THE INESCAPABLE LOVE OF GOD

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For my parents

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"Heaven will solve our problems, but not, I think, by showing us subtle reconciliations between all our apparently contradictory notions. The notions will all be knocked from under our feet. We shall see that there never was any problem.

"And more than once, that impression which I can't describe except by saying it's like the sound of a chuckle in the darkness. The sense that some shattering and disarming simplicity is the real answer."

C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

Preface

This set of reflections is neither a textbook nor a piece of scholarly research. It neither summarizes a specific field of study for students nor advances scholarship in some area of research. It is instead (what I would call) a *real* book, by which I mean that in it I have tried to reach the most demanding audience of all: that of educated non-specialists. The book is in part an intellectual autobiography, in part the elaboration of an argument, and in part an attempt at persuasive writing. In these pages, I have sought to share with others, particularly those who call themselves "Christians," some of my own deepest convictions about the nature of God and the world. I have sought to work out, with some degree of consistency, the idea that the universe really is an expression of love, as some of the mystics from many traditions have always insisted. My principal aim has been to elaborate an overall picture and to illustrate a way of putting things together; hence, I have been less concerned than I might have been in other contexts with the details of specific arguments. In a few cases, indeed, I have taken more detailed arguments, which I have published elsewhere, and have rewritten them in an effort to prevent the details from obscuring the larger picture.

I do not expect, of course, that everyone who reads this book will find my convictions, or my arguments for them, compelling. I ask of my readers, however, only what I would also ask of my students: that you consider my arguments carefully, and then work out your own convictions with as much consistency as possible.

Legion are the teachers, authors, and friends who have influenced my intellectual development. At every stage of my education, it seems, I encountered some very special teachers: Mr. Larry Strickland and Mr. Arthur C. Wade in high school, Dr. David Newhall in college, and Professor Noel Fleming in graduate school, to name just a few. In the area of the philosophy of religion, I am especially grateful for what I have learned from Alvin Plantinga and William Rowe. But I am perhaps most indebted of all to those

who over the years have paid me the compliment of challenging, either in print or in private correspondence, my views on the nature of human destiny: Jerry Walls, Jonathon Kvanvig, William Craig, Larry Lacy, William Hasker, Victor Reppert, John Piper, and Neal Punt. Though I may not always have appeared to appreciate such criticism as I have received, I have benefitted greatly from all of it. And finally, I express my gratitude to my sister, Cathy Thienes, whose eagle eye caught scores of copy errors, and to those who commented on the manuscript at one stage or another: John Thienes, Michael Morbey, Steve Talbott, and the most demanding critic of all, my mother.

Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the Bible in this work are from the New Revised Standard Version copyrighted in 1989 by the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. I have also incorporated into the work, sometimes in rewritten form, parts of the following articles, which were published previously:

“The Love of God and the Heresy of Exclusivism,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* XXVII:1, (Fall, 1997)

“Three Pictures of God in Western Theology,” *Faith and Philosophy* (January, 1995).

“Punishment, Forgiveness, and Divine Justice,” *Religious Studies* (September, 1993).

“Craig on the Possibility of Eternal Damnation,” *Religious Studies* 26 (1992).

“Destruction and Redemption: A Reply to Larry Lacy,” *Christian Scholar's Review* XXII, (September, 1992).

“The New Testament and Universal Reconciliation,” *Christian Scholar's Review* XXI, (June, 1992).

“The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment,” *Faith and Philosophy* (January, 1990).

“C. S. Lewis and the Problem of Evil,” *Christian Scholar's Review* XVII, (September, 1987).

“Vessels of Wrath and the Unpardonable Sin,” *The Reformed Journal*, (September, 1983).

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PART I:
SOME AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL REFLECTIONS

I. AN ENCOUNTER WITH WESTERN THEOLOGY

> "To say that God's goodness may be different in kind from man's goodness, what is it but saying, with a slight change of phraseology, that God may possibly not be good?"
>
> John Stuart Mill

My purpose in this essay is to impart, or begin to impart, a vision of God. "Oh taste and see," says the Psalmist, "that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him" (Psalm 34:8). That is the vision I have in mind. Against the many religious doctrines that appeal to and cultivate our fear, I shall urge upon my reader this simple proposition: Contrary to what we might fear, the Creator and Father of our souls—the Lord of hosts and King of kings—is good.

Towards the end of communicating that vision, however, I shall not begin where some might think I should begin: with some kind of an argument for the existence of some kind of a God. For though I have reflected upon such arguments for the better part of my life, and though I now find some of them far more compelling than I once did, the vision I have in mind is larger than any specific argument; it includes more than any series of arguments could establish beyond question. Indeed, the full vision includes more than I could possibly write down within the confines of a single book. It includes an interpretation of the world as a whole—that is, a way of putting things together, of understanding our religious traditions, and of making sense of our experience. Above all, it includes a particular conception of a worthy or a fitting object of worship. I have therefore chosen, as a kind of thesis for the essay, a statement that some may regard as especially vague because, as they see it, the word "good" is itself especially vague. I could no doubt do a lot, even at the outset, to sharpen that thesis—by pointing, for

example, to the New Testament idea that God is good, because God is love and love is good; love is the one quality that makes any life, whether human or divine, worth living forever. But I can think of no better place to begin than with something a little vague—a mere hint of what I hope eventually to communicate with greater precision.

Neither can I think of any better place to begin than right in the middle of my own religious and philosophical concerns, however provincial some may find them to be. For like many others, I have felt a need to come to terms with my own heritage, particularly my religious heritage; and though some of that heritage now seems to me limited and defective, I have nonetheless tried to penetrate to the very best within it. I have an abiding faith, moreover, that beneath the particular forms of the religion I acquired in my youth—and, for that matter, beneath the particular forms of many religions and many mythologies—there lies something of enduring and even permanent value.[1] But as we embark upon a quest for that which has enduring value—a quest for religious truth or spiritual enlightenment, if you will—we must all proceed today from where we are today, and where we are today is, at least in part, a function of where we have been in the past. Accordingly, I shall begin not with an argument, but with a story, a bit of autobiography: an account of how my own religious views evolved during the early years of my formal education when I, like many of my classmates, began for

[1]I do not mean to imply, however, that all religions are equal. I see no reason to begin with the assumption that my religion is better than, or embodies more of the truth than, someone else's religion does, or that someone else's embodies more of the truth than mine does. Nor do I have any inclination to say of two contradictory doctrines, whether they be expressed within a single religion or between different religions, that they are in some mysterious way both true. We know the status of contradictions; they are quite false. And we also know the status of apparent contradictions; they are either meaningless or false. But once you penetrate beneath the surface of any one of the great religions, you will find, I believe, something of enduring value and a great deal that is true.

the first time to raise serious questions about serious matters and to search for satisfying answers to them.

God and Evil

After a relatively sheltered childhood, I attended a conservative Christian high school of a kind that may no longer exist. I say "may no longer exist" because, at my high school, a good Christian was identified as someone who does not smoke, drink, dance (roller skating was "iffy"), play cards, or attend Hollywood movies. But I thoroughly enjoyed high school. I made a lot of friends, and we argued about everything—about whether, for example, the Rapture (i.e., God's sudden removal of Christians from the earth) would occur at the beginning or in the middle of the Great Tribulation, about whether someone who accepts the theory of evolution could still be saved, about whether it really was a sin to attend Hollywood movies (I ran with a group of rebels who let it be known that we sometimes did go to the movies). It was here also that I first learned to challenge authority. One of our Bible teachers had taught that in the last days the stars will quite literally fall upon the earth; and when a friend of mine pointed out that a single star would consume the earth long before striking it, he was severely reprimanded. But my friends and I, being something of a rebellious lot, would have none of that. It was also here that I encountered the writings of C. S. Lewis, who first awakened me to the larger world of ideas and inspired me to take a philosophy course during my first year in college. But nothing I experienced in high school had quite prepared me for what awaited me when, after graduation, I enrolled at Portland State University.

As fate (or providence) would have it, my first philosophy course was one in which we examined traditional arguments for and against the existence of God. The instructor, I quickly decided, was simply the most brilliant person I had ever known, an honest man who seemed prepared to follow any argument wherever it led, though more often than not an argument seemed to lead in the wrong direction. Our class critique of the arguments for the existence of God was not a problem for me; in fact, I found it almost

exhilarating (even liberating) to join with others in a vigorous critique of bad arguments, or what I then regarded as bad arguments, for the existence of God. But one of the anti-theistic arguments was different, because it attacked my religious beliefs in a powerful way and at the most fundamental level possible. That was the so-called argument from evil, which begins with a worry that almost every religious person thinks about at one time or another, namely this: How can we square the idea of a loving God with the mess that the world seems to be in or with the profound misery and suffering found almost everywhere in the world? How can we possibly affirm the love of God in the face of, for example, heart wrenching pictures of starving children in India or Somalia or Rhodesia, or in the face of suffering children in a place like war-torn Bosnia? Many good and sensitive souls, such as my first philosophy professor, have reflected upon such questions and have concluded, perhaps even reluctantly, that they pose an insoluble problem for traditional theism; as these persons see it, the horrendous quantity of suffering in the world is inconsistent with, or at least is strong evidence against, the existence of God, as traditionally conceived. For if God were truly omnipotent, he would have the power, it seems, to prevent every instance of human suffering; and if he were perfectly loving, he would want to exercise that power. So if he were both omnipotent and perfectly loving, there would be no suffering at all in the world. But there clearly is suffering. Therefore, a God who is both omnipotent and perfectly loving does not exist.

People sometimes speak of a defining moment in their lives, a momentous occasion when they undergo some experience, or perhaps make a decision of some kind, that has a profound effect upon the rest of their lives. Well, I am here talking about a defining moment in my own life. On that day when the teacher I admired more than any other presented the argument from evil as a decisive objection to traditional theism, the entire course of my life was changed. For I interpreted this quite rightly as a fundamental assault upon the very convictions that gave meaning to my life; in effect, I was being asked to believe that the idea of a loving God—an idea I had taken for granted throughout my childhood—is overly sentimental,

too good to be true, just one more example of wishful thinking to be discarded as we mature into adults. During my undergraduate days, I encountered a good many other anti-theistic arguments; for the most part, these were just silly, mere prejudices that anyone who has had a good course in critical thinking should be able to expose. But there is nothing silly about the argument from evil, and it galled me that my instructor, who was always three steps ahead of me, was able to counter my own moves so easily. It galled me even more that he seemed to have such a low opinion of C. S. Lewis, whose book, *The Problem of Pain*, I had read with great excitement during my high school days, though I doubt that I had understood very much of it. I never for a moment doubted that my instructor's arguments were defective in a variety of ways, but neither did I doubt that I would have to find better answers than I had at the time, answers that would at least have the virtue of satisfying me.

A Demonic Picture of God

By cast of mind I tend to be rather conservative. So when I first encountered the argument from evil as an undergraduate, my instinct was to turn to the great theologians of the past upon whose shoulders I was quite prepared to stand. Little did I anticipate, however, the shock and the crisis of faith in store for me when I did just that. For though it came as a complete surprise to me, I found the writings of Christian theologians to be far more disturbing—and a far greater threat to my faith, as I understood it—than those of any atheistic thinker whom I had encountered. The problem was that I kept bumping up against this awkward fact: I seemed unable to find a single mainline Christian theologian who truly believed, any more than my atheistic professor did, in a *loving* God. They all claimed to believe in a *just* and a *holy* God, but this God seemed not to care enough about created persons even to *will* or to *desire* the good for all of them. And anything less than a perfectly loving God, I was already persuaded, would be far worse than no God at all. So in the end, the shock of discovering what the mainline theologians actually taught—and asked me to believe—precipitated a very real crisis of faith.

Part of the problem may have been the "authorities" to whom I then turned and the filter through which I then viewed the tradition. One of the first things I read, even before turning to the great theologians of the past, was a book that a friend of mine had recommended: Gordon Clark's *Religion, Reason, and Revelation*. Clark is what some might call a "hyper-Calvinist" or "double predestinarian"; he believed that even before the foundation of the world God had already foreordained that some would be saved and others lost forever. It is all predetermined. According to Clark, God causes us to sin and then punishes us for it; in the case of the reprobate, those whom he chooses to reject, God will punish them throughout eternity for sins that he himself caused them to commit. And his punishment, furthermore, will be just, since whatever God does is just solely and only because he does it. Here are a couple of examples of what I read:

> God is the sole ultimate cause of everything. . . . The men and angels predestined to eternal life and those foreordained to everlasting death are particularly and unchangeably *designed* [my emphasis]; and their number is so certain and definite that it cannot be either increased or diminished. Election and reprobation are equally ultimate. God determined that Christ should die; he determined as well that Judas should betray him. There was never the remotest possibility that something different could have happened.[2]
>
> God is neither responsible nor sinful, even though he is the only ultimate cause of everything. He is not sinful because in the first place whatever God does is just and right. It is just and right simply in virtue of the fact that he does it. Justice or righteousness is not a standard external to God to which God is obligated to submit. Righteousness is

[2]Gordon Clark, *Religion, Reason, and Revelation* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1961), p. 238. The potential here for modal confusion will be obvious to any professional philosopher, and in fact Clark provides several textbook examples of fallacious modal reasoning. But when I first read this book as an undergraduate, I had, of course, never even heard of modal logic.

> what God does. Since God caused Judas to betray Christ, this causal act is righteous and not sinful. By definition God cannot sin. At this point it must be particularly pointed out that God's causing a man to sin is not sin. There is no law, superior to God, which forbids him to decree sinful acts.[3]

I was utterly dumfounded when I read such passages as these and searched in vain for at least an echo of the love of God as I had learned of it at my mother's knee. If this was an example of sophisticated Christian thinking, I wanted nothing to do with it. I assumed initially that Clark's was simply an aberrant way of thinking, an idiosyncratic view at odds with the tradition. But then, the more closely I looked at the tradition, the more I seemed to find the worst of Clark almost everywhere. Wherever I turned—whether it be to such Protestant Reformers as Martin Luther and John Calvin or to such philosophical theologians as St. Augustine, Jonathan Edwards, and even St. Thomas Aquinas—I seemed to find the same narrow predestinarian theology, the same exclusivism, the same attempt to restrict God's mercy to a chosen few. Augustine, whose name I had been taught to revere long before I became acquainted with his thought, extends his conception of God's limited mercy even to children, arguing that God will reject, and eternally separate himself from, even some who die in infancy; after all, he says, they are all drawn from a corrupt mass anyway.[4] The more I read, the more bewildered I became and the more convinced I became that

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[3]*Ibid*., pp. 239-240. One can agree with Clark that "righteousness is not a standard external to God to which God is obligated to submit." But there are two very different ways in which this might be true. According to Clark, God could will anything whatsoever, even that we torture babies for our own pleasure, and thereby make it righteous; hence, according to Clark, no loving nature stands behind (and explains) what God wills. But if, alternatively, God's nature (or essence) is perfect love and his righteousness expresses his own nature, then it is logically impossible for him to will in an unloving way. This does not mean that God's will is bound to an external standard; it means only that his will is bound to his own nature.

[4]Augustine, *Enchiridion*, XXIV and XXV.

Clark's view was no aberration at all; that he had simply made explicit, and with greater consistency, a demonic picture of God that pervades Western theology. And the deeper I delved into the mainline theologians in search of a theology of love, the more I seemed to find, lurking beneath the surface, a theology of arbitrary power.

