

Heresies: Universalism

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

Universalism is the teaching that every soul, without exception, will ultimately be saved — some versions extending the claim to Satan and the demons. It has returned in our time with new confidence, dressed in the language of love, inclusion, and the rejection of a judgmental God. Pre-servants will meet it among friends, on social media, in paperback apologetics, and in progressive groups. It must be answered — not harshly, but truthfully — because it tampers with the Gospel itself. The Orthodox Church does not teach that God delights in the damnation of any. She teaches that He wills the salvation of all and has made the full provision for it in Christ, while honoring the freedom He gave His creatures and warning us, from the lips of the Lord Himself, that some will refuse that salvation to the end. This lesson sets out what universalism is, traces its history, examines its strongest arguments, and answers it from Scripture and Tradition. The goal is to equip the servant to defend the hope that is in him with firmness and gentleness, neither softening the Lord's warnings nor caricaturing those who have been persuaded by this error.

What Universalism Claims

Universalism — also called universal salvation, universal restoration, universal reconciliation, or universal restitution — is the doctrine that in the end every soul is saved and united to God. Strong versions teach that even Satan and the fallen angels are finally reconciled. Milder versions teach that every human being, regardless of faith or repentance, will at last be brought into the Kingdom.

The emotional appeal of this teaching is obvious. The thought that loved ones, neighbors, or even enemies might suffer eternally is grievous; the thought that anyone would, is harder still. Universalism promises to remove that grief by promising that no one is finally lost. It answers the anxiety of modern Christians who have been taught to view any exclusive claim as intolerant, and it aligns tidily with the reigning instinct of the culture that all sincere paths must lead to the same summit.

But the question for the servant is not whether a doctrine is comforting. It is whether it is true. A teaching that contradicts the explicit words of Christ cannot console a Christian, however softly it is spoken. And this teaching, whatever else may be said of it, contradicts the explicit words of Christ.

A Short History of the Error

The roots of universalism in the Christian world are most often traced to the third-century Alexandrian scholar Origen, who advanced a teaching called apokatastasis — the restoration of all things. Origen was a brilliant and complicated figure. He opposed Gnostic dualism with such zeal that he concluded hell could not be eternal, arguing instead that it was a remedial station through which every creature, at last, would pass into blessedness. This doctrine, along with other speculations, was condemned at

the Eastern Church's Fifth Ecumenical Council in 553. The universal position of the Church from that moment has been clear: the doctrine that every soul must finally be saved is a heresy.

St. Clement of Alexandria, Origen's predecessor, is sometimes invoked by universalists, but the scholarly consensus is that St. Clement did not teach apokatastasis as Origen did. The Fathers who followed — St. Basil, St. Gregory the Theologian, St. John Chrysostom, St. Cyril, St. John of Damascus — continued to teach the reality of an eternal heaven and an eternal hell, distinguished sharply between the doctrine of God's universal saving will and the false doctrine of universal automatic salvation.

In later centuries the error reappeared, usually at moments when theology became detached from the liturgy and the consensus of the Fathers. In seventeenth-century England it was taken up by figures such as Gerrard Winstanley, Richard Coppin, and Jane Leade; in eighteenth-century France and America it was spread by George de Benneville and John Murray, leading to the Universalist Church of America and its eventual merger with Unitarianism. In our day it has reappeared within Protestant academic circles and among those who are drawn to its pastoral appeal while being less attentive to its historical condemnation.

The Core Beliefs of Universalism

The universalist case rests on a handful of threads woven tightly together. Stripped to essentials, they are these: God is love, and love cannot eternally condemn; Christ's work on the Cross was sufficient for all, and so must save all; a temporary purgation after death can cleanse whatever remains, after which every soul enters heaven; and the exclusive language of Scripture must be re-read in light of the universal scope of redemption.

Passages are then marshaled — Acts 3:21 on the "restoration of all things," Colossians 1:20 on reconciling "all things" through the blood of His Cross, Romans 5:18 on the "free gift" that "came to all men," Hebrews 2:9 that Christ tasted death "for everyone," and 1 Corinthians 15:24-28 on God becoming "all in all." Philippians 2:10-11 is read as a prediction that every creature will at last confess Christ as Lord, and confession is treated as equivalent to salvation.

The servant must admit what is true in this picture: God does desire the salvation of all. "Who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4). "The Lord is... not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). This is apostolic teaching, and no Christian may contradict it. But from "God wills the salvation of all" it does not follow that "all will be saved." The will of God encounters a creature He has made capable of refusing. And refusal, sustained to the end, has consequences the Lord has named with His own mouth.

Varieties of the Error

Within universalism itself there are divisions, and the servant should know them so that he can answer precisely.

