

A Brief History of Christian Universalism

For the first 500 years after Christ, most Christians believed that God would ultimately redeem *all* of His creation.

—George Sarris, *Heaven's Doors*

The gloomy and precise Tertullian, the vigorous and austere Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, and Augustine, the gloomiest and most materialistic of theologians, who may almost be said to have invented the hell of the Middle Ages, contributed the forces that later adulterated the genuine Christian faith.

—John Wesley Hanson, *Universalism*

THE BELIEF IN CHRISTIAN UNIVERSAL salvation, that all people, everywhere and throughout all time, are saved through Jesus Christ has been rapidly growing for at least the past fifty years.

The groundwork for the rebirth of Christian universalism, sometimes called inclusivism,¹ was laid by Vatican II, and the current official *Roman Catholic Catechism* along with other church documents reflect it.

1. Depending on how an author defines it, inclusivism has a range of meanings. Hard inclusivism is identical in scope to Christian universalism—all are included. Others—and Clark Pinnock falls into this group—maintain that while many, or perhaps even most, non-Christians are included among those eternally saved, some will still be lost, a position sometimes referred to as soft inclusivism.

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All nations form but one community. This is so because all stem from the one stock which God created to people the entire earth, and also because all share a common destiny, namely God. His providence, evident goodness, and saving designs extend to all against the day when the elect are gathered together in the holy city.²

Regarding other religions:

The Church's bond with non-Christian religions is in the first place the common origin and end of the human race: . . . the Church considers all goodness and truth found in these religions as “a preparation for the Gospel and given by him who enlightens all men that they may at length have life.”³

Pope John Paul II writes that “man—every man without any exception whatever—has been redeemed by Christ, and because with man—with each man without any exception whatever—Christ is in a way united, even when man is unaware of it.”⁴ Salvation is through the work of Jesus Christ, but all are saved.

The growing acceptance of universalism is not limited to the Roman Catholic Church, but is gaining traction within the evangelical Christian community, as the popularity of Rob Bell's book, *Love Wins*,⁵ attests. Jürgen Moltmann notes, “A new cosmic spirituality is developing in many groups and churches today, a spirituality in which we reverence God's hidden presence in all living things and hope for their future in the kingdom of God.”⁶ Clark Pinnock observes, “Though relatively new, inclusivism has become widely accepted and may even be called the mainline model.”⁷ Preston Sprinkle remarks, “Christians can no longer dismiss . . . [the] view as unorthodox.”⁸

The two editions of *Four Views on Hell* serve as a striking example of how quickly things are

2. *Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1994), 223.

3. *Catechism*, 223.

4. Pope John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis: The Redeemer of Man*, trans. Vatican Polyglot Press (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1979), 27.

5. Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

6. Jürgen Moltmann, *Sun of Righteousness, ARISE! God's Future for Humanity and the Earth*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 32.

7. Clark H. Pinnock, “An Inclusivist View,” in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, ed. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 101.

8. Preston M. Sprinkle, “Conclusion,” in *Four Views on Hell*, 2nd ed., ed. Preston Sprinkle (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 197.

changing. In the first paperback edition, published in 1996, the four views presented were: (1) hell is eternal, and the fire is literal; (2) hell is eternal, and the fire is symbolic; (3) in hell people are annihilated; and (4) purgatory.⁹ In the second edition, published in 2016, the four views are: (1) hell is eternal, and the fire is symbolic; (2) in hell people are annihilated; (3) purgatory; and (4) Christian universal salvation.

In the span of twenty years, within two editions of a major evangelical work on hell—a work a Christian curious about hell is likely to read—the possibility that the scriptural descriptions of hell could be literal is no longer viable enough to be worthy of consideration. On the other hand, over the course of a mere two decades, the concept of universal salvation has emerged from the shadows to become a viable interpretive option.

Bradley Jersak explains one key reason for the growing acceptance of Christian universalism. He says, “Many in the ‘emerging church’ movement, whether through its dissatisfaction with the Reformation or its attraction to liturgy and icons, have become reacquainted with older Eastern theologians like Gregory or Celtic radicals like Patrick.”¹⁰ He continues: “Their parents and grandparents were raised on Luther, Calvin, Wesley, and Edwards. The upcoming generations will know Origen, Clement, Basil, and Gregory.”¹¹ Through the increasing influence of these early writers, particularly Clement of Alexandria and his pupil Origen, one would expect to see belief in Christian universalism increase.

