

Plain Guide to Universalism

2. Who Are Universalists?

I. Universalists are those who believe in eventual holiness and happiness of all the human race, as revealed to the world in the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

They are supposed by some to be of a very recent origin, but, it is well known, that there have been Universalists in almost every age since the word of God was revealed to the children of men.

II. Even in the Old Testament we find the promises of God to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the prophecies of David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and several other of the prophets, distinctly foretell the approach of the time, when sin shall be finished, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

"Jesus Christ not only revealed God in the specific character of a Father, and declared the love of God to the world, even to the evil and to the unthankful, as the cause of His own mission, and laid down other distinguishing principles of Universalism; but He also professed, explicitly, to be the Savior of the world, -- not a part merely; asserted, that He would actually draw all men unto Him; and maintained, that all who shall be raised from the dead will be equal unto the angels, and be the children of God, being the children of the resurrection.

St. Paul taught a gathering of all things in Christ, in the dispensation of the fullness of times, - - a universal reconciliation to God, through the blood of the cross; that God had included all in unbelief, in order to have mercy upon all; that of Him and through Him, and to Him, are all things; that Christ must reign until all things are subdued unto Him; till all be made alive in Him, so that, when He shall deliver up the kingdom to the Father, God shall be ALL IN ALL." -- (Universalist Expositor, Vol. IV. pp. 185, 186.)

III. We find distinct traces of Universalism in the Christian church immediately after the age of the apostles, especially among the different sects of the Gnostics; and it is worthy of remark, that a belief in the final salvation of all men was not made a subject either of objection or reproach, for two or three hundred years after the death of the Savior. There are very few works belonging to this period, that are extant.

We find a distinct trace of Universalism in the Sybylline Oracles, that appeared about A.D. 140 or 150.

Clement, of Alexandria, the president of the renowned Catechetical School in that city, held the doctrine of Universalism. He was the most learned and illustrious of all the Christian fathers before Origen.

Origen, as is well known, was a decided Universalist, and taught and defended this doctrine in almost all his works. He was born A.D. 185. It does not seem, that during his life, any

objections were made to him by his contemporaries on account of his believing in the salvation of all mankind. Immediately after Origen's day, we perceive, that many of the fathers maintained the doctrine of Universalism.

Marcellus, Bishop of Ancyra, appears to have been a Universalist, and also Titus, Bishop of Bostra, who maintained (A.D. 364), that the torments of hell are remedial, and salutary in their effects upon transgressors.

Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa, was a decided Universalist (A.D. 380). He believed, that all punishment would be remedial, and that, in the end, all mankind, and even the Devil himself, will be subdued and purified. One of his favorite proofs of Universalism was, 1 Cor. 15th chapter.

Gregory Nazianzen, or Gregory, Bishop of Nazianzus, was probably a Universalist. He was promoted (A.D. 378) to the Archbishopric of Constantinople. Next come the Origenists, a sect who were distinguished by that appellation. They were the warm admirers of Origen, and doubtless believed in the final happiness of all men; but their early opponents, who pursued them with much zeal, did not object to their faith in this particular, although they sought every means to make them odious. It was not until many years afterwards, that Universalism was considered a matter of objection and reproach.

The famous Jerome, in the early part of his life, was a Universalist; but, at a later period, he was led by a theological and personal quarrel, to take sides against this doctrine.

Evagrius, a native of Pontus, but a scholar of Basil the Great, and of Gregory Nazianzen, is said by the ancients to have taught, with Didymus, the doctrine of Universal salvation.

Diodorus, Bishop of Tarsus, in Cilicia, was a Universalist (A.D. 378). "The wicked," he says, "are to suffer, not eternal torment, (for that would render their immortality of no avail,) but a punishment proportioned in length to the amount of their guilt; after which they are to enjoy happiness without end." Theodore, Bishop of Mopsuestia (A.D. 392), renowned as one of the ablest theologians and critics of his time, was a Universalist, as is asserted by the ancients.

About the same time flourished Fabius Manus Victorinus, who was converted to Christianity about A.D. 350. He was also a Universalist. He maintained that "Christ will regenerate all things; through Him all things will be purged, and return into eternal life. And when the Son shall deliver up the kingdom to the Father, all things will be God; that is," he adds, "all things will still exist, but God will exist in them, and they will be full of Him." Universalism spread wide in the church about this period.

