
The Early Church Fathers On Universal Restoration

Description

This article is the 8th part of a 9 part series on Universal Restoration vs Eternal Torment (hell). I recommend reading [the introduction](#) first if you haven't already. (*link below*)

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The Origin of Universalism's Condemnation

(Or how a mass murderer defined the doctrine of Eternal Torment for the entire Church.)

The first time that Universal Restoration was officially condemned as heresy was in 543 at a regional council in Constantinople. The Roman emperor [Justinian](#) convened the council specifically to condemn several teachings, Universalism among them. He issued an edict commanding the council to accept his position on Universalism and Eternal Torment. (*among other teachings*)

The council complied.

Because that council was regional, it wasn't binding on the whole Church. Therefore, Justinian called the Second Council of Constantinople in 553 to make it official. This second council ratified the actions of the first – and by extension Justinian's edict.

According to the New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia:

This council was held at Constantinople (5 May-2 June, 553), **having been called by Emperor Justinian**. It was attended mostly by Oriental bishops; only six Western (African) bishops were present. The president was Eutychius, Patriarch of Constantinople. **This assembly was in reality only the last phase of the long and violent conflict inaugurated by [the edict of Justinian in 543 against Origenism](#)**

[Source](#)

Origenism included Universal Restoration. Again according to the New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia on "*Origen and Origenism*":

(4) Universality of the Redemption and the Final Restoration

Certain Scriptural texts, e.g., 1 Corinthians 15:25-28, seem to extend to all rational beings the benefit of the Redemption, and Origen allows himself to be led also by the philosophical principle which he enunciates several times, without ever proving it, that the end is always like the beginning: "**We think that the goodness of God, through the mediation of Christ, will bring all creatures to one and the same end**" (De Principiis I.6.1-3). **The universal restoration (apokatastasis) follows necessarily from these principles.**

[Source](#)

Justinian himself wrote the Canon (*official statement of doctrine*) that he ordered them to accept (via imperial edict). It goes like this:

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 to a restoration either of the demons or of the impious, let him be anathema

Emperor Justinian was not a nice fellow (*to put it mildly*).

As in his secular administration, despotism appeared also in the Emperor's ecclesiastical policy. He regulated everything, both in religion and in law. At the very beginning of his reign, he deemed it proper to promulgate by law the Church's belief in the Trinity and the Incarnation; and to threaten all heretics with the appropriate penalties; whereas he subsequently declared that he intended to deprive all disturbers of orthodoxy of the opportunity for such offense by due process of law. He made the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan creed the sole symbol of the Church and accorded legal force to the canons of the four ecumenical councils. **The bishops in attendance at the Second Council of Constantinople in 553 recognized that nothing could be done in the Church contrary to the emperor's will and command**

Further, Justinian was a tyrant in the truest sense of the word. During the [Nika riots](#), **Justinian murdered 30,000 innocent men because they were political rivals to his power**

. Like many of the Roman emperors, he tightly controlled everything.

The reason the entire Church believes in Eternal Torment today is because of a mass-murdering, tyrannical, and arguably pagan Roman emperor.

Makes you think doesn't it?

General Historical Information on Universalism

I have many quotes from the early church fathers, but we'll get to them in a minute.

Universalism was never condemned as heresy by the earliest church fathers

First, I want to mention a point often put forth by the Universalists. It is an argument from silence, but given the importance of the doctrine of Eternal Torment it's worth mentioning anyway.

None of the early Church creeds or councils mention Eternal Torment in hell. Yes, this is an argument from silence. However given the importance of hell to modern Christian doctrine I thought it was worth mentioning.

The next three quotes are from the (*admittedly biased*) book by J.W. Hanson, D. D. entitled: "*Universalism The Prevailing Doctrine Of The Christian Church During Its First Five Hundred Years*". It was published in 1899.

You can read the entire book for free online [here](#).

"The three earliest Gnostic sects, the Basilidians, the Carpocratians and the Valentinians (A.D. 117-132) are condemned by Christian writers, and their heresies pointed out, but though they taught Universalism, that doctrine is never condemned by those who oppose them. Irenaeus condemned the errors of the Carpocratians, but does not reprehend their Universalism, though he ascribes the doctrine to them."