Inclusivist universalists hold that all are saved through Christ's work whether they consciously know Him or not. Exclusivist universalists hold that salvation still requires confession of Christ, but that every

person will at last confess Him — if not in this life, then after it, on the authority of Philippians 2. Strong or "ultra" universalists deny any suffering after death: every soul goes directly to heaven. Purgatorial universalists teach a postmortem purification, not identical with the Roman Catholic purgatory but similar in aim, through which all souls are eventually cleansed and welcomed into the Kingdom.

These variations share a common error: they make final salvation automatic rather than responsive. They treat God's saving will as a force that overrides human freedom rather than a love that invites it. The Church's answer to all of them is the same: the Gospel is not a mechanism; it is a marriage. A marriage requires yes from both sides, and the yes may be refused.

Answering Universalism from Scripture

The Lord Himself teaches unambiguously that some will reject salvation and that the rejection is final. The words are not our invention; they are His:

"And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." Matthew 10:28

"And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." Matthew 25:46

The word used in Matthew 25:46 for the punishment of the wicked and the life of the righteous is the same Greek word, *aiōnios*. If "eternal life" is without end, then "eternal punishment" in the same sentence is without end. To cut the verse in half — treating the first half as an everlasting promise and the second as a temporary warning — is not exegesis. It is evasion. The Lord returns to this theme repeatedly.

- In the parable of the wheat and the tares, the tares are not purified; they are burned (Matthew 13:24-30).
- In the parable of the net, the bad fish are cast away at the end of the age (Matthew 13:47-50).
- In the parable of the sheep and the goats, Christ divides His own Kingdom from the outer darkness (Matthew 25:31-46).
- In the parable of the ten virgins, the door is shut — and the Lord speaks five words that no universalist has ever been able to erase: "I do not know you" (Matthew 25:12).
- In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, a great gulf is fixed between heaven and hell, and none can cross it (Luke 16:26).

The apostolic witness reinforces what the Lord teaches. St. Paul warns of everlasting destruction (2 Thessalonians 1:9), and St. John closes the New Testament with two visions — the Lake of Fire into which the devil, the beast, and the false prophet are cast "forever and ever" (Revelation 20:10), and the Book of Life outside of which no one enters the City of God (Revelation 20:15; 21:27). This is not the margin of Scripture. It is the heart of its warning.

Answering Universalism from the Fathers

The Orthodox tradition has always held together the seriousness of divine judgment with the profound hope of divine mercy. This is not the same as universalism. St. Basil the Great is explicit that hell is eternal: "If at some time there were to be an end to eternal punishment, eternal life would also, at some time, have an end." St. John Chrysostom preaches on the reality of hell repeatedly, not to terrify but to move his people to repentance. St. Ephrem the Syrian, the great hymnographer of Paradise, sings of the separation fixed between the company of the saints and those who have rejected the Bridegroom.

Some Fathers — notably St. Gregory of Nyssa — have used language that sounds to modern ears like apokatastasis. Careful reading shows that St. Gregory, while expressing profound confidence in the victory of God's love and in the purifying work of judgment, does not deny the reality of eternal loss for those who persist in rejection. Where his language is ambiguous, the Church's conciliar teaching is clear and normative. The individual opinions of a Father, however venerated, are read in the light of the whole Tradition, not set above it.

The Church, then, allows room for hopeful prayer — we pray for the departed, we trust the mercy of God — but she does not permit us to teach as doctrine that all will be saved. The line between hope and presumption is precisely the line between Orthodox teaching and the universalist error.

The Love of God and the Justice of God

The universalist often argues that God is love, and love cannot condemn. The answer is that God is love, and that the God of Scripture is not a sentimental abstraction but the living Holy One who is also just, holy, and wrathful against sin. These are not competing attributes to be traded against each other. They are one character seen from different angles.

St. John the Apostle, the same apostle of love who wrote "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16), also wrote: "He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36). The same pen that gave us the sweetest teaching on divine love gave us one of the sternest warnings about unbelief. To choose between these verses is not to honor St. John; it refuses his testimony.

Psalms 136 holds both together in one sustained cry. Every verse of that Psalm ends with "His mercy endures forever," and in the very middle the Psalmist sings of the God "who struck down great kings" and "slew famous kings" (Psalm 136:17-18). Mercy and judgment do not cancel each other. They are the two hands by which God holds the world.

The Question of Justice

There is a particular form of the universalist claim that deserves a direct answer. If all are saved in the end, what happens to justice? Universalism speaks tenderly of the repentance of the sinner but rarely of the tears of the sinner's victims. If Hitler, Stalin, and Mao — men whose careers are measured in millions of deaths — at last enter the same blessedness as their victims without repentance, without reckoning, without any word from the God who sees every falling sparrow, then the claim that God is just becomes empty.

