

Universalism

An Evaluation from the Theological Perspective of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

History, Beliefs, Practices

Identity:

Universalism is the belief that ultimately all people, and perhaps even Satan and the other fallen angels, will be saved and enjoy eternal life in heaven.

Founder(s):

There are no specific founders of universalism, although the early church theologians Clement of Alexandria (c. 170-220), Origen (c.185-254) and Gregory of Nazianzen (329-389) each taught some form of universalism. Contemporary advocates of universalism include Rob Bell, Richard Rohr and David Bentley Hart.

Statistics:

Universalism may be a widespread, popular belief even if it is not officially taught. In his 2010 book, *American Grace*, Robert Putnam wrote that “86 percent of Missouri Synod Lutherans said that a good person who is not of their faith could indeed go to heaven.”¹ A 2011 Barna survey showed that 43% percent of Americans agreed with the statement, “All people will experience the same outcome after death, regardless of their religious beliefs.” Among born again Christians, 25% believe that all people will eventually be saved or accepted by God.² In 2011, a Catholic educator commented, “I’d estimate that 95-98% of all the Catholics—including pastoral leaders—that I’ve ever worked with are functional universalists.”³ According to a 2016 Life Way Research survey, “Only 4 in 10 Americans believe Hell is where God sends all people who do not accept Christ as their savior” and 64% of those with evangelical beliefs “were most likely to agree all people go to Heaven when they die.”⁴

History:

The early Christian theologian Origen taught that all beings, people as well as the evil angels, will eventually be restored to God through a purification process that continues after death. A

¹ Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 540. Putnam’s observation was based on data from a 2006 Faith Matters survey by Harvard University.

² “What Americans Believe about Universalism and Pluralism,” *Barna Group*, April 18, 2011, at <https://www.barna.com/research/what-americans-believe-about-universalism-and-pluralism/>, accessed May 29, 2020.

³ Rod Dreher, “Universalism is the New Christian Orthodoxy,” *The American Conservative*, November 17, 2011, at <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/christian-universalism-is-the-new-orthodoxy/>, accessed May 11, 2020.

⁴ Chelsen Vicari, “Americans: Heaven and Jesus, Sure, Hell and Sin, Not So Much,” *Juicy Ecumenism*, September 30, 2016, at <https://juicyecumenism.com/2016/09/30/americans=heaven-jesus-sure-hell-sin-not-much/>, accessed May 23, 2020.

few early teachers held similar beliefs concerning the restoration of souls, but Origen's errors were condemned at the Council of Constantinople in 543 AD. Universalist ideas have been promoted by various teachers through the centuries, including the Anabaptist Hans Denck (1495-1527) and the nineteenth century theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834).⁵ The Universalist Society of Boston formed in 1793 and merged with the Unitarian Church in 1961 to form the Unitarian Universalist Association.⁶ In the 1940s, the theologian Emil Brunner affirmed universal restoration and in the 1960s, theologian Karl Barth affirmed universal election.⁷ The Roman Catholic Church has also declared the possibility of salvation for those who do not know or believe in Jesus Christ. While not stating definitively that all people will attain eternal life, the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), issued its dogmatic constitution on the church, *Lumen gentium*, which teaches that non-Christians who "strive to live a good life" may, in fact, be saved.⁸ In the 1970s and 1980s, Roman Catholic debates concerning the unchurched, such as *Dare We Hope?* by Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, or Karl Rahner's notion of "anonymous Christians," who do not explicitly profess faith in Christ, led some Catholics to consider universalism more seriously. Evangelical theologian John Stott (1921-2011) suggested the possibility of the ultimate annihilation of unbelievers at death, so they would not experience eternal torment.⁹

Universalism is finding increasing acceptance among members of mainline denominations today. In 2008, the Jesuit theologian Avery Cardinal Dulles wrote, "Adherents of other religions can be saved if, with the help of grace, they sincerely seek God and strive to do his will. Even atheists can be saved if they worship God under some other name and place their lives at the service of truth and justice."¹⁰ In his 2012 book, *Flames of Love: Hell and Universal Salvation*, Methodist pastor Heath Bradley said that "hell serves the purpose of correcting and purifying the wicked so they can be united with God."¹¹ In the 2019 document, "A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment: A Policy Statement of the ELCA," the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America stated that "we must be careful about claiming to know God's judgments regarding another religion or the individual human beings who practice it ... The full story of the relationship between our neighbor and God is beyond our knowledge, and even our calling."¹²

Texts:

Recent books that promote some form of universalism include *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope for, and Believe* by Richard Rohr

⁵ Richard Bauckham, "Universalism: A Historical Survey," *Themelios* 4:2 (September 1978): 48-51.