It was, then, the writings of Christian thinkers and Christian theologians, not the argument from evil *per se*, that precipitated my own crisis of faith. I turned to the great theologians of the past in the confidence that they would help me to formulate a convincing theodicy—that is, a convincing reply to the argument from evil—but what I found in them disturbed me far more than did the arguments of my atheistic professor (with whom I had a very cordial relationship). I knew instinctively that I could never worship a God who is less kind, less merciful, less *loving* than my own parents, but that is just what I seemed to encounter in the mainstream of Western theology: a God who, though gracious (after a fashion) to some (the elect), refuses to will the good for others (the non-elect).[5] And I could not imagine my parents *refusing* to will the good for anyone.

Even more disturbing to me at the time was the curious fact that those who seemed to have the greatest respect for, and the most intimate knowledge of, the Bible—those who actually knew Greek for example!—were precisely those whose theology I found most appalling. I'll probably never forget the time, after a long and heated argument with the pastor of a Calvinistic church, that I read carefully Romans 9 for the first time. I was not only shocked; I fell into a deep depression as well. This was as bad as Gordon Clark! Of course it never occurred to me at the time that I was simply reading Clark into the text, or that my naive view of revelation needed considerable modification. What did occur to me was that the message of the text seemed clear: According to Paul, God loved Jacob but hated Esau; and not only that, God has divided the entire

[5]But as we shall see in Part III, God's refusal to extend his love to a single person would undermine his love for all others; hence, it is necessarily true that God does not restrict his love to a limited elect.

human race into vessels of mercy, or objects of his love, and vessels of wrath, or objects of his hatred. Concerning such teaching, moreover, the Apostle seemed to ask exactly the right questions (first about justice and then about finding fault), but his answers seemed utterly absurd in the first case and not a real answer at all in the second. In the end, I decided I could no longer be a Christian in any orthodox sense. If Paul really taught, as Augustine and many of the Protestant Reformers insist he did, that God restricts his mercy to a chosen few, then Paul was, if not an outright fraud, just another confused and small-minded religious zealot. I believed that then, and I continue to believe it today.

As I have already suggested, my parents were at least partly responsible for some of my early struggles and for my stubborn refusal to accept, regardless of what the Bible might appear to teach, a tyrannical picture of God. In church I had been taught that the Bible is the final authority on everything (including the theory of evolution!), but in my home I was *experiencing* the true meaning of love. I was the second born in a large family of six children, and in our family it was unthinkable that our parents might favor one of us over another. There were no favorites, period; we were all equal objects of our parents' love and equally precious to them. So it is perhaps not surprising that I should have found myself unable to worship a God who, unlike my parents, was quite prepared to play favorites. In fact, what I have here called "a crisis of faith" and at the time regarded as such was not a crisis of *faith* at all. For it was precisely an unshakable faith in the love of God—a faith that my mother in particular had instilled within me—that made my doubts about Christianity and the Bible possible; and had I known more about the Bible at the time, or had I possessed a less naive view of revelation, I might have been spared these doubts as well. Indeed, I now occasionally look back at these early struggles with something akin to amusement. At the time it all seemed so serious and so threatening, but the truth is I had nothing to worry about. For as I shall try to demonstrate in subsequent chapters, the picture of God I found so morally repugnant is also riddled with logical impossibilities; the exegesis upon which it rests is remarkably weak, far weaker than I at one time feared; and the great theological tradition

that embraced it must be weighed against another that, although not so successful when judged by the standards of this world, steadfastly affirms the unlimited and inescapable love of God.

2. RELIGION WITHOUT FEAR

> "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."
>
> I John 4:18

After graduating from college, I spent three years at Fuller Theological Seminary, during which time I became increasingly weary of the standard theological fare. I would have no one take this to imply, however, a criticism of Fuller Seminary itself. I am truly grateful not only for what I learned there, but also for this remarkable fact: Though I had many profound disagreements with some of my professors, I always felt absolutely free during my seminary days to be myself and to follow my own muse. And I can think of no greater compliment to pay any institution of higher learning. Still, I found it disconcerting that so many of my professors viewed the world through an Augustinian lens and so few of them seemed even to appreciate the difficulties with which I was then struggling.

Here is an example of what I mean. One of my professors was far more enlightened than I in his consistent opposition to racial and gender discrimination, and yet this man was quite prepared to worship a God who, on the basis of little more than divine whim, divides the world into the elect and the non-elect; he was quite prepared, in other words, to worship the worst discriminator of all. His response to the obvious moral objections was simply to dismiss them as instances of fallible human reasoning. Again, this professor's understanding of revelation was far more flexible and sophisticated than my own; he was quite capable, for example, of either setting aside or reinterpreting Bible texts that seem to place women in a subordinate position to men. But he rejected as unbiblical any suggestion that *all* men and women are equal objects of God's redemptive love. At first I found such a combination of views utterly mystifying; but over time, I simply lost interest in them and became bored. If God himself discriminates against specific individuals

(the non-elect) in the more important matter of *salvation*, why get excited about the lesser forms of discrimination, or even the racial bigotry, to which human beings are prone?

The Idea of Universal Reconciliation

It was also during my seminary days, however, that I first encountered a vision of God that seemed to resonate with my own instincts and convictions. For it was at this time, thanks to my brother, Stephen, that I first encountered the Scottish writer, George MacDonald (1824-1905). I could not overemphasize the importance of that encounter: It was as if I had finally discovered a voice of sanity in what then seemed to me an asylum of theological babble. For though MacDonald rarely addressed theological questions in the abstract way I had come to expect, and though his understanding of Christian piety seemed almost quaint at times, he also articulated with great power and compassion, and with greater clarity than most, a stunning vision of Omnipotent Love. Here, at last, was a religious writer who seemed to appeal not to fear or guilt or mean-spiritedness, but to the very best within me. Here was someone who never—and I mean *never*—asked me to believe something that seemed unreasonable; who insisted, to the contrary, that I not accept anything—not even anything he might say—that seemed to me, for whatever reason, unworthy of human belief. Whereas the mainline theologians I had read—Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, and the like—all asked me to believe things about God that violated my own sense of justice, MacDonald's sermons were sprinkled with such exhortations as these:

> Let no one persuade you that there is in Him a little darkness, because of something He has said which His creature interprets into darkness. . . . Neither let your cowardly conscience receive any word as light because another calls it light, while it looks to you dark. Say either the thing is not what it seems, or God never said or did it. But, of all evils, to misinterpret what God does, and then say the thing as

> interpreted must be right because God does it, is of the devil.[1]

Here, it seemed to me, was the perfect antidote to those, such as Gordon Clark, who attribute heinous acts to God and then insist that such acts are just solely and only because God does them. MacDonald's sermons were also filled with such gems as these:

> . . . How terribly, then, have the theologians misrepresented God! Nearly all of them represent Him as a great King on a grand throne, thinking how grand He is, and making it the business of His and the end of His universe to keep up His glory, wielding the bolts of Jupiter against them that take His name in vain. They would not allow this, but follow out what they say, and it comes much to this.
>
> . . . Brothers, have you found our king? There He is kissing little children and saying they are like God. . . . The simplest peasant who loves his children and his sheep were—no, not a truer, for the other is false, but—a true type of our God beside that monstrosity of a monarch.[2]
>
> . . . the notion that a creature born imperfect, nay, born with impulses to evil not of his own generating, and which he could not help having, a creature to whom the true face of God was never presented, and by whom it never could have been seen, should be thus condemned [to everlasting torment] is as loathsome a lie against God as could find place in a heart too undeveloped to understand what justice is, and too low to look up into the face of Jesus. It never in truth found place in any heart, though in many a pettifogging brain.[3]

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[1]George MacDonald, "Light," reprinted in condensed form in Rolland Hein, "The Creation in Christ" (Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1976), p. 42.

[2]George MacDonald, "The Child in the Midst," reprinted in Rolland Hein (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 34.

[3]George MacDonald, "Justice," reprinted in Rolland Hein (ed), *op. cit.*, p. 71-72.

3. A LEGACY OF FEAR AND PERSECUTION

> "But there are not a few who would be indignant at having their belief in God questioned, who yet seem greatly to fear imagining Him better than He is."
>
> George MacDonald

In his anti-Christian tract, "Why I Am Not a Christian," Bertrand Russell cites the history of persecution within the Christian church as one of his main reasons for rejecting the Christian faith. He writes:

> the more intense has been the religion of any period and the more profound has been the dogmatic belief, the greater has been the cruelty and the worse has been the state of affairs. In the so-called ages of faith, when men really did believe the Christian religion in all its completeness, there was the Inquisition, with its tortures; there were millions of unfortunate women burned as witches; and there was every kind of cruelty practiced upon all sorts of people in the name of religion.[1]

When I first read these words as an undergraduate, I dismissed them with the thought that anyone can claim the name of Christ and any self-righteous despot can commit atrocities in the name of Christ. What I then failed to reckon with, however, was the disturbing fact that some of the greatest theologians in the Western tradition, men still widely revered as heroes of the faith, not only advocated persecution in specific cases, but provided a theological "justification" for it as well. I am now inclined, therefore, to take Russell's criticism much more seriously than I once did; for as I now see the matter, the legacy of persecution within the Christian Church is a symptom not merely of moral failure within the church, but of theological error as well.

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[1]Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), pp. 20-21.

I would therefore ask: Does not Jesus himself sanction the very kind of argument that Russell employs? When Jesus warned that not all who use his name—not even all who perform mighty works in his name—are true disciples (see Matthew 7:22-23), he explained exactly how to identify the *true* disciples: "A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. . . . Thus you will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7: 18 & 20—RSV). Part of the suggestion here seems to be that a sound doctrine, soundly interpreted, will not bear evil fruit in the lives of those who sincerely embrace it; it will, to the contrary, bear good fruit. And in the gospel accounts, at any rate, Jesus is quite explicit concerning what he means by "good fruit." His true disciples, he tells us, are the peacemakers, those who bring reconciliation: the ones who turn the other cheek and walk the second mile and love their enemies and bear the burdens of others (see Matthew 5:9 & 38-48). Similarly for Paul: The "fruit of the Spirit," he says, includes (among other things) "love, joy, peace, patience, [and] kindness" (Galatians 5:22), whereas "the works of the flesh" include "enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissension, [and] factions . . ." (Galatians 5:20). So if a sound doctrine, soundly interpreted, does not produce evil fruit in the lives of those who sincerely embrace it, then we are entitled, I believe, to regard acts of persecution within the Christian Church as a symptom of unsound doctrine or theological error.

That there are complexities (and difficulties) in evaluating such matters I doubt not at all. But the fact is that specific theological ideas seem to lie behind the disgraceful history of persecution, murder, and even protracted torture within the Christian church. Nor need it be any mystery what these ideas are, since a number of Christian theologians, beginning with St. Augustine, have explained them with great clarity—have explained exactly why, in their opinion, the use of the sword to terrorize pagans and heretics is theologically justified. Not every idea to which some persecutor appeals is, of course, automatically suspect. But when a religious doctrine appears consistently (and over a long period of time) to have destructive effects in the lives of those who accept it, then we have a *prima facie* reason, surely, to question its soundness. For as Jesus

said, "A sound tree cannot [consistently and over a long period of time] bear evil fruit."

Theology and the Politics of Terror

I first heard the name of Miguel Servetus (1511-1553), whom the Calvinists in Geneva burned over green wood so that it took three hours for him to be pronounced dead, in an undergraduate history class. Here was a man whom the Christian authorities of a Christian city executed even though he had committed no crime in their city; he was executed solely for his anti-Trinitarian views and because he disagreed with Calvin on some fine points of theology. Nor is there any doubt that Calvin himself engineered the arrest, conviction, and execution of this "heretic."[2] Nor was Servetus the only "heretic" whom Calvin wanted put to death. Previously he had sought, unsuccessfully, the death of Jerome Bolsec, because of a disagreement over a matter as abstract as the doctrine of predestination;[3] and later he had Sebastian Castellio charged with heresy, principally because the latter had criticized the burning of Servetus.

Calvin's precise role in the Servetus affair is not my present concern, however. For two points, at least, are undeniable: First, as a letter to his friend, Guillaume Farel, illustrates, Calvin had desired the death of Servetus for many years. After the sharp tongued and exasperating Spaniard sent Calvin a copy of the *Institutes* in

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[2]Calvin may have preferred, it is true, a less brutal form of execution. For in a letter to Guillaume Farel, he wrote: "I hope the judgment will be capital in any event, but I desire cruelty of punishment withheld" [Quoted in Williston Walker, *John Calvin* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 333].

[3]For an exhaustive (even monumental) treatment of the Bolsec controversy on predestination and of the lengths to which Calvin went in his efforts to get Bolsec condemned to death, see Philip Holtrop, *The Bolsec Controversy on Predestination, from 1551 to 1555: The Statements of Jerome Bolsec, and the Responses of John Calvin, Theodore Beza, and Other Reformed Theologians* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellon Press, 1993).

which he had marked its supposed errors, Calvin penned these portentous words:

> Servetus lately wrote to me and coupled with his letter a long volume of his delirious fancies, with the Thrasonic boast that I should see something astonishing and unheard of. He would like to come here if it is agreeable to me. But I do not wish to pledge my word for his safety. For, if he comes, I will never let him depart alive, if I have any authority.[4]

These words, written several years before the actual arrest of Servetus, already reveal Calvin's willingness to have his adversary put to death. And second, as Leonard Verduin points out, Calvin passionately defended the execution afterwards with "every possible and impossible argument."[5] He sincerely believed, in other words, that Servetus deserved to die.

But why did Calvin believe this? Why did he regard heresy as a crime for which death is an appropriate punishment? It is no answer, in the present context, merely to point out that Calvin was himself the product of an intolerant age. For though that may be true enough, it does not explain the theological roots of the intolerance; to the contrary, it merely underscores Russell's point about some of the pernicious effects that the Christian religion, as organized in its churches, has had. Are we not talking, after all, about a *Christian* age, one in which, as Russell himself puts it, people "really did believe the Christian religion in all its completeness"? Why is it that the so-called Christian ages have produced so much intolerance, so much murder and mayhem?

So far as I know, St. Augustine was the first Christian theologian to advocate the use of terror against those whom he regarded as heretical. In *De Correctione Donatistarum*, Augustine asks: "Where [in Scripture] is what they [the Donatists] are accustomed

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[4]Quoted in T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 118.

[5]Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), p. 51.

to cry: `To believe or not to believe is a matter that is free'?"[6] Against the contention of the Donatists that religious assent must be free, Augustine cites several examples, including the conversion of St. Paul, in which he claims that Christ himself employed physical affliction as a means of coercion. He then goes on to argue:

> But we have shown that Paul was compelled by Christ; therefore the Church, in trying to compel the Donatists, is following the example of her Lord . . .. Wherefore, if the power [of the sword] which the Church has received by divine appointment in its due season, through the religious character and faith of Kings, be the instrument by which those who are found in the highways and hedges—that is, in heresies and schisms—are compelled to come in, then let them not find fault because they are compelled . . ..[7]

Here Augustine makes the remarkable claim that in coercing the Donatists through physical affliction the Church was merely following "the example of her Lord." But that does not yet explain *why* he considered the use of such coercive measures justified. Why should anyone, even the Lord himself, be justified in coercing people into the Church against their will? Augustine's answer emerges clearly in his response to those Donatists who had resisted unto death, in some cases by setting themselves afire. He asks: "What then is the function of brotherly love? Does it, because it fears the short-lived fires of the furnace for a few, therefore abandon all to the eternal fires of hell?"[8] In another place he again asks: "Why, therefore, should not the Church use force in compelling her

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[6]Augustine, *De Correctione Donatistarum* 22, as translated in Ayer, *op. cit.*, p. 451. All other quotations from this document are taken from the translation in Philip Schaff (ed.), *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Co., 1887), pp. 633-651.