"Hippolytus (A.D. 320) names thirty-two known heresies, but Universalism is not mentioned as among them. Epiphanius, (310-403) "the hammer of heretics," describes eighty heresies, but he does not mention universal salvation, though Gregory of Nyssa, an outspoken Universalist, was, at the time he wrote, the most conspicuous figure in Christendom."

"The first advocates of endless punishment, Minucius Felix, Tertullian and Augustine, were Latins, ignorant of Greek, and less competent to interpret the meaning of Greek Scriptures than were the Greek scholars."

Eternal Torment only became popular after Latin became the Lingua Franca

Lingua franca means “language of the people”. It refers to the language that is used by most of the world’s population. It’s the “trade language” which most people who expect to engage in international commerce will know.

In the world today, it’s English. In Jesus’ day, it was Greek. But a few hundreds years later, the trade language shifted from Greek to Latin. As a result, the Greek language fell out of use.

It was only after this happened that Eternal torment became the dominant view.

Again, it’s worth noting that Eternal Torment only gained widespread acceptance AFTER scholars stopped using the original Greek Scriptures. They began using the Latin Vulgate Bible translation sometime after it was finished in the early 400s.

This isn’t proof of something per say. However, it’s interesting the early Greek fathers didn’t seem to support eternal torment. It’s... interesting when a doctrine becomes prevalent right after they stop reading the original language and start reading a translation.

It doesn’t prove anything, but it could be construed as concerning.

The Dark Ages

The Universalists have an interesting observation about history too. This is pure conjecture and without any evidence of any kind. But it’s a very interesting coincidence.

Augustine wrote this:

There are very many in our day, who though not denying the Holy Scriptures, do not believe in endless torments.

Augustine was born in 354 AD and died in 430 AD. So we know that Universalism was a common belief during his time. In 544 AD, Universalism was condemned by Patriarch Mennas of Constantinople and the condemnation was allegedly ratified in 553 by the Fifth Ecumenical Council.

So somewhere between 430 and 544, Universalism went from being quite popular to being denounced as a heresy. Up until at least 430 AD, Universalism was common, but after 544 AD it was heresy.

The accepted range of The Dark Ages usually has them starting around 500 AD and ending around 1500 AD. We know that The Dark Ages ended around the same time as the Protestant Reformation. I have heard many Christians say it was one of the causes for the ending of the Dark Ages.

I'll leave that debate to better men.

I have heard some Universalists say (and I am not necessarily agreeing, merely repeating) that The Dark Ages began because of the doctrine of Eternal Torment and the decline of Universalism.

The argument goes that the early Christians thought God would save everyone, so they viewed everyone as a future brother or sister. This allowed them to endure horrible things because they knew the people torturing were spiritual siblings; they just didn't know it yet.

Universalists say it was this hope and goodness that allowed the early church to flourish. It also stood in contrast to the utter depravity that surrounded the first century Church.

The argument continues that people started thinking God was very cruel when Eternal Torment doctrine was imported from pagan religions because He tortures His enemies forever. The result was mankind thought such behaviors was okay because God did them. Then the world descended into darkness because of this dim view of God. Eventually, Martin Luther's "saved by Grace" is what lifted this darkness because it made God good again in the minds of men.

Certainly, the doctrine of Eternal Torment (*whether true or not*) has led to this in the past. Queen Mary I of England reportedly said the following after sentencing a group of Protestants to die by burning at the stake:

"As the souls of heretics are hereafter to be eternally burning in Hell, there can be nothing more proper than for me to imitate the Divine vengeance by burning them on earth."

Again, I'm not saying I believe this.

However I thought it was worth mentioning.

One thing is certain: Universalism was very common in the early Church.

That's not to say everyone believed it, but according to several early Church heroes it was a very commonly held belief. Even Augustine – the most stalwart of Eternal Torment supporters – said this was the case.

Below you will find many quotes from the early heroes of the faith. I will provide these quotes without comment except to say there were early church fathers on the side of Eternal Torment too. The afterlife was clearly a debated topic in the early centuries of the church. (*Like many issues are still today*)

The following are quotes from early church fathers on Universal Restoration

Clement of Alexandria (150-215 AD)

“He says that the Lord is the Propitiator, ‘not only for our sins’ – that is, for those of the faithful – ‘but also for the whole world.’ He indeed, saves all. But [He saves] some by converting them through punishments. However, those who follow voluntarily, [He saves] with dignity of honor.”

