

THEOLOGY ROUNDTABLE IS JESUS THE ONLY WAY?



PENINSULA BIBLE CHURCH
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INTRODUCTION

Is there any hope for someone who has not believed in Christ during this life to be saved? What about those who have never encountered the gospel? Are faithful adherents of other religions somehow included in God's kingdom?

As with most theological questions, these questions invite us to understand differing biblical texts in the midst of the cultural influences that surround us.

There are texts that speak of the glorious universal nature of God's salvation. Jesus declares in Revelation 21:5 that he is "*making all things new.*" Similarly, Paul claims in 1 Corinthians 12:5 that "*in Christ shall all be made alive.*"

There are texts that speak of the reality of eternal judgment and the necessity for personal response. Jesus says in Matthew 7:21, "*Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven.*" Paul speaks in 1 Thessalonians 1:8-9 of those "*who do not know God*" as receiving "*the punishment of eternal destruction.*"

On top of that, we live in a culture with a strong emphasis on inclusion and fairness. The idea that salvation might be in any way restricted or exclusive is one of the most challenging and difficult ideas to modern society. It seems to challenge the nature of God's love for the world. It calls into question the justice of God. It has caused some to walk away from God altogether.

Ever since the early church, followers of Jesus have wrestled with these ideas in an effort to make sense of them and understand how to live in their particular culture. Several variations of thought have emerged as answers to these questions. The most inclusive can be called **Unitarian Universalism**. This is the idea that all religions eventually lead to the same divine path of salvation. Another

variant can be called **Christian Universalism**. This is the notion that only Jesus Christ offers the true path of salvation, but that God will eventually lead all people to experience it. Finally, the traditional position can be called **Christian Particularism**. This is the idea that only those who confess explicit faith in Jesus Christ during their lifetime will experience salvation.

For the purposes of this round table discussion, we will discuss briefly the first position, but focus most of our attention on the second position. It is the most popular and compelling within contemporary evangelical circles. We will attempt to understand the arguments for this position as well as a traditional response.

As in all theological discussions, we want to emphasize concern for each other, respect for other opinions, and a spirit of healthy dialogue as we listen to each other. These are complicated theological concepts with significant implications on our lives and the world around us. Faithful intelligent people have wrestled with these issues in an attempt to articulate truth and express the mystery of God's character and work in the world.

May we seek truth faithfully as we listen and learn from God and from each other.

BRIEF HISTORY

Different variations of universalism have a long history throughout the church. This brief historical overview will give some perspective as to how the church has worked through these questions. The history of universalism in the church has often been affected by the tension between God and culture. Rob Bell's question in *What We Talk About When We Talk About God* (2013) is often the question being asked: "Can God keep up with the modern world?"

HISTORY

- **Clement of Alexandria (150 - 220)**
"So He saves all; but some He converts by penalties, others who follow Him of their own will, and in accordance with the worthiness of His honor, that every knee may be bent to Him of celestial, terrestrial, and infernal things."
- **Origen (185 - 254)**
"Our belief is that the Word [Christ] shall prevail over the entire rational creation and change every soul into his own perfection. ... For stronger than all the evils in the soul is the Word, and the healing power that dwells in him; and this healing he applies, according to the will of God, to every man."
- **Gregory of Nyssa (335 - 394)**
He taught, "The annihilation of evil, the restitution of all things, and the final restoration of evil men and evil spirits to the blessedness of union with God, so that He may be 'all in all,' embracing all things endowed with sense and reason."

- **Second Council of Constantinople (553)**
Origen's ideas of universal redemption are declared unorthodox by the greater church.
- **Hans Denck (1495 - 1527)**
A reformation leader who prioritized the inner word of God over written Scripture and argued for universal salvation.
- **John Murray (1741 - 1815)**
"Father of American Universalism"
Pastor of Universalist Society of Boston
- **Dedham Case in Massachusetts (1818)**
Court case pitting rights of parish (civil community organized around church) and church (practicing members of the church). Parish won the battle, led by a liberal Unitarian minister. Majority of Massachusetts churches became Unitarian, until Second Great Awakening.
- **American Unitarian Association (1825)**
This is the heyday of Unitarianism.
- **Christian Universalist Association (2007)**
A new association is formed to gather Christian universalists in distinction to Unitarian Universalists.
- **Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (2011)**
This book, by a popular evangelical mega-church pastor, sparks new debate within evangelicalism.