The winds of change are blowing, and what was once a gentle breeze is now a gale-force wind. What do the Scriptures say about salvation? Are the Christian universalists correct? Has the church been in error for over fifteen hundred years about salvation and hell? To the last question, the Christian universalists would answer emphatically, “Yes.”

Within the church as a whole, Christian universalism is probably the dominant belief. John Hick states, “The new consensus, or near consensus, that has emerged out of this trend away from the old exclusivism is today generally called inclusivism. The Christian mind has now for the most part made the move from an intolerant exclusivism to a benevolent inclusivism.”¹²

As the Unitarian Universalist historian David Bumbaugh observes, “Over the decades, Universalists had won the theological struggle with mainline Christianity. Few of those churches

9. See appendix 3 for a definition and discussion of purgatory.

10. Bradley Jersak, *Her Gates Will Never Be Shut: Hope, Hell, and the New Jerusalem* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 144.

11. Jersak, *Her Gates*, 144.

12. John Hick, “The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity,” in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, (n.p.: Orbis Books, 1987; reprint: Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 22.

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now preached the partialist doctrines of hell-fire and damnation.”¹³ The belief in universalism that had become the dominant position in mainline churches is now spreading into evangelical churches as well, albeit in a *Christian* form.

The History of Patristic Universalism

Through the end of the fourth century, Christian universalism had a significant influence within major portions of the church. Heath Bradley writes:

Prior to the fifth century there were three alternatives within mainstream Christianity concerning the fate of non-Christians: eternal conscious punishment (non-Christians suffer everlasting torment), annihilationism (non-Christians simply die and that is that for them), and universal salvation (all people will be saved through Christ).¹⁴

The first significant proponents of universalism were based out of the school at Alexandria, notably Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–ca. 215) and, of greater importance, his pupil Origen. Origen is generally regarded as the first Christian universalist to fully systematize universalism as a core theological concept. Morwenna Ludlow comments,

Origen (c.185–254) was the first person systematically to argue that all people will be saved and to offer an explanation as to how that might be possible. He was closely followed by Gregory of Nyssa (c.335–395). These men were steeped in both the Christian and the pagan Hellenistic culture of their day. They were scholars both of philosophy and of the Bible and it is sometimes difficult to separate out these different strands in their writing.¹⁵

Concerning Gregory, she adds,

Gregory uses the techniques of allegorical interpretation to derive universalistic ideas from Scripture: thus Psalm 59 asserts that sinners will not be destroyed but will be restored; the feast of the tabernacles indicates the eschatological universal feast around God, the story of the

13. David E. Bumbaugh, *Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History* (Chicago: Meadville Lombard, 2000), 175.

14. Heath Bradley, *Flames of Love: Hell and Universal Salvation* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 8.

15. Morwenna Ludlow, “Universalism in the History of Christianity,” in Parry, *Universal Salvation?, The Current Debate*, ed. Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Partridge (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 191.

Egyptians and the plague of darkness suggests that sinners (the Egyptians) will not stay in the darkness of Gehenna for ever.¹⁶

The Influence of Greek Philosophy: Origen's *Apokatastasis*

It is nearly impossible to underestimate Origen's influence in the development of Christian universalism. Origen took the Stoic philosophers' teaching about the *apokatastasis*, combined it with its one biblical reference in Acts 3:21, and set Christian universalism on its theological footing. At the end, all will be reconciled to God, including all fallen angels and even Satan.

