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Uncertainty, Principle of. See INDETERMINACY, PRINCIPLE OF .

Undeniability, Principle of. See SELF-REFUTING STATEMENTS .

Universalism. Universalism is the belief that everyone eventually will be saved. It was first proposed by the unorthodox church Father, Origen (ca. 185–ca. 254). Origen and universalism in general were condemned as unorthodox at the Fifth Ecumenical Council of Constantinople (A.D . 553). The theology of universalism should be distinguished from the Universalist Church, an extreme anticreedal movement born in colonial America whose rejection of historic Christianity extended far beyond the doctrine of universalism itself. This group was a force in the liberal theologies of nineteenth-century North America and continues to the present.

One of the most influential twentieth-century theologians to embrace universalism was Karl Barth (1886–1968). Philosopher John Hick is a contemporary proponent of the view (see Hick). A small number of otherwise evangelical theologians, such as Clark Pinnock and John Stott, have embraced forms of universalism and/or annihilationism . Most liberal theologians and cults hold to some form of universalism or its cousin, annihilationism, the view that persons who cannot qualify for heaven simply go out of existence. The common principle throughout universalist and annihilationist theologies is that there is no eternal punishment.

Basis for Universalism. Universalists generally appeal to arguments from God’s love in support of their positions. They cite several passages of Scripture to substantiate their views.

God’s Omnibenevolence. Universalism is usually based on the notion that a God of love would never allow any of his creatures to perish. But, as C. S. Lewis demonstrated (see, for example, his book, *The Great Divorce*), just the opposite is the case. For while God “so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son” (John 3:16) and “does not desire that any should perish” (2 Peter 3:9), he does not force his love on anyone. Forced love is a self-contradictory concept (see FREE WILL). Jesus said, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing” (Matt. 23:37). Lewis noted that “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘ Thy will be done’ ” (Lewis, *The Great Divorce* , 69).

Further, the Bible unmistakably teaches that there is an eternal hell and that human beings will go into it (see, for example, Matt. 25:41 ; 2 Thess. 1:7–9 ; Rev. 20:11–15). Jesus had more to say about hell than he did about heaven. He warned, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28). He added of those who reject him, “As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age” (Matt. 13:40). In what is sometimes called his Mount Olivet Discourse, Jesus declared, “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels’ ” (Matt. 25:41). Elsewhere he stressed the horror of hell with the statement: “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out” (Mark 9:43). One of his most vivid stories was of the rich man and a beggar named Lazarus. Since this story uses an actual name, most Bible teachers distinguish this from a parable and believe it refers to people who really lived. The description of hell speaks for itself:

In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, “Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.” But Abraham replied, “Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.” He answered, “Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father’s house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.” Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.” [Luke 16:23–31]

God’s Omnipotence. Others have argued for universalism from God’s omnipotence. Origen, declared: “For nothing is impossible to the Omnipotent, nor is anything incapable of restoration to its Creator” (*On First Principles* , 3.6.5). This, of course, implies that God desires by his goodness to do so, a position easily supported by many Scriptures (1 Tim. 2:4 ; 2 Peter 3:9). But if God wants to save all, and he can save all (i.e., he is all-powerful), then it seemed to follow for Origen that he will save all.

Two points should be made in response. First, God’s attributes do not operate in contradiction to each other. God is internally consistent in his nature. This is why the Bible insists that “It is impossible for God to lie” (Heb. 6:18). This is also the reason that God’s power must be exercised in accordance with his love. That is, God cannot do what is unloving. Second, as already demonstrated (above), it is unloving to force people to love him. Forced love is a contradiction, and God cannot do what is contradictory. Love cannot work coercively but only persuasively. And if some refuse to be persuaded, as the Bible says some will, then God will not coerce them into his kingdom.

Reformatory View of Justice. Origen argued that God’s justice has reformation in view, not punishment (see HELL). He claimed, “The fury of God’s vengeance is profitable for the purgation of souls. That the punishment, also, which is said to be applied by fire, is understood to be applied with the object of healing” (2.10.6). He added, “those who have been removed from

their primal state of blessedness have not been removed irrecoverably, but have been placed under the rule of those holy and blessed orders which we have described; and by availing themselves of the aid of these, and being remoulded by salutary principles and discipline, they may recover themselves, and be restored to their condition of happiness” (1.6.2).

One cannot apply God’s obvious desire that persons reform their lives to prove that all will be saved in the end. Nor can one assume, contrary to both Scripture and fact, that all persons choose to be reformed (Matt. 23:37 ; Rev. 20:10–15), or that no decision is final. In this life suicide is both one-way and final. Likewise, the Bible declares that each person “is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment” (Heb. 9:27). It is contrary to the proper concept of justice, which is penal, rather than reformatory. God’s absolute justice and holiness demand that a penalty be paid for sin (see Levit. 17:11 ; Ezek. 18:20).

