

GEORGE W. TRUETT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

UNIVERSALISM: A BIBLICAL, MISSIOLOGICAL, AND CULTURAL REFLECTION

SUBMITTED TO DR. JIMMY DORRELL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
WOCW 7385: INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN WITNESS AND MISSION

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NOVEMBER 30, 2016

In 2011, Pastor Rob Bell dismayed evangelical followers with his work *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. In his book, Bell argues for an afterlife where all humans are restored to God in heaven, attempting to answer most common questions about hell and salvation from a Christian universalist perspective. Though the author admits the book is simply a restatement of historical universalist thought, the work caused many evangelical Christians to rebuke the pastor for his seemingly unorthodox beliefs. For many, this was the first time they had witnessed a pastor they knew of present these arguments, and it seemed far too outside the limits of orthodox Christianity to be accepted. Bell didn't create the concept of universalism however, it has a long history, beginning with biblical authors. Though hotly debated, Christian universalism has a biblical and historical background, and Christian universalists still have something valuable to contribute to the world of mission, even if their eschatological views differ from evangelicals.

Christian universalism, most simply defined, is a broad term to describe a wide variety of beliefs about salvation, all of which teach that eventually Christ will save all humanity to eternal life. Christian universalism is distinctive among other universalist thinking in that it still teaches that Jesus is the ultimate savior and redeemer between humanity and God. While other forms of universalism teach that all people eventually go to heaven or a paradise, they may not explicitly identify Jesus as the redeemer. Christian universalism also stands in stark contrast to two other traditional Christian views of eternity: particularism and annihilationism. Most evangelical Christians around the world are particularistic, meaning that they believe some will be saved to eternal life through Jesus, while others will be damned to eternal separation from God. Though similar to Christian universalists in their assertion that only Jesus redeems, particularists would teach that some people (either by their own rejection of the Gospel, ignorance of Christ, or

predestination) will spend eternity separated from God. Though it is not as popularly held of a view, another group of Christians identify as annihilationists. This group of Christians would teach that while Jesus will save some for eternal life, others will be either eventually or immediately annihilated; leaving no trace of their soul to inhabit either heaven or hell.

Though the concept would appear unorthodox to many, Christian universalism has historical roots in some of the thinking of Christians dating back to the Apostle Paul himself. Many scholars would hesitate to label Paul as a full Christian universalist¹, but some of the Apostle's writings unashamedly show "every knee" bowing before God at the end of time (Phil 2:10 NIV). In addition to these universal images of worship and eternal life, one missiological scholar even identifies that in Paul's overall positive message of salvation, he "has no doctrine of hell"². Do this lack of a developed teaching on hell and these images of universal praise to God make Paul a Christian universalist? Well, in the eyes of David Bosch, no; the images stand in too stark of a contrast with other Pauline images of particularism². Though these contrasting images create an odd dichotomy of thought for the modern reader to analyze, it still provides Christian universalists with scriptural images for their beliefs, straight from the words of an Apostle. Early on, several Christian leaders adopted this thinking into their theology.

Universalist thought was carried into the early church by Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, both of whom had dedicated followings. The movement would have grown larger, had the Second Council of Constantinople not declared universalism a heresy in 553³. This declaration was critically damaging to the universalist movement, and though historians see small pockets of

¹ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. 20th Anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2014), 150.

² Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 151.

³ Roger E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity*. 2d ed. (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2016), 304.

universalist thought in all eras of church history, the movement did not make a strong appearance again until the Enlightenment. Revitalization came to the Christian universalist movement because of a group of British Methodists in the 1700s, preaching their interpretation of Scripture to any who would listen⁴. Some have suggested that as human knowledge of the world and the many cultures surrounding Christian societies began to interact with one another in the Enlightenment, universalism became popular, because it allowed believers to intellectually answer the question of salvation for the unconverted around them. This movement gained a following, and soon several Christian universalist churches formed in New England. The Christian universalist movement reached its most recent apex in the 1800s, shortly before the universalists divided into more traditional Christian groups and non-Christian Unitarian fellowships³. Before finding its way into the thinking of modern mainline denominations, universalism reappeared briefly in America during the Shaker movement⁵. Though the Shakers are considered heretical for a variety of other reasons, this universalism revived discussion of the issue among American Christians shortly before the Second Great Awakening.

Theologian Roger Olson chronicles the current state of universalism by demonstrating how the belief has become, in his opinion, “almost essential” to liberal Protestantism and in the works of more liberal theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann⁶. In a surprising explanation however, Olson also provides the reader with evidence of more orthodox theologians like Karl Barth promoting a universalist view⁷, before he reminds the reader why the thought is

⁴ Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity Volume II: the Reformation to the Present Day*. 2d ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 321.

⁵ González, *The Story of Christianity*, 325.

⁶ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, 305.

