are recorded as being "received into fellowship" (on Aug 29, 1779).

While this revival seems to have increased Winchester's popularity within the congregation,[24] there were uneasy relations between the white and the black members (perhaps indicated by the relative absence of blacks recorded in the records). On August 2, 1779, not long after the revival began, "the negroes were constituted into a Church by themselves." After Winchester left on another preaching trip in September 1779, one from which he never returned, things degenerated. The church records contain a note, in the handwriting of Winchester's successor, Revd. Edmund Botsford, appended to the September 5 entry, to this effect: "N.B. A great many of those baptized by Mr. Winchester have been excommunicated, both white and black; but the greater number of blacks; many of the latter upon examination appeared to be very Ignorant of the nature of true religion. Soon after Mr. Winchester left Pee Dee, he fell into error of universal restoration, which he first published in Philadelphia, where after baptizing a great many, he was the means of dividing the Baptist Church in that city." Clearly Winchester's reputation in the church was badly damaged after he left and stories of his "error" became known.

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[21] Ibid., x.
[22] Winchester, "Reigning Abominations," 27 fn.
[23] Winchester, "Preface," x–xi.
[24] The church records (1 Feb 1774) note, on the death of their previous pastor, Revd. Bedgegood, that while he was "a good scholar, and a sound divine; an eloquent preacher" and "polite" yet "not with standing all his abilities and endowments, he was never very successful, especially in the latter part of his life: none being baptized after his return." Clearly this was a congregation that was expecting their pastor to deliver new converts. Winchester's approval rating had waned, with his only being retained in 1778 "after some debate" (March 28). However, in the midst of the revival in 1779 the church "unanimously gave a Call to Mr. Winchester for another year," which he accepted on the condition that "they continue to be all agreed to a single person and not otherwise; and also if he should not like it, he might be allowed to depart at any time" (July 3).

Winchester tells us that he had every intention of returning to Welsh Neck after leaving in September 1779 to see friends in New England. He remained in New England for about twelve months, travelling and preaching. His preaching "to vast multitudes of people"[25] was met with much success and "many were brought to entertain a hope and were baptized by him."[26] On his way back to Welsh Neck, via New York, he stopped off in Philadelphia on October 7, 1780, intending to pass through after a few days. However, the Baptist church, destitute of a pastor, sought to secure his services. In the end he was persuaded and never made it back to Welsh Neck.

But his church in South Carolina was not left in the lurch. He writes that when he left them, in September 1779, "to prevent their being left destitute, I procured the Rev. Mr. Botsford to come and supply them, upon this condition, that whenever I should return, he should resign the congregation to me again, if I required it. But he has remained the constant Pastor ever since"[27] Botsford may have been well thought of by Winchester but the note Botsford wrote about Winchester in the church records (quoted above) suggests that after Winchester's "apostasy" the respect was not mutual.

Journey to Universalism (1778–80)

What led this mainstream Baptist to embrace universalism? After being expelled from the church in Reheboth, MA, over the issue of closed communion, he joined the Baptist church in Bellingham, MA, which was where he renounced his Arminian sentiments and embraced the hyper-Calvinist theology of the English Baptist John Gill. He was, in his own words, "deemed one of the most consistent Calvinists upon the continent, much upon the plan of Dr. Gill, whom I esteemed almost an oracle."[28] Winchester's journey from hyper-Calvinism to a belief in universal restoration took place over a two-year period and involved several elements.

Central to Winchester's "conversion" was a book by a certain Paul Siegvolk, entitled *The Everlasting Gospel*. Paul Siegvolk was a pseudonym, perhaps for a German universalist called George Klein-Nicolai, deposed pastor of Friesdorf. The book had been published in German in 1700 under the title *Das von Jesu Christo dem Richter der Lebendigen und der Todten* and, at the request and expense of George De Benneville, had been translated into English by a John S (Johann Christopher Sower? John S. Price? John Sechla?)[29] and published in Germantown, near Philadelphia, in 1753 by De Benneville's friend Christopher Sower,[30] a member of the "German Baptists" (i.e., Church of the

[25] Winchester, "Preface," xiv.
[26] Grafton's Century Sermon, quoted in Stone, *Biography*, 28.
[27] In fact, Botsford, a pastor from Georgia, was not quite so constant. He visited to preach in October 1779 and, at the request of the church, served as minister from November 1779 to June 1, 1880. However, when British troops approached he left for Virginia not returning again until January 1782, when he took up the call properly. In his absence, the church was assisted by Revd. Joshua Lewis and Revd. John Thomas.
[28] Winchester, "Preface," v.
[29] Albert Bell argues that George De Benneville was the translator, *The Life and Times of George De Benneville*, 42–43. But if that were so why would the book claim that "John S" was the translator?
[30] Sower also printed a newspaper with 4,000 subscribers. This may explain the wide distribution that Siegvolk's book received. The book was also fiercely promoted by Christopher Marshall, a Quaker bookseller in Philadelphia.

Brethren).[31] Winchester was later to be influenced by his direct contacts with this group and with De Benneville.

Winchester's first brief encounter with universalism was at the beginning of 1778 in Welsh Neck. He called to see a friend who put a copy of Siegvolk's book into his hands. Winchester's friend did not know what to make of the book (which he had been leant), so strange were its sentiments, so he asked Elhanan to explain it. Winchester dipped into it here and there for perhaps thirty minutes and quickly got a feel for what it was arguing—a total end to evil and redemption of the whole creation. "I had never seen any thing of the sort before in my life; and I seemed struck with several ideas . . . But, as I was only desired to tell what the author meant, when I had satisfied my friend in that respect, I laid the book down, and I believe we both concluded it to be a pleasant, ingenious hypothesis; but had no serious thoughts of its being true; and for my part, I determined not to trouble myself about it, or to think any more on the matter."[32]

The following summer, on a journey to Virginia, he happened to mention the subject to a minister friend who informed him of a public controversy on the matter a few years previously. He was also told of an Anglican clergyman in Virginia who had preached "the Restoration" over two Sundays before being struck sick and dying (obviously, in the view of many, divine judgment on him for preaching such wicked error).[33] Clearly the issue was worrying away at the back of his mind.

Sometime after he returned to South Carolina he was visited by an acquaintance from Virginia, a doctor, and among his books Winchester found a copy of Siegvolk's *The Everlasting Gospel*. He read a little more of it this time but "as yet had not the least thought that ever I should embrace his sentiments; yet some of his arguments appeared very conclusive, and I could not wholly shake them off, but I concluded to let them along, and not investigate the matter; and therefore I never gave the book even so much as one cursory reading . . ."[34] It would not be for another two years before Winchester read the book properly, after he acquired his own copy in Philadelphia.[35]

Prior to 1779, Winchester, following the teaching of John Gill, had refused to issue general gospel calls for salvation. This refusal was motivated by the belief that God did not command *all* people to repent and believe, only the elect. However, "in the year 1779," he writes, "I found myself much stirred up to exhort my fellow creatures to repent, believe, and obey the Gospel." He found that "viewing the worth of souls, I felt great compassion towards them, and invited them with all my might to fly for mercy to the arms of Christ, who died for them, and who was willing to save them."[36] It was around this time that he experienced his "summer of great success" that saw the conversion of

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[31] The German Baptists were, in effect, the Anabaptists of the Pietist movement in the early eighteenth century. They were European Pietists who had developed baptistic views and praxis (see Briggs, "Church of the Brethren"). By 1735 the majority of them had fled Europe for Pennsylvania. Germantown was a centre for the Church of the Brethren.

[32] Ibid., iv.

[33] Ibid., v–vi.

[34] Ibid., viii.

[35] Winchester, soon after his conversion to universalism, read and was influenced by a copy of James Stonehouse's book, *Universal Restitution: A Scripture Doctrine* (London, 1761) (Winchester calls it *The Restitution of All Things*, though none of Stonehouse's three books [1761, 1768, 1773] on universalism have that title). Stonehouse was a member of the Holy Club in Oxford with the Wesley brothers and Whitfield. None of his books on universalism bear the name of an author on the title page.

[36] Ibid., viii–ix.

many blacks and whites. So he began to adopt a more open method of gospel preaching and found it very effective. This shift in his practise felt right to him and he continued to pursue it without worrying about its consistency with his hitherto strict Calvinist theology. But his new practices and experiences did impact his theology: "I became fully persuaded that the number of the finally saved would equal if not exceed the number of the lost." This belief was a source of great joy to him and he boldly preached it on Sundays to a congregation that generally consisted of close to a thousand people.

But Winchester was not yet a universalist, though he says that some of the arguments in Siegvolk's book would frequently present themselves to his mind in such a forcible manner than he could scarcely withstand them.

In September 1779 he left Welsh Neck for New England (never to return). On his twelve-month travels he would stay with friends, often fellow-ministers, and would sometimes, in private conversations, engage them in discussions of Siegvolk's arguments. Winchester would play devil's advocate and defend the universal restoration to see what kind of responses and rebuttals they would propose. This was his way of thinking through the issues. To his surprise, even the most able ministers were at a loss, not knowing what to say. And the defences of endless punishment that were offered served not to sooth Winchester's doubts about the traditional theology of hell but actually to *increase* them. The more he subjected Siegvolk's arguments to the criticisms of those he considered able minds the more he found himself becoming convinced that Siegvolk was right. Nevertheless, he continued to resist the doctrine of the general restoration with all his might and "sometimes preached publically against it with all the force I could muster."[37] Yet it had got under his skin and he simply could not shake it. Indeed, he found it deeply attractive. He writes, "The ideas were sometimes so transporting to me, even while I professed to oppose the sentiment, that I have been constrained to set them forth in the most sublime manner that I was able; and sometimes so as actually to bring them who heard me converse upon the subject to believe and rejoice in the *Universal Restoration*, while I thought myself an opposer of it . . ."[38] Clearly this year of travelling and preaching provided time for Siegvolk's ideas to burrow their way deep into Winchester's thinking. He describes himself as "half a convert" by the time he arrived in Philadelphia in 1780.[39]

First Baptist Church, Philadelphia (1779–80)

It was in Philadelphia that Elhanan Winchester made the transition from "half a convert" to an unashamed believer in the general restoration. Upon arrival "the Baptist Church being destitute of a minister, . . . invited me to stop and preach with them, to which I was at length persuaded, and for some time I was much followed,

[37] Ibid., xii.
[38] Ibid., iii.
[39] Ibid., xv.

and there were great additions to the church."[40] The congregation grew and he was invited to speak at the Church of St. Paul—a very large church—for a series of perhaps eighteen sermons. He preached to packed houses and reckoned that "most of the clergy of every denomination in the city, heard me there, and many thousands of different people."[41] But Winchester's growing convictions with regard to universalism were about to create a crisis.

In the house in which he lodged on his arrival in Philadelphia he had freely conversed on the topic of "the Restoration." But his "false friends"[42] told a minister—a man that Winchester had, for some years, considered his best and most intimate friend—that he had turned heretic. Upon bumping into Winchester in the street his old friend said that he had been informed that Elhanan was inclined to the doctrine of universal restoration and that if he embraced this belief he would no longer consider Winchester as a brother. Winchester adds, "And he has hitherto been as good as his word . . ."[43] But here was a warning of things to come for "If my intimate friend treated me in such a manner, what had I not to expect from my open and avowed enemies?"[44]

Seeing the brewing storm, he determined to work out once and for all what he thought about the question of universalism. The deciding issue was this—was it a *biblical* teaching? If not then he would retract it but it if was then he would embrace it with all his soul. He shut himself up in his room, read the Scriptures, and prayed for enlightenment seeking to be open, as best he was able, to whatever he felt God revealing to him. The outcome of this was that "I became so well persuaded of the truth of the Universal Restoration, that I was determined never to deny it, let it cost me ever so much, though all my numerous friends should forsake me, as I expected they would, and though I should be driven from men . . ."[45] He was now ready in himself for when the trial came. Ironically, it was the opposition of some to the questions he was pondering that forced him into to clarify his views and actually made him into a full-blown universalist. Without that opposition he may have forever remained "half a convert."

On January 22, 1780—fifteen weeks after his arrival in the city—a number of members of the Baptist church who had heard that he was a universalist met him at a friends house to question him on the matter. Between them an agreement was reached. Winchester would not preach in public on the matter (something that he had never done anyway) and would not raise the issue in private conversation. However, if anyone asked him about his sentiments he would not deny them and, further, if they wanted to know *why* he believed in the restoration he would explain his reasoning. Thus the matter was apparently settled amicably and they parted with mutual agreement.[46]

However, despite all attempts to brush Winchester's views under the carpet where they would not cause trouble, news got out and various people did come to visit him to

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[40] Ibid. According to Rev. J. H. Jones, Winchester was invited to preach to the church for one year ("History of the Philadelphia Baptist Association." *The World* (1832), quoted in Stone, *Biography*, 53).
[41] Ibid. The diary of Christopher Marshall, a Quaker bookseller in Philadelphia, records that crowds of 500 to 1,000 would turn up to hear Winchester preach at St. Paul's (and later at the College Hall). Bell, *The Life and Times of George De Benneville*, 58.
[42] Winchester, "Preface," xvii.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid., xviii.
[46] Ibid., xix–xx.

discuss the matter. And, as per the agreement, he did so, explaining as best he could why he believed what he did.[47] This led to a number of people being converted to his views and to others violently opposing them. Things continued in this way until the end of March.