[7]*Ibid.*, 23 & 24. Those who believe that Augustine's exegesis of the Bible was more accurate than that of many of his predecessors would do well to examine carefully the fantastic exegetical arguments he offers in support of these claims.

[8]*Ibid.*, 14.

lost sons to return, if the lost sons compelled others to their destruction [i.e., to eternal death]?"[9] In other words, the use of the sword in coercing heretics back into the State Church is justified, Augustine believed, because the alternative would be to consign many more—those under the influence of the heretics, as well as the heretics themselves—to eternal damnation. As Augustine saw it, therefore, we must distinguish between two classes of people. For the righteous "who thirsteth for God," "there is no need of the terror of hell, to say nothing of temporal punishments or imperial laws . . ."; but for those who have fallen into heresy, "many must first be recalled to their Lord by the stripes of temporal scourging, like evil slaves, and in some degree like good-for-nothing fugitives."[10]

It is worth noting at this point that the Donatists, whose persecution Augustine advocated, agreed with him on almost all theological matters except the nature of a true church. They believed, first of all, in the separation of church and state and, secondly, in the separation of a true church from the surrounding culture. Because they regarded the State Church as fallen and impure, in part because it had appropriated the power of the sword to further its own ends, they refused to submit to its authority. I have no doubt, moreover, that they were a narrow and self-righteous lot, as purists and schismatics often are. But Augustine's defense of the use of terror against them remains one of the most appalling aspects of his thinking, and it is important to see that this defense was not an isolated quirk in his thinking. Indeed, within the context of his own assumptions, his argument is perfectly reasonable. If you suppose, as Augustine did, that heresy leads to eternal damnation and that, like a deadly germ, the heretic tends to infect others with heresy, then you have every reason to terrorize and even to murder heretics. Such brutality may be a tragic necessity on this view, but it remains a necessity nonetheless.

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[9]*Ibid.*, 23.

[10]*Ibid.*, 21.

Though Augustine may have been the first Christian theologian to argue against freedom of conscience in religious matters, he was by no means the last. His arguments were repeated throughout the Middle Ages and then were picked up by the Protestant Reformers. Like Augustine, Calvin too regarded heresy as a sin worse than murder: "The mockers who would suffer all false doctrines . . . are not only traitors to God but enemies of the human race. They would bring poor souls to perdition and ruin, and are worse than murderers."[11] Similarly, Calvin's close friend and associate, Theodore Beza, once wrote: "The contention that heretics should not be punished is as monstrous as the contention that patricides and matricides should not be put to death; for heretics are a thousandfold worse criminals than these."[12] And the Reformers were, of course, quite prepared to act upon their convictions; in 1526, for example, the Christian authorities in Zurick "ordered Anabaptists drowned, in hideous parody of their belief . . .."[13] Here is how Urbanus Rhegius, an associate of Martin Luther, justified the persecution of Anabaptists (whom he also called "Donatists," using that term as a form of abuse):

> When heresy breaks forth . . . then the magistrate must punish not with less but with greater vigor than is employed against other evil-doers, robbers, murderers, thieves, and the like. . . . The Donatists murder men's souls, make them go to eternal death; and then they complain when men punish them with temporal death. . . . All who know history will know what has been done in this

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[11]Quoted in Georgia Harkness, *John Calvin: The Man and his Ethics* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1931), p. 111. If, according to Calvin, those heretics who cause others to land in hell are worse than murderers, one wonders why he did not also regard, as worse than a murder, a "God" who would predestine some to hell.

[12]Quoted in Stefan Zweig, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

[13]Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), p. 127.

> matter by such men as Constantine, Marianus, Theodosius, Charlemagne, and others.[14]

Indeed! All who know history do know what such men as these have done in the name of Christ! Certainly none of them championed freedom of conscience, which they regarded as a threat to their own political power. So, whether they truly believed it or not, they all welcomed the theological assumption that, given the horrors of eternal damnation, heresy is a sin worse than murder. As the above quotations illustrate, moreover, religious persecution in the Western Church typically has had its roots in an obsessive fear of eternal damnation. It is no doubt possible to believe in eternal damnation without believing that God would be so unjust as to damn someone eternally for an honest mistake in abstract theology. But fear is often irrational, and, as a matter of historical fact, the Christian church has consistently employed the fear of eternal damnation as a weapon against "theological error." It has consistently cultivated in its constituency the fear that those who die in unbelief, or with certain mistaken beliefs, are precisely those whom God will damn eternally in hell. Such fear, which springs ultimately from a lack of confidence (or faith) in the character of God, has had disastrous consequences in the life of the church. Having no confidence in the love of God, those in the grips of such fear have too often wielded the sword in a sincere effort to protect their loved ones from the tragic consequences, as they see it, of error in religious matters.

Moral Progress and the Christian Faith

The more I have reflected upon the history of persecution within the Christian church, the more it has seemed to me that Bertrand Russell's indictment of religion, at least as a cultural phenomenon, has considerable merit. Like the harlot described in Revelation 17, the Christian church has at times become "drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus" (17:6—RSV). For

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[14]Quoted by Leonard Verduin, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

what else were many of the "heretics" so-called, except saints and martyrs?

But having said that, I think it also important to point out that Russell himself falls into confusion when he writes: "the more intense has been the religion of any period and the more profound has been the dogmatic belief, the greater has been the cruelty and the worse has been the state of affairs." There are two difficulties here: First, Russell ignores completely those intense forms of religious fervor that inspire love and charity rather than fear and suspicion; and second, he attributes all of the evils of religion, as he sees them, to dogmatic belief in general rather than to *specific* dogmatic beliefs. He fails to distinguish carefully enough, in other words, between different dogmatic beliefs. A dogmatic belief in the love of God, or in the sacredness of human life, or in freedom of conscience in religious matters not only does not lead to religious persecution; it probably provides the most effective opposition to it. So it is not dogmatic belief in general, but specific dogmatic beliefs, that we should indict at this point; in particular, we should indict that *conjunction* of dogmatic beliefs implying that heresy is a crime worse than murder. Had it not been for an obsessive fear of heresy, grounded in the traditional understanding of hell, most of the atrocities committed in the name of the Christian religion would never have occurred.

Russell goes on to expand his indictment of Christianity as follows:

> You find as you look around the world that every single bit of progress in humane feeling, every improvement in the criminal law, every step toward the diminution of war, every step toward better treatment of the colored races, or every mitigation of slavery, every moral progress that there has been in the world, has been consistently opposed by the organized churches of the world. I say quite deliberately that the Christian religion, as organized in its churches, has been and still is the principal enemy of moral progress in the world.[15]

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[15]Russell, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-21.

By way of a reply, I would here ask: Has not the Christian faith also *inspired* much of the moral progress of which Russell speaks? Has it not provided the very standard by which many of us would measure moral progress in the world? Consider three beliefs at the very heart of the Christian religion: the belief that (a) God *is* love; that (b) through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God is reconciling the world to himself; and (c) that in response to God's love for us, we must learn to love our neighbors—our enemies as well as our friends—even as we love ourselves. However foolish one might otherwise think them to be, such beliefs not only inspire moral progress of the kind that Russell speaks; they provide a much more rigorous standard for measuring such progress than most people would likely accept. I have no doubt that Russell's critical remarks about "the Christian religion, as organized in its churches," are true enough; religious establishments are no different from any other establishment, more concerned with their own power and self-preservation than with anything else. But is not the Christian faith, as displayed in the life of someone such as Mother Teresa, just the sort of thing that inspires moral progress? And did not individual reformers, under the inspiration of their Christian faith, vigorously oppose, for example, plantation slavery in the United States? It seems to me, at any rate, that the Christian faith has inspired much of the moral progress that, paradoxically, "the Christian religion, as organized in its churches," has opposed so vigorously.

Take the one issue of armed warfare. Virtually all of the early Christian converts, and in particular the early church fathers, were pacifists; they were prepared to bear the same cross that Jesus bore and, like Jesus, saw themselves as suffering servants. They no doubt acknowledged an obligation to the truth (as they saw it), to speak the truth in love for example, but they would never have acknowledged an obligation (or even a right) to wield the sword in an effort to make Christian converts, or to stifle dissent, or to settle theological disputes. Within a few centuries, however, the young and vibrant faith of the early Christians had congealed into an organized religion with its own orthodoxy and political intrigues; within a few centuries, Christians were killing other Christians, not

to mention pagans, in defense of an orthodoxy they evidently had little confidence in. But here, I would suggest, a reasonable interpretation is this: Between the time at which Christians were almost universally pacifists and the time at which those who called themselves "Christians" began persecuting pagans and heretics, the organized Christian church had simply lost its prophetic vision; having twisted the Christian gospel into a message of fear, one that the early suffering servants would not even have recognized, it then felt compelled to defend its message of fear with the weapons of fear. So in that sense, perhaps the Christian church did become an obstacle not only to moral progress in the world, but to genuine Christian faith as well.

I am now inclined, then, to draw a relatively sharp distinction between the Christian faith, on the one hand, and the organized Christian church, on the other, and I am quite prepared to see the latter as, more often than not, an enemy of the former. Not that the organized Christian church is any worse than other human institutions; on the whole, it is just no better. Nor should we expect it to be any better. We humans tend to make a mess of all our institutions, and our religious institutions are no different from any others in this regard. That those who call themselves "Christians" have made a mess of the Christian religion is no more surprising, I would suggest, than that the scribes and the Pharisees (during New Testament times) made a mess of the Jewish religion, or that Islamic Fundamentalists (in our own day) have made a mess of the Islamic religion. Accordingly, though I still believe in religious inspiration, in divine revelation, and in the prophetic word, and though I still regard the Christian faith as one of the principal sources—if not *the* principal source—of moral and spiritual enlightenment in the world, I also believe this: Over time our religious organizations inevitably twist and distort the very prophetic word they were instituted to preserve. They inevitably twist a message of love and hope into a message of fear.

The Destructive Power of Fear

Having conceded that Russell's indictment of the Christian church has some merit, I would also, in an effort to strike a balance, caution against an overly moralistic attitude towards history. Here I mean to caution myself as much as anyone else. We who have enjoyed religious liberty all of our lives no doubt find it easy—too easy, I should think—to regard those Christian authorities who misused their power in the past as unmitigated villains. But we also need to bear in mind, at this point, the complexity of historical events. Whether it be the Spanish Inquisitioners who murdered heretics on a regular basis, the Calvinists who murdered Servetus and countless Anabaptists, or the Puritans in Salem, Massachusetts, who murdered young women charged with witchcraft, the real villains in such episodes are not those who, in their own historical circumstances, may have acted as well as they could; the real villains are the fear that inspired such acts of terror in the first place and the religious ideas, such as the doctrine of eternal damnation, that kindled the fear. When Western Christendom not only backed away from, but actually condemned, the idea of universal reconciliation, it also, so I shall argue in subsequent chapters, backed away from the only *consistent* theology of love; and it has struggled ever since with the only possible alternative: a theology that cultivates, even as it expresses, our fear.

Fear need not, of course, always express itself in the form of physical brutality against others. So far as I know, Jonathan Edwards never advocated the persecution of either heretics or unbelievers, but he nonetheless remains one of the great apostles of fear. In "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," perhaps the most famous sermon ever delivered in America, Edwards evoked such fear in the congregation he addressed that some, unable to endure it, actually passed out in church. Here is but a sample of what he said:

> The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards

> you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours.[16]

Clearly, Edwards needed no sword to sow the seeds of terror. Why he believed that God would look upon a human being, created in the divine image, as "worthy of nothing else" but everlasting torment, or why he supposed that human beings, however sinful, are "more abominable" in the eyes of God than a disobedient child is in the eyes of a loving parent, he does not say. But reflect, for a moment, upon the likely effect of his sermon on the mind of a child. Imagine growing up in a church (or Christian school), as I and many of my friends did, in which ministers, Sunday school teachers, and camp counselors (good people all, but in the grips of their own message of fear) try repeatedly—with less eloquence than Edwards displayed, but with no less fervor—to frighten children into the faith. My point here is not that my early teachers were all failures; far from it. Most of them were far better than the message they sometimes preached, and most of them even had a good deal to say, however inconsistently, about the love of God. When I compare my own childhood, moreover, with that of many others, including those who have suffered physical and sexual abuse of various kinds, I am keenly aware of just how good it was and just how important the Christian community was in making it good. Nonetheless, the *theology* I encountered, both in church and in high school, was essentially a message of fear, and God's love always turned out, within the context of that theology, to be conditional in one way or another.

As I came to understand it, the fundamental religious problem was to find an answer to the question of how I, a polluted sinner, might escape the vindictiveness and the wrath of God. How, in particular, might I escape everlasting torment in hell? Even

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[16]Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," reprinted in Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards: Basic Writings* (New York: The New American Library, Inc.), p. 159.

salvation I came to understand as essentially an escape from the wrath, even the hatred, of God, and I still have in my possession a "gospel" tract that begins with these ominous words in bold faced, capital letters: **"GOD HATES YOU."** The technique here, familiar to anyone who understands the art of brain washing, was especially evident at the church camps I attended: First evoke a terrible fear; then offer a means of escape. According to a host of teachers whom I encountered in my youth, Jesus Christ, who died for us and was subsequently raised from the dead, provided the means whereby we might escape the wrath of God; by enduring our punishment for us, by allowing God to vent his wrath on someone other than us, Christ successfully appeased the vindictive God. But then, according to that teaching, vindictiveness and wrath remain ultimate facts about God. If we accept Christ as our savior—if, that is, we respond to the preacher's altar call, or submit to the authority of some church—God's vindictive attitude towards us will change; but if we do not accept Christ, if perchance we should die in our sin, God's vindictive attitude will *never* change. First evoke a terrible fear; then offer a means of escape.

I'll probably never forget my first job as a teenager, when I worked for a contract paint company scraping walls, sand blasting, and cleaning gutters; I'll never forget that job, because I was terribly afraid of the boss. Nor was I alone in this. Many of the other workers, particularly those who liked to loaf, were likewise afraid of the boss, whose wrath, easily kindled, was something to behold. But we also had, fortunately, a good foreman who always stood by us, a kind of mediator between the boss and the working crew. Again and again, the foreman would deflect the boss' anger away from us, or pacify his wrath, or reconcile him to something we were doing. Still, though I was certainly relieved to have someone pacify the boss on my behalf and on behalf of the other workers, I never felt comfortable around that man and was always glad to see him leave; during that particular summer anyway, I never felt reconciled to that particular boss. And we have here, I believe, a parable of the twisted gospel, the message of fear, that I encountered in the churches of my youth. God in his wrath and his anger is essentially someone to fear, not because he means to perfect us, but because he

may reject us and torment us forever and ever and ever. Because Jesus Christ provides a means of escape, we experience a sense of relief, perhaps, but not a heartfelt love for the one we have learned to fear.

Observe how easily a subtle shift of emphasis can twist the New Testament message of hope into a message of fear. As George MacDonald was so fond of pointing out, not one word in the New Testament implies that vindictiveness and wrath are ultimate facts about God, or that Christ's sacrifice was required in order to appease a vindictive God. A more accurate understanding would be that Christ's death and resurrection was God's sacrifice to us, the means whereby God changes *our* attitudes and reconciles *us* to himself (see, for example, II Corinthians 5:19); it is not a means whereby God's attitude towards us is changed. God's attitude remains the same yesterday, today, and forever. For God is love; that is the rock-bottom fact about God. But the history of organized religion, at least in the Western tradition, is a record of our human resistance to the proclamation that God is love, that his love extends to everyone, and that it is in no way conditioned upon human obedience or human faithfulness.

