

The Good News

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After the death of Jesus almost two thousand years ago, his followers spent almost five hundred years determining who was a follower, what Jesus believed, developing an organizational structure, and for at least three centuries struggling to survive. In the midst of this transition and chaos there were many complimentary and conflicting theological ideas influenced by Greek, Roman, Egyptian, and developing Christian philosophy and theology. One such idea was “universal salvation” (also known as “restoration”), that all souls would ultimately be reconciled and restored with God.

For several centuries the developing Christian Church accepted the theology of universal salvation. One of the early Church Fathers, Origen (born sometime around 185 C.E. in Alexandria, Egypt) was a prolific writer and teacher who wrote extensively about many theological concepts, including universal salvation, which he called the “restoration of all beings.” Origen believed that the love of God was so strong, powerful, and infinite that it would restore everyone, even the devil, after a period of time. Origen quoted from the Pauline New Testament text, *1 Corinthians* 15: 25-28, to justify his faith in restoration

For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when it says, “All things are put in subjection,” it is plain that this does not include the one who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all.¹

No one seemed concerned by this theology of universal salvation. Origen was deeply respected during his lifetime, and virtually revered after his death around 254 C.E. However, the situation changed several centuries later when Augustine popularized new ideas like original sin, atonement for this sin by the crucifixion of Jesus, predestination (some were elected to heaven and others were not), and the grace of God. Original sin (Adam and Eve’s “fall”) and restoration (universal salvation) do not match. They are theological concepts at odds with one another. A series of events, including the growing predominance of Augustinian thought, dismantled the reputation and writings of Origen. In 544 C.E., and again in 553 C.E. the developing Catholic Church declared universal salvation heretical and most of Origen’s writings were destroyed.

Universalist ideas continued to be held by some in private, but it was not until the Protestant Reformation and Enlightenment that they regained limited (and persecuted) popularity, particularly England, the most liberal European country of the 18th century.

¹ *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, New Revised Standard Version (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1989).

One English Universalist, James Rely, preached that the death of Christ had immediately atoned for all human sin and made salvation possible for everyone, not election to heaven for the few (and hell for the others), but salvation for all. Rely's ideas eventually influenced another English minister, John Murray. Murray originally believed in Calvinism and the evangelical piety of Methodism. According to his own writing he considered Rely a "detestable babbling," and he "carefully avoided every Universalist, and most cordially did I hate them."² Then, like now, Universalism was a challenging theology that inspired fear and hatred.

So how did a minister who cordially hated Universalists, become their greatest spokesperson in America? The answer is simple, an inquiring mind, and open heart led to his conversion in 1760. A few years later Murray ran into deep debt, was arrested and imprisoned, and his wife and young son died.

Swearing to never preach again, in 1770 he set sail for America to start over. As the story goes, the ship he was on floundered on a sandbar off the coast of New Jersey during a storm, and could not move afterwards due to still winds. While the passengers waited for the winds to change, they came ashore, and a local resident persuaded Murray to preach for them, saying the winds would not change until he did so (is it lore or truth, we will never know, but it makes for a good story). The good news of God's Love was preached in America. Murray eventually moved north to Gloucester, Massachusetts where he founded the first Universalist congregation in America. It still stands today, as does the house he lived in with his second wife, the poet Judith Sargent Murray.

Murray is considered the "founder" of Universalism in America, and for those of you who have joined First Unitarian Church, you will recognize these words of his that I use at the conclusion of every membership signing ceremony

Go out into the highways and byways.
Give the people something of your new vision.
You may possess a small light, but uncover it, let it shine
Use it in order to bring more light and understanding
to the hearts and minds of men and women
Give them not hell, but hope and courage.

Universalist theology was always controversial. Eighteenth century New England was tightly controlled by the descendants of the Puritan church, the Standing Order churches across New England. If you remember from the sermon I preached in September, all residents in the parish had to pay a tax to the Standing Order church (whether or not they attended or agreed with the theology) in order to preserve the "moral order" of the community. This rule came from the days when the Puritans were the only religion in the town and everyone belonged.