“All men are Christ’s, some by knowing Him, the rest not yet. He is the Savior, now of some and the rest not. For how is He Savior and Lord, if not the Savior and Lord of all?”

Theophilus of Antioch (168 A.D.)

“And God showed great kindness to man, in this, that He did not suffer him to continue being in sin forever; but as it were, by a kind of banishment, cast him out of paradise in order that, having punishment expiated within an appointed time, and having been disciplined, he should afterwards be recalled...just as a vessel, when one being fashioned it has some flaw, is remolded or remade that it may become new and entire; so also it happens to man by death. For he is broken up by force, that in the resurrection he may be found whole; I mean spotless, righteous and immortal.”

Origen (185 to 254 A.D.)

He founded a school at Caesarea, and is considered by historians to be one of the great theologians and exegete of the Eastern Church.

“Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.’ Is the ‘world’ here to be taken spiritually to mean the church? Is the taking away of sin limited to the church? If so, what are we to make of the saying of the same disciple? Paul’s words appear to me to be the same effect, when he says, ‘Who is the Savior of all men, especially of the faithful.’”

“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. The consummation of all things is the destruction of evil...to quote Zephaniah: “My determination to gather the nations, that I am assemble the kings, to pour upon them mine indignation, even say all my fierce anger, for all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of my jealousy. For then will I turn to the people a pure language that they may all call upon the name of the Lord, to serve Him with one consent”...Consider carefully the promise, that all shall call upon the Name of the Lord, and serve him with one consent

.”

St. Basil the Great, (330-379 AD)

“The mass of men (Christians) say there is to be an end to punishment and to those who are punished.”

Gregory of Nyssa, (335-390 AD)

“For it is evident that God will in truth be all in all when there shall be no evil in existence, when every created being is at harmony with itself and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord; when every creature shall have been made one body.”

Diodore of Tarsus, (???-390 AD)

“For the wicked there are punishments, not perpetual, however, lest the immortality prepared for them should be a disadvantage, but they are to be purified for a brief period according to the amount of malice in their works. They shall therefore suffer punishment for a short space, but immortal blessedness having no end awaits them...the penalties to be inflicted for their many and grave sins are very far surpassed by the magnitude of the mercy to be showed to them.”

St. Chrysostom, 398 AD

“While the devil imagined that he got a hold of Christ, he really lost all of those he was keeping.”

Ambrose, Bishop of Milan (340-397 A.D.)

“Our Savior has appointed two kinds of resurrection in the Apocalypse. ‘Blessed is he that hath part in the first resurrection,’ for such come to grace without the judgment. As for those who do not come to the first, but are reserved unto the second resurrection, these shall be disciplined until their appointed times, between the first and the second resurrection.”

Augustine, (354-430 AD)

“There are very many in our day who – though not denying the Holy Scriptures – do not believe in endless torments.”

St. Jerome, (347-420 AD)

“In the end and consummation of the Universe all are to be restored into their original harmonious state, and we all shall be made one body and be united once more into a perfect man and the prayer of our Savior shall be fulfilled that all may be one.”

“Our Lord descends, and was shut up in the eternal bars, in order that He might set free all who had been shut up... The Lord descended to the place of punishment and torment, in which was the rich man, in order to liberate the prisoners.”

Commenting on Zephaniah 3:8-10

“The nations are gathered to the Judgment, that on them may be poured out the wrath of the fury of the Lord, and this in pity and with a design to heal. in order that every one may return to the confession of the Lord, that in Jesus’ Name every knee may bow, and every tongue may confess that He is Lord. All God’s enemies shall perish, not that they cease to exist, but cease to be enemies.”

Theodore of Mopsuestia, 350-428

“The wicked who have committed evil the whole period of their lives shall be punished till they learn that, by continuing in sin, they only continue in misery. And when, by this means, they shall have been brought to fear God, and to regard Him with good will, they shall obtain the enjoyment of His grace.”

That's just a sampling. I have found other quotes that were too long or too wordy so I didn't include them.