THE AIR WE BREATHE

Any and every theological discussion happens in the midst of a particular culture. It is helpful to understand the culture that we live in, not because it determines our understanding of truth, but because it necessarily affects the way we think and the values that we internalize. The best description of the dominant public environment of 21st century America and particularly the area of Silicon Valley is **Secular Humanism**.

Secular Humanism can be summarized as embracing human reason, ethics, social justice, and philosophical naturalism, while specifically rejecting religious dogma, supernaturalism, pseudoscience, or superstition as the basis of morality and decision making (Wikipedia article on secular humanism). The American Humanist Association motto describes it as "Good Without God."

There is a complex history of humanism arising out of the Enlightenment, but with roots in the Protestant Reformation. Some of the prevailing values of humanism that have become underlying tenets in our modern society are a deep commitment to improving the quality of natural life and a commitment to justice and fairness.

These values are certainly evident within and arguably arise from the Christian tradition. However, their pre-eminence and elevation in modern culture have to be understood as informing and affecting our theological discussion.

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM

Unitarian Universalism (normative pluralism) is the idea that all ethical religious and non-religious paths eventually lead to the same end. This version of universalism emerged from the Christian tradition. Other forms have emerged from other world religions with similar ideas.

The “Blind Man and the Elephant” analogy

- Are world religions like different blind men trying to describe parts of an elephant that they feel?
- Analogies illustrate ideas, they do not prove them.
- Christianity claims that God reveals himself, not that humans discover him.
- We are informed about other religions - we do not live in ignorance of other truth claims.
- Claim to higher perspective is actually a religious claim to universal truth.
 - “Each of us is blind, but I’ll tell you what the world really looks like.”
 - The blind man and the elephant analogy is told from the perspective of someone with the sight to recognize the entire elephant. Isn’t that another form of the universal truth that is being objected to?

Similarities and Differences of Major Religions

- Similarities of world religions are often relational ethics: how to live with others in this world.
- Differences are theological, eschatological: the nature of God, the fate of the world, the object of worship, the content of evangelism.

- Point of view determines similarity: consider a ball and a pipe viewed from two dimensions.

Religion from a Secular Humanist Point of View

- Unitarian Universalism is essentially an attempt to converge Christian faith with the presiding cultural humanism.
- Similarities are all those that deal with natural and ethical questions.
- Differences are those that deal with theological and supernatural issues.
- What is our goal?
 - I want to go for a drive.
 - I want to get to San Francisco.
- Major aspects of the character of the Christian God (inclusion and justice) have been misunderstood and mistakenly applied.

Unitarian Universalism is an offensive and belittling way of understanding world religions.

- It elevates secular humanism above all other religions, making the same claim it criticizes in other religions.
- It casts any distinctive aspect of religion necessarily as a “minor” point.
- It is the attitude that I take toward my kids when I don’t feel like really listening to them: “just let it go.”

CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALISM

Christian Universalism (patristic universalism, christocentric universalism, evangelical universalism, universal reconciliation, general redemption).

- The belief that all people will eventually be reconciled to God through the atonement of Jesus Christ
- May include period of suffering similar to purgatory

Basic argument for Christian Universalism

God's Love. If God loves the whole world, he will offer everyone the same chance to enjoy salvation.

God's Judgment. The judgment of God throughout the Bible is most often restorative and redemptive.

God's Victory. The message of the cross is that Christ wins. A victory which many don't share in can't be considered a full victory.

God's Inclusion. There is a repeated theme of inclusion and universality to the gospel (note the many "all" passages). If God is really making "all things new," that must apply to everyone.

Verses that can be understood as support for universal redemption:

Isaiah 45:22, *Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.*

- The invitation of God is addressed to the whole world, implying universal availability.

John 12:32, *And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.*

- Jesus speaks of drawing "all people" to himself. This could imply that everyone will eventually believe in him.

1 Corinthians 15:22, *For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.*

- This verse is part of a detailed comparison between Adam and Christ (as the second Adam). If the universal consequence of Adam's sin is exactly parallel with the universal atonement of Christ on the cross, then everyone would be saved just as everyone is sinful.

Colossians 1:19-20, *For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.*

- If God "reconciles to himself all things," that could imply that everyone will be reconciled.