Matters came to a head at the start of April, 1780. Winchester had heard that the German Baptists in Germantown, about eight miles north of Philadelphia, were universalists and he made arrangements to visit them. Among them was George De Benneville (1703–93), a man who would influence the shape of Winchester's universalism.[48] As he was heading off he heard that some members of the church had privately sent off messages and collected seven able ministers who had just arrived in the city to debate him. Winchester gave them the liberty of his pulpit and proceeded to Germantown as per the original arrangements. When news of Winchester's departure reached his opponents they spread the story that he had fled the city to avoid a debate with the ministers. It is quite possible that they were unaware of Winchester's prior arrangements and that this is how things really appeared to them. On the other hand, given that they had not alerted him in advance of the debate they had arranged for him and that, presumably, they did not try to ascertain why he had left the city, the rumour that was spread was, at best, uncharitable.

Winchester came back to Philadelphia two days later, as he had planned. While he was attending a funeral one of his friends came urgently for him calling him to come without delay to a meeting. When he arrived he found that his opponents had been making much of his absence claiming that it was because Winchester knew that he was sure to be shown wrong. Winchester's friends spoke otherwise and declared that he would be along soon. It was decided in his absence that Winchester would debate Rev. Mr. Boggs. According to Winchester, when he arrived his friends were very pleased but the rest were "much confounded and disappointed" because they were, he believed, convinced that he would not turn up.[49]

Winchester then declared himself ready to comply with the request for a debate at which point Boggs backed down. According to Winchester, he said, "I am not prepared to dispute with Mr. Winchester, I have heard that he says that it would take six weeks to canvass all the arguments fairly on both sides; and I suppose he has been studying on the subject for a week or more, and I have no studied it at all; and therefore I must beg to be excused."[50] The other ministers similarly refused to debate him. Winchester asked permission to speak anyway so as to explain his views but was not permitted to do so. One of the ministers then said that they were *not* there to debate the issue—a very overt change of strategy—but simply to ascertain *whether* Winchester affirmed the universal restoration. Winchester told them that he did "heartily believe" it and gave an account of the affair to date. According to Winchester the minister was impressed by his conduct in the affair and declared that Elhanan had behaved throughout in a manner befitting a

[47] Not long after this Winchester informs us that he got hold of Siegvolk's *The Everlasting Gospel* for the third time, and this time he read it properly and found it convincing (ibid., xx). In 1792 he was to publish an edition of the book himself while based in London.
[48] De Benneville's biography is fascinating. See Albert Bell, *The Life and Times of George De Benneville* and De Benville's own account in *A True and Most Remarkable Account*.
[49] Ibid., xxii.
[50] Ibid., xxiii.

Christian man and that he could not be accused of improper conduct.[51] Winchester then left.

After he was gone the ministers advised the congregation to get another minister. A power-struggle ensued between the two parties—Winchester's friends said that such a decision would need to be taken by "the subscribers at large" but the opposing party would not agree to this. There was much debate and no resolution. The following protest was put on record by the traditional party and signed by about eighty members:

> Whereas the doctrine of the Universal Restoration of bad men and angels, in the fullest extent, has been for a considerable time privately, and of late publicly, been introduced among us, by some of the members, to the great disgrace and confusion of our Church, and wounding the hearts of many of the brethren, the said doctrine being contrary to the Bible, and the Confession of Faith; we, whose names are underwritten, do, in the most solemn manners from our real conviction of duty, protest against the same, as a most dangerous heresy."[52]

However, it was decided by a majority of two to one that a committee would *not* be appointed to inform Winchester that the church would not admit him to officiate in the pulpit. Nevertheless, the minority party did appoint a committee of their own members for that very purpose. They sent a note to Winchester asking him not to preach in the church and another to Rev. Samuel Jones asking him to supply the pulpit. Apparently Winchester did not open his note but returned it. According to J. H. Jones, Winchester and his party broke into the Meeting House, and "occupied" it[53] (presumably this related to Winchester's comment that they were "barred by force" from the building by the traditional party).

At a subsequent meeting in April the debates continued. "The adherents of Mr. Winchester contended, that as they were the *majority*, they were undoubtedly the *church*; and that it was contrary to the principles of Baptist church government, for a minority to attempt to defeat the expressed will of the majority . . . The minority contended that they were the church because they adhered to every article of the confession of faith, and that the majority had abjured the confession of faith."[54] Again no resolution was reached. It was eventually agreed that both parties would meet a council—that had appointed by the traditional party as a means of finding a way forward but that Winchester's supporters had until that point failed to recognize the legitimacy of—the next day.[55] The following day, after both parties had presented their case, the council, somewhat predictably, gave the following opinion: "That those of said church who imbibed the doctrine of the *Universal Restoration*, have departed from the Baptist Society: that those who protested against said errors, are the Baptist church of Philadelphia."[56] And, also unsurprisingly, Winchester's supporters failed to recognize this opinion. The dispute continued.

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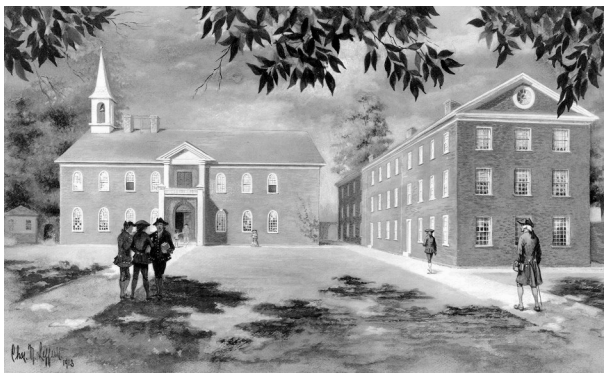
[51] Ibid., xxiv.
[52] Jones, "History," quoted in Stone, *Biography*, 53–54.
[53] Ibid., 54.
[54] Ibid., 54–55.
[55] The council included Rev. Boggs, the man who had refused to debate Winchester, and Rev. Samuel Jones, the man that the traditionalists had asked to replace Winchester.
[56] Ibid., 55.

The minority party then proposed referring the matter to selected members of the churches of the Philadelphia Association or to all the ministers. This proposal was rejected by Winchester's supporters because they knew that the other Baptist ministers were unsympathetic to Winchester. In exasperation, the minority group them made a formal declaration to the majority that they, the traditional party, now consider themselves to be the church and would act accordingly, and that the universalists "are not of us."

It became clear that a separation was inevitable so Winchester's party proposed selling the building and dividing the money or sharing the building and holding meetings at different times. Neither proposal was accepted. It appears that the traditional party considered Winchester's group so corrupted by heresy that they wanted no association with them. So the traditional party met the next day and excluded Winchester's party from the church.

Winchester's supporters then commenced a legal suit to regain the property but lost because the judges were persuaded that the received doctrines of the Baptist community were not those of the universalists. Winchester felt that this decision was unjust because, he says, "we were the majority at first; but they took uncommon pains in carrying about a protest against me to every member of the church, both in the city and in the county, and threatening all with excommunication who would not sign it; by which some were intimidated, and by these and other means they strengthened their party. But on the other hand, I took no pains, either to proselyte people to believe my sentiments or to make my part strong."[57]

Now that the whole issue was out in the open and Winchester felt obligated to defend his views he began to preach openly about the universal restoration. The very first such sermon was preached on 22 April 1780. It was based on Gen 3:15 and was entitled "The Seed of the Woman Bruising the Serpents Head" and was published the following year in Philadelphia by Benjamin Towne. This was Winchester's first universalist publication, indeed his first *prose* publication (prior to that he had published some poetry and some hymns).



The Society of Universal Baptists, Philadelphia (1780–87)

Close to a hundred members of the Baptist church left with Winchester and organized themselves as a church—The Society of Universal Baptists—regularly celebrating the Lord's Supper.[58] The trustees of the University gave them the use of their Hall where they met for a

[57] Winchester, "Preface," xxv. In 1781 Winchester published his response to an official pamphlet circulated by his opponents to explain the affair. It was entitled, *Remarks upon a pamphlet entitled "An address from the Baptist Church in Philadelphia, to their sister churches of the same denomination, throughout the confederated states of North America." In which some mistakes are rectified, and the matters of fact set in a true light*.

[58] Ibid. After the first Philadelphia Convention in 1790, they were reorganized, with John Murray's assistance, as the First Independent Church of Christ, commonly called Universalists. Benjamin Rush helped draft the articles of belief. But by this time Winchester was in England.

few years before they bought their own building (in Nov 1785).[59] Winchester received no fixed salary for his service as the minister but rather "derived his support from weekly contributions."[60]

On January 4, 1782, Winchester preached a sermon entitled "The Outcasts Comforted (Isa 66:5)" to consol his supporters that had been excommunicated for their beliefs. It was published the same year (and the next year in London[61]). Winchester published seven further works—the majority of which did not concern universalism—prior to his move to London in 1787.

During 1781 Winchester married a widow in Philadelphia named Mary Morgan. She died after twenty-one months of marriage in 1783. By the age of thirty-two Winchester was four times a widower! His friends advised him not to marry again but he thought it important for a minister to be married so in 1784/85 he married for the fifth and final time. His new marriage, to a widow named Maria Knowles, was unhappy.[62] She outlived him.

News of the events in Philadelphia reaches the ears of John Murray, an English universalist in the tradition of James Relly, who pastured a universalist church in Gloucester, MS—the very first overtly universalist congregation in America. Murray is a significant figure in early universalist history and his journal is a fascinating window into early evangelicalism and his own life. We have four (undated) letters that he sent to Winchester. The first letter is simply Murray making contact, explaining his joy at hearing the news of Winchester's change of sentiments (along with some caution regarding the reality of the conversion), and expressing a desire to meet Winchester should he ever be in the vicinity of Gloucester. Their first meeting is recounted in Murray's *Journal*:

> G: Have you seen Mr. W—?
> M: No, sir.
> G: I attend on his ministry Sir; and but that he is too ill to go abroad, I am persuaded that he would have waited upon you.

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[59] The Hall was on the West side of Fourth Street, south of the Arch. The universalist congregation first attempted to purchase a building—The Masons Lodge—on the south side of a narrow street (later named Lodge Alley) running westward from Second Street north of Walnut. They attempted in autumn 1785 to raise the money by subscription. John Murray refers to this attempt in a letter (*Letters and Sketches*, vol 2, 114). There is also a reference from Seventh Day Baptist Church, NJ. It concerns a request from the church in Philadelphia asking for help to buy the Mason's lodge. (The request was granted but this decision to help the universalists divided the NJ church. After two years of controversy the money was returned. Some time later, Moses Winchester, Elhanan's half-brother, joined the church [Jan 1788] and served as pastor for six months [from May 1788], which stirred up the controversy again, the church's three main preachers being divided between Arminian, Calvinist, and universalist theology. The church divided.) In the event not enough money was raised for the building of the church in Philadelphia. On Nov 24, 1785, two brothers-in-law, Anthony Cuthbert (mast-maker) and Abraham Collins (sail-maker), bought the building for $4000 on behalf of the church. On Jan 16 1785 **[1786? – check]** they united in a deed of trust on behalf of the Society of Universal Baptists. The details can be found in Thomas, *A Century of Universalism in Philadelphia*.

[60] Stone, *Biography*, xi.

[61] By Richard Clarke, an Anglican priest and long-term universalist.

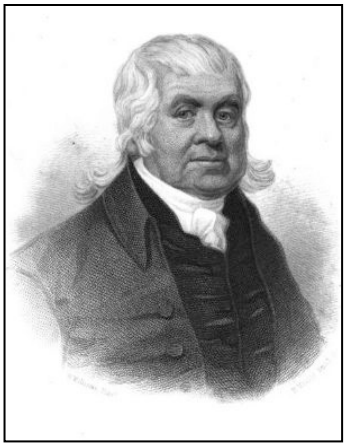
[62] His first wife, Alice, was the mother of four children. His second wife, Sarah, was mother of two. His fourth wife, Mary, had two children. Only one of these eight children was born living—a daughter, named Reconcile, born to Alice. She lived for seventeen months and died Sept 20, 1773 (Stone, *Biography*, 26).

M: I am told Mr. W— is ill, sir, and I very much regret his indisposition. I will thank you to present him my respectful compliments.
G: That I will do sir with a vast deal of pleasure. I shall be very happy indeed, sir, to carry such a message from you to him.
M: Well, sir, I will make you more happy still. I will pray you to assure Mr. W— of my heart's best affection, not as a compliment, but with such unfeigned sincerity as one servant of the Redeemer ought to cherish toward another.
G: Well, sir, I am exceedingly pleased to be the bearer of such a message.
And thus, as I presume, the way is opened for my introduction to this zealous, benevolent, and most uncommon man.[63]

Later he writes

I have been by invitation, to visit Mr. W—; he seems tottering on the verge of another world. I have been edified by his remarks; and although I am not united with him in sentiment in every particular, yet we join issue in one glorious and fundamental truth, the final restoration of the whole posterity of Adam; and on this ground I hail him as my friend and brother. Our interview has been extremely affecting; he clasped me with ardor to his bosom, and dropped such tears, as friends are wont to shed upon meeting each other after a long and painful separation. I anticipate both pleasure and profit from associating with this gentleman.[64]

The second letter was written some time after they met in person and a few months prior to a visit of Winchester to Massachusetts. It refers to Winchester's forthcoming book on the deity of Christ, which was published in 1784, and also to the attempts of the Universal Baptists to erect a building. Murray offers his services as an outsider "not immediately connected with you" to offer input on the building plans. He says that he is pleased that Winchester is enjoying more health now then when they previously met. Murray had felt very alone in America as a universalist preacher—a cause for which he suffered much—and he clearly had hopes that Winchester would now stand strong alongside him. His tone is very gushing and affectionate—"no one can feel a more warm and sincere affection for you than I have delighted to cherish . . ." He was delighted that he and Winchester considered each other friends.