As a more recent illustration of such resistance, consider Kenneth Kantzer's claim that "the biblical answer [to the question of human destiny] does not satisfy our wishful sentiments. It is a hard and crushing word, devastating to human hope and pride."[17] It is "a hard and crushing word," Kantzer evidently believes, because it implies that, even if we should escape eternal perdition ourselves, some of our loved ones may not. And one could hardly imagine anything more "devastating to human hope" than that. Is it any wonder that so many well-meaning people have turned to persecution and violence? Is it any wonder that they have resorted to desperate means in an effort to protect their loved ones from a fate worse than death? Perhaps few Christians today would advocate, or even tolerate, the persecution of those whom they see as heretics; we may be thankful for that. But even today, the fears that have

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[17]Kenneth S. Kantzer, "Troublesome Questions," *Christianity Today*, March 20, 1987.

led to such persecution in the past continue to do their evil work of making people miserable and of estranging one person from another—as the wife whose husband dies "in unbelief," or the mother whose teenage son leaves the faith, or the teenager whose closest friend commits suicide might testify. A church in the grips of fear has little to offer those most desperate for a word of consolation, little except more pain, more misery, more fear. Kantzer claims that this really is the Christian gospel—"a hard and crushing word, devastating to human hope"—but I shall argue in subsequent chapters that he is simply wrong about that. I shall try to set forth a radically different picture, according to which the gospel, if true, really would be, as the word itself implies, good news—indeed, the best possible news for those of us in our present human condition. The gospel presents, for our consideration, a vision of God and the world that makes one want to shout with joy, a vision that can free us from all of the fear and the guilt and the worry within which we so often imprison ourselves. That vision may not always satisfy our *wishful sentiments*—Kantzer is right about that—but it does satisfy our *deepest yearnings*; it may at times devastate human *pride*, but it could never, ever devastate human *hope*. It is a vision altogether worthy of being true, and that is also, I believe, an indispensable condition of its being true.

In her novel, *Jane Eyre*, the nineteenth century writer, Charlotte Bronte, captures with a haunting accuracy the coldness and emptiness that sometimes passes for Christian ministry. I could almost feel the hard wooden pews against my back when I first read this description of a sermon:

> Throughout there was a strange bitterness; an absence of consolatory gentleness; stern allusions to Calvinistic doctrines—election, predestination, reprobation—were frequent; and each reference to these points sounded like a sentence pronounced for doom. When he had done, instead of feeling better, calmer, more enlightened by his discourse, I experienced an inexpressible sadness; for it seemed to me—I know not whether equally so to others—that the eloquence to which I had been listening had sprung from a depth where lay turbid dregs of disappointment—where moved troubling impulses or insatiate

> yearnings and disquieting aspirations. I was sure St. John Rivers—pure-lived, conscientious, zealous as he was—had not yet found that peace of God which passeth all understanding; he had no more found it, I thought, than had I . . ..[18]

Perhaps few of us in this life *have* found the "peace of God which passeth all understanding"; many who glibly claim to have found it sooner or later prove by their actions that they have not yet found it. But according to the Christian faith, as I have come to understand it, all of us *will* eventually find such peace, either in this life or in some other, but only after we have finally learned the lessons of love. As we learn our lessons, in some cases after much travail and hardship, we will find that in the end "perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love" (I John 4:18). And just as "perfect love casts out fear," so also, I am persuaded, is the New Testament message of love, when rightly understood, the best corrective for a theology that expresses our fear. In the following chapters, therefore, I shall try to create a context—biblical, theological, and philosophical—in which the grounds for hope and the groundlessness of our fears might be more evident to us.

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[18]Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre* (New York: The New American Library, inc.), p. 354.

5. ST. PAUL'S UNIVERSALISM

> "When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all."
>
> St. Paul

Let us now begin to consider the positive case for a universalist reading of the New Testament. I shall contend that the universalism of the New Testament is not only all pervasive, but clear and obvious as well. It emerges most clearly, perhaps, in the letters of Paul, in part because Paul addresses the issue more systematically than other writers do, but it is also implicit in the theme of victory and triumph that pervades the entire New Testament. It is so clear, I shall argue, that in the end we must try to account for this mystery: Why is it that so many, including perhaps a majority of scholars in the West, seem to have missed it?

Perhaps "missed it" is the wrong expression, however. The real mystery is why so many have failed to *appreciate* the universalism of the New Testament and why so many have tried to *explain it away*. For no one who reads the New Testament carefully could possibly miss the many passages that display the theme of victory and triumph and at least *appear*, when taken in their own context, to have a clear universalistic thrust. Paul, for example, speaks eloquently of the triumph of God's sovereign love; again and again, we find in his letters explicit statements to the effect that God will eventually bring all things into subjection to Christ and reconcile all things in Christ and bring life to all persons through Christ. As we shall see, these statements are neither obscure nor incidental; indeed, the lengths to which some have gone to explain them away is itself a testimony to their clarity and power. But there is, of course, another prominent theme in the New Testament as well, namely that of God's judgment and wrath; and the failure to understand this second theme sometimes induces people to ignore, or even to explain away, the all-pervasive theme of victory

and triumph. The irony is that Paul himself explains exactly how to harmonize the theme of judgment with that of victory and triumph, but his explanation is so unexpected and so counter to some deeply entrenched ways of thinking that we are apt to miss it altogether. And if we do miss it, we are not likely to appreciate fully the theme of triumph.

Accordingly, in this chapter I shall examine some of the passages in the Pauline corpus that display the theme of triumph. I shall argue, first, that the standard ways of explaining them away are untenable, and second, that Paul clearly did anticipate a time when all created persons would be reconciled to God. I shall argue further that, if we understand the theme of judgment in the way Paul does, we shall no longer be tempted to find a doctrine of everlasting punishment, or even everlasting separation, in it. Neither shall we be tempted to water down the all-pervasive theme of triumph. My aim in this and the following chapters, however, is not to refute every conceivable argument against a universalist interpretation of the New Testament; it is rather to illustrate a way of putting things together. For in the end, I believe, it is a failure of the imagination—an imagination crippled by fear—and an inability to see how to fit things together from a universalist perspective that lies behind many of the faulty and confused exegetical arguments in the Bible commentaries. Even more important than the details of specific arguments, therefore, is the matter of perspective, and it is a complete transformation of perspective that I would here hope to encourage.

"Justification and life for all"

I begin with a remarkable assertion found in the fifth chapter of Romans: "Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation [or doom] for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all" (5:18). How should we understand such an assertion? To all appearances, Paul here identifies one "all"—that is, all human beings—and makes two distinct but parallel statements about that one "all"; and to all appearances, the second of these statements implies that all human beings shall receive

"justification and life" and hence shall eventually be reconciled to God. But our text is, of course, a single sentence, lifted from a context; and as we all know, we cannot finally determine the meaning of a sentence apart from the context in which it occurs. So let us ask this question: Are there good reasons either in the immediate context of our text or in the wider context of Paul's thought for believing that Paul did not intend to say what his sentence, taken in isolation, *appears* to say? I think not, but many are those who disagree.

A popular strategy among conservatives at this point is to do an exhaustive (and, I should think, exhausting) word study: Look at every use of the word "all" in the New Testament, and try to find instances where it either does not literally mean *all* or where there is an understood (but unstated) limit to its scope. Fortunately, we need not actually carry out such a study in order to predict its likely results. When a storefront sign declares, "Going out of business. Everything must be sold!" we understand that "everything" does not include the cash registers and sales personnel;[1] and similarly, when Jesus tells his disciples that "you will be hated by all because of my name" (Luke 21:17), we understand that "all" does not include John's hating Peter or, sillier still, Peter's hating Peter. So the desired examples are not difficult to find. According to Loraine Boettner, "In some fifty places throughout the New Testament the words 'all' and 'every' are used in a limited sense";[2] and though some of Boettner's examples seem to me confused, we can let that pass. After citing his examples, Boettner concludes, without further argument, that "the doctrine of universal redemption cannot be based on the words 'all' or 'every' or the phrase 'all men.'"[3]

But how does any of this bear on the correct interpretation of *our* text, namely Romans 5:18? There are several difficulties here.

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[1]I borrow the example from one of my own teachers in graduate school, Merrill Ring.

[2]Loraine Boettner, *Studies in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1947), p. 321.

[3]*Ibid.*

First, Boettner lifts almost all of his examples from the gospel narratives, and narrative is just where one would expect to find uses of "all" in which the scope of its reference is less than precise ("When the Portland Trailblazers passed over the chance to draft Michael Jordan, they disappointed all of Oregon"). Though Paul's theological arguments are riddled with statements about "all human beings" and it is Paul's view that is supposedly at issue here, Boettner fails to cite a single example from one of these contexts. And that is surely unfortunate, to say the least. Suppose that a future racist society should come to regard our country's Declaration of Independence as a sacred document, and suppose further that some scholars in this society, being determined to explain away the statement that "all men are created equal," should scour other letters and documents of the time in order to find instances in which "all" does not literally mean *all*. We might suppose that they find "some fifty places," perhaps in some narratives of the Revolutionary War, where "the words 'all' and 'every' are used in a limited sense." Would this have any bearing on the meaning of "all men" in the statement, "all men are created equal," as it appears in the Declaration of Independence? It is hard to see why it should. And it is no less hard to see how Boettner's strategy is even relevant to the correct interpretation of either Romans 5:18 or any of the other universalistic texts in Paul.

Second, when we focus on the Apostle himself, we encounter this interesting fact: Every time he uses "all" in the context of some theological discourse, he seems to have in mind a clear reference class, stated or unstated, and he refers distributively to every member of that class. When he says that God "accomplishes *all* things according to his counsel and will" (Ephesians 1:11),[4] he is not, it is true, literally talking about everything, including numbers and propositions and sets of properties; he is talking about every *event*. Everything that happens in the world, he is saying, falls under God's providential control. And similarly for Paul's remark that

[4]Here I adopt the traditional assumption that Paul was the author of Ephesians, but nothing of substance hangs on it, since the quotation from Romans 8:28 is of similar form and unquestionably Pauline.

"*all* things work together for good to them that love God" (Romans 8:28—KJV); here he means not just *some* events, but *all* events. Or again, when Paul asserts that "God has put *all* things in subjection" to Christ (I Corinthians 15:27), he clearly has in mind all *created* things; and so, as he points out himself, this does not include the Father (15:28). But it does include every member of the class he has in mind. And the same is true of his assertion that "*all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). This "all" may not include dogs and birds and unfallen angels, as well as human beings; but it does include all the descendants of Adam, or more accurately, all the *merely human* descendants of Adam. Paul excludes Jesus Christ from this "all," because he did not think of Christ as merely human—*fully* human, perhaps, but not *merely* human. In all of these cases, the scope of "all" is clear; indeed, I have been unable to find a single example, drawn from Paul's theological writings, in which Paul makes a universal statement and the scope of its reference is unduly fuzzy or less than clear. Paul's writing may be cumbersome at times, but he was not nearly as sloppy a writer (or a thinker) as some of his commentators, in their zeal to interpret him for us, would make him out to be.

Finally, and most important of all, we must do justice to the grammatical evidence that our text itself presents. Note first the parallel structure of the sentence: "Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all." This is typically Pauline. In the eleventh chapter of Romans, Paul again writes: "For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all" (11:32); and in the fifteenth chapter of I Corinthians, he writes: "for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ" (15:22). In each of these texts, we encounter a contrast between two universal statements, and in each case the first "all" seems to determine the scope of the second. Accordingly, when Paul asserts in Romans 5:18 that Christ's one "act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all," he evidently has in mind every descendant of Adam who stands under the judgment of condemnation; when he insists in Romans 11:32 that God is merciful to all, he has in mind every human being whom God has "shut up" to, or has

"imprisoned" in, disobedience; and finally, when he asserts in I Corinthians 15:22 that "all will be made alive in Christ," he has in mind everyone who has died in Adam. The grammatical evidence here seems utterly decisive; you can reject it only if you are prepared to reject what is right there before your eyes. And though there seems to be no shortage of those who are prepared to do just that, the arguments one actually encounters have every appearance, it seems to me, of a grasping at straws.

Here is an example of what I mean. Following Charles Hodge, a number of commentators have sought to avoid the clear universalistic thrust of Romans 5:18 in the following way: First, they point to at least one exception—namely the man Jesus—to the first "all"; as Hodge himself put it: "Even the *all men* in the first clause, must be limited to those descended from Adam 'by ordinary generation.' It is not absolutely all" human beings.[5] Then, after finding this one *unstated* exception to the first "all," they (in effect) hold out for a vast number of additional exceptions to the second. But a little reflection will reveal that this entire line of reasoning is spurious, because it attributes an unwarranted theological significance to a perfectly familiar way of talking.

Observe first that Paul excludes Jesus Christ from the "all" of *both* clauses; even as Paul did not regard Jesus as having been condemned in Adam, neither did he regard Jesus as someone who receives the salvation that Jesus himself brings. So Hodge's claim is utterly irrelevant to this point: According to Paul, the very same "all" who were condemned in Adam received "justification and life" in Jesus Christ. Consider, moreover, a perfectly familiar way of talking. If I were to say: "Adam was the father of the entire human race and hence the father (or progenitor) of all men and women," would anyone take this to imply that Adam was the father of himself (or even of Eve)? Of course not. In most contexts, others would simply take the expression "all men and women" to *mean* "all men and women except Adam and Eve"; hence, in most

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[5]Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1896), p. 269.

contexts I would have no need to state the two obvious exceptions. And similarly for Paul: In virtually any soteriological context—that is, any context in which Paul has in view Christ's saving activity—he treats the expression "all human beings" as if it were shorthand for "all human beings except Christ" or, as already stated, "all the merely human descendants of Adam." As the agent of salvation, Jesus Christ obviously is not included in the "all" who are the object of his salvific actions; but just because this is so obvious, Paul had no need to state it in an explicit way. Nor does that one obvious exception justify additional exceptions; much less does it justify Hodge's conclusion that "the *all men* of the second clause is [not] co-extensive with the *all men* of the first."[6]

Consider the context of Romans 5:18 more carefully. In 5:12 Paul identifies the group or class he has in mind with great clarity; it is, he says, all human beings, or more accurately, all human beings who have sinned. Then, in vs. 15, he distinguishes within that single group or class between "the one" and "the many"—"the one" being Adam himself, who first sinned, and "the many" being those who died as a result Adam's sin. As John Murray points out:

> When Paul uses the expression "the many", he is not intending to delimit the denotation. The scope of "the many" must be the same as the "all men" of verses 12 and 18. He uses "the many" here, as in verse 19, for the purpose of contrasting more effectively "the one" and "the many", singularity and plurality—it was the trespass of the one", . . . but "the many" died as a result.[7]

In the same context, moreover, Paul insists that "the one," namely Adam, was "a type" of Jesus Christ (vs. 14), presumably because Jesus Christ, the second Adam, stands in the same relationship to "the many" as the first Adam did. But with this difference: "if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did

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[6]*Ibid*., p. 268.

[7]John Murray, *Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, Vol. I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), p. 192-193.

God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!" (vs. 15—NIV). It seems to me indisputable, therefore, that Paul had in mind one group of individuals—"the many," which includes all human beings except for the first and the second Adam—and he envisioned that each of the two Adams stands in the same relationship to that one group of individuals. The first Adam's act of disobedience brought doom upon them all, but the second Adam's act of obedience undid the doom and eventually brings justification and life to them all.