Ludlow describes how the meaning of *apokatastasis* initially evolved:

The Stoics believed that when the planets reached the place in the heavens which they occupied when they were first created there would be a world conflagration (*ekpurōsis*), followed by the recreation or restoration of the world—the *apokatastasis* (literally, a setting back to the beginning). From this specific astronomical meaning, the term came to refer simply to the end of the world: this is the meaning which it appears to have in Acts 3:21, where Peter mentions “the time of the restoration of all things” (*apokatastaseōs pantōn*).¹⁷

Origen, and Gregory after him, took *apokatastasis* and read into the word the idea of a complete restoring of all creatures in the end times, a setting back of all things to the state they were in at the beginning. Origen says, “For the end is always like the beginning.”¹⁸ He adds, “As there is one end to many things, so there spring from one beginning many differences and varieties, which again, . . . are recalled to one end, which is like unto the beginning.”¹⁹ Ludlow describes the specific change in meaning:

However, it gained its connection to universal salvation through its use in the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:28. Origen and Gregory reasoned that, since the Father created the world through the Son, the submission of the world to the Father in the Son is akin to the return of all things to their original state, in a manner loosely analogous to the Stoic astronomical return. . . . This consummation was seen as universal because God is described in 1 Corinthians 15:28 as

16. Ludlow, “Universalism,” 193.

17. Ludlow, 192.

18. Origen, “De Principiis,” trans. Frederick Crombie, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (n.p.: Christian Literature, 1885; reprint, Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), 4:260.

19. Origen, 4:260.

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being “all in all” (*panta en pasin*). This phrase then became associated with the phrase “the restoration of all things” (*apokatastaseōs pantōn*) from Acts.²⁰

Bradley Jersak notes the current Christian universalists’ understanding of *apokatastasis*:

It is the doctrine of ultimate redemption that believes a time will come when all things (the whole cosmos) will be saved by grace. This includes creation, the lost, the fallen angels, and for some, even the devil. It is a question of how far God is willing to extend restitution to “all things.” The logic is simple and powerful: when God is finally “all in all” and everything is “summed up in Christ,” evil will cease to exist.²¹

Thus, *apokatastasis* gained its specific meaning as used by Christian universalists. As Jersak says, universalists have taken this “restoration of all things” to include all of the fallen angels, and for many, that even includes Satan. Since all things are in essence set back to their beginning place, Satan will once again exist in his pre-fallen condition.

As we examine how Christian universalists interpret key Scriptures, we will find David Burnfield, in particular, make repeated references to the end-time *apokatastasis*, the universal reconciliation of all things. The end-time *apokatastasis* even defines and limits God’s judgment. Origen’s concept is at the heart of the Christian universalist gospel.

John Wesley Hanson describes the influence the Greek philosophers had over Clement, Origen, and their school at Alexandria: “The materialistic philosophy of Epicureanism, . . . the Pantheistic system of Stoicism, . . . the logical Aristotelianism, and the Platonism that regarded the universe as the work of a Supreme Spirit . . . all had their votaries, but the noblest of all, the Platonic, was most influential with the Alexandrine fathers, though, like Clement, they exercised a wise and rational eclecticism, in adopting the best features of each system.”²² He adds, “Had the church followed the prevailing spirit of the ante-Nicene Fathers, it would have conserved the best thought of Greece, the divine ideals of Plato, and joined them to the true interpretation of Christianity.”²³

Even the Christian universalists’ doctrine on punishment has its roots in Platonic thought. Quoting Hanson again, “The Platonic doctrine of a separate state where the spirits of the departed

20. Ludlow, “Universalism,” 192–193.

21. Jersak, *Her Gates*, 123.

22. John Wesley Hanson, *Universalism: The Prevailing Doctrine of the Church during Its First Five Hundred Years* (n.p.: Beloved Publishing, 2015), 78.

23. Hanson, 13–14.

are purified, and on which the later doctrine of purgatory was founded, was approved by all the expositors of Christianity who were of the Alexandrian school.”²⁴

Heath Bradley writes that patristic universalists included “Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Macrina, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, Evagrius of Pontus, Cyril of Alexandria, Ambrose of Milan, and the early Jerome.”²⁵

Christian Universalism: The Predominant View of the Early Church

Hanson, in his influential work published in 1899, asserts that universalism was the prevailing doctrine for the first five centuries, as his title insists: *Universalism: The Prevailing Doctrine of the Church during Its First Five Hundred Years*. George Sarris agrees: “For the first 500 years after Christ, most Christians believed that God would ultimately redeem *all* of His creation.”²⁶ Hanson explains, “From the days of Clement of Alexandria to those of Gregory of Nyssa and Theodore of Mopsuestia (A.D. 180–428), the great theologians and teachers, almost without exception, were Universalists. . . . In all Christendom, from A.D. 170 to 430, there were six Christian schools. Of these four, the only strictly theological schools taught Universalism, and but one endless punishment.”²⁷ Of the schools, the one in Alexandria was the oldest and the most prominent. Through the influence of the schools, universalism was probably the predominant view within the church as a whole.