The third letter again addresses the issue of Winchester's poor-though-improving health and wishes for his full recovery. The bulk of the discussion concerns Winchester's book on the deity of Christ, which Murray claims to applaud. Murray himself, however, appears to have been a modalist and it is not clear whether he simply misunderstood Winchester's book (which was not at all modalist) or whether he sought to affirm it but to push Winchester in more modalist directions. But

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the tone remains affectionate. The final letter contains Murray's reflections on mourning for dead friends, perhaps in response to a sermon that Winchester had sent him which Murray took to be a funeral oration (because, he says, it was useless as a gospel sermon—"You see, my friend, I am a friend, and do not flatter.") There is some more sense on Murray's part in the final letter of some disagreements with Winchester but a tolerance with regard to that—"When we agree, I am pleased; when we do not, I am not displeased. I think you are sincere, and I am attached to you."

It seems that Murray was kindly disposed towards Winchester but it may be that his attitude hardened somewhat over time because Murray was a tireless advocate for his own Rellyan brand of universalism and Winchester would not accept key aspects of that version. The relationship between the two seemed to cool,[65] although Murray did maintain some involvement with Winchester's congregation while the latter was away in London.

During this period other universalist societies were organizing and it was felt appropriate that their preachers should meet at least once a year. The first universalist association meeting took place in Oxford, MA, on 14 September 1785. Twelve people attended in what Murray described as a "truly primitive" occasion.[66] But it was the start of a more connected universalist movement in the USA. Winchester served as moderator and both Winchester and Murray spoke at the meeting.[67] This was the seed from which the later Universalist denomination grew.[68]

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[65] Murray, being a good disciple of James Relly, believed that Christ had taken all the eschatological punishment of all humanity upon himself at Calvary. Consequently, nobody would go to hell. Winchester, on the other hand, made much of the fate—albeit a *temporary* fate—of the lost in hell. He felt that the biblical warnings of eschatological judgment were "an insuperable bar to the opinions of those who deny a future state of retribution, which I think impossible for them to answer fairly" (Winchester, *UR*.IV.A10). Similarly, he later objects to "those who suppose that all the human race shall be admitted into the kingdom of heaven on the day of judgement" (*UR*.DIV.A13) It is likely that he had Murray in mind.

We may note some comments from Murray's *Life* by Murray's wife, Judith Sargent Murray, that indicate tensions. She notes that Winchester's kind of universalism differed from her husband's and she writes that he searched the Bible in order to confute Murray (Murray, *Life*, 212), though she does admit that he was a man of pure morals and an ardent lover of the redeemer. She quotes a letter from Murray to a friend in which he writes, "Mr. Winchester is full with Mr. Law and of course preaches purgatorial satisfaction. According to these gentlemen, every man must finally be his own Saviour! If I must suffer as much, in my own person, as will satisfy divine justice, how is, or how can Christ Jesus be, my Saviour? If this purgatorial doctrine be true, the ministry of reconciliation, committed to the Apostles must be false; 'to wit, God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing unto them their trespasses.' In fact, I know no persons further from Christianity, genuine Christianity, than such Universalists" (ibid., 248). Those are harsh words.

We also note that when Murray went on a visit to London in March 1788 his biography gives us a blow by blow account of his time in England (ibid., 216–20) and yet he made no effort to see Winchester, even though the latter was running a universalist church nearby—something that Murray cannot have been unaware of or indifferent about (ibid., 218–19). This cause was Murray's life so his failure to visit Winchester is notable.

[66] Murray, *Life*, 212. According to Judith Sargent Murray, John Murray organized the conference (ibid.) but it is not clear that this is so. He may merely have suggested the idea of a meeting.

[67] Murray's sermon is found in Murray, *Letters and Sketches*, vol. 2, 118–22. Winchester's sermon is not preserved but, according to Murray, it was on Gal 1:8 (*Life*, 212) and was "most excellent." At this meeting Winchester also met Caleb Rich (1750–1821). Rich was one of the earliest New England universalist preachers. Rich had become a universalist as a result of religious visions he had, around 1773, from which he developed a universalist theology. For this he was rejected by his Baptist church. Rich was much

Winchester's time leading the infant Philadelphia congregation was fruitful[69] and interrupted only by occasional preaching trips[70] or visits to Germantown to see George De Benneville.[71] Indeed between 1781 and 1787 Winchester and De Bennville sometimes went together on preaching tours. But in July 1787, only a year and a half after the congregation acquired its own building, Winchester announced to his congregation that he felt called by God to go and preach in England. Within less than forty-eight hours from the announcement, Elhanan and Maria Winchester had boarded a boat, the Swallow, for England. The congregation were disappointed and dismayed at this sudden loss.[72]

London (1787–94)

In a letter to Col. Zephaniah Andrews, written from London on 13 February 1790, almost two years and five months after his arrival in England , Winchester wrote that,

> I have had for many years a great desire to see this country, but for sometime before I came, had almost laid aside the thoughts of coming speedily; but one day

impressed by John Murray when they met in 1785. Murray was unimpressed by Rich, whom he considered "blasphemous," "impious," and "God-dishonouring." This was because of a disagreement over theology.

[68] In 1790, while Winchester was in London, a committee of four, representing the Universal Baptist congregation, called all believers in universal salvation to assemble for a convention in Philadelphia from May 25 to June 8, 1790. The aim was "to unite in one general church . . . to have one uniform mode of divine worship; one method of ordaining suitable persons to the ministry; one consistent way of administering the Lord's Supper,—etc." The representative of the universalist societies agreed the Articles of Religion and the Plan of Church Government. The Articles of Religion concerned 1. The Scriptures as revelation and the rule of faith; 2. One infinite and perfect God; 3. One mediator, Jesus Christ; 4.The Spirit; 5. Good work and holy living. The Plan of Government was akin to that of the Congregational Church. It concerned a basic ecclesiology, church officers, call and ordination, worship, Ordinances (e.g., baptism, Lord's Supper), admission and exclusion of members, marriage, instruction of children, and inter-communion between the member churches. There were also recommendations on war, using courts to settle disputes, holding slaves, oaths, and submission to government. By the start of the nineteenth century the Association had set itself up as a distinct denomination. The Articles and Plan were adopted by the New England Universalist churches in 1794 making them effectively national. The 1803 convention of the New England churches in Winchester, New Hampshire, was a key event in this process. It set out a "Profession of Faith" with just three components: 1. Holy Scripture; 2. "one God, whose nature is love, revealed in one Lord Jesus Christ, by one Holy Spirit of Grace, who will restore the whole family of mankind to holiness and happiness"; 3. Holiness and happiness are inseparably connected and so believers should maintain order and practice good works.

[69] During his time in Philadelphia Elhanan also made some significant friends, among whom were Dr. Benjamin Rush (1745–1813) (a signatory of the Declaration of Independence and an eminent physician) and Dr. John Redman (first president of the College of Physicians in Philadelphia). Both were admirers of his work. During this period Winchester found a co-worker in his family. In 1784 Elhanan's brother, Moses Winchester, then aged twenty-one, entered the ministry, becoming pastor of Shiloah Baptist Church, New Jersey. He would occasionally provide the pulpit at Elhanan's church in Philadelphia, especially when Elhanan had gone to England. He served as a universalist minister until his early and painful death on 17 February 1793, when he was just twenty-nine, caused by a cancerous tumour in his mouth.

[70] The winter of 1785–86 was spent in Providence, Rhode Island, preaching at the universalist society there as well as to at least one non-universalist church. Winchester returned to Philadelphia by water (for an account of which see Winchester's letter to Col. Zephaniah Andrews, dated 9 June 1786, in Stone, *Biography*, 96–97).

[71] Winchester's account of his relationship with De Benneville can be found in his introduction to *A True and Most Remarkable Account*.

[72] As testified by the diary of Christopher Marshall. See. Bell, *The Life and Times of George De Benneville*, 59.

in the month of July, 1787, I went into Philadelphia (for we lived at that time a little out of town) where I saw an advertisement of a ship ready to sail in a few days to London. I went down to it and I think I asked the fare, but with hardly a thought of taking passage. I came home and told my wife. The matter seemed to hang in suspense some days; but to make short of it, about two days before the ship sailed we fully concluded to come. And accordingly on 30th July we went on board, and sailed for London, where we arrived on September 21, after a long passage of fifty-three days. When we arrived in London, we had not an acquaintance in the whole city; were in a place where many of the necessaries of life were exceedingly high; and we had no great store of money. I brought over several letters, but I believe they never introduced me to preach so much as once. However, I introduced myself to some strangers, and they asked me to preach, so a little door was opened for me, and I preached in a part of London called Southwark for near six months, and then took a meeting house for myself for Sunday and Wednesday evenings, and after a quarter more, another meeting house for Sunday mornings. We remained about thirteen months in and about

London, before we went at all into the country. Then we went to Chatham, Canterbury, and Dover; and so great a door was opened in the county of Kent, that I have preached in eighteen places in that county alone. We have been twice down into Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire, and a great and effectual door is opened for the gospel there also. I have preached in all in about thirty-eight different houses in this kingdom, and have had invitations to preach in many more. I have also published many pieces since I have resided here: more than in my whole life before.[73]

[73] Stone, *Biography*, 181–82. Winchester also later told William Vider that he had "for several years . . . a strong impression on his mind to come [to England], because he had a message to deliver" (Vidler, "A Testimony of Respect to the Memory of Elhanan Winchester," 41–42). A letter from Winchester to Dr. Benjamin Rush, dated 13 Dec 1788, adds that Winchester came with a letter of recommendation from Rush, which opened up an invitation to eat with a Mr. Dilly and a couple of other dissenting ministers but none of them maintained the relationship after that meal. Winchester tried several times in the coming years to gain the support of Dilley but to no avail. However, the letter did open a more fruitful relationship with Dr. Richard Price (Stone, *Biography*, 183–85, 187–88). Price (1723–91) was an English Dissenter, minister of Newington Green Unitarian Church, a preacher and a political pamphleteer who supported causes such as the American Revolution. (One of the congregants he influenced most was Mary Wollstonecraft.) Here is the letter from Rush (a trinitarian) to Richard Price (a unitarian), dated July 29, 1787: "The bearer the Rev Mr Winchester has yielded to an inclination he has long felt of visiting London, and has applied to me for a letter to you, for Americans of every profession and rank expect to find a friend of human kind. You

In 1788 he was taken on for a year as the morning preacher at the Baptist meeting house in Worship Street, who were without a minister at the time. "Here," according to William Titford, a member of the congregation, "he was much followed, and highly approved."[74] He also preached regularly in the Glass House Yard congregation and all the while his "friends" grew in number. Eventually his supporters took the Chapel in Parliament Court for Winchester.

Writing to Dr. Benjamin Rush in December 1788 Winchester claimed that "The doctrine of the restoration bids fair to spread here in time, if the ministers that are of the sentiment would declare it freely; but some are deterred by one motive, and some by another; so that I am almost the only person in London that openly preaches it."[75] In February 1990 he wrote to Rush of the many doors that were opening up for preaching the message—especially among Baptists and Presbyterians—across England. The subscribers that supported the publication of some of his books bear testimony to his widespread appeal beyond the bounds of London town.[76]

Parliament Court Congregation, Artillery Lane (1792–94)

The congregation in Parliament Court was thus established to provide Winchester with his own preaching base.[77] By all accounts it could not accommodate the number of people who wished to hear him preach and he would regular receive 400 to 500 congregants.

One of the more significant converts to Winchester's message was a Particular Baptist minister from Battle, Sussex, by the name of William Vidler (1758–1816).[78] Since as early as 1784 Vidler had

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are no stranger to his principles. I can with great pleasure add, that his life and conversation have fully proved that those principles have not had an unfavourable influence upon his heart. With a few oddities in dress and manner, he has maintained among both friends and enemies the character of an honest man. He leaves many sincere friends behind him. I know not how his peculiar doctrine of Universal Salvation may be received in London. But in every part of America it has advocates. In New England it continues to spread rapidly. In this city Mr Blair, a Presbyterian minister of great abilities and extensive learning, and equally distinguished for his humility and piety, has openly professed his belief of it from the pulpit." It is also worth noting that while in London Winchester became friends with the celebrated nonconformist minister Joseph Priestly. They met after the Birmingham riots had driven Priestly to London. Winchester, after his return to America, was later to welcome Priestly to his church in Philadelphia to preach.

[74] In a letter to the *London Monthly Repository*, dated March 20, 1823 (Stone, *Biography*, 106–7).