"So all will be made alive in Christ"

The explicit universalism of the fifth chapter of Romans is so clear that even the proponents of everlasting punishment have sometimes conceded, as Neal Punt does, that "Romans 5:18 and its *immediate context* place no limitation on the universalistic thrust of the second 'all men.'"[8] In opposition to absolute universalism, therefore, Punt argues from the so-called "analogy of Scripture": He in effect tries to find grounds elsewhere in the Bible for making exceptions to the second "all" of Romans 5:18. As our discussion in the previous chapter should already have suggested, however, arguments from "the analogy of Scripture" are tricky and fraught with difficulty; more often than not, they amount to little more than a deduction from the picture of God that someone brings to the text. Still, a legitimate question concerning Pauline thought as a whole is whether we can find elsewhere in Paul's writings grounds for rejecting a universalistic interpretation of Romans 5:18. Not a few have claimed that we can. According to John Murray:

> When we ask the question: Is it Pauline to posit universal salvation? the answer must be decisively negative (cf. II Thess. 1:8, 9). Hence we cannot interpret the apodosis in verse 18 [of Romans 5] in the sense of inclusive universalism, and it is consistent with sound canons of interpretation to assume a restrictive implication. In I Cor. 15:22

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[8]Neal Punt, *Unconditional Good News* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Co., 1980), p. 14.

> Paul says, " As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive". As the context will demonstrate the apostle is here dealing with the resurrection to life, with those who are Christ's and will be raised at his coming. The "all" of the second clause is therefore restrictive in a way that the "all" in the first clause is not. In like manner in Rom. 5:18 we may and must recognize a restriction in the "all men" of the apodosis that is not present in the "all men" of the protasis.[9]

Like Punt, Murray seems to recognize that nothing in the immediate context of Romans 5:18 justifies any restriction upon its universalistic thrust; so like Punt, Murray appeals to the wider context of Pauline thought. As his decisive evidence against attributing "inclusive universalism" to Paul, Murray cites a text that we shall examine ourselves in the following chapter, II Thessalonians 1:8, 9. But Murray also considers I Corinthians 15:22, whose parallel structure so resembles that of Romans 5:18, and concerning this text he argues in the following way: As the context demonstrates, the second "all" of I Corinthians 15:22 is restricted to those who belong to Christ; therefore, despite the parallel structure of the sentence, the second "all" is more restrictive than the first. Because the structure of Romans 5:18 is so similar to that of I Corinthians 15:22, moreover, we may also conclude that the second "all" of Romans 5:18 is likewise more restrictive than the first.

The first part of Murray's argument, however, is a simple *non sequitur*. From the premise that the second "all" of I Corinthians 15:22 is restricted to those who belong to Christ, it simply does not follow that the second all is more restrictive than the first. To get that conclusion, one must make the additional assumption that the first "all" includes persons who will never belong to Christ—an assumption that not only begs the whole question of the correct interpretation of the passage, but also contradicts Paul's explicit claim, in the following verses, that everything shall eventually be brought into subjection to Christ. If anything, the second "all" of I Corinthians 15:22 is *less* restrictive than the first; for in the

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[9]Murray, *Op. cit.*, p. 302.

following verses Paul immediately *expands* the second “all” to include not only every descendant of Adam (except Christ himself), but every competing will as well. Christ must continue to reign, Paul insists, until he finally brings *all things*, including every will and opposing power, into subjection to himself (15:24-27), and there is but one exception to this “all things,” the Father himself (15:28). The last enemy that Christ shall destroy is death (15:27), which in the larger context of Paul’s thought includes all separation from God. When Christ finally overcomes all separation from God, all persons will then be in subjection to Christ *in exactly the same sense* that Christ places himself in subjection to the Father (15:28)—a sense that, as I shall argue in the following section, clearly implies spontaneous and glad obedience. Then and only then will the Father truly be “all in all,” because then and only then will all persons belong to him, or at least *know* that they belong to him, through his Son.

The most natural interpretation of I Corinthians 15:22, then, accords perfectly with the most natural interpretation of Romans 5:18: The very same “all” who died in Adam shall be made alive in Christ. Against this interpretation, Larry Lacy has written:

> Talbott believes that the theme of 15:22 is the affirmation that all those who have died in Adam will be made alive in Christ. But a close examination of the immediate context reveals, I believe, that this is not the theme which is in Paul’s mind. Rather, the theme in Paul’s mind in the immediately preceding verses and in the immediately following verse is the theme that the resurrection of believers is dependent on the resurrection of Christ, that is, it is only *in Christ* that believers shall be made alive. . . . We see this confirmed in v. 23, where Paul says “Christ, the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.”[10]

Now Lacy is certainly right about this: One “theme in Paul’s mind” when he wrote the fifteenth chapter of I Corinthians was that

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[10]Larry Lacy, “Talbott on Paul as a Universalist,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* XXI:4 (June, 1992), p. 402.

“the resurrection of believers is dependent upon the resurrection of Christ . . ..” But why should anyone believe that this theme somehow excluded from Paul’s mind the additional idea that “all those who have died in Adam will be made alive in Christ”? Why not attribute *both* ideas to Paul? What Lacy evidently fails to appreciate is that in verses 20-28, or right in the middle of the discourse on resurrection, Paul works the theme of resurrection into a much larger context—one that includes, as we have just seen, the bringing of all things into subjection to Christ; indeed, the hope of the resurrection itself depends upon the hope that all things shall be brought into subjection to Christ. Like Murray and many other commentators, Lacy considers only two stages in a process that Paul describes as having three stages. After informing us that “in Christ shall all be made alive,” Paul goes on to say: “But each in his own order” (vs. 24). It is as if Paul has in mind the image of a procession, and he quickly lists three segments of the procession: At the head of the procession is Christ, the first fruits; behind him are those who belong to Christ at his coming; and behind them are the remainder—that is, those at the end of the procession—who are there when Christ “hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power” (vs. 24). Of course Lacy would no doubt reject my assumption that “ε τα τὸ τέλος” (literally “then the end”) is correctly interpreted as “then, the remainder.” For though this *is* a documented use of the Greek expression, and it *is* what the structure of Paul’s list of three stages suggests, it is also controversial; hence, I shall not insist upon it here. For even if we understand “then the end” to mean something like “then comes the end of the ages or the end of redemptive history,” Paul makes one point absolutely clear: The end will not come until Christ’s victory and triumph are complete; that is, until “he has put all his enemies under his feet” (vs. 25), until he has destroyed the last enemy, which is death (vs. 26), and until “all things are subjected to him” (vs. 28)

We thus approach the very crux of the matter: How did Paul himself conceive of Christ’s triumph, of the defeat of Christ’s enemies, and of the final destruction of sinners? As we shall see in the following sections, nothing short of universal reconciliation could

possibly qualify, within Paul's scheme of things, as a triumph; and neither could anything short of personal redemption qualify as the defeat of an enemy or as the destruction of a sinner.

"And through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things"

I have claimed that universal reconciliation is a central and pervasive theme in Paul. So far, we have seen that in the fifth chapter of Romans Paul spells out his universalism with great care and precision, and in the fifteenth chapter of I Corinthians he anticipates a time when every competing will shall be brought into subjection to Christ and all those persons in subjection to Christ shall be made alive. Let us now consider two texts that may help us to understand somewhat better what all of this means. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul again anticipates a time when "at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (2:10-11); and in his letter to the Colossians, he goes so far as to declare that the very same "all things" created in Christ—including "all things in heaven and on earth . . . visible or invisible, whether thrones or dominions or powers" (1:16)—shall in the end be reconciled to God in Christ (1:20).[11] One could hardly ask for a more specific statement; Paul here applies the concept of reconciliation, which is explicitly a redemptive concept, not only to all human beings, but to all the spiritual principalities and dominions as well.

It is within this context, I believe, that Paul himself understood the nature of Christ's victory, the defeat of Christ's enemies, and the destruction of sin. But consider how some have tried to limit and minimize the victory. A standard argument at this point is that in Colossians 1:20 and Philippians 2:10-11 Paul had in mind, not reconciliation in the full redemptive sense, but a pacification of evil powers, a mere subjugation of them against their will. Peter T.

[11]Even if Paul was not the author of Colossians, as some scholars have argued, the old hymn or creedal statement reproduced in 1:15-20 is surely one that Paul would have endorsed.

O'Brien, a respected New Testament scholar of conservative outlook, puts the argument this way:

> The reconciliation of the principalities and powers is in mind. They are one category whatever others are included. Yet these forces are shown as submitting against their will to a power they cannot resist. They are reconciled through subjugation (cf. I Cor 15:28) . . ..
>
> Although all things will *finally* unite to bow in the name of Jesus and to acknowledge him as Lord (Phil 2:10, 11), it is not to be assumed that this will be done gladly by all. For as the words following the hymn (Col 1:21-23) indicate, the central purpose of Christ's work of making peace has to do with those who have heard the Word of reconciliation and gladly accepted it. To assert that verse 20 [of Colossians 1] points to a universal reconciliation in which every man will finally enjoy celestial bliss is an unwarranted assumption.[12]

In the second paragraph of this quotation, we encounter the same confusion that we previously observed in Murray. For like Murray, O'Brien adopts a true premise: that in Pauline thought *only* "those who have heard the Word of reconciliation and [have] gladly accepted it" will experience reconciliation in the full redemptive sense. But that premise, which Christian universalists also accept, hardly provides a *reason* for denying to Paul the view that someday all will gladly bow before their Lord. So here we have, it seems, just one more *non sequitur*. The argument of the first paragraph, however, is perhaps more cogent and runs as follows: According to Paul, at least some spiritual beings, such as Satan and his cohorts, will never be reconciled to God in the full redemptive sense. Therefore, when Paul speaks of the reconciliation of "all things"—all things including these spiritual beings—he does not have in mind reconciliation in the full redemptive sense; and when he says that every tongue shall confess Jesus Christ as Lord, he does not necessarily mean that everyone will do it gladly.

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[12]Peter T. O'Brien, *Word Bible Commentary Volume 44: Colossians, Philemon* (Waco: Word Books, Publisher, 1982), pp. 56-57.

Is O'Brien right about this? Does Paul in fact teach in I Corinthians 15:28 that some spiritual beings will merely be subjugated and not reconciled to God in the full redemptive sense? Before addressing the specific exegetical question, I want first to suggest that O'Brien has in fact attributed to Paul an incoherent idea. The contradiction in the very idea of reconciliation through subjugation is no superficial matter. If the powers and principalities of which Paul speaks are *competing wills*, then as a matter of logic these powers and principalities could never be *entirely* in subjection to Christ against their will; for if they should be subjugated against their will, then their *will* would precisely not be in subjection to Christ. Here one is reminded, perhaps, of John Milton's Satan who, even after God defeats him in battle, finds that "the mind and spirit remains / Invincible."

> What though the field be lost?
> All is not lost; the unconquerable Will,
> And study of revenge, immortal hate,
> And courage never to submit or yield:
> And what else is not to be overcome?
> That Glory never shall his wrath or might
> Extort from me.[13]

As Milton's Satan illustrates, perhaps contrary to Milton's own intention, there is but one way for God to defeat a rebellious will and to bring it into subjection to Christ; he must so transform the will that it voluntarily places itself in subjection to Christ. For so long as a single will remains in a state of rebellion against Christ, so long as a single person is able to cling to his or her hatred of God, at least one power in the universe—the power of that person's will—is not yet in subjection to Christ. As a paradigm of subjection, therefore, consider Christ's own subjection to the Father, as Paul depicts it in I Corinthians 15:28. If Christ's will were in conflict with the Father's on some important issue, if he *wanted* to act contrary to the Father's will but simply lacked the power, would he truly be in subjection to the Father? Of course not. The very

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[13]*Paradise Lost*, Bk. I, 105-111.

suggestion seems incoherent. And yet, in the very passage O'Brien cites, I Corinthians 15:28, Paul draws a parallel between the subjection of all things to Christ and Christ's subjection of himself to the Father; so that very passage shows, it seems to me, that Paul did not in fact hold the incoherent idea that O'Brien attributes to him.

And similarly for Philippians 2:10-11 and Colossians 1:15-20. When Paul suggests that every tongue shall *confess* that Jesus Christ is Lord, he chooses a verb that throughout the Septuagint is used to imply not only confession, but the offer of praise and thanksgiving as well; and as J. B. Lightfoot points out, the verb has such implications of praise "in the very passage of Isaiah [45:23] which St. Paul adapts . . . ."[14] Now a ruling monarch may indeed force a subject to bow against that subject's will, may even force the subject to utter certain words; but praise and thanksgiving can come only from the heart, as the Apostle was no doubt clear-headed enough to discern. Quite apart from the matter of praise, moreover, either those who bow before Jesus Christ and *declare openly* that he is Lord do so sincerely and by their own choice or they do not. If they do this sincerely and by their own choice, then there can be but one reason: They too have been reconciled to God. If they do not do this sincerely and by their own choice, if they are forced to make obeisance against their will, then their actions are merely fraudulent and bring no glory to God; a Hitler may take pleasure in *forcing* his defeated enemies to make obeisance against their will, but a God who honors the *truth* could not possibly participate in such a fraud.

There remains an even more important exegetical consideration. In Colossians 1:20, Paul himself identifies the *kind* of reconciliation he has in mind; he does so with the expression "making peace through the blood of his cross." Similarly, in Philippians 2:6-11, Paul himself explains the nature of Christ's exaltation; he does so by pointing to Christ's humble obedience "to the point of death—even death on a cross." Now just what is the power of the

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[14]J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963), p. 115.

cross, according to Paul? Is it the power of a conquering hero to compel his enemies to obey him against their will? If that had been Paul's doctrine, it would have been strange indeed. For God had no need of a crucifixion to *compel* obedience; he was quite capable of doing that all along. According to the New Testament as a whole, therefore, God sent his Son into the world, not as a conquering hero, but as a suffering servant; and the power that Jesus unleashed as he bled on the cross was precisely the power of self-giving love, the power to overcome evil by transforming the wills and renewing the minds of the evil ones themselves. And Paul not only endorses this idea; he also tells us exactly what he means by "reconciliation" in the two verses following Colossians 1:20, citing as an example his own readers: "And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now *reconciled* in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him" (1:21-22—emphasis mine).[15] So the blood of the cross does bring peace, but not the artificial kind that some tyrannical power might impose; it brings true peace, the kind that springs from within and requires reconciliation in the full redemptive sense. It seems to me without question, therefore, that Paul did envision a time when all persons will be reconciled to God in the full redemptive sense.

"That he may be merciful to all"

I have already mentioned one reason so many find it difficult to take Paul's universalism seriously: Many think it impossible to square such universalism with the theme of divine judgment that we find not only in Paul, but throughout the Bible generally. The God of the Bible, they like to remind us, is not only merciful; he is also just. But where is the biblical warrant, I would ask in return, for thinking that divine justice requires something that divine mercy does not, or that divine mercy permits something that divine justice does not? Where is the biblical warrant for thinking that mercy and

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[15]I leave it to the reader to puzzle out how anyone could cite this passage, as O'Brien does, on behalf of the view that Paul has in mind something less than reconciliation in the full redemptive sense.

justice are separate and distinct attributes of God? At this point, I fear, we sometimes read our own ideas (and our own philosophical misconceptions) into the Bible. *We* think that mercy is one attribute and justice another, so we read this into the Bible; *we* think that God's love is an attitude of one kind and his wrath an attitude of an opposite kind, so we also read this into the Bible; *we* think that God punishes for one kind of a reason and forgives for another, and we tend to picture God as a schizophrenic whose justice pushes him in one direction and whose love pushes him in another; so we again read all of this into the Bible. When we turn to St. Paul, however, we find that he challenges this whole way of thinking.