The reformatory view of justice also is contrary to the substitutionary death of Christ. “Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God” (1 Peter 3:18 ; cf., 1 Cor. 15:3 ; 2 Cor. 5:21). “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Why did Christ have to pay the awful price for sin if sin is not an infinite crime and does not have to be punished?

God is indeed interested in reformation. That is what this life is all about. Those who refuse to accept what Christ did in the atonement cannot be reformed in this life. And then they must stand without the righteousness of Christ before an infinitely holy God who cannot abide in the presence of sin’s corruption. Separation from God is the necessary punishment for those who cannot exist in God’s presence and are rightly the objects of his anger. This is why God is so long-suffering with those who live. He does not wish that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9).

Origen offered an argument for universalism from God’s wisdom:

God, by the ineffable skill of his wisdom, transforming and restoring all things, in whatever manner they are made, to some useful aim, and to the common advantage of all, recalls those very creatures which differed so much from each other in mental conformation to one agreement of labour and purpose; so that, although they are under the influence of different motives, they nevertheless complete the fullness and perfection of one world, and the very variety of minds tends to one end of perfection. For it is . . . is one power which grasps and holds together all the diversity of the world, and leads the different movements towards one work, lest so immense an undertaking as that of the world should be dissolved by the dissensions of souls.

This again misses the point that God’s wisdom does not act contrary to his love. And love cannot force anyone to do something.

The fact that God is infinitely wise (omniscient) allows him to know that not everyone will freely choose to serve him. The attempt to save people God knows will never accept him would be contrary to God’s wisdom. Still, all are invited, even those God knows will reject him.

Many, with Origen, respond “that God, the Father of all things, in order to *ensure the salvation of all* his creatures through the ineffable plan of his word and wisdom, so arranged each of these, that every spirit, whether soul or rational existence, however called, should *not be compelled by force*, against the liberty of his own will, to any other course than that to which the motives of his own mind led him (lest by so doing the power of exercising free-will should seem to be taken away, which certainly would produce a change in the nature of the being itself)” (Origen, 2.1.2, emphasis added). But God cannot “ensure the salvation of all” without compelling them by force. As long as someone refuses to freely accept God’s love, a loving God cannot ensure they will be saved.

Biblical Support for Universalism. A number of biblical texts have been used to support the claim of universalists. It should be noted at the start of this survey that the Bible does not contradict itself (*see* BIBLE, ALLEGED ERRORS IN). Texts that can be interpreted in more than one way must be understood in the light of those that cannot:

Psalms 110:1 . David said and Christ repeated (Ps. 110:1 ; Matt. 22:44): “The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’ ” The enemies, literally of the Christ, are here referred to as subjugated, not saved. They are called the Lord’s “footstool”—hardly an appropriate description of saints who are joint heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17 ; Eph. 1:3). In Psalm 110 , David is speaking of the visitation of God’s wrath on his enemies, not of blessings on his people.

Acts 3:21 . Peter speaks of Jesus who “must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.” This reference to the “restoration of all things” is taken by universalists to mean the restoration of all to God. However, the context does not support such a conclusion. Acts 3:20–21 does not even remotely hint that there will be a total salvation. Other passages totally refute such an idea. Jesus said the gates of hell would not prevail against the church (Matt. 16:18). He also promised his followers, “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). Jesus could not be with his followers to the end of the age if the entire church had gone into complete apostasy soon after its founding. In Ephesians 3:21 , the apostle Paul says, “To him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever.” How could God be glorified in the church throughout all ages if there was no church for many centuries? Ephesians 4:11–16 speaks of the church growing to spiritual maturity, not degeneracy.

What then does “the restoration of all things” mean? Peter is speaking to the Jews and refers to the “restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began” (Acts 3:21). Here is the “covenant which God made with our [Jewish] fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed’ ” (vs. 25). This Abrahamic covenant was unconditional and included the promises of possessing the land of Palestine “forever” (Gen. 13:15). Peter refers to the future fulfillment of this Abrahamic covenant, the restoration of all *things* to Israel. Paul affirms the same in Romans 11 (see vs. 23–26).

Romans 5:18–19 . Paul wrote: “Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that

brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous” (Rom. 5:18–19). From these verses universalists infer that Christ’s death for all guarantees salvation for all. This conclusion, however, is contrary to the context and certainly to the message of Romans as a whole. This is explicitly in the context of being justified *by faith* (5:1), not automatically. In the preceding verse he declares that salvation comes to those “who receive . . . the gift of righteousness” (5:17).

The rest of Romans makes it unmistakably clear that not everyone will be saved. Romans 1–2 speaks of the heathen, who are “without excuse” (Rom. 1:19). Upon them the wrath of God falls (1:18). It declares that “as many as have sinned without the law will also perish without law ” (Rom. 2:12). At the heart of his argument, Paul concludes that, apart from justification by faith, the world is “guilty before God” (Rom. 3:19). Speaking of the destiny of both saved and lost, Paul affirms that “the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23). Likewise, Paul recognized that, in spite of his prayers, not all of his kinsmen would be saved (Romans 11) but would be “accursed” (Rom. 9:3). The whole point of Romans is to show that only those who believe will be justified (Rom. 1:17 ; cf. 3:21–26). Romans 9 leaves no doubt that only the elect not everyone will be saved. The rest are “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction” (Rom. 9:22).