[75] Stone, *Biography*, 184.

[76] The vast majority of subscribers are, understandably, from London and the surrounding towns. The second best-represented area is Kent, Chatham in particular. But there are also a fair few subscribers from Cambridgeshire, Hampshire, Surrey, Lincolnshire, Sussex, Birmingham, and even some from Yorkshire, Dublin, and at least one from Scotland.

[77] The buildings date from 1766 and were apparently built for a Hugenot congregation.

[78] See F. W. Butt-Thompson, *The History of Battle Baptist Church*.

concerns about the traditional doctrine of hell so when he read *The Universal Restoration* (1788) in 1791 he was persuaded to embrace the cause. Fifteen members within his church withdrew in protest but most of the congregants remained. For this he and his church were excluded from the connexion in 1793. Vidler came to London in 1794 to supply Winchester's pulpit for a short time and to serve as Winchester's assistant. After Winchester left for America, he took over the leadership of the community (although continued as a part-time ministry at Battle Baptist Church until 1796). Winchester wrote of Vidler that, "He was a very popular man amongst them [his church], a good preacher, and a man of excellent character . . . a man of . . . openness, sincerity, and resolution . . . [a] valuable man"[79] Vidler continued to proclaim Winchester's message of universal restoration (and engaged in a printed exchange on the issue with Andrew Fuller[80]). Vidler was converted to Unitarianism by Richard Wright, minister of the General Baptist Church in Wisbech, East Anglia, in 1798 (?) and the congregation split over the issue. After the Trinitarians had left the church, Vidler led it into the General Assembly (i.e., the association of the General Baptists) on June 8, 1802.[81] The Assembly itself was drifting more and more in the direction of unitarianisam in this period and by 1815 the General Assembly Committee reported on "the success of Unitarianism which, with the exception of Baptism, may surely be called the cause of the General Baptists."[82] It is no wonder that Dan Taylor and the New Connexion of General Baptists severed their links with the Assembly.[83] Vidler and Wright both worked tirelessly for the universalist and unitarian causes, Vidler himself rising to great prominence within the General Assembly. After several generations and several metamorphoses the "church" still exists . . . as The South Place Ethical

[79] Letter to Benjamin Rush, dated July 26, 1793 (Stone, *Biography*, 191–94).

[80] In 1799 Vidler published *God's Love to His Creatures Asserted and Vindicated*, and from 1797 onwards he edited *The Universalist's Miscellany; or, Philanthropist's Museum: Intended Chiefly as an Antidote against the Antichristian Doctrine of Endless Misery*. All of which drew eight letters from Fuller, of which the first was written in September 1795 and the last in July 1800. See Fuller, "Letters to Mr. Vidler." See also Howson, "Andrew Fuller and Universalism."

[81] [Raymond Brown lists the date of their joining as 1803, *English Baptists*, 107]. Vidler became a personal member of the Association in 1801. In 1803 Dan Taylor withdrew from the Assembly, a watershed event in the deteriorating relations between the Assembly and the New Connexion of General Baptists.

[82] See Brown, *The English Baptists in the Eighteenth Century*, ch. 6. The quote is from p. 108.

[83] Indeed the previous divisions between General Baptists (Arminians) and Particular Baptists (Calvinists) became redefined in this period. The drift towards doctrinal heterodoxy by the General Baptists led to the rise of the New Connexion of General Baptists, under Dan Taylor, who were concerned to maintain orthodoxy. At the same time Andrew Fuller's moderate Calvinism was having a big impact on the Particular Baptists counteracting the hyper-Calvinism that that characterized the movement. These changes led to new alignments such that New Connexion Baptists found that they has more in common with Particular Baptists than with the General Assembly. Eventually the New Connexion and the Particulars were to merge and the General Assembly was to fade into oblivion. Today's Arminian Baptists are descendants of the New Connexion and not the General Assembly. For a general overview of Baptists in the eighteenth century in England see Briggs, "The Changing Pattern of Baptist Life in the Eighteenth Century." For an excellent study on Christological controversies within Nonconformity in this period see Sell, *Christ and Controversy*.

Society, an important *secular humanist* organization!

Publications

In 1788, the year after his arrival in London, Winchester published his most celebrated book, *The Universal Restoration: exhibited in a series of dialogues between a minister and his friend*.[84] The book sold across England and in America and Winchester received a lot of letters, both of criticism and encouragement, as a result. In 1792 he published an expanded edition that included a biographical account of his conversion to universalism and discussion of criticisms that had been raised of the first edition.

In February 1788, Winchester delivered a series of forty-two lectures at the chapel in Chapel Court, in the Borough of Southwark; a series he repeated at the Glass House Yard in 1789. In 1789 these lectures were published in a three-volume set, later to become a four-volume set, entitled *A Course of Lectures on the Prophecies that Remain to Be Fulfilled*. This was, without question, Winchester's longest work, at over 1,000 pages long. It also served to greatly enhance his theological reputation in certain quarters.[85] The lectures aimed to do exactly what the title declares—to explore what the Bible had to say, according to Winchester's interpretation of it, about the future of humanity. He interpreted Old Testament prophecies as literally as possible and, on the basis of aspects of oracles that were clearly not fulfilled in past history, sketched out the future in broad, premillennialist terms.

A controversy with Rev. Dan Taylor, who was serving at the time as a minister in London, prompted Winchester to publish *The Restitution of All Things (which God Hath Spoken by the Mouth of All His Holy Prophets) Defended* (1790).[86] It consisted of five open letters written to Dan Taylor. Winchester had great affection for Taylor and felt somewhat hurt that Taylor had taken what he perceived as a confrontational approach to their relationship.[87]

In February 1793 Winchester delivered two discourses in Parliament that were subsequently published as *The Three Woe-Trumpets* on Rev 11:14–19.

Back to America (1794–97)

According to Martin Stone, although we do not know what evidence he had to support the claim, Winchester's wife, Maria, "was subject to bursts of ungovernable passion, which spent the fury of its paroxysms upon a kind and affectionate husband . . . Mr. W's trials increased, until they became insupportable to a constitution already greatly impaired by ill health. To obtain release, he resolved to return to America, and settle upon

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[84] Or, to give it its full title, *The Universal Restoration: exhibited in a series of dialogues between a minister and his friend: comprehending the substance of several conversations that the author hath had with various persons, both in America and Europe, on that interesting subject wherein the most formidable objections are stated and fully answered*

[85] According to Stone, Winchester sent George Washington a copy, who acknowledged them in a "very friendly letter" (Stone, *Biography*, 173). We also have a letter from Dr. Benjamin Rush to Winchester expressing his admiration of the book (dated May 11, 1791, Stone, *Biography*, 195–97; and a further letter on the topic dated Nov 12, 1791, in ibid., 197–99, in which he relates how Dr. Redman, having read the book, declared Winchester to be "our theological Newton.").

[86] He had previously appended "A Few Remarks on the Rev. Dan Taylor's Discourse, entitled, 'The Eternity of Future Punishment . . .' in a Letter to a Friend" to the end of *The Holy Conversation* (1789).

[87] Winchester, *Restitution of All Things*, 30–32, 56

Mrs. W. a separate maintenance."[88] Writing to a friend, Winchester said, "I have also the conscience of innocence, and the testimony of good conscience in the step I have been at last compelled to take, which has been before my mind for years past, and which I have often spread before the Lord in the bitterest agony of my spirit, and have begged his direction with all the powers of my soul."[89] He left London alone on 1 May 1794 for Bristol from where he sailed back to America.

Winchester departed Bristol on May 19 and landed in Boston on July 12, 1794. Nobody was expecting him so his arrival caused some surprise. He never told those in America—not even his friends and family—the reason for his return.[90] In no time at all he was busy preaching again in Brookline, Roxbury, at John Murray's church in Boston, and various locations all over New England. Writing to his brother he said, "I never saw the country so open to me as it is now," and to a friend in London he wrote, "I have the greatest door open that I ever saw, insomuch that I am surprised at the alteration since I was here last. I have preached in a great many meeting-houses of different denominations, and to a great number of people, as often as eight or nine times a week, and with greater acceptance than I ever did."[91]

In September 1794 Winchester presided as moderator at the convention of universalist ministers at Oxford, MA. Here he spontaneously inducted Hosea Ballou (1771–1852), a universalist convert of Caleb Rich, into the ministry. Apparently, at the end of a sermon and without any warning, Winchester held a Bible against Ballou's chest and cried out, "Brother Ballou, I press to your heart the written Jehovah!" Ballou was to become the most significant player in the new universalist denomination in the nineteenth century.[92]

He continued travelling and preaching and found time to write and publish a critique of Thomas Paine's book *The Age of Reason*, a blistering attack on revealed religion. Paine was the Richard Dawkins of his day and Winchester's critique was only one of many that were published in that period.[93]

Mediated correspondence went back and forth between Elhanan and Maria. She would not accept life without him and professed penitence for the past. Taking passage for America she arrived on March 15, 1795, and persuaded Elhanan to take her back. Meanwhile the Parliament Court congregation were keen to get him back and a letter signed by several hundred people was sent to him to request his return. It is unknown whether he ever received it. He certainly never returned to England.

Winchester's health had never been good and the more he exerted himself the worse it got but he continued travelling and preaching—New York, Providence, and Philadelphia, speaking at the church he had founded there.[94] During this period he continued to write and publish—some universalist hymns, a political catechism for American youth. Then, in February 1796 he had a severe haemorrhage of the lungs.

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[88] Stone, *Biography*, 212–13.
[89] Quoted in ibid., 213.
[90] According to a letter he wrote to a friend in London after leaving (quoted in ibid., 214–15).
[91] Ibid., 216.
[92] See the online entry on Ballou in *The Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography*.
[93] See Haykin, "The Oracles of God" on Andrew Fuller's response to Payne's infamous book.
[94] Maria's health was also not good. There are several references in his correspondences to her being ill with fever for weeks at a time.

Benjamin Rush came immediately and managed to stop the bleeding so, a few days later, Winchester was able to preach again! But he knew that his time was short.

In June 1796 he went back to New York for a few months and in October of that same year he travelled to Hartford. There he preached in a full theatre, as no other hall was considered big enough. He preached regularly for several months until he was confined by disease to his deathbed. He died on April 18 1797.

Theology

The shape and place of Winchester's universalism

Before examining Winchester's case for universal restoration it will be helpful to outline his beliefs about the shape of the future. This will allow us to see the place of universal salvation in the grander scheme of things. Winchester's beliefs about the future are spelled out in great detail in his *Lectures on the Prophesies That Remain to be Fulfilled* (1789), and more briefly, and in third-rate poetic form, in his *The Process and Empire of Christ* (1793), as well as in discussions scattered across various other works.

Winchester was a premillennialist, fascinated with unfulfilled prophetic promises. He was expecting the future times of restitution to pan out in something like the following way: everything will kick off when the Jewish people return to their Promised Land and are re-established as a nation. Israel's enemies will then arise and attack Jerusalem but before they can complete their destruction Jesus will return, descending upon the Mount of Olives, and stop them. At that point dead believers will be raised and the living saints will be changed—the first resurrection—and they shall rule with Christ.[95] The second advent of the Messiah will lead the Jewish people to repent and accept him as their Lord. Christ's millennial kingdom of peace will then be set up. Satan will be bound and Jesus and the saints will rule from a rebuilt Jerusalem for a thousand years: there will be global peace—nations will come to worship at Jerusalem and will no longer make war against each other.[96]

After the Millennium, Satan shall be released to deceive the nations and lead them in a futile rebellion against Jesus. The Lord will easily crush the rebellion, and the day of the final judgment will then dawn. *All* the dead shall be raised (the second resurrection) and judged according to their deeds. The saints shall ascend to heaven with their Lord as the whole earth is destroyed by flame. The entire planet will be turned into a volcanic lake of fire inhabited by unredeemed sinners—hell.[97] Winchester considers this fate to be unimaginably terrible.

After many ages, when the lake of fire has done its work of humbling sinners and drawing them to repentance, the time will arrive when Jesus shall return to earth (again)

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[95] Winchester envisaged graded levels of glory in future ages for the redeemed depending on how they lived—rewarded according to their obedience to Christ. Those who suffered for Christ, the overcomers, will reign with him—those later saved from hell will not have that honor (*UR*.IV.A13).

[96] On this see Winchester, *Process and Empire* books VIII and IX.

[97] Winchester saw the Lake of Fire as "probably the earth in its melted state" (*UR*.II.A3) *prior to* new creation. See Winchester, *Process and Empire* Book X line 721ff. for extended, vivid descriptions of the volcanic earth. The number of the unredeemed he poetically, and somewhat pessimistically, described as "ten hundred thousand millions" (*Process and Empire*, Book X, line 17).

and all God's enemies—Lucifer and his demons included[98]—will be reconciled to God through Christ's atoning blood. Thus shall all creation be saved.

At *that* point the new creation takes place—God makes all things new.[99] Against some popular views at the time Winchester argued that the new creation is not a timeless eternity totally distinct from this creation. On the contrary, the new creation is in fact *this* earth and heaven renewed after its destruction by fire.[100] Elhanan Winchester reached this "materialistic" conclusion long before the idea caught on in mainstream evangelicalism.