Perhaps the best example of such a challenge is the eleventh chapter of Romans. For here Paul explicitly states that God's severity towards the disobedient, his judgment of sin, even his willingness to blind the eyes and harden the hearts of the disobedient, are expressions of a more fundamental quality, that of mercy, which is itself an expression of his purifying love. In Romans 11:7 he thus writes: "What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened" (or blinded). He then asks, "have they [the nonremnant who were hardened or blinded] stumbled so as to fall?" and his answer is most emphatic: "By no means!" (11:11). By the end of the following verse, he is already speaking of their full inclusion: "Now if their stumbling means riches for the world, and if their defeat means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!" (11:12).[16] And three verses later he is hinting that their

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[16]In order to avoid the implication that God hardens the heart as an expression of mercy, some commentators have insisted that Paul here speaks of Israel as a corporate whole. John Piper thus writes: "Notice that this [i.e., the "they" in 11:11] is not a reference to all Jews but to Israel as a corporate whole conceived of as an entity that endures from generation to generation made up of different individuals from time to time" ("Universalism in Romans 9-11? Testing the Exegesis of Thomas Talbott," *The Reformed Journal*, Vol. 33, Issue 7, p. 12). But that will never do. For in 11:7 Paul mentions three groups of people: Israel or the nation as a corporate whole, "the elect" or the faithful remnant, and "the rest." that is. the nonremnant Jews who were hardened. Now the

acceptance will mean "life from the dead" (9:15). He then generalizes the whole thing: God blinded the eyes and hardened the hearts of the unbelieving Jews, we discover, as a means by which *all* of Israel might be saved (Romans 11:25-26)—all of Israel including those who were blinded and hardened. There is simply no way, so far as I can tell, to escape the universalistic implication here. The *specific* point that Paul makes in Romans 11 is this: Though the unbelieving Jews were in some sense "enemies of God" (11:28), they nonetheless became "disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy" (11:31-NIV). But the general principle (of which the specific point is but an instance) is even more glorious: "For God has imprisoned *all* in disobedience so that he may be merciful to *all*" (11:32—my emphasis).

According to Paul, therefore, God is always and everywhere merciful, but we sometimes *experience* his mercy (or purifying love) as severity, judgment, punishment. When we live a life of obedience, we experience his mercy as kindness; when we live a life of disobedience, we experience it as severity (see 11:22). Paul himself calls this a mystery (11:25) and admits that God's ways are, in just this respect, "inscrutable" and "unsearchable" (11:33),

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antecedent of "they" in 11:11 cannot be the faithful remnant; they are not the ones who stumbled and were hardened. Neither can it be the nation as a corporate whole, for Paul has just distinguished between two groups within that corporate whole: the faithful remnant who did not stumble and were not hardened, and "the rest" who did stumble and were hardened. Accordingly, the antecedent of "they" in 11:11 must be "the rest," the nonremnant Jews, the very ones whom God had hardened. Even John Murray admits this. Murray thus asks (*op. cit*., p. 75, n. 18): "Is not the denotation of those in view [in verse 11] the same as those mentioned in verse 7: 'the rest were hardened'? And is not Paul thinking here of those in verse 22: 'toward them that fell, severity'?" The answer is, "yes" and "yes." But since Murray cannot believe that God's severity, or his hardening of a heart, is an expression of mercy, he insists that "those who stumbled did fall with ultimate consequences." The "denotation of those in view" in verse 11, however, is not only "the same as those mentioned in verse 7"; it is also the same as those mentioned in verse 12: those whose "full inclusion" will mean so much more than the stumble which makes their full inclusion possible.

but nothing could be clearer than his own glorious summation of the whole thing in 11:32. If the first "all" of 11:32 refers distributively to *all* the merely human descendants of Adam, if all are "imprisoned" in disobedience, then so also does the second; they are all objects of divine mercy as well. And if one should insist, as some have in an effort to escape universalism, that neither "all" literally means "all without exception," the obvious rejoinder is that here, no less than in Romans 5:18 and I Corinthians 15:22, the parallelism is even more important than the scope of "all." According to Paul, the *very ones* whom God "shuts up" to disobedience—whom he blinds, or hardens, or cuts off for a season—are those to whom he is merciful; his former act is but the first expression of the latter, and the latter is the goal of the former. God hardens a heart in order to produce, in the end, a contrite spirit, blinds those who are unready for the truth in order to bring them ultimately to the truth, "imprisons all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all."

Romans 11:32, where Paul declares the full extent of God's mercy, is the culmination of a theological argument that begins in chapter 9 and extends through chapter 11. It is here that Paul takes up the problem of Jewish unbelief and systematically defends his view that, contrary to what many of his kinsmen believed, God has every right to extend his mercy to all human beings including Gentiles. But though his argument *as a whole* is an explicit argument against limited election, against the pernicious idea that God restricts his mercy to a chosen few, we also confront this irony: Many commentators have interpreted the early stages of his argument (in chapter 9) as precisely an argument *for* such a restriction. And perhaps that is not surprising. For in the early stages of his argument, Paul does say some things that, if removed from the context of his full argument, might seem to imply that God does indeed restrict his mercy to a chosen few. For one thing, Paul gives several examples here of the severity of God's mercy—as, for instance, when he reminds his readers that according to the story in Exodus God himself had hardened Pharaoh's heart (9:17-18). In addition, Paul appears to draw a sharp distinction between (what he calls) vessels of mercy prepared beforehand for glory and vessels of wrath fit for destruction (9:22), and some have read into this a

distinction between the elect and the non-elect. But no one who follows Paul's argument to its conclusion in Romans 11 will likely confuse the *severity* of God's mercy with the *absence* of mercy; nor will they likely confuse the distinction between vessels of mercy and vessels of wrath with a distinction between those who are, and those who are not, objects of God's mercy.

Consider first the severity of God's mercy towards Pharaoh: the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. One can find, it seems to me, a good deal of nonsense about this in the literature. Some speak as if the hardening of Pharaoh's heart were an instance of God's causing a man to sin;[17] others, in an effort to do justice to our moral intuitions, insist that Pharaoh first hardened his own heart and then God hardened it further.[18] Before jumping to conclusions of any kind, however, one should perhaps first consider what God's hardening of a heart *means*. The Hebrew word most commonly used in the Exodus account to which Paul refers literally means "to strengthen"; it is the same word that appears throughout the Old Testament in the formula "Be of good courage."[19] God simply strengthened Pharaoh's heart and gave him the courage to stand in the face of the "signs and wonders" performed in Egypt. God consistently hardened (or strengthened) Pharaoh's heart in connection with a specific command: "Let my people go!" Why would a merciful God do that? In the context of the story in Exodus, one possibility is this: Though Pharaoh had exalted himself over the Hebrews for years, he was essentially a coward who could never have stood the pressure, apart from the strength that God gave him, once things began to get difficult in Egypt. It is often that way; cowardice often prevents us from doing the wrong that we in fact wish to do. In the case of Pharaoh, God gave him the strength not

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[17]See, for instance, Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1968), pp. 222-223.

[18]See, for example, Edward John Carnell, *Christian Commitment* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1957), p. 236.

[19]See, for example, 2 Samuel 10:12, 1 Chronicles 19:13, Ezra 10:4, Psalm 27:14, 31:24, Isaiah 41:6 in the King James Version.

to be cowed too easily; God gave him the *courage* to sin, if you will, but it hardly follows that God was the sufficient cause of the sin itself. And the hardening of Pharaoh's heart was an expression of mercy in two respects: First, it revealed to Pharaoh the destructive nature of his own sin, and second, it revealed to the Egyptians something of the nature of God. For as the Lord declared to Moses, "The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out from among them" (Exodus 7:5). These great historical events no doubt brought real hardship to the Egyptians, even as they did to the Israelites; but they were also a revelation to the Egyptians, even as they were to the Israelites. Within the context of Paul's own argument, moreover, God's actions towards Pharaoh and the Egyptians were no different from his actions towards the Israelites or anyone else; if, at one time or another, God "imprisons" all the descendants of Adam in disobedience and does so for a merciful purpose, it is hardly surprising that he should do the same thing to Pharaoh.

Consider next Paul's distinction between vessels of mercy and vessels of wrath and why he could not possibly have in mind a distinction between those who are, and those who are not, objects of God's mercy. In the first place, the vessels of wrath of which he speaks in 9:22 are the unbelieving Jews, the very ones concerning whom he later makes two claims: (i) that "as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors" (11:28), and (ii) that "they have now become disobedient in order that they too might receive mercy" (11:31-NIV). In Paul's scheme of things, therefore, those who are vessels of wrath, no less than those who are vessels of mercy, are objects of God's mercy; it is just that, for a person's own good, God's purifying love sometimes takes the form of wrath. Secondly, if Paul was indeed the author of Ephesians, then he clearly assumes that the *same individual* can be a vessel of wrath at one time and a vessel of mercy at another; he also assumes that every individual who is now a vessel of mercy was at one time a vessel of wrath. For as he says in his letter to the Ephesians, using a slightly different metaphor, all Christians were at one time "children of wrath" (Ephesians 2:3). But then, if Paul himself is a

vessel of mercy who was at one time a vessel of wrath (call him Saul), a paraphrase that captures part of the meaning of 9:22-23 is this:

> What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience Saul, a vessel of wrath fit for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for Paul, a vessel of mercy which he has prepared beforehand for glory. . .?

And what this paraphrase illustrates is again only what Paul himself explicitly states in 11-32; namely, that those whom God has "imprisoned" in disobedience—the vessels of wrath whom he endures with much patience—are precisely those to whom he is merciful. By literally shutting sinners up to their disobedience and requiring them to endure the consequences of their own rebellion, God reveals the self-defeating nature of evil and shatters the illusions that make evil choices possible in the first place.

Some Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, we have examined some of the passages in the Pauline corpus that display Paul's belief in the ultimate triumph of God's love and mercy. Though the weight of tradition lies on the side of those who would try to explain these passages away, the actual arguments we encounter in the tradition are remarkably weak. One of the most common arguments rests upon a mere confusion. First, someone points out that, according to Paul, only those who belong to Christ, or only those who gladly confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, or only those who repent of their sin will be saved; no unrepentant murderer, for example, can enter the Kingdom of God. Then, the person draws the faulty inference that, according to Paul, not all sinners will be saved. But as I have tried to show in this chapter, that is a simple *non sequitur*. Paul's whole point is that the day is coming when all persons will belong to Christ, all will gladly confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, and all will have repented of their sin. For though Paul nowhere endorses the absurd view that God will reward unrepentant sinners with eternal bliss, he does endorse the view that the same God who transformed

Saul, the chief of sinners, into Paul, a slave of Christ, can and eventually will do the same thing for every other sinner as well.

Now if God is truly merciful to all, as Paul insists in the eleventh chapter of Romans—if God's severity towards the disobedient, no less than his kindness towards the obedient, is an expression of his mercy—then we must adjust our understanding of divine punishment accordingly. We must come to appreciate that, according to Paul, God punishes sin for exactly the same reason he sent his Son into the world: to redeem or reclaim those who have fallen into sin. Such a view is logically compatible with many things, including fierce punishment in the next life; but it is *not* compatible with a doctrine of *everlasting* punishment. So the full weight of what we have argued in this chapter provides a powerful reason to deny that Paul himself believed in everlasting punishment. But at this point someone may ask: Does not at least one text traditionally attributed to Paul, namely II Thessalonians 1:9, speak of the "eternal destruction" of the wicked?—and does not this text seem to imply a doctrine of everlasting punishment? Certainly many commentators have thought so. As I have already mentioned, John Murray cites this text as his decisive evidence against a universalistic interpretation of Romans 5:18; and in a similar vein, Charles Hodge writes:

> As, however, not only the Scriptures generally, but Paul himself, distinctly teach that all men are not to be saved, as in 2 Thess. I.9, this [universalistic] interpretation [of Romans 5:18] cannot be admitted by any who acknowledge the inspiration of the Bible.[20]

What are we to make of such an argument? In the following chapter, I shall argue that Murray and Hodge have misinterpreted II Thessalonians 1:9 entirely: Not only does this text carry no implication that some persons will be lost forever; we have every reason to believe that, within the context of Paul's own thought, the concept of "eternal destruction" is itself a redemptive concept. Before turning to that matter, however, I want to consider Hodge's claim

[20]Hodge, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

that a universalistic interpretation of Romans 5:18 "cannot be admitted by any who acknowledge the inspiration of the Bible." On the face of it, that is a remarkable claim for two reasons: first, because many Christian universalists have believed as strongly as Hodge did in the inspiration of the Bible, and second, because one could just as easily, if one wanted to be uncharitable, use the same kind of argument against Hodge. For surely, the following argument is at least as strong, if not stronger, than the one that Hodge gives:

> Because not only the Scriptures generally, but Paul himself, distinctly teach universal reconciliation, as in Romans 5:18, Romans 11, and I Corinthians 15:20-28, Hodge's interpretation of II Thessalonians 1:9 cannot be admitted by any who acknowledge the inspiration of the Bible.

As this argument illustrates, the issue of inspiration is a distracting irrelevancy in the present context; it is the correct interpretation of a text, not the inspiration of the Bible, that is here at issue. And concerning that issue—the correct interpretation of Romans 5:18—the appeal of Murray and Hodge to II Thessalonians 1:9 suffers from a serious weakness. For without any trouble at all, we can simply reverse their argument and argue in the opposite direction.

We here touch upon a point that is perhaps more familiar to philosophers than to others, and it illustrates how something that comes naturally to a philosopher can help to clarify our interpretation of the Bible. The logic of the situation is this: At least one proposition in the following inconsistent set must be false:

(1) Paul wrote both II Thessalonians 1:8-9 and Romans 5:18.

(2) II Thessalonians 1:8-9 teaches that some persons will literally be punished forever and hence will never be reconciled to God.

(3) Romans 5:18 teaches that Christ's one act of righteousness "leads to acquittal and life for all men" and

hence that all sinners will eventually be reconciled to God.

(4) There is no inconsistency in Paul's teaching.

Because we know that at least one of these propositions is false, we must also consider whether one of them is more plausible to deny than the others. Some would no doubt reject proposition (1), because some scholars have come to doubt the Pauline authorship of II Thessalonians; others may want to reject proposition (4) and simply admit that Paul was himself inconsistent. But those who accept a traditional view of the Bible, as Murray and Hodge both do, are unwilling to reject either (1) or (4); such persons must therefore reject either (2) or (3). So let us ask ourselves: Which of *these* propositions is the more plausible to reject. According to Murray and Hodge, (2) is true; therefore, (3) is false. These theologians allow, in other words, their understanding of II Thessalonians 1:8-9 to determine their interpretation of Romans 5:18 and the other universalistic texts in Paul. But one could just as rationally argue in the reverse direction and insist that (3) is true; therefore, (2) is false. One could just as rationally, in other words, allow one's understanding of the universalistic texts to determine one's interpretation of II Thessalonians 1:8-9. At the very least, therefore, Murray and Hodge owe us some explanation of why they prefer an argument in the one direction rather than an equally plausible argument in the other.

We have here but another instance of the hermeneutical problem discussed in the previous chapter. Whichever way we argue, we shall end up denying a proposition for which there is at least some *prima facie* support in Paul. But consider this: On the one side, we have such systematic discourses as Romans 5 and 11 and I Corinthians 15; on the other, we have a single incidental text whose translation, as we shall see in the following chapter, is by no means clear and whose interpretation is debatable on any translation. Is it not remarkable, therefore, that Murray and Hodge should think it sufficient merely to *cite* this text without so much as *discussing* it or defending their interpretation of it?