As America grew, and other religious denominations, such as Universalists, Quakers, and Baptists grew, there were increasing theological and financial conflicts. Universalists, Quakers, Baptists and others DID NOT want to pay taxes to the Standing Order church. They had their own faiths and congregations to sustain. At times, ministers with divergent theologies were forbidden to preach in Standing Order churches,

² Quoted in David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 48-49.

and if Standing Order members went to listen to divergent preaching they were threatened with removal from their congregation. Remember, when Universalism arrived in America, the Unitarians had still not separated from the Standing Order churches, so the theologies of original sin, predestination, and election to heaven (or not) still predominated. Salvation for all was a controversial theology that refuted the theological base of New England congregations.

In addition, the Standing Order churches favored either orthodoxy or at least restraint. They were dismayed by the fervent evangelism and itinerant preaching of Universalism. Early universalism was a passionately Christian, Bible-based faith proclaiming the good news of God's love. The well-bred, educated, Bostonians (even of a liberal theological persuasion) looked down their noses at the rabble rousing Universalists. Universalist theology was also "morally" suspect.

Seventy years after Universalism officially arrived in the United States, Universalist minister, Reverend Thomas Whittemore was still refuting charges of Universalist moral laxity. Those who detested or distrusted Universalists often complained, that without the fear of hell, and with complete assurance that everyone was going to heaven, people had no incentive to behave, therefore a Universalist faith would lead to licentious behavior. In a manual Whittemore wrote for the average Universalist layperson he quoted a Universalist critic who complained

It cannot be denied, that the advocates of Universalism are mostly to be found in that class of people which the Bible denominates wicked; while nearly all the wise and good adopt the contrary belief. The intemperate, the thief, the robber, the profane swearer, the murderer, the corrupt and dissolute, are generally pleased with the preaching of Universalists; but the pious and the better portion of community deprecate the influence of such preaching.³

When I hear this it reminds me of criticism that I receive today as a Unitarian Universalist. This was (and is) the general prejudice that Universalists faced. They lived and preached in a country hostile to their faith.

If I had lived in 19th-century America, Universalism would have been a very attractive faith to me. Universalism is kinder and gentler. It restores an image of a loving and merciful God. It is optimistic. It emphasizes an emotionally felt and lived faith through conversion to the good news of God's love, human potential, and redemption. It is a hopeful message of "with God all things are possible." The Universalists were the first American denomination to ordain a woman, Olympia Brown in 1863, because even if they thought it bizarre and inappropriate at the time that a woman would preach, when they searched their faith and hearts they could not find a reason to deny her, so they ordained her. The good news of God's love breaking through prejudice.

Perhaps the greatest Universalist missionary and writer was Hosea Ballou. In 1805 Ballou published *Treatise on Atonement*, a vital, challenging work. Ballou argued that God's love was infinite, so infinite that it included, perhaps even created, sin. This is a radical idea, God created sin? Ballou indicates it may be part of a larger plan we just

³ Thomas Whittemore, "The Plain Guide to Universalism" in *Universalism in America: A Documentary History of a Liberal Faith*, ed. Ernest Cassara (Boston: Skinner House, 1971), 133.

don't understand, but that someday everything will be encompassed in the love of God. Ballou wrote

If our Creator is worthy of the love and devotion of his rational offspring . . . it must be on account of his real goodness to them; and if his requirements are worthy of our careful observance . . . it must be because the keeping of them is enjoyment to us . . . The preaching of future rewards and punishments, for the purpose of inducing people to love God and moral virtue, is not only useless, but pernicious.⁴

That's a faith I could believe in. Ballou was very specific that human sin is the cause of human misery, so sin is paid for in this lifetime. I like this idea, however, I have seen people do wrong and experience no remorse so I am not sure this is logical, but on the other hand Ballou is right that most of us feel guilt and pain over our wrongdoing, even if it is kept secret within our hearts.