Once all Christ's enemies have been placed under his feet, his role as Mediator—namely that of reconciling creation to God—shall be completed. So he will hand his kingdom over to the Father. Here Winchester is drawing on an unusual, though not unique,[101] interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:24–28.[102] Against the more traditional view, he maintains that the time at which all things are placed under Christ's feet and handed over to the Father is not at the return of Christ but *much, much later*. Also, and even more idiosyncratically, Christ's handing over his kingdom to the Father marks *the end of Christ's mediatorial kingdom* and the start of a new era in God's economy.[103] It is at *this* moment—far, far in the future when Christ hands the kingdom over to God the Father—that God will be all in all. On occasion Winchester expresses this view of 1 Corinthians 15:24–28 tentatively[104] but at other times seems certain of its truth.[105]

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[98] For extended imaginative descriptions of Satan's repentance and salvation see Winchester, *Process and Empire*, books X and XI.

[99] Ibid., Book XI.

[100] He also argued at length that the new creation is not identical with the millennium but follows on from it; is not metaphorical but literal; and is not heaven—Winchester, *Letter to De Coetlogon*, 9–15.

[101] Charles Chauncey defended this interpretation at length in Chauncy, *The Mystery Hid From Ages*, 197–237. One finds something not unlike it in Augustine's *De Trinitate*.

[102] See Winchester, *Lectures*, Lecture XLII.

[103] Here again he differed from Siegvolck who thought Christ's kingdom eternal (Siegvolk, *Everlasting Gospel*, 63–64). But the difference may be superficial—It is important to see that Winchester was very careful to qualify this claim about the end of Christ's kingdom in such a way as not to compromise his trinitarian theology. In Poem XII, lines 264–71 of *Process and Empire*, after the Son has handed over the kingdom, the Father says to him:

> . . . behold, I give command
> To all my subjects, still to honour Thee,
> Not as the Mediator, but my Son.
> My Son thou wast in whom I did rejoice,
> Long ere thou Mediator didst become;
> And though no more thou Mediator art,
> Yet Thou shalt still remain my darling Son,
> The Part'ner of my throne, my soul's delight

In a similar qualification in his *Letters to Dan Taylor*, he writes "His kingdom is an *aionion* kingdom, a dominion of ages [N.B. not an '*eternal* kingdom'] . . . the Son of God must reign . . . 'Until all his enemies are put under his feet . . . Then cometh the end when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father' . . . Yet Christ shall never cease to be, but I believe that he, with the Father, and the Holy Ghost, shall ever reign one God, world without end" (pp. 7, 9). It is only the *mediatorial* kingdom that ends.

[104] Winchester, *Letter to De Coetlogon*, 16. Was his hesitation for rhetorical reasons?

[105] Winchester, *Letters to Dan Taylor*, 8.

Winchester's case for universalism

Affirming the promises and the threats

For Winchester, theology *was* biblical exegesis. As an evangelical his oft-repeated conviction was that if the idea of the restitution of all things was unbiblical then it *must* be rejected (and he often said that he would drop it instantly if any could convince him that it was not scriptural). He even urged caution on the part of those considering it, calling them to weigh the biblical teachings very carefully before affirming Christian universalism.[106] So the bulk of his work is an attempt to show that the diverse texts of the Bible were consistent with—indeed some positively taught—universal restoration.

The heart of Winchester's hermeneutic is an attempt to find a way of holding firmly to all the diverse teachings of the Bible—not "in any wise to explain away or weaken, the force of either the threatenings or promises, set forth in this wondrous book" (*UR*.IV.A14). The Bible speaks *both* of some in hell *and* of universal restoration so, reasons Winchester, *both* those teachings must be true. Therefore any understanding of hell that excludes the promise of universal salvation cannot be accepted. But Winchester was well aware that this was the heart of the disagreement between himself and more traditional Protestants. Those who took issue with him felt that the hell texts were so clear that the promises must be interpreted in the light of them. Winchester, however, felt that the situation was exactly the reverse.[107] Everything hinges on which way one attempts to hold the biblical teachings together.

Central to Winchester's case was what he took to be positive promises of universal salvation.[108] For instance, Ephesians 1:9–10 pictures the goal of creation as the gathering together of "*all* things" in Christ; Colossians 1:19–20 speaks of Christ reconciling "*all* things" (and in context this means *all things that have been created*) to God, making peace through his blood shed on the cross;[109] Revelation pictures "every creature in heaven, on earth, and under the earth" worshipping the Father and the Son—the creating and redeeming God (Rev 5:13); Romans 5:18–20 claims that all those who died in Adam (i.e., every human being) will be made alive in Christ and that grace will undo all the damage that sin has done. From Philippians 2:9–11 and 1 Corinthians 12:3 Winchester proposed a syllogism

1. If all people (every tongue in creation) shall confess Jesus as Lord (Phil 2:11); and
2. if no one can confess Jesus as Lord apart from by the Spirit (1 Cor 12:3); then
3. the Spirit must work effectually in all people leading them to confess Christ as Lord.

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[106] Something he claimed had been his own procedure (*UR*.III.A6).
[107] Winchester, *Letter to a friend*, 43.
[108] Winchester listed these texts in *An Attempt to Collect the Scripture Passages*, and surveys these, and other such texts, in *The Universal Restoration*; *Letter to De Coetlogon*, 26–31; *Letters to Dan Taylor*, 45–50.
[109] Winchester discusses at some length whether "all" literally means "all" (*UR*.I.A9). He argues that "all" means "all without exception" except when the context indicates that it does not (e.g., 1 Cor 15:27). He is, in my judgement, correct.

He took this confession to be salvific (and not one of forced subjugation) in light of the OT text Paul used—Isaiah 45:23, which has a clear global-salvation context ("turn to me you ends of the earth and be saved")—and in light of general Pauline teaching on the link between confessing Jesus as Lord and salvation (*UR*.I.A7). Critically, in terms of his hermeneutic, he wrote, "As endless damnation appears to me to be *against the promises*, I cannot hold to it as an article of my faith; but were there no promises or intimations to the contrary in Scripture, I should not require it to be threatened in any stronger terms than it is . . . my difficulty arises from these express promises of God" (*UR*.I.A7).[110]

One interesting argument of Winchester's which he deployed in several publications is based on his reading of John's gospel.[111] It is worth repeating because it is an argument that has not made it into the popular universalist literature. It can be set out as follows:

1. *Major premise:* the Father has given all into the hands of the Son (John 13:3, cf. Matt 11:27; Luke 10:22)
2. *Minor premise:* all that the Father has given to the Son will come to him and will not be cast out (John 6:37) but will be raised up at the last day (John 6:39–40).
3. *Therefore*, all will come to the Son, will not be cast out but will be raised up at the last day.

One aspect of this argument open to dispute is the interpretation of the texts in the minor premise *in the light of* the text in the major one. The texts in the minor premise had often, as Winchester was well aware, been used as an argument for a Calvinist theology. It is the major premise that allows one to suppose that those given by the Father to the Son are not a limited group, as Calvinists claimed, but *all* people (*UR*.IV.A2). Winchester saw his argument brought together in John 17:2–3: "For thou [the Father] hast given him [the Son] power over *all flesh*, that he should give eternal life to *all* that thou hast given him." He further reinforces his case by appeal to John 6: "If all shall be taught of God [John 6:45]; and all that are taught shall come to Christ [John 6:45]; and none that come to him shall be cast out or rejected [John 6:37]; if all these premises are true . . . how very naturally the conclusion follows, viz. that all shall be finally brought home to God" (*UR*.IV.A2). As further support he brings in John 12:32: "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth [on the cross], will draw *all* unto me." Christ will see the travail of his soul *and be satisfied* (Isa 53:11).[112]

Winchester saw the positive case for universal restoration as founded on several theological principals (*UR*.III.A1). First, God is the universal and only *creator* of all—that all creatures are made by him and for him. Second, the universal *love* of God—he loves all that he has created (Wis 11:24). Third, Christ *died for all* (Heb 2:9; 1 John 2:1–2; 1 Tim 2:5–6; 2 Cor 5:14–15). Fourth, that God is *unchangeable* and so his love for his creatures cannot waver, no matter how heinous their sins may be and no matter how

[110] Similar sentiments are expressed in Winchester, *Letter to a Friend*, 41–42.
[111] A slightly different version is found in ibid., 53.
[112] Dan Taylor, the founder of the new connexion of General Baptists, criticized Winchester's interpretation of John here (Taylor, *The Eternity of Future Punishment*), and Winchester responded (Winchester, *Letters to Dan Taylor*, 56–59). On Taylor see Rinaldi, *The Tribe of Dan*.

much he may hate that sin. Fifth, that God's *purposes* are unchanging and that those purposes are to gather all things together in Christ (Eph 1:8–11).[113]

But what about the biblical teachings on hell? Dialogue I of *The Universal Restoration* opens with an issue right at the heart of the debate—the meaning of the words translated as "eternal"/"everlasting" as applied to the eschatological punishment of the wicked. In the context of the eighteenth century, more or less every attempt to defend or attack universalism was compelled to engage this issue. A few Scriptures describe the punishment of the wicked as "eternal" (Isa 33:14; Dan 12:2; Matt 18:8; 25:41, 46; Mark 3:29; 2 Thess 1:7–9), and such verses were foundational for traditional theology. Winchester's response, which was partly inspired by his reading of Siegvolck,[114] was to argue (a) that the word "eternal" is only *rarely* used of the punishment of the wicked in the Bible (eight times in total), (b) that the Hebrew and Greek words translated "eternal" are often applied in the Bible to *things which have an* end. For instance, the "everlasting hills" in Canaan (Gen 49:26), Aaron's "everlasting" high priesthood (Ex 40:15), Phinehas' "everlasting" priesthood (Num 25:11–13), "everlasting" atonement rituals for the Israelites (Lev 16:34), etc. But, said Winchester, these "everlasting" ordinances were only *until* the time of Christ (Heb 9:10) and are now no more. The Hebrew and Greek words only indicate "an age"—a complete, albeit long, period of time—and *not* eternal duration.[115] He lists over fifty cases where the Hebrew *le'ôlam* does not mean "forever" (*UR*.I.A1).[116] Winchester thus established his principle that the meaning of *aiōnios* in any specific instance must be determined by its subject—the meaning is not the same on all occasions.[117] Even spiritual things which are said to be "forever and ever"—such as the kingdom of Jesus (Heb 1:8)—are declared by the Bible to have a limited duration (here Winchester refers to his unusual interpretation of 1 Cor 15:24–28, on which see earlier) (*UR*.I.A3). However, Winchester's *main* reason for resisting an endless torment interpretation of these verses was that he believed such an interpretation to contradict the plain teaching of various other texts that he believed promise universal salvation (*UR*.I.A2). In sum, Winchester argued that the final punishment of the lost is certainly "for an age" but not obviously "for ever."[118] So we cannot found a doctrine of eternal punishment on the words *aiōnion* or *le'ôlam* (*UR*.I.A6).

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[113] He also added a sixth (the argument from John's gospel discussed above) and a seventh (that the Scriptures cannot be broken and they promise universal salvation) principle.

[114] Siegvolck, *Everlasting*, chap. 7.

[115] Winchester also pointed out that the Greek word for "punishment" in the phrase "eternal punishment"—*kolasis*—means "chastisement" or "correction" in classical literature. This suggests that the punishment in question is not merely retributive but also intended to correct (Wincester, *Letter to De Coetlogon*, 6–8). On *aiōnios* see also Winchester, *Letters to Dan Taylor*, Letters 1 and 2 which, if anything presents a better case than *The Universal Restoration* for resisting "eternal" as a translation.

[116] Concerning the expression "forever and ever" (*eis tous aiōnas ton aiōnōn*) which is used in Revelation of the punishment of the wicked (Rev 14:11; 19:3; 20:10): Winchester admited that it is very strong—literally meaning "for an age of ages"—but it is consistent, he says, with a *very* long *yet limited* period. (*UR*.I.A2). Winchester listed some uses of the Hebrew expression "forever and ever" in which a he thought a limited period was intended (Isa 30:8; Jer 7:7; Jer 25:5; Ps 148:6, cf. Ps 102:25–26). Winchester, *Letters to Dan Taylor*, 13–14.

[117] Winchester, *Letter to De Coetlogon*, 8.

[118] Note that Winchester's conclusion is modest—not that the biblical language *cannot* mean that hell is everlasting, but merely that it *need* not (Winchester, *Letter to De Coetlogon*, 26; Winchester, *Letters to Dan Taylor*, 6).

And it is not simply a matter of the *terminology* used but of theology—the life of the saints arises from their *union with Christ*. *Union with the ever-living Lord* is the ground of eternal life (Heb 7:16; Col 3:4). The doctrine of the eternal duration of hell has no such *theological* foundation (*UR*.I.A7). Indeed, Winchester worried that a theological foundation for everlasting hell appears to require an eternal moral dualism between light and darkness—a pagan and not a Christian notion (*UR*.I.A8).