The proponents of everlasting punishment do not, of course, restrict themselves to a single text in Paul; like Neal Punt, most would appeal to the so-called "analogy of Scripture," placing great weight upon the words of Jesus as these words are recorded in the Gospels. Accordingly, in the following chapter, we shall examine not only the idea of "eternal destruction," as it appears in II Thessalonians 1:9, but also that of "eternal punishment," as it appears in the parable of the sheep and the goats. We shall find that, contrary to what some have read into them, neither of these ideas carries an implication of unending punishment and, as surprising as it may at first appear, both turn out to be redemptive ideas.

11. GOD, FREEDOM, AND HUMAN DESTINY

> "No matter how many eons it takes, he will not rest until all of creation, including Satan, is reconciled to him, until there is no creature who cannot return his love with a joyful response of love."
>
> Madeleine L'Engle

In the previous chapter, we saw something of the importance that Arminians attribute—correctly, in my opinion—to the idea of free choice. Insofar as freedom and determinism are incompatible, free choice introduces into the universe an element that, from God's point of view, is utterly random in that it lies outside of God's direct causal control. Accordingly, if I should freely act wrongly—or worse yet, freely reject God's grace—in a given set of circumstances, then it was not within God's power to induce me to act otherwise, at least not in those precise same circumstances. So in that sense, our free choices, particularly the bad ones, are obstacles that God must work around as he tries to bring his loving purposes to fruition.

Now so far, the Arminian picture seems to me essentially correct. But Arminians hold not only that our free choices are sometimes obstacles that God must work around; they hold also that we are free to defeat God's loving purpose for us altogether. They hold not only that we can reject God for a season, during the period of time we are mired in ambiguity and illusion, but also that we can reject him forever. They deny, in other words, that God is *almighty* in the sense that he is able in the end to accomplish *all* of his loving purposes. According to William Craig, for example, it is quite possible, given the nature of free will, that some created persons are utterly irredeemable in this sense: Nothing God can do—that is, no revelation he might impart, no punishment he might administer, and no conditions he might create—would ever induce them to repent freely or successfully reconcile them to himself.[1] It is also possible,

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[1]See William Lane Craig, "'No Other Name': A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation Through Christ," *Faith and*

Craig insists, that some persons would repent freely only in a world in which others were damned forever; it is even possible that God must permit a large number of people to damn themselves in order to fill heaven with the redeemed. Craig himself puts it this way:

> It is possible that the terrible price of filling heaven is also filling hell and that in any other possible world which was feasible for God the balance between saved and lost was worse. It is possible that had God actualized a world in which there are less persons in hell, there would also have been less persons in heaven. It is possible that in order to achieve this much blessedness, God was forced to accept this much loss.[2]

As this passage illustrates, Craig accepts at least the possibility that, because of free will, history includes an element of irreducible tragedy, and he exploits this supposed possibility in defense of a doctrine of everlasting hell. For it is possible, says Craig, that in order to fill heaven, God had to pay the "terrible price" of "filling hell" as well. So perhaps God, who is omniscient on Craig's view, knows from the outset that his triumph will never be complete, and perhaps he merely does the best he can to minimize his defeat and to cut his losses.

Now to some, it may appear as if Craig's picture of a defeated God is but a logical extension of some of my own remarks in the previous chapter. For as I insisted there myself, the Arminian is right about this: It is quite possible that, given the reality of free will, God could not have created a world with less evil in it *and* a better overall balance of good over evil than exists in the actual world. But if that is true, one might wonder whether Craig is not also right. For is it not likewise possible that, given the reality of free will, God could not have created a world in which no one is

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Philosophy, VI (April, 1989), pp. 172-178. It is possible, claims Craig, that some persons suffer from what he calls "transworld damnation" (and what I have called "transworld reprobation"). For a further discussion of this idea, see Thomas Talbott, "Providence, Freedom, and Human Destiny," *Religious Studies*, XXVI (1990).

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 183.

damned *and* some are saved? And is it not possible that, if fewer people were damned, then fewer would be saved as well? If so, then perhaps God had no choice but to permit some persons to damn themselves freely in order to achieve a better overall balance of good over evil.

In what follows, however, I shall argue that Craig is quite mistaken about the range of possible free choice. But first I want to point out that his picture of a defeated God is in no way a logical extension of anything I have conceded in the previous chapter. For according to Craig, God willingly permits *irreparable* harm to befall at least some of his loved ones, and my own view carries no such implication. To the contrary, I assume that God permits no evil, however horrendous it may appear to us in the present, that he cannot eventually turn to good; and he permits no harm to befall his loved ones that he cannot in the end repair. I also assume that, given a long enough stretch of time, the Hound of Heaven can overcome all of the obstacles that our wrong choices present and can thus achieve *all* of his redemptive purposes; in that respect, he is like the grand chessmaster who, though exercising no direct causal control over the moves of a novice, is nonetheless able to checkmate the novice in the end.

We thus approach the fundamental point of dispute between the universalists and the Arminians. Both agree that God is a perfectly loving being. But they disagree over the question of whether God is *almighty* in the specified sense. As the universalists see it, God's love will eventually triumph; he will thus destroy evil completely and thus remove every stain from his creation. But as the Arminians see it, evil will defeat the love of God in some cases; and in these cases, God will try to minimize the defeat by confining evil to a particular region of his creation, known as hell, where he will keep it alive throughout eternity. Accordingly, against the Arminian picture of a defeated God, I shall now defend three propositions: (i) The very idea of someone freely rejecting God forever is deeply incoherent and therefore logically impossible; (ii) even at the price of interfering with human freedom, a loving God would never permit his loved ones to reject him forever, because he would never permit them to do irreparable harm either to themselves or to

others; and (iii) the Arminian understanding of hell is, in any case, utterly inconsistent with the New Testament teaching about hell. Then, in our final chapter, I shall consider again Paul's understanding of Christ's victory over sin and death, and examine the problem of human suffering in light of that victory.

(I) Free Will and the Concept of Damnation

Suppose that the parents of a young boy should discover, to their horror, that they must keep their son away from fire, lest he thrust his hand into the fire and hold it there. Suppose further that their son has a normal nervous system and experiences the normal sensations of pain; hence, the boy not only has no discernible motive for his irrational behavior, but also has the strongest possible motive for refraining from such behavior. Here we might imagine that when the boy does thrust his hand into the fire, he screams in agony and terror, but he nonetheless does not withdraw his hand. Nor does he show, let us suppose, any sign of a compulsion to get to the fire and thrust his hand into it; he sometimes just does it for no discernible reason and in a context in which nothing seems to force him to do it.

Is the story I have just told coherent? I doubt it, though perhaps more would have to be said to settle the matter decisively. But whether coherent or not, the story nonetheless illustrates an important point. If someone does something in the absence of any motive for doing it *and* in the presence of an exceedingly strong motive for not doing it, then he or she displays the kind of irrationality that is itself incompatible with free choice. A necessary condition of free choice, in other words, is a minimal degree of rationality on the part of the one who acts freely. Even on the assumption that nothing causes the boy to thrust his hand into the fire, his totally inexplicable act would be more like a freak of nature or a random occurrence than a choice for which he is morally responsible. Would his parents attribute to him some sort of moral guilt for his bizarre behavior? Not if they are thinking clearly. For moral guilt can arise only in a context in which there are discernible, albeit selfish, motives for what one does. We have

imagined, however, a case where the boy has no motive at all, not even a spiteful or a selfish one, for his bizarre behavior.

Now as we have seen, the Arminians insist, correctly, that free will is incompatible with determinism; that is, I perform an action freely, on their view, only if conditions outside my control do not causally determine that I perform it. But too often the Arminians have been content to leave it at that, to proceed as if there were no other necessary conditions of a free act, which there clearly are. As our story above illustrates, a free choice implies not only indeterminism of a certain kind, but a minimal degree of rationality as well. The latter is required in order to distinguish a free choice from a purely random event or chance occurrence, such as the unpredictable change of state of a radium atom, and it also limits the range of possible free choice. That which is utterly pointless, utterly irrational, and utterly inexplicable will simply not qualify as a free choice for which one is morally responsible.

So with that understanding, let us now consider what it might *mean* to say that someone freely rejects God forever. Is there in fact a coherent meaning here? Religious people sometimes speak of God as if he were just another human magistrate who seeks his own glory and requires obedience for its own sake; they speak as if we might reject the Creator and Father of our souls without rejecting ourselves, oppose his will for our lives without opposing, schizophrenically perhaps, our own will for our lives. Craig thus speaks of "the stubborn refusal to submit one's will to that of another".[3] But if God is our loving Creator, then he wills for us exactly what, at the most fundamental level, we want for ourselves; he wills that we should experience supreme happiness, that our deepest yearnings should be satisfied, and that all of our needs should be met. So if that is true, if God wills for us the very thing we *really* want for ourselves, whether we know it or not, how *then* are we to understand human disobedience and opposition to God?

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[3]William Lane Craig, "Talbott's Universalism," *Religious Studies*, 27 (Sept., 1991), p. 301.

As a first step towards answering this question, let us distinguish between two senses in which a person might reject God. If a person refuses to be reconciled to God and the person's refusal does not rest upon ignorance, or misinformation, or deception of any kind, then let us say that the person has made a *fully informed* decision to reject God; but if the person refuses to be reconciled to God and the person's refusal *does* rest upon ignorance or deception of some kind, then let us say that the person has made a *less that fully informed* decision to reject God. Now no one, I take it, would deny the possibility of someone's making a less than fully informed decision to reject God; it happens all the time. Even St. Paul, before his conversion to Christianity, presumably saw himself as rejecting the Christian God at one time. But what might qualify as a motive for someone's making a fully informed decision to reject God? Once one has learned, perhaps through bitter experience, that evil is always destructive, always contrary to one's own interest as well as to the interest of others, and once one sees clearly that God is the ultimate source of human happiness and that rebellion can bring only greater and greater misery into one's own life as well as into the lives of others, an intelligible motive for such rebellion no longer seems even possible. The strongest conceivable motive would seem to exist, moreover, for uniting with God. So if a fully informed person should reject God nonetheless, then that person, like the boy in our story above, would seem to display the kind of irrationality that is itself incompatible with free choice.

In an effort to establish a motive for a *fully informed* decision to reject God, Craig quotes the famous passage in Book I of *Paradise Lost*, where Milton's Satan declares that he would rather rule in hell than serve in heaven. But that will never do. Even if Milton's Satan were a believable character—which, in my opinion, he isn't[4]—we have no reason to believe that such a character, with so

[4]Milton's portrayal of Satan, though enormously insightful in specific contexts, seems to me in the end as unrealistic as his depiction of the war in heaven (in which immortals fight each other with cannons and the like). Milton's artistic challenge was to portray Satan both as the Arch Fiend and as a free and morally responsible agent. That he was

many illusions yet to be shattered, could possibly hold out for an eternity against the love of God. Observe the many ways in which Satan comforts himself: with the illusion that he "Can make a heaven of Hell," with the illusion that in hell he is at least free (despite his bondage to destructive desires), and with the illusion that in hell he "may reign secure." He evidently never even considers the outer darkness (where he would have no one to rule and no world to experience); nor has he yet come to terms with the fact that his willful opposition to God, his desire for revenge, is in reality an attack upon himself. It is a tribute to Milton's art, however, that by Book IV Satan has already lost most of the illusions that made the "heroic" speech of Book I possible; and had Milton's art not been the slave of his theology, I have no doubt that the more pitiful (and even human) character of Book IV would have repented.

Far from illustrating a fully informed decision to reject God, then, Milton's Satan in fact illustrates the essential role that ignorance, deception, and bondage to unhealthy desires must play in any intelligible decision to reject God. But ignorance, deception, and bondage to unhealthy desires are also obstacles to free choice of the relevant kind. If I am ignorant of, or deceived about, the true consequences of my choices, then I am in no position to embrace those consequences freely; and similarly, if I suffer from an illusion that conceals from me the true nature of God, or the true import of union with God, then I am again in no position to reject God freely. I may reject a caricature of God, or a false conception, but I would be in no position to reject the true God himself. Accordingly, the very conditions that render a less than fully informed decision to reject God intelligible also render it less than fully free; hence, God should be able to remove these conditions—the ignorance, the illusions, the bondage to unhealthy desires—without in any way interfering with human freedom.

As a counter to this, Craig makes the following suggestion: If God should shatter all of my illusions, remove all of my ignorance, resolve all of the ambiguities I face, and impart to me an absolutely

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unable to unite both portraits into a believable whole in no way diminishes his artistic achievement.

clear revelation of himself, then that too would effectively remove any freedom I might have to reject him. Writes Craig: "It may well be the case that for some people the degree of revelation that would have to be imparted to them in order to secure their salvation would have to be so stunning that their freedom to disobey would be effectively removed . . . ."[5] But if Craig is right about that, then the very idea of someone freely rejecting the true God is simply incoherent. If both ignorance and the removal of ignorance are incompatible with the relevant kind of freedom, then there can be no freedom of the relevant kind. So it seems that Craig is impaled on the horns of a dilemma. Either I am fully informed concerning who God is and the consequences of rejecting him, or I am not. If I am not fully informed, then I am in no position to reject the true God, as we have seen; and if I am fully informed, then (as Craig himself insists) I am incapable of rejecting God *freely*. So in neither case am I free to reject the true God.

Perhaps this is but one more reason why, according to Paul, we do not choose our own destiny, which "depends not upon human will or exertion, but upon God who shows mercy" (Romans 9:16). The Arminians rightly stress the importance of human freedom and choice, of choosing "this day whom you will serve" (Joshua 24:15). But they are quite mistaken, I believe, in their assumption that we choose our eternal destiny; we no more choose that than we choose to come into existence in the first place. We choose instead which path we shall follow today, and it is God who determines where that path ultimately leads. As the proverb says, "The human mind plans the way, but the Lord directs the steps" (Proverbs 16:9).

As we saw in Chapter 5, moreover, Pauline theology provides a clear picture of how the end of reconciliation could be foreordained even though each of us is genuinely free to choose which path we shall follow in the present. The picture is this: The more one freely rebels against God in the present, the more miserable and tormented one eventually becomes, and the more miserable and tormented one becomes, the more incentive one has to repent of one's sin and to give up one's rebellious attitudes. But more than that, the

[5]"Talbott's Universalism," p. 300.

consequences of sin are themselves a means of revelation; they reveal the true meaning of separation and enable us to see through the very self-deception that makes evil choices possible in the first place. We may think that we can promote our own interest at the expense of others or that our selfish attitudes are compatible with enduring happiness, but we cannot act upon such an illusion, at least not for a long period of time, without shattering it to pieces. So in that sense, all paths have the same destination, the end of reconciliation, but some are longer and windier than others. Because our choice of paths in the present is genuinely free, we are morally responsible for that choice; but because no illusion can endure forever, the end is foreordained. As Paul himself puts it: We are all predestined to be conformed to the image of Christ (see Romans 8:29); that part is a matter of grace, not human will or effort.

(ii) Irreparable Harm and the Limits of Permissible Freedom

We have seen so far that the idea of someone freely rejecting God forever—of someone rejecting the true God, as opposed to a caricature of God—is deeply incoherent. I shall now argue further that, even if there were a coherent motive for such a choice, a perfectly loving God would never grant his loved ones the freedom to make it; his love would require him to prevent any choice that would, in the end, undermine the very possibility of supreme happiness not only in the one making the choice, but in everyone else as well.