⁷ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, 304.

incompatible with Great Tradition Christian thinking. Olson goes on to explain that Universalistic thought often leads to an eschatology that focuses on a new heaven and a new earth, asserting that God will bring about change gradually through time and a process, rather than through a major cataclysmic event⁸. Though most Christian universalists believe that the world is slowly getting better, and would identify with post millennial thought, not every, or even most post millennials would necessarily identify with universalists⁹. Universalism today, though spreading into more denominations, simply does not have the vast theological work devoted to it as the traditional Christian particularist view. Many are quick to dismiss universalism, claiming that it would impair missionary efforts across the world, but it is this postmillennial eschatological view held by most universalists that keeps them motivated and encouraged to be involved in missions.

Christian universalism poses many questions in relation to missions and evangelism, but perhaps the most important question to be posed here is why believers should spend time, money, and effort to share the Gospel globally and seek converts, if there is no danger of millions of unbelievers spending eternity in hell? This question begs at the very core of how we view ourselves as Christians, and what our motivation for missions has become. If a Christian is to view him or herself as primarily a being bound for heaven, and the role of missions as primarily a tool to send others to heaven, then yes, missions would be a useless pursuit for a universalist. Many Christians, however, do not simply view themselves as beings in waiting for heaven. They instead view themselves as full-time followers of Christ, commissioned to go into all the world, teaching the way of Jesus, and baptizing disciples. For orthodox particularists,

⁸ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, 374.

⁹ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, 384.

eternal separation from God is indeed a huge motivator in evangelism, but very few Christians would argue that missions exists for the sole purpose of seeking conversions for salvation from hell. Many recognize that missionary ventures fill very real, physical needs, and that conversion fills current, present spiritual needs besides an avoidance of hell; if living in Christ's kingdom now is actually better than living for oneself, then missions would be worth the effort, even if eternal salvation was not part of the offer.

As our missionary paradigm is shifting toward our current postmodern mindset, salvation is beginning to be viewed by many as a more holistic process rather than a singular, salvific event¹⁰. This framework takes seriously Paul's New Testament terminology of "being saved" and "working out your salvation with fear and trembling" (1 Cor 1:18). Salvation then becomes not solely a process of avoiding damnation, but rather, a process of seeking (and experiencing) redemption in all things; economically, socially, physically, and spiritually. To a Christian universalist then, missions would (and does) focus much more on the process of introducing people to Jesus, simply because He provides the best way of life, and redeems all things. A Christian universalist believes that a person's eternity was already bound for relationship with God when the creator formed them. Therefore, their goal in missions is to transform lives by meeting needs and introducing them to the redemptive ways of Jesus before death, bringing about hope and redemption here on earth, as it is in heaven¹¹. Christian universalists do still tend to participate in mission, but they focus much more on social justice and development than do their counterparts in particularist evangelical missionary fields.

¹⁰ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 408.

¹¹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 409.

Beyond a simple burden to not send people to hell, many Christians seek conversion in missions because they believe that the second coming of Christ will occur the very moment that every people group has been reached with Gospel¹². This premillennial motivation for mission also asks difficult questions of the Christian universalist: why would Jesus bother to leave earth and come back when everyone has heard the Gospel if He is going to tell everyone one day anyway? This is an excellent example of how differently particularists and universalists view eschatology. As Olson asserts, most Christian universalists would hold to a postmillennial view of the end times. The post millennial Christian would view the world on a slow path to Christ's coming earthly kingdom, as the oppressed are set free, the blind are given sight, and the Gospel is shared (Lk 4:20). In this view, the role of mission and the things Christians are commanded to do in the Great Commission are meant to bring about the kingdom of God on earth, not so much of a focus on what happens to the dead. Therefore, a Christian universalist might be involved in mission to hurry the return of Christ, in a similar manner to a premillennial believer, but this attempt would be to help in the construction of a Kingdom here on earth for which Jesus can return, not for the premillennial purpose of being taken away to an other-worldly kingdom before a tribulation period.

Christian universalism is an intriguing movement among believers. Though universalists have some scriptural support and some early church fathers on their side, they were universally condemned in the 500s, and have struggled for recognition and a place in the Christian conversation ever since. Though evangelicals may have many questions for a Christian universalist and many difficult scriptural passages from both Jesus and Paul for which the universalist will need to answer, they pose little threat to the world of mission. Though the

¹² Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 5.

thought has captured many progressive, mainline denominations in America, these groups are generally shrinking and do not have any influence over where and what more orthodox, particularist evangelicals choose to do mission. In areas where universalists and particularists may want to do mission together, their core message of “Jesus is Lord” and “Jesus saves” remains the same, and they can (and should) work together. Universalism, though declared heretical, is not and should never become an obstacle to effective mission, due to their similar goals and optimistic hope for a future return of the risen Christ.

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