1 Timothy 2:4-6, *[God] desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.⁵ For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, "who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.*

- If God desires all people to be saved, and God is sovereign, how could it be that all people aren't eventually saved? Also, if Jesus is given "as a ransom for all," doesn't that imply everyone benefits from it?

1 Timothy 4:10, *For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.*

- This is a particularly confusing verse. It could be interpreted that God will save everyone, but that those who believe are saved in this world. That would be an exact support for Christian Universalism. There are other ways of understanding this verse.

Revelation 21:5, *And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."*

- The vision of “all things new” is a guiding principle for the Christian universalist. It is understood to mean that God will, in Christ, recreate and reconcile all things and all people.

CHRISTIAN PARTICULARISM

Responding to universalism is complicated and depends on the context of the discussion. The Unitarian Universalist will likely not hold the Bible to be authoritative and inerrant. Those arguments must start from a philosophical basis. Discussions regarding Christian Universalism often center more on the biblical text. Christian universalists sometimes argue that the Bible reveals that all people will be saved, but frequently argue that the salvation of all people through Christ is at least consistent with revelation.

There are other sources of discussion as well. From a philosophical perspective, the largest difficulty with any position of universalism is the nature of free will. If people truly have free will, how could it be that everyone from everywhere in all times will eventually come to the same decision regarding Christ? It would seem that people only truly have free will if some of them decide to reject God. The conflict between free will and universalism is difficult to resolve.

In addition, the historical position of the church has always been to uphold the unique salvation offered through Jesus Christ. While we must form our theology based on interpreting Scripture, we can learn from and be guided by how Scripture has been interpreted throughout church history.

The most compelling conversation, however, happens around how the Scripture is interpreted. What follows are some common aspects of the conversation.

Biblical Response

Christology

- Christ is not just pictured as a man who was God, but the pre-existent creator and redeemer
- **John 1:1**, *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*
- **Colossians 1:16-17**, *For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*

Salvation is by faith

- The Bible is abundantly clear that salvation is received through faith.
 - **Luke 7:50**, *And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."*
 - **Ephesians 2:8**, *For by grace you have been saved through faith.*
 - **John 1:12**, *But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God*
- Not everyone in this life comes to faith in Jesus Christ.
- Therefore, the only possible mechanism for universal redemption is another opportunity to exercise faith after death.
- At the least, there is no biblical evidence for such an opportunity. At the most, there is evidence that no such opportunity exists.
 - **Hebrews 9:27**, *And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.*

The Name of Jesus Christ

- The name of Jesus Christ is emphasized throughout the New Testament as having particular significance.
 - **1 Corinthians 6:11b**, *You were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*
 - **1 John 3:23**, *And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.*
- Several times, the name of Jesus Christ is presented as the only and exclusive path toward salvation.
 - **John 3:18**, *Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.*
 - **Acts 4:12**, *And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*
 - **John 14:6**, *Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*

The Reality of Judgment

- The Bible is full of warning passages to indicate that judgment is a very real outcome for many people
 - **Matthew 22:14**, *For many are called, but few are chosen.*
 - **1 Thessalonians 1:8-9**, *[When Jesus appears] inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.*
- The Bible is full of invitations to respond to Jesus, as if the opportunity to do so is limited.
 - **2 Corinthians 5:20-21**, *Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.*

- **Romans 10:14-15**, *How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ¹⁵And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!”*

Understanding “all”

- Greek “pas” is used over 1200 times in the New Testament. Most times, it is limited in scope.
 - **Matthew 10:22**, *You will be hated by all for my name’s sake.*
Jesus’s disciples were clearly not hated by every individual.
 - **John 8:2**, *Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them.*
Clearly, not every individual came to hear Jesus teach
- “all” can mean “all of a particular group.”
 - **Romans 5:17-18**, *For if, because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. ¹⁸Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.*
Verse 17 specifies a category of people who “reign in life,” namely “those who receive the abundance of grace.” This qualifies the “all men” who experience life at the end of verse 18 to refer to all those people.
- In several passages, “all” clearly refers to “all kinds of people,” rather than “every single individual.”
 - **1 Timothy 2:1-2**, *First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings*

be made for all people, ²for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

This passage begins by encouraging prayer for “all people” in verse 1 and then specifically mentions kings and civil authorities in verse 2. The author’s intention is to encourage prayer for civil authorities. He begins in verse 1 by saying that all kinds of people should be prayed for. That is immediately followed up by a specific reference to the kinds of people that they might not normally pray for, because these are the people he wants to highlight.