2/3+ of Early Christian theology Schools taught Universalism

It's also worth mentioning that:

“In the first five or six centuries of Christianity there were six theological schools, of which **four** (*Alexandria, Antioch, Caesarea, and Edessa, or Nisibis*) were Universalist, **one** (*Ephesus*) accepted conditional immortality; **one** (*Carthage or Rome*) taught endless punishment of the wicked. Other theological schools are mentioned as founded by Universalists, but their actual doctrine on this subject is not known.”

~ “The Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge” by Schaff-Herzog, 1908, volume 12, page 96

At least **two thirds** of the theological schools in the early church taught Universal Restoration. That percentage is probably much higher if you consider the others were founded by people who believed in Universal Restoration. By contrast only a single school taught Eternal Torment.

Tertullian

It's also worth noting who founded the school that taught Eternal Torment. It was founded by Tertullian, who had some... disturbing views on hellfire:

“At that greatest of all spectacles, that last and eternal judgment how shall I admire, how laugh, how rejoice, how exult, when I behold so many proud monarchs groaning in the lowest abyss of darkness; so many magistrates liquefying in fiercer flames than they ever kindled against the Christians; so many sages philosophers blushing in red-hot fires with their deluded pupils; so many tragedians more tuneful in the expression of their own sufferings; so many dancers tripping more nimbly from anguish than ever before from applause.”

“What a spectacle. . .when the world. . .and its many products, shall be consumed in one great flame! How vast a spectacle then bursts upon the eye! What there excites my admiration? What my derision? Which sight gives me joy? As I see. . .illustrious monarchs. . . groaning in the lowest darkness, Philosophers. . .as fire consumes them! Poets trembling

before the judgment-seat of. . . Christ! I shall hear the tragedians, louder-voiced in their own calamity; view play-actors. . . in the dissolving flame; behold wrestlers, not in their gymnasia, but tossing in the fiery billows. . . What inquisitor or priest in his munificence will bestow on you the favor of seeing and exulting in such things as these? **Yet even now we in a measure have them by faith in the picturings of imagination.**"

Tertullian in De Spectaculis, Chapter XXX

You may not believe in Universal Restoration and that's fine. But I think any Christian who understands the heart of God will at least wish it were true (*though obviously wishing something is true doesn't make it true.*)

Tertullian fails this test rather spectacularly.

Tertullian was looking forward to watching his enemies being roasted in hellfire for all eternity. He took comfort in imagining it. He was actually looking forward to watching people being tortured for the rest of time.

How loving does he sound?

What happened to God's position that "*I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked*"? What about "*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*"? Does Tertullian sound like a good Christian role model to you?

Yet he founded the **only** school that taught Eternal torment during the first several centuries of the Church. The only school where you would learn Eternal Torment was founded by someone who – at the very least – was a **VERY** immature Christian.

And it was out of this man (*and his school*) that Eternal Torment grew...

The Jewish View of Eternal Torment in the Afterlife

To be clear, I am not saying we should look to the Jews for doctrine. However, understanding where our beliefs as Christians came from does provide some context. (*and if you've read my [article on Revelation](#), you'll know I'm all about context*)

The Majority view of Jews since antiquity

According to [JewFAQ.com](#):

The period of time in Gehinnom (*Gehenna*) does not exceed 12 months, and then ascends

to take his place on Olam Ha-Ba... (*Olam Ha-ba is their name for heaven*)

...This 12-month limit is repeated in many places in the **Talmud**, and it is connected to the mourning cycles and the recitation of Kaddish.

For those who don't know, the "Talmud" is the most significant collection of the Jewish oral tradition interpreting the Torah. To those who are familiar with Catholicism, it would be comparable to the Catholic Catechism. To the Jews, it contains the "right" way to interpret their "Bible" (*our Old Testament*).

Simcha Paull Raphael writes,

"The Rabbis often discuss the duration of punishment in Gehenna. The generally accepted belief was that the punitive tortures of Gehenna are time-limited, not eternal. Eternal Punishment was never accepted as a doctrinal belief in Rabbinic Judaism."

For something a little closer to Jesus' time, we can look at the three VERY significant Jewish Rabbis of that era. They were [Rabbi Hillel](#) (110 BC- 10AD), [Rabbi Shammai](#) (50 BC-30 AD), and [Rabbi Akiva](#). (50AD -135 AD)

Rabbi Akiva believed the Jewish version of Universal Restoration. He said in Shabbat 33b.