Outside of Romans are numerous passages that speak of the eternal destiny of lost people, including the vivid passage at the end of Revelation when John said:

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. [Rev. 20:11–15]

2 Corinthians 5:19. Universalists also use 2 Corinthians 5:19 , in which Paul told the Corinthians “that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.” It is argued that “the world” was reconciled to God by Christ’s work. Thus, all are saved on the basis of Jesus’ work on the Cross.

The context clarifies the meaning of “the world.” First, reconciliation is regarded as a process according to God’s purpose, not an accomplished universal fact. God desires to save all (2 Peter 3:9), but all will not be saved (Matt. 7:13–14 ; Rev. 20:11–15). Second, the context indicates that actual reconciliation is only for those “in Christ,” not for all (vs. 17). If all were already saved, then Paul’s exhortation to be “ambassadors for Christ” and to “plead” with the world to “be reconciled to God” is senseless. They already are reconciled. All are made savable by Christ’s reconciliation, but not all are thereby saved.

Ephesians 1:10. Also misconstrued by universalists is Paul’s statement that in “the fullness of the times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are under the earth—in Him” (Eph. 1:10 NKJV). A careful examination of this text reveals that Paul is speaking only of believers. First, the context is those “he chose in Him before the foundation of the world” (1:4). Second, the phrase “in Christ” is never used in Scripture of anyone but believers. That unbelievers are excluded is further clarified by the omission of those “under the earth,” which Paul elsewhere uses to speak of the lost (Phil 2:10).

Philippians 2:10–11. Paul predicts that one day “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and the every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:10–11). Here, the universalists insist, unbelievers are clearly in view in the phrase “under the earth.”

No one denies that unbelievers will eventually confess Jesus is Lord, but that does not mean they will be saved. Even demons believe *that* Jesus is Lord, but they refuse to submit to him (cf. James 2:19). Believing *that* Jesus is Lord will not save anyone. Only belief *in* Christ (James 2:21–26) saves. “Those under the earth” (= the lost) in this text, make a confession from their mouth, but this acknowledgment will not be from the heart. For salvation, Paul insisted, one must both confess and “believe in your heart” (Rom. 10:9).

1 Corinthians 15:25–28. Of the eschaton or culmination of history, Paul affirmed in 1 Corinthians 15:25–28 that “then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. He must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. . . . And when all things shall be subdued unto him, then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all.” On this text Origen wrote, “But if even that unreserved declaration of the apostle do not sufficiently inform us what is meant by ‘enemies being placed under his feet,’ listen to what he says in the following words, ‘For all things must be put under Him.’ What, then, is this ‘putting under’ by which all things must be made subject to Christ?” He added, “I am of opinion that it is this very subjection by which we also wish to be subject to Him, by which the apostles also were subject, and all the saints who have been followers of Christ” (Origen, 1.6.1)

This interpretation ignores both the content and context of this passage. Paul is not speaking of the salvation of the lost but, rather their condemnation. This is evident in such phrases as *destroy*, *put under his feet*, and *put an end to all rule*. This is the language of subjugation (see vs. 24, 27, 28). Those in view are spoken of as God’s “enemies,” not his friends or children. They are subjugated enemies, not saved friends. That God will be “all in all” (vs. 28) does not mean that all will be in God. He will reign supreme in all the universe after ending the rebellion against him. The phrase *all things* must be understood in its context. All things are made subject to Christ (vs. 28). But these “all things” are enemies (vs. 25). The phrase is used in parallel with *enemies* in successive verses (vss. 26–27).

Heaven is not a place where God overpowers the will of his enemies and forces them into the fold. So, there is not a hint in such passages of salvation for all unbelievers.

Conclusion. Not only is there a lack of support for universalism, but there are decisive arguments against it.

Universalism is contrary to the implications of being created in the image of God. God made humankind in his image (Gen. 1:27) which included freedom. For everyone to be saved, those who refuse to love God would be forced to love him against their will. Forced “freedom” is not freedom. A corollary to this is that universalism is contrary to God’s love. Forced love is not love, but a kind of rape. No truly loving being forces himself on another.

Universalism is contrary to God’s perfection and justice. God is absolutely holy. And as such he must separate himself from and punish sin. Hence, as long as there is someone living in sin and rebellion against God, God must punish them. The Bible identifies this place of separation and punishment as hell (see Matthew 5 , 10 , 25).

Universalism is based on Scriptures wrenched out of context, and it ignores other clear passages.

Universalism is based on a kind of Freudian illusion. Sigmund Freud called any belief based on a mere wish to be an illusion. We do not *wish* anyone to suffer in hell forever, and this strong wish seems to be a primary impulse in the universalist thinking. But it is an illusion to believe that all wishes will be fulfilled.

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