David Burnfield asks the question, “So if it’s true that the majority of the theological schools taught universalism and that many in the church in general held to this view, how can modern theologians be so confident Universalism was a minority belief of the early church?”²⁸ Thomas Talbott comments, “Given the profound understanding of divine love within the early church—that is, before the time of Augustine—and the powerful support in Alexandria for the idea of universal reconciliation, one might almost have expected orthodox theology to reject the idea of eternal damnation altogether.”²⁹

Given the assertion that Christian universalism was the predominant view of the early church, what led to its decline and ultimate rejection? Tertullian (160–225) initially opposed Christian universalism, but Augustine (354–430) and his followers rejected it even more strongly.

24. Hanson, *Universalism*, 47.

25. Bradley, *Flames of Love*, 9.

26. George W. Sarris, *Heaven’s Doors: Wider Than You Ever Believed!* (Trumbull, CT: GWS, 2017), 1.

27. Hanson, *Universalism*, 211.

28. David Burnfield, *Patristic Universalism: An Alternative to the Traditional View of Divine Judgment* (Boca Raton: Universal Publishers, 2013), 193.

29. Thomas Talbott, *The Inescapable Love of God*, 2nd ed. (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014), 15.

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It went into a steep decline when Origen—universalists insist he was not directly named—and several of his beliefs were condemned in AD 553 at the Fifth Ecumenical Council, a council at Constantinople called by the emperor Justinian.

Contemporary Christian universalists denounce Justinian, that council, and Augustine as well. Talbott writes, “It is hardly surprising that a church under the control of such an emperor, who is famous for his anathemata and his persecutions, should have rejected the doctrine of universal reconciliation.”³⁰ Burnfield contends, “It hardly needs to be emphasized that any conclusions about Origen that arose from a council consisting of despotic men who lived by violence and bloodshed, and who were willing to do almost anything for power should be viewed with a large amount of suspicion.”³¹

Regarding the “hell champion” Augustine, Julie Ferwerda remarks, “Not only was Augustine somewhat the champion of the hell doctrine in the Western Church, he also had a major influence on the onset of religious bigotry and hate campaigns in the following centuries.”³² Over a hundred years earlier, Hanson had stated, “The gloomy and precise Tertullian, the vigorous and austere Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, and Augustine, the gloomiest and most materialistic of theologians, who may almost be said to have invented the hell of the Middle Ages, contributed the forces that later adulterated the genuine Christian faith.”³³ Hanson adds, “Augustine, however, held the penalties of sin in a much milder form than do his degenerate theological descendants in modern times.”³⁴

Hanson theorizes that one key reason the Christian universalists did not successfully stand up to Augustine and others was that the doctrine of Christian universalism was often kept from the Christian masses. Hanson notes that “Clement, Origen, and the great Alexandrians and their associates were Gnostic Christians.”³⁵ They believed the Gnostic concept of “reserve,” of keeping truth from people who either were not ready to receive it or if they could somehow be harmed by the truth. Hanson explains, “Many, in and out of the church, held that the wise possessor of truth might hold it in secret, when its impartation to the ignorant would seem to be fraught with danger, and that error might be properly substituted. The object was to save

30. Talbott, *Inescapable Love*, 19.

31. Burnfield, *Patristic Universalism*, 215. Burnfield offers no supporting evidence for his assertions.

32. Julie Ferwerda, *Raising Hell: Christianity's Most Controversial Doctrine Put Under Fire* (Sandpoint, ID: Vagabond, 2014), 55.