⁶ See the CTCR evaluation on the Unitarian Universalist Association at www.lcms.org/ctcr.

⁷ Michael McClymond, "Opiate of the Theologians," *First Things* (December 2019), at <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2019/12/opiate-of-the-theologians>, accessed May 4, 2020.

⁸ *Lumen Gentium* II.16.

⁹ Paul Copan, "How Universalism, 'the Opiate of the Theologians,' Went Mainstream," interview with Michael McClymond, *Christianity Today*, March 11, 2019, at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/march-web-only/michael-mcclymond-devils-redemption-universalism.html>, accessed May 11, 2020.

¹⁰ Avery Cardinal Dulles, "Who Then Can Be Saved?" *First Things* (February 2018), at <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2008/02/001-who-can-be-saved-8>, accessed April 27, 2020.

¹¹ Amy Forbus, "A Stand for Christian Universalism," *The United Methodist Reporter*, February 21, 2013, at <http://unitedmethodistreporter.com/2013/02/21/qa-a-stand-for-christian-universalism>, accessed May 18, 2020.

¹² Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment: A Policy Statement of the ELCA*, Action of the 2019 Churchwide Assembly, August 8, 2019, at <https://www.elca.org/Faith/Ecumenical-and-Inter-Religious-Relations/Inter-Religious-Relations/Policy-Statement>, accessed May 5, 2020.

(2019), *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* by David Bentley Hart (2019), *Flames of Love: Hell and Universalism Salvation* by Heath Bradley (2016) and *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* by Rob Bell (2011).

Beliefs and Practices

There are different forms of universalism. Some universalists believe that everyone goes to heaven immediately at death. Others believe that Christians and non-Christians alike must be purified from sin before going to heaven (something like purgatory for both believers and unbelievers), although ultimately all will be saved. Another approach to universalism is annihilationism, which does not involve eternal, conscious suffering because at death unbelievers simply cease to exist. Their punishment is permanent, but they do not suffer for all eternity.

New Testament scholar N. T. Wright rejects universalism, but also rejects the idea of eternal conscious torment for unbelievers. Wright suggests that human beings, who during their earthly lives completely turned away from God, become at death “*beings that once were human but now are not*.”¹³ These beings then exist forever as ex-humans. Other scholars suggest a remedial universalism, in which God’s grace is extended even to the sinners in hell. This view is supported by passages from Scripture about setting captives free (Eph. 4:8-9) and Jesus’ descent into hell (1 Peter 3:18-19). It is thought that the soul or spirit must return to God because it is a “divine spark” within the person.

Universalists emphasize certain verses of Scripture, such as, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor. 5:19), and “One act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men” (Rom. 5:18). Other verses often cited by universalists include John 3:17, 1 Corinthians 15:22, Philippians 2:12 and 1 John 2:2.

Universalist Richard Rohr distinguishes “Jesus” from “Christ,” saying that Christ is God and Jesus was the manifestation of God in time. Rohr writes, “Christ is both the Divine Radiance at the Beginning Big Bang and the Divine Allure drawing us into a positive future.”¹⁴ According to Rohr, Jesus’ death was God’s act of solidarity with humanity, not a sacrifice to satisfy God’s justice. Universalist author David Bentley Hart, in his book, *The Universal Christ*, comments that Scripture does not teach “a clear doctrine of eternal torment.... On the other hand, many New Testament passages seem—and not metaphorically—to promise the eventual salvation of everyone.”¹⁵ Peter Marty, editor of *The Christian Century* magazine, asks, “Are we to believe that God happily created billions of people only to turn around at the time of their death and eternally condemn them for not professing Jesus as Lord?”¹⁶

Rob Bell’s popular book, *Love Wins*, encouraged evangelical Christians to consider universal salvation. Bell believes that the idea of unbelievers suffering eternal torment in hell “is misguided, toxic, and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus’ message of love, peace,

¹³ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2008), 182, emphasis in the original.

¹⁴ Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ* (New York: Convergent Books, 2019), 95.

¹⁵ David Bentley Hart, “Why Do People Believe in Hell?” *New York Times*, January 10, 2020, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/10/opinion/sunday/christianity-religion-hell-bible.html>, accessed May 11, 2020.