Among the Gnostics it was extensively received, and the Manichaeans, a very powerful sect, held that sentiment.

Until the year 390, or rather 394, the doctrine of Universalism was never impeached in the Christian world, either by orthodox or heretic.

Among the heretics (that is, such as were so regarded for other reasons) we find broad traces of it from the beginning.

Of the orthodox Fathers, notwithstanding some of them seem to leave the matter in doubt, yet from the year 140 or 150 onward, they show us many evidences, that the sentiment prevailed.

That doctrine prevailed most in the eastern church, and in those places near the Holy Land, where the influence of the teachings of Christ and his apostles may be supposed to have been the most strongly felt.

In the western or Latin church, there were indeed instances of persons who defended it; but the influence of the pagan philosophy was here more powerfully felt.

In the year 394 a quarrel broke out in the East, between the Origenists, and their opponents, in which some of the latter attacked, for the first time, the particular tenet of the ultimate salvation of the Devil, but did not at first object to the final salvation of all men.

In 399, some of the councils, that were convened against the Origenists, condemned expressly the doctrine of the salvation of the Devil and his angels, though they passed by the kindred belief of the salvation of all mankind, without a censure.

Soon, however, the doctrine of the final salvation of all men was condemned, but still it continued to prevail; and it finally became necessary, in the Fifth General Council, which was opened at Constantinople, May 4th, 553, to pass a formal condemnation and anathemas. At the close of this anathema the council decreed, -- "Whoever says or thinks that the torments of the demons and of impious men are temporal, so that they will, at length, come to an end, or whoever holds a restoration either of the demons, or of the impious, let him be anathemas."

Thus we see, that for at least four hundred years after the beginning of the Christian era, the doctrine of Universalism was scarcely objected to in the church.

For further information on this subject, I refer the reader to that very valuable work, now rarely to be found in the market, "The Ancient History of Universalism," by Rev. Hosea Ballou 2d, and also to his abridged history in the "Universalist Expositor," (Vol. IV. pp. 184-209,) to which I confess myself much indebted.

IV. The doctrine of Universalism being thus condemned and put down by the highest ecclesiastical authority, continued to meet with less and less favor. The church, too, was fast sinking into ignorance and vice, and soon almost every feature of primitive Christianity was obliterated and lost. Of course, but slight traces of it can be seen until the light of the glorious Reformation broke upon the world.

No sooner did men begin again to think for themselves, and to throw off the shackles of ecclesiastical despotism, than we discover anew indications of the doctrine of Universalism.

It was embraced by the Anabaptists of Germany, who were cruelly persecuted on account of their faith, and who were condemned, in the famous Augustine Confession, among other things, for believing in the eventual restoration of all men to holiness and happiness.

When the Reformation took its rise in England, Universalism came up with it, and it was defended with great zeal by the Anabaptists in that kingdom, so much so, that it was judged necessary, in forming the XLII Articles of the English Church, to introduce a special

condemnation of Universalism, which may be found in the 42nd Article. These articles afterwards were reduced to XXXIX, and the condemnation of Universalism was omitted.

In 1648, parliament passed a statute, denouncing the punishment of death upon those who denied the doctrine of a future judgment, or, if they held to the final salvation of all men, they should be seized and imprisoned until they gave sufficient sureties, that they would teach said doctrine no more. Still there were not wanting those who defended this doctrine, even under so great peril, among whom we may name Gerard Winstanley, William Everard, William Earbury, Richard Coppin, and others.

About this time, the work entitled "Eternal Hell Torments Overthrown," was written and published by Samuel Richardson.

Soon after this, Jeremy White who had been a chaplain to Cromwell, published a book in defence of Universalism, entitled, "The Restoration of all Things."

Shortly after, and not far from 1700, several eminent men came out against the doctrine of eternal torments, among whom we may name Dr. Henry More, Archbishop Tillotson, Dr. Thomas Burnet, and William Whiston.

Dr. Burnet wrote decidedly in favor of Universalism in a work entitled "De Statu Mortuorum." Sir Isaac Newton inclined to the same doctrine.

Dr. George Cheyne and the Chevalier Ramsay, both distinguished men, came out in favor of that sentiment.

Paul Siegvolk, a learned German, published a work in defence of the same point, as did also John William Petersen.