But the traditional theology of hell was not simply founded on the use of the word "eternal" but also upon certain descriptions of judgment. For instance, *gehenna* is described as a place where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched (Mark 9:43–49). Winchester drew attention to various fires in the Bible that are described in just as strong terms as the fire of *gehenna* but which went out long ago. For instance, Jeremiah 17:27 speaks of an unquenchable fire in the gates of Jerusalem (cf. Ezek 20:42–48); and Isaiah 34 speaks of Edom being consumed by an unquenchable fire that burns unceasingly, day and night, with smoke that rises forever. To take the texts *literally* would require us to say that the prophets were wrong, but this is to misunderstand the language. It indicates a fire that will not be quenched *until it has completed its task* rather than a fire that will not *ever* be quenched. We should, he believed, hear Jesus' words similarly. In fact, Jesus himself mitigates the strong words on *gehenna*'s fire by describing its function as that of "*salting* with fire" (Mark 9:49), which suggests that the purpose of the fire of hell is that of preservation and *purification* and not simply of retributive torment (*UR*.II.A1).[119]

Winchester's discussion of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16—a classic text used to support traditional views of hell—is interesting. Here a great gulf separates hades from paradise and no one can cross it. But Winchester deployed a theological trump card: *Christ* can pass the impassible chasm. "With man is it impossible; but with God all things are possible. And I believe, that Jesus Christ was not only able to pass, but that he actually did pass that gulph, which was impassable to all men, but not to him" (*UR*.II.A5). He went on to employ the theological motif of Christ's "descent into hell" to support this claim (discussing at length the biblical foundations of the motif along the way, e.g., 1 Pet 3:18–20; 4:5–6).

> "For to this end Christ both died, rose, and revived, that he might be Lord, both of the dead and living." Rom xiv.9 . . . It seemed necessary, that our Saviour should visit men in all situations, that he might redeem them . . . It was not only necessary that he should die, to vanquish death, and to redeem us from its power; but it was equally needful for him to go into those places, where spirits were confined in the regions of darkness, that he might gain universal dominion, spoil principalities, and redeem the captives whom he had bought with his blood" (*UR*.II.A5).

[119] Winchester suggested that furnace language has similar implications. Regarding the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which will not be forgiven (Matt 12:31–32; Luke 12:10): Winchester saw it as the same as the sin of apostasy in Hebrews (6:5–6; 10:26–29; 12:15–17) and the sin unto death in 1 John (5:16). He wanted to take the threat very seriously. This sin, he said, cannot be pardoned but *must* be punished with the second death. That fate is sealed. But, as Winchester believed that there would come a time when the lake of fire will cease to exist (on the grounds that Christ's victory over sin and death—1 Cor 15:26—requires him to defeat the *second* death, as it is far more an enemy than the first death) there is still hope for such sinners. In the end, grace must abound more than sin (Rom 5:20).

So the gulf in Luke 16 can be crossed *through union with Christ*. It might indeed be "impossible" for the rich—like the man in Luke 16—to enter the kingdom; *but with God* nothing is impossible (Mark 10:27).[120]

Winchester's reading of the Judas story is also suggestive. Jesus said of his betrayer that it would have been better for him if he had never been born (Mark 14:21). Does this rule out any future hope for him? One must understand the rhetoric being used. It was, wrote Winchester, a common proverb among the Jews, if a great misfortune befell a man, to say that it would be better that he had not been born. He looked at Job's extensive cursing of the day of his birth in light of his misfortunes (Job 3:2–19). Job felt that it would have been better for him never to have been born than to face the calamities that had come upon him. Jeremiah had similar sentiments (Jer 20:11–18). Postmortem punishment is not even in sight in these texts. The expression is not theological doctrine but a powerful way of expressing the emotions of horror people have in the face of dire circumstances. Judas would feel the *dreadful remorse*—a remorse that drove him to suicide—of having betrayed the Lord he loved. That is *all* that Jesus' words require (*UR*.II.A6).[121]

Winchester developed his theology of hell in light of the wider scriptural pattern of punishment followed by restoration—a regular motif across the Bible. He noted that "God frequently threatens the greatest judgements, and promises the greatest mercies, to the same people and persons" (*UR*.IV.A3). Indeed over and over again we see those who are living under divine wrath, in what seems a hopeless state, being redeemed. "I could justify this observation by hundreds of passages wherein God threatens his people with judgements the most severe, and declares—that his eyes shall not pity, nor his arm save; that he will visit their transgressions upon them, will utterly cast them off, and will not have compassion on them at all; and then such promises of mercy break out as are sufficient to astonish every one with their greatness" (*UR*.IV.A3). Even the judgment that serves as a paradigm of hell itself—Sodom, which was destroyed with eternal fire (Jude 7)—was to be restored (Ezek 16:44, 53–63).[122] Punishment is indeed "a just retribution" but it is *also* intended as a corrective for the good of the one punished (*UR*.IV.A16).

Winchester maintained that the burden of proof lies with traditionalists who claim that there is *a radical distinction* between God's purposes in judgment in the *present* age (where they allow it a corrective function) and in the age to come (where they do not).[123]

Of course, divine punishment might not yield an immediate result: "punishment to a certain degree, inflames and enrages, in a most amazing manner; but continued longer, and heavier, produces a contrary effect—softens, humbles, and subdues . . . God knows

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[120] It is interesting to contrast this interpretation with John Murray's universalist interpretation of Luke 16 (Murray, *Letters and Sketches*, vol 1, Letter 1). Winchester was inclined to see the story not as a parable but as a literal account of a real event. Murray read the story, rather implausibly, as an allegory.

[121] Also Jesus said that his twelve apostles—Judas among them—would sit on twelve thrones (Matt 19:28), which perhaps *suggests* a future for Judas. Peter did indeed quote Ps 69:25 when seeking another to replace him (Acts 1:20) but Winchester pointed out that Paul uses Ps 69 to speak of the Jews (Rom 10:9–10) and yet they will be restored, so the use of Ps 69 does not rule out restoration (*UR*.II.A6).

[122] Winchester defended this reading of the Ezekiel text in *UR*.IV.A2, A15. See too Winchester, *Letters to Dan Taylor*, 11–12.

[123] Winchester, *Letters to Dan Taylor*, 71–72.

how to correct men, in such a manner as to bring them to submit to him, in due time" (*UR*.IV.A11).[124] Winchester also assured his readers that

> . . . so amazing is God's boundless love
> And tenderness towards the human race,
> That none shall drink this dreadful cup of woe,
> And feel the torments of the lake of fire,
> Whom any gentler methods could reclaim.[125]

Yet the concern for modern readers here is that Winchester gives the impression that God *tortures* people into submission.

How long would hell last? Winchester thought that the NT language of "an age" or even of "an age of ages" indicates that, for some at least, it will endure for a *very* long time indeed. He speculated on one occasion that the time from the creation of the world to the final restoration would be one grand jubilee, of perhaps fifty thousand years.[126] As Winchester believed the world to be six thousand years old and the millennium about to dawn we might imagine that he is supposing hell to last about forty three thousand years! On another occasion he speculated that it might "last fifty thousand years, or fifty thousand times that number . . . 2,500,000,000 years."[127] Even though he was fending off those who accused him of making light of hell and was possibly overstating things, it is nevertheless clear that he did envisage hell as lasting a *long* while.

And Winchester did take the warnings of hell *very* seriously.[128] His evangelistic address to the youth of Philadelphia (1785) is telling in this regard. He *pleaded earnestly* with them to take the fate of their souls seriously in light of "the shortness of time, the uncertainty of life, the certainty of death and judgement, the worth of the soul, the duration of eternity, the torments of the damned, and the happiness of the righteous." And thus he esteemed the task of the evangelist very highly: "There is no business or labour to which men are called, so important, so arduous, so difficult, and that requires such wisdom to perform it [as that of the soul-winner]. The amazing worth of winning souls, makes the labour so exceeding important, and of such infinite concern."[129]

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[124] Winchester appeared to hold libertarian views of freedom. Thus he argued that the reason that God does not save everyone immediately is that "God dealeth with us as intelligent and moral agents; and therefore, though he will have us be saved, yet our wills must choose salvation before we can be happy; . . . in short, we must be holy by choice, in order to be happy" (Winchester, *Letter to De Coetlogon*, 33).

[125] Winchester, *Process and Empire*, book X, lines 605–9.

[126] Winchester, *Letter to De Coetlogon*, 18.

[127] Winchester, *Letter to a Friend*, 50–51.

[128] Some objected that if one could be redeemed from hell then one does not take hell seriously. Winchester had little time for this: If a man said, "Earthly punishment must come to an end, so I can see no difference between being made an heir to the king and being hanged, drawn, and quartered for high treason," we would think that man *insane* (*UR*.IV.A14).

[129] Winchester, *Funeral Sermon*. In this sermon—delivered in honor of John Wesley on his death in 1791—he offered practical advice on "soul winning" and the kind of life God requires of one called to such a ministry.

A theological via media

For Winchester the theo-logic of the issue forces a choice between Calvinism, Arminianism, and Universal Restoration. "Either God created some to be miserable to endless ages [Calvinism], or must be frustrated eternally in his designs [Arminianism], or all must be restored at last [Universalism]." (*UR*.II.A3). One of the appeals of universalism to Winchester was that it offered a way to affirm and hold together key aspects of both the Calvinist and the Arminian systems—"to embrace them [both] in one grand system of benevolence."[130] He articulates this most clearly in his sermon, *The Outcasts Comforted*. We can summarize his theological points in the table below.

Doctrine	**Calvinists**	**Arminians**	**Universal Baptists**
God loves all		☺	☺
The objects of God's love will come to salvation	☺		☺
God desires to save all		☺	☺
All God's purposes will be accomplished	☺		☺
Christ died for all		☺	☺
All for whom Christ died will be saved (his blood was not shed in vain)	☺		☺

We Universalist Baptists, he said, simply affirm beliefs that mainstream Protestants hold, so why are we considered heretical?

As Winchester saw it, the problems generated within both the Calvinist and Arminian systems stem from the conviction of those on both sides of that divide that a belief in eternal torment is non-negotiable. Making eternal hell a first principle requires them to sacrifice other doctrines to accommodate it. Thus Calvinists must surrender the beliefs that God loves all people, desires to save them, and that Christ died for them. And Arminians must surrender the belief that in the end God will achieve all his purposes for creation, believing instead in God's *partial* victory over sin (*UR*.III.A6). Indeed, the universalist system understood as a theological *via media* seemed to Winchester, perhaps somewhat naïvely, to have some ecumenical potential in bringing Calvinists and Arminians together.[131]

A place for "experimental knowledge"

While maintaining that theology must conform to Scripture Winchester could not but be influenced by the currents of Enlightenment thought that flowed in both America and in England. As such he took seriously both reason and experiential evidence as having a role in theological reflection. For instance, he has an interesting argument from

[130] Ibid.

[131] See his preface to his edition of Paul Siegvolck's book, *The Everlasting Gospel* (1792) and Winchester, *The Outcasts Comforted* (1782).

conversion experience for his universalist doctrine.[132] Evangelical conversion had a very particular shape in the eighteenth century. One first experienced oneself as a dreadful sinner in the sight of God, worthy of wrath, and unable to save oneself. After a period of wrestling with this dreadful truth the gospel word broke through into one's heart as a word of great release and one abandoned oneself to Christ with joy and gratitude. This was Winchester's own experience. And in that moment of conversion he felt "the fullness, the sufficiency, and willingness of Christ to save me and all men . . . and O how did I long, that ever soul of Adam's race might come to know the love of God in Christ Jesus! And I thought I could not be willing to live any longer on earth, unless it might please God to make me useful to my fellow creatures" (*UR*.III.A2). This "experimental knowledge" many evangelicals found as an almost spontaneous aspect of their conversion. They *felt* that Christ can save all and they earnestly desired that he do so. Do we, asked Winchester, have more compassion for creatures than God himself? Surely not! Do not these feelings come from the Holy Spirit and express God's own desires? And who could imagine the Spirit inspiring someone to pray *against* the salvation of all people. Such a prayer seems blasphemous even to those who deny universalism and this, he thinks, ought to give them pause for thought (*UR*.III.A2).

Responding to objections

One common eighteenth century objection to universalism was that it encouraged licentiousness. The fear of eternal torment, it was felt, was needed to motivate people to avoid sinful living. Remove that threat and society would degenerate. Winchester denied the logic. The theological principals that undergird universalism—the God created all people to "glorify his name, and enjoy him forever," the love of God for his creatures, the death of Jesus for all, the *unwavering* love of God even in the face of our rebellion—in no way encourage sinful living (*UR*.III.A1). On the contrary they encourage lives of holy devotion and gratitude. After all, *who* would reason as follows? "I know that God created me, seeks to do me good, sent his Son to die for me, and that he will always love me . . . so I must hate him!" On the contrary, the revelation of divine love solicits our loving response (1 John 4:19). Winchester said that in his own experience over the years of knowing universalists they were not at all ungodly people. He felt that universalist belief "causes benevolence, meekness, humility, forbearance, forgiveness, charity, and all goodness to abound and increase"[133] (*UR*.III.A2). Rather than denial of eternal torment undermining holiness Winchester suspected that belief in eternal torment was actually a chief reason that many *reject* Christianity. And, he wrote, the belief in eternal torment does not seem to have restrained evil very well over the centuries in which it has been the dominant belief (*UR*.III.A3).