- **1 Timothy 2:6**, *Who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.*
Similarly, the author in this verse is referring to Christ’s sacrifice as a ransom for all kinds of people, including the Gentiles whom he specifically mentions in the next verse.

LIVING WITH TENSION

The path of faith in Christ is one of living in the midst of tension. Many of the long standing doctrines of the church involve ideas that are at best mysterious, such as the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the nature of atonement itself. We cannot expect all our questions to be answered, and yet we must be willing to boldly claim and proclaim how we understand the truth revealed in Scripture.

Following Christ involves tension between

the glory of the gospel, and
the tragedy of people rejecting it

The two extremes of application to evangelism are unsatisfying:

- Only those who respond explicitly to the gospel are saved, therefore the failure of the church to evangelize hinders God's work of salvation.
- God will save everyone anyway, so evangelism is a nice gift, but ultimately doesn't accomplish anything that God won't do eventually.

This is a classic expression of the tension between free will and God's sovereignty. How do we understand our efforts to proclaim the gospel as *important*, but not *critical*?

Some observations to affirm from Scripture:

- Eternal life is found through faith in the name of Jesus Christ through his atoning life and death.
- Those who express faith have a calling and invitation to share this message urgently with the world.
- The danger of eternal judgment is real.

Some questions that remain:

- Everything that God has revealed is true, but we can't assume that God has revealed everything.

- God works in ways that aren't always understood.
 - Note the examples of Melchizedek, Cornelius, modern day dream conversions.
 - Note Jesus' claim that we will be surprised at who will be saved (Matt 7:21).
- The issue of an opportunity to exercise faith after death is not clearly resolved by Scripture.

A place to land:

- Our theology is held with faith and humility.
- Our calling is to follow Jesus, not have all the answers.
- **John 6:68-69**, *Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."*
- In the end, we rest in faith of the goodness of God and ask with Abraham, *Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?* (**Genesis 18:25**)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BOOKS

Salvation in a Pluralistic World

This book offers the most comprehensive discussion of the debate. The writing is technical and detailed. It is heavily theological and philosophical. Four views are presented by different authors: Normative Pluralism (all ethical religions lead to God); Inclusivism (salvation is universally experienced through the redemption of Christ); Salvation in Christ (agnosticism regarding those who haven't heard the gospel); and Salvation in Christ Alone (salvation depends on explicit personal faith in Jesus Christ). Each author also responds to the other views. Geivett, R. Douglas, John Hick, Alister E. McGrath, W. Gary Phillips, and Clark H. Pinnock, *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*. Michigan: Zondervan, 1996.

Love Wins

This is the book that contributed to this debate being re-ignited among evangelicals several years ago. It is not a well-argued theological presentation of a view. The language seems most sympathetic to a Christian Universalism perspective. It is written in a provocative way which has made it very popular, but also heavily criticized. In particular, the traditional perspective is treated with great dissatisfaction, bordering on being insulting and arrogant. Bell, Robert H. Jr., *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. HarperCollins: New York, 2011.

God Wins

This is one of many books that has come out as a response to *Love Wins*. It is an attempt to highlight the deficiencies of the perspective suggested by *Love Wins*. It argues that the traditional view of salvation is not only true, but in reality, more attractive. Galli, Mark, *God Wins*. Illinois: Tyndale House, 2011.

Universal Salvation? The Current Debate

This book deals specifically with the perspective of Christian Universalism in a detailed theological manner. That perspective is described and defended through biblical, philosophical, theological, and historical arguments. At each point, critics of the view are allowed to respond to these ideas. This is a good source for further understanding and interacting with one version of the Christian Universalism view. Partridge, Parry, *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate*. Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2003.

Faith Comes By Hearing

This book is described as "A Response to Inclusivism," which is another way of describing Christian Universalism. It includes several scholars and theologians offering different arguments defending the traditional understanding of salvation. Questions include whether faith must be explicit or implicit; whether God saves those from other religions who have an innate understanding of Jesus; what it means that the gospel is for all nations; and whether general revelation can lead to salvation. Morgan, Christopher W., Robert A. Peterson, *Faith Comes By Hearing*. Illinois: InterVarsity, 2008.

NOTES

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