33. Hanson, *Universalism*, 75.

34. Hanson, 189. To Hanson, the Puritans are among those degenerate descendants.

35. Hanson, 65. Hanson separates the Gnostic Christians from the Christian Gnostics, such as the Basilidians and Marcionites.

‘Christians of the simpler sort’ from waters too deep for them.” He adds, “Some of the fathers who had achieved a faith in Universalism were influenced by the mischievous notion that it was to be held esoterically, cherished in secret, or only communicated to the chosen few . . . and even that the opposite error would, with some sinners, be more beneficial than the truth.”³⁶ The net result was that “it caused many to hold out threats to the multitude in order to restrain them; threats that they did not themselves believe would be executed.”³⁷ Under some circumstances, it was therefore better to lie to your Christian hearers than to tell them the truth. Thus, even those who did not believe the “lie” of eternal punishment promulgated it, giving it even greater prominence.

Christian Universalism since the Reformation

It is not until the time of the Reformation and its aftermath, beginning with a few of the most radical Anabaptist sects, that universalist sentiments reemerge in theological publications. After the Justinian anathemas, few in the intervening centuries up until the Reformation were willing to risk publicly advocating universal salvation.

Later, John Murray (1741–1815) taught the doctrine in England and then in America, founding the first Universalist church in Massachusetts in 1780.³⁸ Following Murray was Hosea Ballou (1771–1852), whose work is described as “light in a dark place.”³⁹ John Wesley Hanson (1823–1901) has had a major influence over subsequent Christian universalists through his book *Universalism: The Prevailing Doctrine of the Church during Its First Five Hundred Years*. Most of the major Christian universalists reference his work.

Ludlow notes that in continental Europe, “Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) was the first really influential theologian since the Patristic period to consider universalism.”⁴⁰ More recently, Karl Barth, while technically not a universalist in the absolute sense, had strong universalist leanings within his theology. As Ludlow indicates,

Barth’s rethinking of Calvin’s doctrine of election points in the direction of universalism: put very simply, he sees *Christ*, not humanity as the object of election, so that while previous doctrines of election have taken the ideas of election to salvation and election to damnation and applied

36. Hanson *Universalism*, 39.

37. Hanson, 40.

38. See Bumbaugh, *Unitarian Universalism*, 149.

39. Hanson, *Universalism*, 2.

40. Ludlow, “Universalism,” 207.

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them to two different groups of people, Barth applies them both to the one, single person of Christ: Christ died for *all*, and that *all* have died in him, whether they know it or not.⁴¹

Barth cast a long shadow over theologians that came after him. At the very least, many evangelical theologians post-Barth have embraced the idea that salvation after death, or post-mortem salvation, is possible. David Hilborn and Don Horrocks observe,

One of the more intriguing trends in current evangelical theology is the growing number of evangelical theologians since the 1960s who have either endorsed or seriously entertained the concept of “second chance” or “post-mortem” evangelism. This group now includes, at least, George Beasley Murray, Charles Cranfield, Donald Bloesch, Clark Pinnock, Gabriel Fackre, and Nigel Wright.⁴²

Belief in Christian universalism continues to rapidly expand with the numerous recent books published by Thomas Talbot, Jürgen Moltmann, David Burnfield, Gregory MacDonald, Eric Stetson, Wm. Paul Young, and several others, as well as through the rise of internet blogs and discussions.

Summary

According to Christian universalists, the concept of Christian universalism traces back to the teachings of Clement of Alexandria. Systematized by his star pupil, Origen, it became the predominant view within the early patristic church. However, few were willing to risk holding a belief in universalism after the Fifth Ecumenical Council, under Justinian’s direction, anathematized it in AD 553. Not until the time of the Reformation did the concept of Christian universalism again receive serious theological consideration. Over the past fifty years, belief in Christian universalism has once again been spreading. While a belief in general universalism along the lines of religious pluralism came to dominate mainstream churches, evangelical churches are embracing the Christianized form of it, that all are universally saved through Christ.

41. Ludlow, “Universalism,” 214.

42. David Hilborn and Don Horrocks, “Universalistic Trends in the Evangelical Tradition: A Historical Perspective,” in Parry and Partridge, *Universal Salvation?*, 229.