In fact, Winchester argued, the cause of practical godliness is potentially undermined by the denial of universal restoration. How so? Consider the following divine commands: (a) love all people, even your enemies, so that you may be perfect like your heavenly Father (Matt 5:44–48), (b) do good to all people (1 Thess 5:15), (c) forgive those who sin against you (Matt 6:12; Luke 11:4, etc.), (d) pray for all people so that they might be saved (1Tim 2:1, 8; 4:9–11). Now a traditional theology of hell implies that God's own behavior or purposes are inconsistent with these commands (he does not love

[132] A version of the argument is also found in Winchester, *Letter to De Coetlogon*, 33–34.
[133] Obviously this is a somewhat idealized account!

his enemies in hell, nor will he ever again do good to them, or forgive them). Consequently a traditional view on hell works in a subtle way *against* the practice of godliness. Take (d): in 1 Timothy 2 Paul commands prayer for all people that they might be saved on the grounds that (i) God wants to save them, and (ii) Christ died to save them. So he urges prayer without doubting (1 Tim 2:8). But how can we offer prayer for the salvation of all *without doubting* if we believe either that God does not really *wish* to save all (Calvinism) or that he is *incapable* of doing so (Arminianism)?[134] So observing the practical commands is at very least assisted by a belief in universalism (*UR*.III.A2).[135]

To Winchester, belief in universal restoration served not to undermine the seriousness of sin but to extol the power of divine grace—where sin abounds grace abounds all the more—and not to remove the importance of the cross but to better appreciate the breadth of its saving effects. "They [i.e. those who deny universalism] hold that it shall cleanse a small number from their sins; I believe that it shall cleanse, heal, and restore the whole human race. They believe that its virtue endures for a little season [i.e. prior to death]; I maintain that it shall continue to all ages, until all evil shall be destroyed out of the universe" (*UR*.III.A2). So he was unimpressed by the regular accusation that he set aside the need for the cross. He believed that his view of it set it in an even more glorious light.

A hell of a problem

Winchester also had criticisms of traditional philosophical-theological arguments for eternal torment in hell.[136] The classical Anselmian defense of eternal torment that was commonly employed by evangelicals in the eighteenth century ran as follows:

1. God is a being of infinite majesty and perfection worthy of infinite honor.
2. To sin against God incurs infinite demerit.
3. Infinite demerit deserves an infinite punishment.
4. Therefore, the sinner deserves to be punished infinitely.

Winchester was singularly unimpressed with this reasoning. In the first instance, it is not a case of reasoning based on biblical *revelation* but of simple speculation and therefore it cannot be decisive. Second, on this reasoning does one act of obedience yield *infinite merit*? If so, where does that take us? Third, the merit or demerit of an action is not determined by the object of the action (in this case, the infinite God) but by the actor, and the actions of finite creatures cannot incur either infinite merit or demerit. To do so would be to ascribe one of God's perfections (infinity) to a creature. Fourth, the Bible teaches that some sins are worse than others and deserve different punishments. Indeed, there are different degrees of punishment in hell (Luke 12:47–48) (*UR*.IV.A16).[137] But the

[134] It ought to be noted that the Greek is better translated "without *arguing*" and not "without *doubting*."
[135] A version of this argument is also found in Winchester, *Letter to De Coetlogon*, 34–35.
[136] Winchester was familiar with the alternative view of hell-as-*annihilation* but he found it unconvincing—partly because the Bible pictures those in hell as *suffering*, but mainly because he thought the Bible promised universal salvation and so annihilation *could not* be true (*UR*.IV.A15).
[137] He defended this interpretation of Luke 12:47–48 against Dan Taylor's critique in Winchester, *Letters to Dan Taylor*, 67–70.

Anselmian defense of hell levels out all such differences making all sins as bad as each other—a ten year old child would deserve the same punishment as the most persecuting tyrant, and this offends our sense of justice (*UR*.II.A5). In short, this speculative theology falls foul of both revelation and reason. However, Winchester reasoned that even *if* this philosophical argument for eternal torment was correct, it would be no disproof of universalism, because the cross of Christ—which takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29)—is powerful enough to redeem people from such an eternal condemnation (*UR*.IV.A16).

Winchester's irenic apologetics

Winchester's work unsurprisingly generated controversy and animosity in both spoken and published responses.[138] One of the most striking aspects of Winchester's ministry was his unwavering insistence on considering all his "opponents" as siblings in Christ that must be treated with humility, gentleness, and respect. In the theologically polemical world of the eighteenth century this is very impressive.

By temperament Winchester hated controversy and by religious conviction he believed that it was wrong to seek to win arguments while in the process failing to love those with whom one was in disagreement. "I have no great opinion of controversial writings in general; the combatants more commonly seek after victory than truth . . . Writing on controversy is sometimes attended with many bad consequences, such as alienating the affections of Christians from one another."[139] He added, "For my own part, I by no means wish to contend with any man—and as far as I know my own heart, never yet did; and I hope I never shall write from any principle but love, and a desire to do good to mankind, within the very small circle of my acquaintance."[140] In his fourth letter to Dan Taylor he began his response:

> I had almost once determined never to enter into personal contest with any man or men, but rather suffer to let them keep the field, and let them go away with the cry of victory on their side, than to enter the lists with them. For I was more afraid of myself than I was of my antagonists; I feared lest I should in any instance return railing for railing, or that a spark of wrath, pride, or contempt, should arise in my heart while defending what appeared to me to be the truth of God. And I considered it a *million* times better that my name and character should be trampled under foot, and despised, than that my soul should be hurt by those evil tempers before-mentioned, the innocent cause of Religion be reproached through my means, the name of that God whom I profess to love and serve, be dishonoured, and fresh cause of stumbling given to mankind.[141]

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[138] Published reactions include Thompson, *The Eternity of Hell Torments Vindicated* (1788), Sinclair, *A Letter to . . . Winchester* (1790); Taylor, *The Eternity of Future Punishment* (1790), Huntingdon, *Advocates for Devils refuted* (1794); Spalding, *Universalism Confounds and Destroys Itself* (1805); Isaac, *Doctrine of Universal Restoration, Examined and Refuted* (1808). In this period we also find published responses to other universalists (e.g., Jonathan Edwards' reply to Charles Chauncey and Andrew Fuller's letters to William Vidler).

[139] Winchester, *Letter to De Coetlogon*, 3–4.

[140] Ibid., 35.

[141] Winchester, *Letters to Dan Taylor*, 51–52.

Indeed it was, he said, only because so much trouble had been taken by some to represent him as a dangerous heretic that he felt compelled to defend his theology before the world at all (*UR*.II, intro; *UR*.IV, conclusion).

He did not despise Christians with different views on the issue: he esteemed Wesley the Arminian and Whitfield the Calvinist as "faithful servants of the Lord Jesus Christ" who, despite their differences, had many Christian virtues in common.[142] He regarded Jonathan Edwards as a "great and good man . . . of profound learning, good sense, and piety"[143] and Dan Taylor as "a sincere Christian, a faithful minister of Christ, and a man who speaks and writes what he believes"—someone of whom Winchester can say, "I heartily love and esteem him."[144]

When he did engage in debate he wanted such discussion to model how Christians could disagree in love.[145] Thus in his *Letters to the Rev Dan Taylor*, part of a public exchange of letters published in 1790, he wrote, "It is my intention to treat you with the same personal respect throughout these letters as I would conversing with you face to face"[146] And, "I had great hopes, that our manner of writing controversy would have been a pattern to others, and that nothing in the least bitter would have appeared in the whole. But, oh, how rare it is to find controversial writings without some acrimony!"[147]

A Brief Appreciative Critique

Elhanan Winchester is now a largely forgotten figure but in his day he was a prolific preacher and writer and was relatively influential in both America and England. He is of interest not because he was an especially good theologian—he was certainly no Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, nor Andrew Fuller—but because he does not fit the mould. Here we see an evangelical preacher who was theologically orthodox, deeply committed to maintaining a biblical faith, and passionate about God's gospel and evangelism. Yet he was a convinced believer in "the universal restoration" and one of the founding figures of the modest universalist revival of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

My main purpose in this paper has been simply to *set out* for readers key aspects of Winchester's universalism because few people are aware of his theology, and his work is not easy to access. However, a few very brief words of evaluation are in order to end.

There is a lot to commend Winchester. In the first instance there is the respectful way in which he engaged his interlocutors. His conviction that when Christians debated issues on which they disagreed they must do so with love and gentleness, and with an openness to being persuaded to change their views in the light of Scripture, is inspiring. And certainly in his *written* works (many of which were originally *preached* works) he "walked the talk."

Second, while his exegesis of some texts is stretched and, to many readers today, embarrassingly "fundamentalist" in its literalism, Winchester was often a level-headed

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[142] Winchester, *Funeral Sermon*.
[143] Winchester, *Letter to De Coetlogon*, 4.
[144] Winchester, *Letter to a Friend*, 55.
[145] Even his book-length response to Thomas Paine's shocking book *The Age of Reason*—entitled *A Defence of Revelation* (1796)—was amazing in its restraint. Paine's work was, in Winchester's view, outright blasphemy, and yet he still managed to treat Paine with courtesy and respect.
[146] Winchester, *Letters to Dan Taylor*, 1.
[147] Ibid., 60.

theological exegete who was always genuinely open to correction. One feels that one is reading a *student* of the word rather than one who wished to master it and make it fit his pre-existent scheme (although in practice he sometimes did fall into this pit). And his overall proposal for a universalist reading of Scripture *at very least* contains many elements worthy of serious consideration.

Third, his success at holding together faith in universal restoration alongside a heartfelt fear of divine wrath and a deep passion for evangelism goes a long way to extracting the sting from the oft-repeated argument that universalism undermines both the serious warnings in the NT about final punishment and the motivation for evangelism.

Fourth, he deployed some solid theological arguments that I think still carry a lot of weight. For instance, his critique of the Anselmian defense of eternal hell, while not made with analytical precision, is powerful. His grasp of the issues regarding the relation of Calvinist, Arminian, and universalist theologies is "on the ball." And his experiential argument from conversion, while less coercive, is highly suggestive.

Yet Winchester was not without his faults. He was a man of his time and fell prey to the same failure as many other nonconformists in this period: a failure to appreciate the place of tradition in theological reflection and biblical interpretation, opting instead for what I would suggest was a naïve biblicism. This was Protestantism in one of its reactions to the intellectual currents of the time. But it led to a certain superficiality in his theology—a tendency to just list off texts and then link them in certain ways.

Second, while Winchester was orthodox in his Christology and his universalist theology had a trinitarian shape[148] (although he did undervalue pneumatology), he did not, in my opinion, allow that trinitarian faith to penetrate his universalist theology *deeply enough*. In this he would have done well to have learned from some of his Calvinist predecessors (such as John Owen) or contemporaries (such as Jonathan Edwards) whose theology was integrally trinitarian. I think that Winchester should have pondered and spelled out far more carefully what would happen to his system of Christian universalism if one abandoned trinitarian theology in favor of unitarianism. Winchester's failure to do this was perhaps a consequence of his biblicism and it allowed some of his followers in both England and the USA to hold fast to his belief in universal restoration while rejecting the Trinity. As a consequence the bulk of the organized Universalist movement quickly bound itself to unitarian theology and thereby marginalized itself still further in the eyes of the orthodox. But there is a case to be made that Winchester's Christian universalism *comes apart* if one abandons the Three-in-One God.

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[148] We find him speaking on occasion of God as "Trinity" and as "the Triune God" (see Winchester, *Seed*), and as formulating salvation in trinitarian ways: "We are sure . . . that those who are drawn by the Father, united to the Son, sealed by the Holy Ghost . . . shall never be separated from him." (*UR*.I.A7); "the powerful, saving grace of God, and the operation of the Divine Spirit, must have the glory of restoring, or creating men anew: and the blood of Jesus must cleanse their souls from the guilt and pollution of sin" (*UR*.IV.A13). "Salvation is wholly owing to the grace of God, through Jesus Christ, by the work of the Holy Spirit" (Winchester, *Funeral Sermon*). "Christ shall never cease to be, but I believe that he, with the Father, and the Holy Ghost, shall ever reign one God, world without end" (Winchester, *Letters to Dan Taylor*, 9). We also have a trinitarian prayer from a sermon: "Christ the Lord . . . in whose name help me always to offer my petitions, in whom thou are ever well pleased. To him with thee, O Father, and thee, O Holy Ghost, be praises world without end. Amen" (Winchester, *Address to the Youth*). It is also worth noting that Siegvolk, De Benneville, and Rush were also trinitarian.

Third, Winchester did not always maintain a sense of proportion in his theology. Now I have to say that he did have a very measured approach to preaching universal restitution. His preference was to preach *texts* and if universalism came out of the text then he'd preach it, but if it did not then he did not. Thus he preached on all sorts of topics other than universalism. However, one gets a glimpse of the shape and proportions of his theology in *The Process and Empire of Christ*. It celebrates the story of Jesus from his birth through to the time he hands over the kingdom to the Father. What is interesting is the amount of space devoted to the parts of the story. I will set out the contents and the point will be clear

Book I: the birth and life of Christ
Book II: the passion of Christ
Book III: the intermediate state
Book IV: the resurrection
Book V: the ascension
Book VI: the intercession of Christ in heaven (a shorter book)
Book VII: the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost
Book VIII: the second coming of Christ and the start of the millennium
Book IX: the millennium
Book X: the end of the millennium
Book XI: the new creation
Book XII: the conclusion of the mediatorial kingdom (a shorter book)

It is immediately clear that Winchester placed *great* stress on future events (Books VII–XII). Indeed he devoted more space to the millennium than to the birth, or the life, or death, or resurrection of Jesus. Now, of course, his theology was integrated enough for his discussions of the future to be related to his discussions of the *whole* life of Christ (for instance, the power of Jesus' blood looms large in the chapters on the future) but there is still something askew here. That he devoted a whole book to Easter Saturday (Book III)—a day about which the Bible has *almost nothing* to say—is "interesting." And that he gave almost as much space to celebrating Lucifer's repentance—an event that is *at best* an inference from Scripture—as to discussing the coming of the Spirit clearly indicates a lack of balance in his theology.