"The duration of the punishment of the wicked in Gehenna is twelve months."

Rabbi Hillel believe that torment in "hell" (*Gehenna*) would be limited in duration.

"Wrongdoers of Israel who sin with their body, and wrongdoers of the gentiles who sin with their body, go to Gehinnom and are punished there for 12 months."

Of the three, the only Rabbi who believed in Eternal Torment was Rabbi Shammai. Like Tertullian above, Shammai was far from a loving fellow. For instance, Shammai taught you shouldn't even pray for the sick on the Sabbath, let alone heal them. We already know Jesus' opinion of healing on the sabbath.

Also, some of Jesus' well known enemies sat under Shammai's teachings...

But the most important group in Israel was **the Pharisees who sat under the teachings of a rabbi named Shammai**, who founded his school shortly before Jesus was born...

...To give one example of just how legalistic Shammai was, Jewish history records that when his daughter-in-law gave birth to a son during Sukkot—when the people built tabernacles to stay in for that Festival—Shammai tore the roof off the daughter-in-law’s room, and had the bed covered over with boughs so his newborn grandson wouldn’t be in technical violation of a commandment! **In another incident, he even had to be shamed by his fellow rabbis into allowing a hungry child to be fed during a period when the Jews were required to fast.**

[\(Source\)](#)

The only Rabbis who believed in Eternal Torment were those who taught the Pharisees of Jesus’ day.

It’s also worth noting that Jesus almost never agreed with Shammai’s teachings. Jesus’ teachings were much closer to Hillel.

As such, it is interesting that in the eight key debates that Jesus entered, he sided with the School of Hillel – or went even farther than Hillel – in seven and only sided with Shammai in one case (*that of when divorce is acceptable*).

For instance, in the debate of “who is my neighbor?”, **Shammai taught that only God-fearing, observant Jews were ‘neighbors’** (*thus, the only ones worthy of love*). Hillel, on the other hand, taught that everyone – including one’s enemies – were ‘neighbors’, with the exception of the hated, apostate Samaritans.

[\(Source\)](#)

Jesus agreed with Hillel, though He obviously included Samaritans as neighbors too. A random interesting fact, Hillel’s grandson Gamliel was a tutor to Paul. It’s also worth noting that the famous “golden rule” was an allusion to something that Rabbi Hillel said before Jesus was born.

“That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn.” – Rabbi Hillel

By contrast, Shammai was the leader of the Sanhedrin for many years, though he died before Jesus was tried. When he was appointed, he issued 18 edicts. The Talmud records this as a disastrous event in [Shabbat 17a](#).

And **that day was as difficult for Israel as the day the Golden Calf was made**, as Hillel, who was the *Nasi*, was forced to sit in submission before Shammai, and **the opinion of Beit Shammai prevailed in the vote conducted that day**

We also know the Sanhedrin was composed primarily of Shammai followers during Christ's trial:

Nevertheless, the Sanhedrin would remain primarily dominated by the House of Shammai until after 70 C.E. After that time, the House of Shammai rapidly lost influence.

[\(source\)](#)

The vast majority of Jewish tradition teaches a limited torment in Gehenna (hell). The Talmud (*the "Jewish Catechism"*) teaches this and most limit the duration to only 12 months. Shammai was the only major Rabbi (*both in Jesus day and in most of their history*) who believed in Eternal Torment.

I would like to point out the similarities between Shammai and Tertullian. Both were quite legalistic and very unloving toward their enemies. Shammai taught the Pharisees and Tertullian liked to imagine his enemies burning in hell forever.

Not exactly good Christian role models.

And knowing the source makes me look at their ideas with even more suspicion. It doesn't mean they're wrong of course, but their character does cast doubt on their beliefs.

Conclusion

It was because of a tyrannical Roman emperor that Universalism was condemned and eternal torment officially became doctrine. Roughly 2/3 of early Christian Theology school taught Universalism, and it's likely that many more did as they were founded by Universalists. Even so, the earliest church fathers never listed Universalism as a heresy despite its prominence. The only Jews who believed it were the ones who crucified Jesus, and even their Jewish brothers thought they were extreme.

Interesting, isn't it.

The next article in this series is: [Universal Restoration vs Eternal Torment Conclusion](#)