As a dissenting religion afraid of creeds and suspicious of authority, the Universalists were terrible organizers, but they did agree to a profession of faith in 1803 (which lasted until 1899), entitled the *Winchester Profession*. It reads

Article I. We believe that the Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament and the New Testament contain a revelation of the character of God, and of the duty, interest and final destination of mankind.

Article II. We believe that there is one God, whose nature is Love, revealed in one Lord Jesus Christ, by one Holy Spirit of Grace, who will finally restore the whole family of mankind to holiness and happiness.

Article III. We believe that holiness and true happiness are inseparably connected, and that believers ought to be careful to maintain order and practice good works; for these things are good and profitable unto men.⁵

For a creed, this is flexible and open. It emphasizes the importance of the Bible as a "revelation of the character of God." Note that this is 1803 and the revelation is not the literal word of God, but the "character." That's a liberal translation. It has Unitarian leanings before the Unitarians even broke away from the Standing Order Church. "There is one God, whose nature is Love," revealed in other things. God will restore everyone at some time and people are encouraged to behave well. That's it. That's to the point and optimistic.

Universalism spread as an alternative theology. With most 19th-century Protestant congregations still preaching about hell and damnation the Universalists had quite a niche. Circuit riding preachers went out spreading the good news of God's love throughout the colonies and Midwest. People would assemble to listen, a congregation would be founded, and the preacher would move on. This is a great foundational tactic, but terrible for permanence. Organizations need leaders that remain. At one point there

⁴Hosea Ballou, "An Examination of the Doctrine of Future Retribution," in *Universalism in America*, 148.

⁵ See <http://www.universalistchurch.net/faith/1803full.html>.

were almost 100 Universalist congregations in Ohio. In the Cincinnati area today only one remains, Heritage Universalist Unitarian (founded in 1827) as a Universalist congregation three years before First Unitarian Church.

This week I took a trip up to Montgomery, Ohio to visit another old Universalist church, this one empty, in the center of the town. Built in 1837 from a group that broke away from the Hopewell Presbyterian Church, it is a beautiful brick church with columns, wood floors and white pews, meticulously maintained. The original offertory plate, wood with red fabric rests under the pulpit. The church organ is still there, and functional. Over the pulpit these words are framed

Universalist Declaration of Faith

The Universal Fatherhood of God

The Spiritual authority and leadership of His Son Jesus Christ

The Trustworthiness of the Bible as containing a Revelation of God

The Certainty of just Retribution for Sin

The final harmony of all souls with God.

Do you hear “the certainty of just retribution for sin?” They were not slackers. The pain of sin would be paid out in this lifetime. “The final harmony of all souls with God.” All souls saved. The elderly woman who showed me the church said “I like the last sentence best of all. It is what I believe.” “The final harmony of all souls with God.” I turned to her and said “I like that sentence too.” That’s the power of universalism, then and now.

Universalism lost members in the 20th century, when many Protestant denominations moved away from regular talk about hell and damnation, and eased up on concepts like predestination and election to grace. The Universalists lost their niche. One of their last great spokespersons was the Reverend Clarence Skinner, an avowed pacifist, who I quoted in this morning’s reading. Writing in 1915, he eloquently proclaims

The Universalist idea of God is that of a universal, impartial, immanent spirit whose nature is love. It is the largest thought the world has ever known; it is the most revolutionary doctrine ever proclaimed; it is the most expansive hope ever dreamed . . . the democratic creator of the solid, indivisible world of rich and poor, black and white, good and bad, strong and weak, Jew and Gentile, bond and free; such a faith is as much a victory for the common people as was the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution.⁶

Olympia Brown urged her congregation to “Stand by this faith. Work for it and sacrifice for it . . . always trusting in the one God which ever lives and loves.”⁷ Whether or not we believe in God, we still stand by this faith, when we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and justice, compassion, and equity in human

⁶ Clarence Skinner, “The Social Implications of Universalism,” in *Universalism in America*, 250.

⁷ Brown, “Stand By This Faith,” in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993), 569.

relations, acceptance of one another, and a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. Our faith is a faith of salvation, if not for individuals, then certainly for a broken world. May it always be so.