Fourth, Winchester does face a moral objection to his portrayal of hell. Even though we must take into account that he was reacting against those who are accusing him of making light of hell it is hard for modern readers not to feel rather awkward. Is God a torturer who inflicts great pain on sinners until they repent? We are not unreasonable in posing this question and it is one that all universalists who believe that God sends people to hell—and I include myself here—must ponder.

Finally, Winchester never seemed to fully grasp one of the theological concerns of his opponents. They reasoned as follows: If those in hell suffer the full punishment for their sin (remember that Winchester had denied that the full punishment would be *eternal*) then their liberation from hell is simply the result of their having paid the price for their own sins themselves and the cross of Christ seems to play no role. As such Winchester's universalism seems make the cross unnecessary for the salvation of many people. Now he denied this and insisted that those redeemed from hell were redeemed by Jesus' atoning death. Judgment, he wrote, *reveals* and lays bare sin, convicting sinners, while punishment *destroys* sin, humbles and subdues sinners. But only the saving grace

of God, in the Spirit, by the blood of Jesus can *save* people (*UR*.IV.A13). However, the worry remains that he has not provided a fully integrated theological account of *how* this all fits together.[149] Perhaps this too was a result of Winchester's biblicism. He insisted that salvation from hell was only by divine grace, through Christ's atoning work *because that is what he believed the Bible to teach*. That was enough for him, and it is fine as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough. What Winchester's critics reasonably asked of him was an integrated theological account of what role Christ's atonement plays in redeeming people from hell. This he never provided.[150]

But these weakness must not lead us to dismiss the bold and often interesting theology of Elhanan Winchester. He provides a thought-provoking overall case for Christian universalism and he was a good and faithful servant of his Lord Jesus Christ.

Winchester among the Variety of Christian Universalisms

We now need to locate Winchester in the context of the variety of eighteenth-century universalisms. Winchester and Murray were two of the leaders of churches that were officially universalist and were part of the foundation for what soon became a universalist denomination. For the first time in Christian history we see the denominational institutionalization of universalism.[151] The universalist churches provided structures for passing on universalist theologies from generation to generation. However, prior to the eighteenth century—and still now in mainstream Christianity—universalism has had a more precarious existence. There have been no reliable channels to secure its passing on from one generation to another. Consequently, we observe two things about its perpetuation: its constant "spontaneous" reinvention, and its, sometimes complex, genealogical lines of descent.

Reinventing universalism

Throughout Christian history, but most especially since the seventeenth century, universalism keeps being "reinvented." We can illustrate this from the eighteenth century again. Here I will introduce three different people who all appear to have come to universalist convictions without having been taught them by anyone else.

George De Benneville (1703–93)

In early eighteenth-century Europe we discover universalist sentiments bubbling up among some of the pietistic groups. One prominent member of such a group was George De Benneville. De Benneville, the son of Huguenot refugees from France, was born and brought up in the royal court in London. After a period of mental anguish over his sinful state, he had a profound conversion experience—a revelation of God's love and grace in Christ. This experience made him both an avid evangelist and a universalist.

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[149] Winchester tried to respond to this argument in Winchester, *Letters to Dan Taylor*, 78–80 but it seems to me that he failed to adequately appreciate the objection.

[150] There are some resources in his work that he could have drawn on to start to answer such a request. E.g., for Winchester the cross is about more than escaping punishment in hell. More fundamentally it is about destroying the evil in fallen human nature (Winchester, *Seed*, 10–11). Christ shared in all of our human life and overcame the evil in his own body.

[151] I ought to add that, from the start, denominational universalism was theologically heterodox, embracing not merely universalism but also unitarianism.

His expansive views of divine grace set him at odds with the Huguenot community he had grown up in and as a result he was cast out. So, aged seventeen, he travelled to France and later to Germany and Holland to preach the gospel. He joined with like-minded believers setting up pietistic communities, was thrown into prison on several occasions, and once was only saved from execution by a *literally* last-minute reprieve from Louis XV.

At the age of thirty-seven (c.1740) De Benneville had a vivid and profound near-death visionary experience. He "became sickly of consumptive disorder" resulting from his deep anguish over the fate of the unsaved. The sickness brought him to death's door and then to his life-changing universalist vision.[152] Here we have an example of a man that became a universalist on the basis of a couple of profound religious experiences that ran counter to his religious upbringing.

Charles Chauncey (1705–87)

Charles Chauncy, the son of a prosperous Boston merchant, went to Harvard College—of which his great-grandfather had been the second president—at the age of twelve to study theology. In 1727 he was ordained and installed as co-pastor of Boston's First Church, where he remained until he died in 1787. He obtained a reputation through his controversial writing. The topics he wrote on included (a) criticizing what he saw as the extravagancies of the "Great Awakening," (b) defending congregational forms of church government, and (c) affirming certain "unorthodox" theological convictions (amongst them universalism and doubts concerning the doctrine of the Trinity). His universalism was first made public in a sermon in 1762 titled "All Nations Blessed in Christ" but it was not until 1784 that his book-length defense of universalism—*The Salvation of All Men*—was published. It is the most scholarly of all eighteenth-century defenses of universalism and remains worthy of serious reflection. The heart of Chauncey's case is composed of arguments for what he sees as key biblical-theological principles that establish universalism (in the process, offering very detailed and scholarly—though sometimes idiosyncratic—exegetical studies of Rom 5:12–21; 8:19–23; and 1 Cor 15:24–28). The final section of his book considers standard objections and offers responses.

What led Chauncy to reject eternal conscious torment in favor of universalism? Clearly the influence of the Enlightenment freed him up to be prepared to challenge tradition; but he was no Bible-rejecting liberal. In fact, he took the normative role of Scripture as a given and his book was simply an attempt to expound what he saw as the *real* teaching of the Bible; teaching that he believed had been obscured by tradition. So which Bible teachers guided Chauncy to this view? According to his own testimony it seems that he was led to universalism simply through his own Bible studies on the issue.[153] The distinctive shape of his arguments makes this claim plausible. So in

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[152] De Benneville's testimony, written in 1782, was translated from French into English by Elhanan Winchester and published in London in 1791 (against De Benneville's wishes). Winchester considered De Benneville a man of "piety, humility, benevolence, and universal good character."

[153] He tells us, in the preface of *The Salvation of All Men*, that he was influenced in his thinking by the Rev. John Taylor of Norwich; but this was more at the level of a general approach to the interpretation of Scripture rather than in a direct influence on his universalism. Rev Taylor, Chauncy tells us, explicitly *denied* universalism.

Chauncy's case we have another spontaneous eruption of universalist thinking but one with a quite different foundation.

James Relly (1722–78)

Finally, consider James Relly. Relly was a Welsh convert of George Whitfield and subsequently one of Whitfield's evangelistic preachers. It appears that he was troubled by theological difficulties with the popular evangelical accounts of penal substitutionary atonement. The standard objection to the idea that God punished Christ for our sins was that: (a) punishing an innocent person for the crimes of someone else and (b) failing to punish the guilty person, were quite simply *unjust*. Relly came up with a solution to this problem, and it involved a strong doctrine of union with Christ. Christ unites himself with humanity in such a way that he *really takes our sins upon himself* and is not "innocent" of them. And humanity is united to Christ in such a way that when he dies, *we really die* "*in him*." This, to Relly's mind, solved the problem of divine justice and the atonement. One implication of his system, however, was that *all humanity was already saved*—they simply did not yet realize it. So we find universalism spontaneously "reinvented" again. This time not on the basis of religious experiences (as with De Benneville), nor on the basis of rigorous exegetical biblical studies (as with Chauncy), but on the basis of basis of systematic theological reflections (albeit ones with biblical roots).

I would suggest that one of the reasons that universalism seems able to keep spontaneously reappearing, even when it is not taught, is that it is rooted in some fundamental Christian and biblical convictions. I am not claiming that Scripture or Christian theology require people to be universalists—far from it—but I would suggest that certain Christian beliefs and certain biblical texts *seem to point* in that direction and thus the potential for some form of universalism to burst forth is ever-present. Christian universalism is most fundamentally motivated not by mere sentimentalism nor by pagan philosophy (though both have had influence on some versions of universalism) but by currents within Christian Scripture, tradition, praxis, reason, and experience.[154] Whether such currents are best followed to universalist conclusions is another matter, but that they sometimes have been and probably will continue to be seems clear.

Genealogies of universalism

Another feature of universalism is the creation of different "family lines" through the passing on of the teaching (whether through books, sermons, informal discussions, or formal church structures). We can illustrate this using a couple of the characters mentioned above.

The Relly "family tree"

James Relly's most celebrated convert was John Murray (1741–1815). Murray had grown up as a boy in the heart of the evangelical Methodism, knowing both George Whitfield and John Wesley personally. He ended up worshipping at Whitfield's tabernacle in London and, while there, converted to Rellyism, being persuaded by Relly's biblical and theological arguments. Eventually Murray left England for America and, against his

[154] To take Clement, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa to illustrate the point: While Stoicism and neo-Platonism clearly influenced their theologies; the Bible played a decisive role in shaping their universalisms. On this claim see Harmon, *Every Knee Should Bow*.

intentions, became a preacher of universalism. Over many years he worked tirelessly and against much opposition, to the detriment of his health, becoming the pastor of the first overtly universalist church in America (in Gloucester, Massachusetts).[155] Murray never claimed to have rediscovered universalism but simply to have transmitted the teachings of his mentor. His gospel message was a faithful development of Relly's own thought. As it happens, while his ministry bore fruit for a while and he left his mark on American universalism, his distinctive Calvinist mode of universalism quickly faded and that short-lived informal "family tree" was extinguished. Judith Sargent Murray, writing in 1816, concedes that "If we except the Rev. John Tyler, Episcopalian minister in Norwich, Connecticut, and the Rev. Edward Mitchell in the city of New York, we do not know that the sentiments of any Preacher of Universalism, now upon this Continent, are *exactly* in unison with the departed Promulgator."[156]

The Pietistic "family tree"

At the age of thirty-eight De Benneville moved to America and lived in Germantown, near Philadelphia, where he worked as a physician. Alongside his medicine he continued on preaching tours in Pennsylvania and New Jersey until he died of a stroke in 1793.

De Benneville transmitted the heritage of German Pietist religious communities and the European Radical Reformation (of the Schwenkfelder tradition) to a wider American public. He also instigated and paid for the translated Paul Siegvolk's book *The Everlasting Gospel* into English. This book, as I have already mentioned, fell into the hands of Elhanan Winchester and it played a key role in his conversion to universalism. Winchester's subsequently made contact with De Benneville and they shared fellowship between 1781 and 1787. The shape of Winchester's theology owed a lot to this pietistic version of universalism. Winchester himself then went on to publish on the topic and his books, in turn, converted William Vidler (1758–1816)—an English Particular Baptist minister—to the cause. Vidler then went on to be an influential universalist teacher in England continuing the "family line."[157]

For a time this pietistic strand of universalism troubled the waters of the Baptist movement but in the end, as we noted at the start of this paper, it was diverted out of the

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[155] Murray's autobiography is a truly fascinating insight into eighteenth-century evangelicalism and his own universalist ministry.

[156] Murray, *Life*, 249. Though we ought to note the existence of the Calvinistic universalist "No Hellers"—more properly known as Primitive Baptist Universalists, found in the Appalachian mountain region. On which see Dorgan, *In the Hands of a Happy God*. This appears to be a tiny-scale Baptist reinvention of a Relly-style universalism.

[157] And these are just two traditions within universalism. Another recurring tradition is that of the neo-Platonic Christianity of the Alexandrian school. Throughout Christian history, but especially since the seventeenth century, whenever neo-Platonism and/or Clement, Origen, or Gregory of Nyssa are "rediscovered" one finds them having some level of influence on small-scale "revivals" of Christian universalism. That neo-Platonic influence might be strong (as was the case with Cambridge Platonists Peter Sterry and Jeremiah White) or weak (as was the case with various nineteenth-century universalists).

And the above simply illustrates the neater side of the lines of transmission for universalist theology. Often, the picture was much more complex, as is clear from, for instance, the different threads that influenced Thomas Erskine's universalism and, in turn, the way in which his thinking became one of several different interweaving influences on late nineteenth century universalism. The role of literature—both ancient and modern—and personal friendships and acquaintances played their part in both the perpetuation and the transformation of universalist theologies.

mainstream churches at the turn of the nineteenth century and is now only a footnote in the Baptist story. Whether it will ever be rediscovered and recovered within mainstream Baptist churches remains to be seen.

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