The Cross does not render justice unnecessary. It fulfills justice. In Christ Crucified, God's mercy and wrath meet at one point, and sin is actually dealt with. But the Cross does not apply itself automatically. It is received by faith, by repentance, by baptism, by the life of the Church. A sinner who refuses it to the end is not justified by the Cross he refused. This is why the Lord can say, in the same breath, that He is the Savior of the world (John 4:42) and that whoever does not believe is condemned already (John 3:18).

Pre-servants must keep this balance in their own preaching. A Gospel that soft-pedals judgment is not the Gospel St. Paul preached, and it will not produce the kind of repentance that changes lives. A Gospel that dwells on judgment without the infinite mercy of Christ is not the Gospel either. The servant holds both truths in one message, because Christ did.

Why Universalism Is Spiritually Dangerous

The error is not merely academic. It is pastorally corrosive in at least three ways.

First, universalism **removes urgency from evangelism**. If every person is saved regardless of whether he hears the Gospel, the labor of preaching becomes optional, the cost of missions becomes unintelligible, and the urgency that drove the apostles through Roman prisons and imperial edicts dissolves. St. Paul did not say, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of possibilities"; he said, "How shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard?" (Romans 10:14).

Second, universalism **devalues repentance**. If final reconciliation is guaranteed, the command to "repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17) becomes advisory rather than urgent. The sinner is free to delay, to postpone, to sin his way through a life with the assurance that all roads eventually lead home. This is not mercy. It is a lie that will cost souls their struggle.

Third, universalism **cheapens the Cross**. The death of the Son of God becomes a ceremonial gesture rather than a decisive rescue. If all are saved in the end either way, the blood of Christ is reduced to a symbolic solidarity with suffering. The apostolic preaching will not permit this. "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The Cross is not a symbol; it is the actual ground of our reconciliation, and it has to be received.

How to Speak to Someone Drawn to Universalism

The servant will meet sincere people who have come to this position honestly. Some have lost a child; some have a beloved friend who died outside the faith; some are simply repelled by the caricatures of hell they have encountered in bad preaching. The answer to them is not contempt. It is truth spoken with tenderness.

Three things can be said at almost any conversation of this kind. First, the Church teaches that God desires the salvation of every person; our hope for the departed is real, and our prayers are real. Second, the Church teaches that freedom is real; God has made us capable of saying yes or no to Him, and He does not override that freedom. Third, the Church teaches that the Lord's warnings about hell

are His words, not ours — and a Christian has no authority to edit them out in order to spare our feelings.

The pastoral offer is not damnation-talk but life-talk. We can say, truthfully, that the Church's answer to the grief behind the universalist question is not universalism but prayer, the Divine Liturgy, the commemoration of the departed, and the confidence that God is more merciful than we can imagine — while still being the God who has warned us what our refusals cost.

St. Augustine wrote of the error in his own century: "Let no one be deceived, brethren, by those who promise impunity to everyone... The Scriptures cannot be broken." (Enchiridion 112). The servant must not be deceived either, and must help his people not to be deceived. The price of the error is too high.

The Mistake of Universalism

Universalism mistakes God's universal saving will for universal automatic salvation. It is not Orthodox. It was condemned in the person of Origen and has been refused by the consensus of the Fathers ever since. It is not supported by the words of Christ, whose teaching on final judgment is explicit, repeated, and unflinching. It is not required by the love of God, which includes holiness, justice, and wrath as parts of one character. It is not the better gospel; it is a different gospel, and St. Paul has already warned us what to do with different gospels (Galatians 1:8-9).

The Orthodox hope is richer. God does desire the salvation of every soul. The Cross is sufficient for every sin. The sacraments, the prayers of the Church, and the persevering love of the faithful are real means by which real persons are saved. We may hope for the salvation of those who have died in ways we do not fully understand; we pray for them; we commend them to the mercy of the God who is their Judge and ours. But we do not teach that hell will be empty, because our Lord has not taught us that. He has said something harder and more hopeful at once: "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able" (Luke 13:24).

The servant preaches the narrow gate, opens it for all, and warns that it is narrow. This is the faith once for all delivered to the saints.



Review Questions

1. What is universal salvation? (A. It is the belief that all people eventually end up in heaven.)
2. What does George T. Knight claim about the origin of the idea of universalism? (A. He claims that Universalism was a widely held view among theologians in Early Christianity. These included such important figures such as Alexandrian scholar Origen as well as Clement of Alexandria, a Christian theologian.)
3. What is their belief? (A. Universalism applies passages like Acts 3:21 and Colossians 1:20 to mean that God intends to restore all things to their original state of purity)

through Jesus Christ (Romans 5:18; Hebrews 2:9), so that in the end everyone will be brought into a right relationship with God (1 Corinthians 15:24–28).

4. Name two types of universalism? (A. Ultra and Purgatorial)
5. Name two parables that reflect Jesus' teaching about hell. (A. The parable of the net and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus)
6. True or false: the universalists ignore God's justice. (A. True)