Many others, very learned men, in Germany, embraced this doctrine. It spread also in Holland, Switzerland, Ireland, and Scotland. In the latter country, Neil Douglass and James Purves distinguished themselves as the defenders and preachers of the doctrine.

To return to England, we may name, as eminent Universalists, Dr. David Hartley, who wrote the "Observations on Man," Bishop Thomas Newton, Sir George Stonehouse, John Henderson, James Brown, D.D., Rev. R. Barbauld, and his accomplished lady, Mrs. Anna Letitia Barbauld, the authoress, and Rev. John Brown.

Among the English Unitarians we may mention Rev. Theophilus Lindsey, Rev. Joseph Priestly, L.L.D., Rev. John Simpson, and Rev. Messrs. Kenrick, Wright, Estlin, Belsham, Carpenter, Aspland, Grundy, Scott, Fox Harris, and many others.

James Rely began to preach Universalism in the city of London about 1750, and gathered a congregation of believers there.

The celebrated John Murray was converted under Mr. Rely's labors, having formerly been a Methodist. In 1770, Mr. Murray came to America, and was soon called on to preach the doctrine of a world's salvation. He labored abundantly in the good cause, as did also Elhanan Winchester, a convert from the Baptists. The Universalists of the United States are under great obligations to these two men and should always respect and venerate their memories. There

are now in the United States nearly five hundred preachers of Universalism and the number of believers, and societies, and churches is continually increasing.

V. It will be seen, from what has been said, that the views of those persons, who suppose that Universalism was not known until quite recently, are erroneous. It was no new doctrine. It had its advocates in the earliest ages of the church, and, with the exception of the dark ages, it has had them ever since. Universalism can claim great antiquity. It has also been embraced and defended by some of the most learned and pious men the world hath ever seen.

It is also worthy of remark, that the Christian Fathers defended Universalism as the doctrine of the Sacred Scriptures. Clement of Alexandria, the renowned Origen, Gregory, of Nyssa, and others, quoted much the same texts to prove that sentiment, that are now quoted. They used the words eternal and everlasting, not to signify endless duration when applied to punishment, but they used them in a limited sense.

It was not until nearly four hundred years after the death of Christ that Universalism was regarded as worthy of condemnation, and it was not formally condemned by any general council until the meeting of the Fifth General Council in 553. The four previous General Councils had not condemned it, although it had been believed and eloquently defended by some of the most eminent fathers in the church.

How much more time would have elapsed before the condemnation had it not been for the quarrel that broke out in the church in regard to the Origenists, we know not. They were objected to, at first, in respect to other points, and not for many years, on the ground of their being Universalist, although some of their most eminent men, like the distinguished Father from whom they took their name, had held that sentiment and defended it with much zeal.

Let it be observed, also, that Universalism was not put down, by reason, by argument, by appeals to the Word of God, but it was crushed by the arm of power. It was the arm of usurped power that crucified the Son of God. It was the arm of Usurped power that persecuted the infant church, and, it was the arm of usurped power that condemned and crushed Universalism in 553.

During the dark ages, when the Pope held undisturbed dominion, and the whole Christian world trembled at his nod, -- when the light of science almost expired, and wickedness of every description stalked abroad at noonday, then little was known of Universalism, while the contrary doctrine of endless misery flourished abundantly, and furnished ground for the contending ecclesiastics to anathematize, first each other and then the world, and proclaim the sentence of eternal banishment from immortal blessedness.

But we have shown, that no sooner was the arm of usurped power broken than Universalism once more appeared. It rose gently but irresistibly, winning admirers among the greatest and best of men, and pouring peace, consolation, and joy into every heart.

Not so with the doctrine of endless misery. From 553, the nearer we approach to the days of the Savior, the less we find of that doctrine, and it was not fully established until the Fifth General Council.

During the dark ages, very few persons, if any, doubted the truth of that sentiment. It was one of the strong pillars that upheld priestcraft, papal corruption, and ecclesiastical oppression.

But, no sooner did the light of the Reformation shine, than this doctrine was disputed. It was soon declared to be unscriptural, dishonorable to God, injurious to man, and from that time to the present, it has been losing more and more its power over the human mind.

We refer those, who wish to see a fuller account of Universalism from the time of the Reformation to the year 1830, to the "Modern History of Universalism," by the author of this work.