¹⁶ Peter Marty, “Betting on a Generous God,” *Christian Century* 128:10 (May 17, 2011), 22-23, 25.

forgiveness and joy that our world desperately needs to hear.”¹⁷ Concerning those who suffer in hell, Bell asks, “Can God do this, or even allow this, and still claim to be a loving God?”¹⁸

Reformed pastor Kevin DeYoung comments that in Bell’s book, God “is shrunk down to fit our cultural constraints” and “the cross is diminished.”¹⁹ Universalist teachings are in keeping with popular worldviews in contemporary society, such as moralistic therapeutic deism, according to which all good people go to heaven when they die, and pluralism, the belief that all religions are equal paths to God. Author Michael McClymond writes that “universalism fits the age we inhabit ... It’s the way we would want the world to be. Some imagine that a more loving and less judgmental church would be better positioned to win new adherents.”²⁰

A Lutheran Response

“Holy Scripture teaches the doctrine of eternal punishment so clearly and definitely that only those can rightly deny it who reject the divine authority of God’s Word.”²¹ Universalists deny what Jesus Himself taught, that at the final judgment, He, as King and Judge, will say to those on His left, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt. 25:41). Jesus describes hell as “unquenchable fire” (Mark 9:43), “outer darkness” (Matt. 25:30) and “eternal punishment” (Matt. 25:46). On the Last Day, the Lord Jesus will say to those who falsely confessed His name, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness” (Matt. 7:23). Before the risen Lord appeared to His followers, He descended into hell (1 Peter 3:18-20), not to rescue imprisoned souls, but to proclaim His victory over death and the devil.

All religions do not provide equal paths to God or worship the same God under different names. Concerning other “gods,” the Triune God declares, “I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god” (Is. 44:6) and “I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols” (Is. 42:8). All spiritual “paths” do not lead to eternal life. In Scripture, there is “the way of the righteous” and “the way of the wicked” (Ps. 1:16), the wide, easy way that “leads to destruction” and the narrow, hard way that “leads to life” (Matt. 7:13-14). Jesus is the only Way to the Father (John 14:6), and His is the only name “by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). “Jesus” cannot be separated from “Christ,” as the apostle John writes, “Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ?” (1 John 2:22). With an answer revealed to him by God the Father, Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ, that is, the Messiah: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16).

Universalists point to biblical passages such as 1 John 2:2, “[Jesus] is the propitiation for our sins, and not only for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world,” as evidence of universal salvation. In Christ all people have been reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:19), but the forgiveness Jesus won is “received by faith” (Rom. 3:25). God “desires all people to be saved and to come to

¹⁷ Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), vii.

¹⁸ Bell, 2.

¹⁹ Kevin DeYoung, “God Is Still Holy and What You Learned in Sunday School Is Still True,” *The Gospel Coalition* (2011), at <https://media.thegospelcoalition.org/static-blogs/kevin-deyoung/files/2011/03/LoveWinsReview.pdf>, accessed May 11, 2020.

²⁰ Copan, at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/march-web-only/michael-mcclymond-devils-redemption-universalism.html>, accessed May 11, 2020.

²¹ John Theodore Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1934), 633.

the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4), but some people choose to reject the salvation God so graciously provides. The Pharisees and teachers of the law who refused John’s baptism of repentance were said to have “rejected the purpose of God for themselves” (Luke 7:30). Jesus said, “Whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 10:33). The apostle Paul points out that the preaching of Christ crucified will be to some “a stumbling block” and “folly” (1 Cor. 1:23).

Given a vision of the final judgment, the apostle John saw the devil “thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur” (Rev. 20:10) and that “if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:15). The Lutheran Confessions state, “On the Last Day Jesus will return to raise the dead, to give eternal life to those who believe, “but to condemn the ungodly and the devils to hell and eternal punishment.”²² Scripture says of Christ Jesus, “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (John 3:18). Even believers are warned against having an unbelieving heart that would lead them “to fall away from the living God” (Heb. 3:12).

Salvation is a free gift of God’s grace, to be received by faith, but the terrible possibility remains that some will reject the gift. Using the example of Israelites who, through unbelief, were not allowed to enter the promised land, the writer to the Hebrews warns us to take care, “lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God” (Heb. 3:12). Yet confident that God is merciful and desires the salvation of all people, we are encouraged to draw near to the throne of grace that, through faith in Jesus Christ, “we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16).

For Further Reading

The following CTCR reports and evaluations are available at www.lcms.org/ctcr:

The End Times: A Study on Eschatology and Millennialism (1989)

Theses on Justification (1983)

A Statement on Death, Resurrection and Immortality (1969)

Abrahamic Religions: An Evaluation from the Theological Perspective of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (2014)

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism: An Evaluation from the Theological Perspective of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (2020)

²² Augsburg Confession, Article XVII, *The Book of Concord*, 50.3.