

How best to advance the Christian Universalist cause

A Universalist friend of mine, Jason Caldwell, wrote this analysis:

“How do we reclaim Christianity? I'm not sure what the answer is. But I think there is more than one group at fault for churches dying out. First, we have the fundamentalist movement that started in the late 19th to early 20th century America. These leader set up a theological system for the purpose of eliminating liberal theology from the mainline Christian churches. This was done by putting heavy emphasis on what they called the "five fundamentals". These fundamentals pretty much say that to be Christian you must believe this, this, this, this, and this. Our treatment of our fellow man and the world around us aren't covered in these five fundamentals. Only religious dogma is included. The fundamentalists and most evangelicals have promoted this theology so well that many in and out of the church think that this is the one and only form of Christianity. Those who despise this theology in turn despise the name Christian altogether.”

The other group at fault is the liberal Christians themselves, which includes most of those who identify as Universalists. Liberal Christians tend to shy away from evangelizing. They don't try to make converts. They feel that to do so is to be too pushy and intruding I suppose. They think people will take them the wrong way, and they are surely correct on that. None the less, very few people not raised in church decide on their own to attend. Usually, a church goer sparks the interest. And that church goer is almost always an evangelical and/or fundamentalist. Also, it seems that most liberals attend church out of habit rather than devout faith. They may be good people or not so good people, but they generally don't think much of their religion. So far as the typical liberal church services are concerned, they just don't do much to spark interest in the members, let alone outsiders. They promote love and compassion and respect. But people can get that and learn to give it in places other than Christianity. Basically, if Universalists and other liberals who believe following Jesus is more important than believing correct doctrine are to reclaim the Christian name, then we must change how we look at our faith and change how we express our faith. And the typical services must have some change too, I believe. How should this be done? I honestly don't know, but I'd say there's a way.”

Here is my response:

Jason, you make some very good points. For this reason, I believe the best course of action would be to rescue evangelical Christianity from negative fundamentalism. I believe this is actually occurring. The evangelical churches that deemphasize the negative aspects of Hell and embrace a form of inclusivism, as in the case of Billy Graham, are the ones that are growing the fastest. The rigid, negative, Calvinist oriented churches will eventually decline. I believe that the Christian Universalist cause would be best served by a gradual process of reformation. When we leave the confines of traditional Christianity, the result is most often exactly as you outlined above. I see this reformation from within taking place in two stages, beginning with a more "inclusive" theology that allows for a person being "saved" without necessarily professing Jesus Christ. Billy Graham supports this view, as do a very large percentage of evangelicals. The acceptance of a "post-mortem" conversion to Christ would be the first step. The second step

would be to embrace the doctrine of the ultimate, universal restoration of all humanity. I do believe this reformation will take place, as people become more modern, scientific, and logical in their approach to Christian doctrine. 18th century rationalism gave rise to fundamentalism. In like manner, I believe that a reversal will occur in response to a new kind of rationalism in the 21st century, one that is accompanied by a renewed emphasis on "right living," "human rights," and a growing spirituality within the secular culture.