The issue here concerns the limits of permissible freedom. Consider first the two kinds of conditions under which we humans feel justified in interfering with the freedom of others. We feel justified, on the one hand, in preventing one person from doing irreparable harm—or more accurately, harm that no *human being* can repair—to another; a loving father may thus report his own son to the police in an effort to prevent the son from committing murder. We also feel justified, on the other hand, in preventing our loved ones from doing irreparable harm to themselves; a loving

father may thus physically overpower his daughter in an effort to prevent her from committing suicide.

Now one might, it is true, draw a number of faulty inferences from such examples as these, in part because we humans tend to think of irreparable harm within the context of a very limited time-frame, a person's life on earth. Harm that no human being can repair may nonetheless be harm that God can repair. It does not follow, therefore, that a loving God, whose goal is the reconciliation of the world, would prevent every suicide and every murder; it follows only that he would prevent every harm that not even omnipotence can repair, and neither suicide nor murder is necessarily an instance of that *kind* of harm. So even if a loving God could sometimes permit murder, he could never permit one person to annihilate the soul of another or to destroy the very possibility of future happiness in another; and even if he could sometimes permit suicide, he could never permit his loved ones to destroy the very possibility of future happiness in themselves either. Just as loving parents are prepared to restrict the freedom of the children they love, so a loving God would be prepared to restrict the freedom of the children he loves, at least in cases of truly irreparable harm. The only difference is that God deals with a much larger picture than that with which human parents are immediately concerned.

So the idea of *irreparable* harm—that is, of harm that not even omnipotence can repair—is critical; and if one fails to distinguish between that kind of harm and others, then one will miss the whole point of the above argument. Jonathan Kvanvig, for example, clearly misses the point when he writes: "Contrary to what Talbott claims, freedom is sometimes more important than the harm that might result from the exercise of freedom."[6] For of course I have never claimed otherwise. I have claimed only that a *certain kind of harm*—that is, harm that omnipotence can neither repair nor compensate for—would outweigh not only the value of freedom but also the value of any conceivable good that God might bring forth from the misuse of freedom. Suppose, by way of illustration, that

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[6]Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *The Problem of Hell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 85.

God should know the following: If he should grant me the freedom to annihilate the soul of my brother and I should exercise that freedom, then thousands of people who otherwise would not freely repent of their sin would, under these conditions, freely repent of their sin. We might imagine that the horror of such irreparable harm would induce these people to re-examine their own lives. Even so, God could not permit such irreparable harm to occur; an injustice such as I have just imagined—the complete annihilation of an innocent person—would outweigh any conceivable good that God might use it to achieve. In the end, it would also undermine the possibility of supreme happiness in everyone else, as we have seen in previous chapters (especially Chapters 8 and 9).

And similarly for the kind of case that William Craig asks us to imagine. Even if someone's damnation *would* induce thousands of people to repent of their sin freely, God could not permit, I contend, such irreparable harm to befall one of his loved ones. Some will no doubt want to drive a wedge between the kind of case where one does irreparable harm to *oneself*, perhaps by freely choosing to damn oneself, and the kind where one does irreparable harm to *another*. That seems to be what Jonathan Kvanvig has in mind when he first concedes that one might justifiably interfere with someone's freedom to commit murder, and then goes on to criticize my example of suicide in the following way:

> Talbott has not . . . correctly analyzed the case of suicide. Sometimes interference in cases of suicide is justified, but it is not justified solely because suicide causes irreparable harm. . . Rather, what justifies our intervention is the fact that the person will come, or will likely come, to see that his choice of death was not what he really wanted or would have wanted if he had reflected carefully. Alternatively, if we are fully convinced and it is true that the person is competent to choose, is rational in choosing suicide, and cannot be persuaded otherwise, then, from a purely moral point of view, interference is not justified (except insofar as

> the suicide has consequences for other persons such as dependent children).[7]

But this criticism rests upon a pair of misunderstandings. Observe first that Kvanvig imagines a case where a "person is competent to choose" and "is rational in choosing suicide." Such a case is not difficult to imagine. If a person suffers from a terminal illness such as Alzheimer's disease, or suffers persistent and excruciating pain for which there is no treatment, or possesses information that an enemy could use against comrades in arms, then it may be quite rational to see suicide as the lesser of two evils. In at least some such cases as these, those who love the suicide victim may view the suicide with relief or even as a noble act; and in all such cases God would retain the power to re-unite the suicide victim with his or her loved ones at some future time. The relevant cases for our purposes, however, are those in which the suicide is quite irrational, even as a fully informed decision to reject God would be quite irrational. In these cases, we can reason in one of two ways: We might insist that the decision to commit suicide, being irrational, is not truly free; or if we grant, for the sake of argument, that the decision is free despite its irrational character, we might then insist upon an obligation to interfere, where possible, with the freedom of others to harm themselves in a way that is both irrational and irreparable.

Observe second Kvanvig's final proviso concerning the consequences of a suicide for other persons. In conceding the relevance of such consequences, he in effect concedes the very argument he has set out to criticize. For a person is not an isolated monad whose happiness, or lack of same, is independent of other persons; as we have seen repeatedly, it is simply not possible that one should destroy every chance of future happiness in oneself without, at the same time, undermining the future happiness of others as well. If I truly love my daughter as myself, for example, then her damnation would be an intolerable loss to me and would undermine my own happiness every bit as much as it would undermine hers. One simply cannot drive a wedge, therefore, between the kind of case

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[7] *Ibid.*, p. 84.

where one does irreparable harm to oneself and the kind where one does irreparable harm to others. And if a loving God must prevent the latter, as Kvanvig himself concedes, then he must prevent the former as well.

This argument seems to me utterly decisive. But in an heroic effort to defeat it and to defend an Arminian conception of hell, Craig insists that God could indeed damn some without harming others; he could do so by foisting upon the redeemed an elaborate deception, thereby maintaining them in a state of blissful ignorance. For it is possible, Craig suggests, that God simply "obliterates" from the minds of the redeemed "any knowledge of lost persons so that they experience no pangs of remorse for them."[8] Here the suggestion seems to be that God performs a kind of lobotomy on the redeemed, expunging from their minds any memory that might interfere with their future happiness. In the case of those whose entire family is lost, this would mean, I presume, that God expunges from their minds every memory of parents and other family members; and I doubt that Craig has any conception of how much of a person's mind that would likely destroy. He is right, of course, about one thing:

> We can all think of cases in which we shield persons from knowledge which would be painful for them and which they do not need to have, and, far from doing something immoral, we are, in so sparing them, exemplifying the virtue of mercy.[9]

But withholding information for a season is one thing; obliterating part of a mind forever is something else altogether. The latter reduces God's victory over sin to a cruel hoax; his hollow "victory" consists not in his making things right, but in his concealing from the redeemed just how bad things really are. Though utterly defeated in the end, God simply conceals from us the enormity of the defeat.

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[8]"Talbott's Universalism," p. 306.

[9]*Ibid*.

Nor has Craig analyzed correctly the conditions under which it is appropriate to withhold painful information from a loved one. In every case, I would suggest, this is either a concession to someone's poor physical health—as when a doctor conceals from a woman, critically injured in a traffic accident, that her child was killed—or a concession to someone's psychological or spiritual immaturity. The blissful ignorance that results from such deception is not only not supremely worthwhile; it is even inferior to the experience of misery under certain conditions. For no one who truly loves another would want to remain blissfully ignorant of the other's fate, however painful the knowledge of such a fate might be. No loving father, for example—not even one whose daughter endures a brutal rape and murder and not even one whose son commits suicide—would want to remain blissfully ignorant about what happened. It is far better, he would judge, to know the truth of the matter; he might even take elaborate steps to discover the truth. And the idea that he might prefer to have all memory of a son or a daughter obliterated from his mind—that he might prefer this over his anguish—is simply preposterous.

On Craig's account, at any rate, God is the author not merely of a *temporary* deception, but of an *everlasting* deception as well. Now I have no doubt concerning this: In order to meet the needs of his loved ones, God sometimes does employ a temporary deception as a means of redemption; as Paul himself teaches, God sometimes deceives those who are unready for the truth in order to bring them ultimately to the truth (see Chapter 5). But here the goal of the deception is to prepare people for an ultimate unveiling of truth; as Jesus said, we shall know the truth, and the truth (not an elaborate deception) shall set us free (John 8:32). If the truth itself (and not an elaborate deception) is what ultimately sets us free, then that tells us something important about the nature of the truth. It tells us that the truth about the universe is ultimately glorious, not tragic; it is something that God can gladly reveal to us, not something that he must conceal from us, lest it should undermine our happiness in the end. But even if the truth about the universe were ultimately tragic, it would be far better, I believe, for God to reveal to us the full dimensions of the tragedy. For even then we might

find *some* consolation in sharing our eternal grief with others; and from love's point of view, honest grief is far better than blissful ignorance.

(iii) Free Will and the Misery of Hell

The theological and philosophical arguments, just considered, for preferring the universalist picture of a triumphant God over the Arminian picture of a defeated God are enough, I believe, to decide the issue in favor of the former. For those Christians who look to the New Testament for guidance and inspiration, however, I also want to point out how far removed the Arminian picture is from anything we encounter in the New Testament. In Part II of this essay, I tried to set forth the positive case for a universalist reading of the New Testament. Let us now examine, more specifically, the Arminian understanding of hell in light of the New Testament teaching.

As we have seen, the fundamental Arminian idea is that created persons are free to reject God forever (and therefore to defeat his love forever); and as we have also seen, the fundamental difficulty here is to discern any conceivable motive for a fully informed decision to reject God. Beyond that, there is this additional difficulty: The misery of hell, as depicted in the New Testament, would seem to provide the strongest conceivable motive for leaving the place *if* one were truly free to do so. According to C. S. Lewis and a host of others, God does not reject the damned; the damned, being successful rebels to the end, reject him. Hence, the gates of hell are closed from the inside; that is, though the inhabitants of hell are indeed free to repent and to vacate this place at any time they choose, at least some of them will never choose to do so. But here we must ask once again: How could anyone who is rational enough to be morally responsible for his or her actions prefer the misery of hell over the joys of reconciliation? What motive, what greater good from the perspective of the damned, would make the miseries of hell seem like the lesser of two evils?

A popular strategy among Arminians at this point is to suggest that, from the perspective of the damned, hell really isn't that bad a

place to be; at the very least, it is apt to seem far superior to heaven. The first step is to challenge the traditional image of a fiery furnace and torture chamber as overly barbaric and superstitious; the second is to suggest a motive for preferring hell over heaven. According to Jerry Walls, for example, "hell may afford its inhabitants a kind of gratification which motivates the choice to go there."[10] More than that, the damned may even experience a kind of illusory happiness.

> Those in hell may be almost happy, and this may explain why they insist on staying there. They do not, of course, experience even a shred of genuine happiness. But perhaps they experience a certain perverse sense of satisfaction, a distorted sort of pleasure.[11]

Though Walls denies that the damned are *genuinely* happy, he does not deny that they *believe* themselves to be happy; to the contrary, he insists that, for some lost souls, the illusion of happiness may endure forever and with sufficient conviction to explain why they never leave their preferred abode in hell.

> Those who prefer hell to heaven have convinced themselves that it is better. In their desire to justify their choice of evil, they have persuaded themselves that whatever satisfaction they experience from evil is superior to the joy which God offers.[12]

This line of thought leads naturally to a conclusion that Eleanore Stump has explicitly defended:[13] Because God knows that he can do nothing, short of removing their freedom, to induce the damned to repent, he simply employs his omnipotent power to make them as comfortable as possible and to prevent them from harming

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[10]Jerry L. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), p. 128.

[11]*Ibid*., p. 126.

[12]*Ibid*., p. 129.

[13]See "Dante's Hell, Aquinas' Moral Theory, and the Love of God," *The Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, June, 1986.

others. But this entire line of thought also seems far removed from the images and language of the New Testament, which are far more suggestive of a chamber of horrors than many would like to believe. Is it not precisely the New Testament that pictures hell as a "furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 13:42) and where people will pray for the mountains to fall upon them (Revelation 6:16)? In the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46), Jesus alludes not to a freely embraced condition, but to a form of *punishment*, as we have seen; and in some cases at least, the punishment will come as a complete surprise. And in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:16-31), the rich man wants to warn his five brothers "so that they will not also come into this place of torment" (16:28). As depicted in the New Testament, in other words, hell is not the kind of place that even the wicked would freely choose to inhabit forever. For it really is a place of unbearable suffering and torment.

We can appreciate, of course, why the Arminians might want to water down the New Testament picture of hell as a place of unbearable suffering; an eternity of such suffering would be, after all, utterly pointless, and a god who would actually inflict such suffering forever would be unspeakably barbaric. But here, I would suggest, the universalists are in a far better position to accept the images and the language of the New Testament than the Arminians are. For the universalists can regard hell as a genuine form of punishment or correction, rather than a freely embraced condition; hence, they have no need to water down the New Testament image of unbearable suffering. Perhaps a period of such suffering is just what a Hitler or a Goebbels needs; and for that matter, perhaps it is just what they began to experience during the final days of their earthly life. So if, as John Hick has suggested,[14] hell is but the continuation of the purgatorial sufferings of this life, then we have no reason to reject the language of unbearable suffering. Nor even to reject the image of a fiery furnace, which is as good a representation of God's purifying love as there is. When people

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[14]See John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion,* 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1963), p.125.

deceive themselves and beat their heads against the hard rock of reality, they suffer and sometimes suffer unbearably. They may not *choose* to suffer any more than Hitler chose to be defeated in battle, but their suffering is an inevitable consequence of their misguided actions. And in the end, the unbearable nature of their suffering will shatter their illusions and reveal to them the error of their ways.

One reason that some Arminians reject the New Testament language of unbearable suffering and the image of a fiery furnace is this: If the consequences of living a sinful life include unbearable suffering, at least over the long run, and if unbearable suffering will, in the end, successfully shatter those illusions that make a sinful life possible in the first place, then no one is truly *free* to live in sin forever. As Jerry Walls puts it, "no finite being can continue endlessly to choose greater and greater misery for himself. So in the end, the knowledge which makes impossible the choice of damnation is not acquired through free choice, but is itself impossible to avoid."[15] That is correct. But consider the alternative. The only alternative would be for God to protect people forever from the consequences of living a sinful life and to do so for the purpose of sustaining the illusions that make such a life possible. That, it seems to me, would be incompatible with God's moral character. Suppose that I should act upon the illusion that I can benefit myself at the expense of others. If God should protect me forever from the bitter consequences of such actions, then in a very real sense I would not be acting upon an illusion at all. I would be right on the most important matter. For I could indeed act selfishly with a degree of impunity. It is as if I should bring my hand near to a flame and God should protect me from the excruciating pain of the flame. In that event, my belief that I could so act with impunity would not be an illusion.

The fact is, moreover, people have their illusions shattered against their will all the time. A man who, upon entering into an adulterous affair, makes a total mess of his life may in time learn a hard lesson, one that he in no way *chose* to learn; and having

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[15]Walls, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

learned his lesson, he may be utterly unwilling to repeat the experiment. And similarly for Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus: As I read the account in *Acts*, Paul in no way *chose* to have his illusions shattered; and neither did he choose to receive a revelation that would in a very brief time transform this "chief of sinners" into a Christian missionary. Indeed, his own experience on the road to Damascus probably explains why Paul consistently regarded redemption as no less a work of God than creation itself. But Pauline theology in no way excludes human freedom and moral responsibility altogether. For even if redemption is a work of God, free choice and the correction of wrong choices could still be, as I believe it is, an essential part of the process whereby God reveals his true nature to us and teaches us the (occasionally hard) lessons we need to learn as we travel the road to redemption.