Talbott vs. Piper

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On Predestination, Reprobation, and the Love of God
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On Predestination, Reprobation, and the love of God
A polemic
Thomas Talbott

My concern in this article is with a form of theological blasphemy, the Reformed doctrines of predestination and reprobation; and here I use the term "blasphemy" in a very exact sense. The Reformed doctrine of predestination-with or without its corollary, the doctrine of reprobation-is a form of blasphemy in this sense: those who accept the doctrine inevitably attribute Satanic qualities to God; they inevitably confuse the Father in heaven, whose essence is perfect love, with the Devil himself. But it is also a respectable form of blasphemy in that, as is well known, this doctrine can be found in many of the confessional statements associated with the Protestant Reformation and remains part of the official doctrine of many mainline churches, including my own church, the Christian Reformed Church. That this should be so is, for me, one of the great mysteries of church history-though no greater, perhaps, than the mystery of why the Jews, during New Testament times, should have found it so difficult to believe that God's grace also extends to the Gentiles. It seems that a kind of exclusiveness in theology, the temptation to believe that God's grace extends to it but not to them, to Jews but not to Gentiles, to Christians but not to non-Christians, is one of the more intractable forms that original sin takes in our lives. Indeed, as I shall argue, the Reformed doctrine of predestination is an expression of human rebelliousness; for it is simply not possible, not psychologically possible, not even logically possible, to love God with all one's heart, to love one's neighbor as oneself, and simultaneously to believe the Reformed doctrine of predestination. Precisely what is the Reformed doctrine of predestination? John Calvin defines the term "predestination" as follows:

We call predestination God's eternal decree, by which he determined with himself what he willed to become of each man. For all are not created in equal condition: rather, eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others. Therefore, as any man has been created to one or the other of these ends, we speak of him as predestined to lite or to death. (Institutes, iii, xxi, 5)

Now the first point to make about this definition is that it at least sounds deterministic, and of course many theologians have in fact interpreted the doctrine of predestination as a deterministic theory. Indeed many theologians have used the terms "predestination" and "predetermination" interchangeably-as, for instance, Louis Berkhof:

Predestination includes two parts, namely election and reprobation, the predetermination (my emphasis] of both the good and the wicked to their final end, and to certain proximate ends which are instrumental in the realization of their final destiny. (Systematic Theology, p. 113)

And in some cases Calvin's view has been defended

The God of Calvin is a God who chooses not to redeem some he could have redeemed.

precisely by arguing for determinism and against free will. ***Furthermore, if we admit free will in the sense that the absolute determination of events is placed in the hands of man, we might as well spell it with a capital F and a capital W; for then man has become like God-a first cause, an original spring of action-and we have as many semi-gods as we have free wills. Unless the sovereignty of God be given up, we cannot allow this independence to man. (Loraine Boettner, The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination, p. 222)***

It is not surprising, therefore, that so many have argued that predestination is quite incompatible with human responsibility, but I shall not insist upon that criticism here. Nor shall I have much to say, in what follows, about the free will/determinism controversy or even about the problem of reconciling human responsibility with God's sovereignty (which, properly understood, is a moral and legal concept anyway, not a deterministic one). I shall have little to say about these matters because I am now convinced that the absolutely diabolical character of the Reformed doctrine of predestination cannot be isolated by focusing on such worn-out controversies as these. It is by no means obvious, after all, that all attempts to reconcile determinism with moral responsibility are bound to be mistaken. For the record, I am a libertarian, to be sure, though not quite as confident a libertarian as I once was. But as a libertarian, I am forced to admit that many reasonable persons, including perhaps even a majority of contemporary philosophers, have found some form of compatibilism just as convincing as, say, Jonathan Edwards did. So if one wants to argue, as I do, that no reasonable person who fully understands the Reformed doctrine of predestination could possibly accept it, then a very compelling argument is required-one much more compelling, surely, than is even possible when dealing with the free will/determinism controversy and the knotty conceptual problems connected with it

Accordingly, I am now inclined simply to let the chips fall where they may with respect to the free willl determinism controversy and to focus instead on what seems to me a much more fundamental issue: whether there are persons whom God could redeem but chooses for one reason or another not to redeem.' Here it is noteworthy that theologians in the Reformed tradition have typically distinguished between two versions of the doctrine of predestination: one that includes reprobation and one that does not. According to the first version, the reprobation (that is, the blinding, hardening, etc.) of the wicked, no less than the purification of the righteous, is viewed as an explicit act of God; but according to the second, only the purification of the righteous

is viewed as an act of God, not the reprobation of the wicked. In general-and this is a very broad generalization-Reformed theologians of a more philosophical bent, because of their respect for the requirements of logical consistency, have tended to opt for the first version, while those of a less philosophical bent, because of their respect for the moral character of God, have tended to opt for the second version. What is common to both versions, however, is the claim that God has bestowed a special grace upon those whom he has chosen to redeem, and it is this special grace that makes their redemption possible. Indeed, the whole point of the doctrine of predestination (in any form that excludes universalism) is that God could have chosen a different set of persons for redemption; that his decision to redeem one person and to pass over another is a matter of his own "good pleasure" and hence does not depend on any characteristic, or any act of will, of the persons themselves. The whole point of the trifle of predestination, therefore, is that there are persons whom God could redeem but whom, for one reason or another, he chooses not to redeem and that is the point I want to emphasize here. The God of Calvin and many of the Protestant Reformers is precisely a God who chooses not to redeem some of those whom he could have redeemed.

In what, follows I want to examine more closely this remarkable claim of Reformed theology. I shall divide the discussion into two sections. In the first, I shall draw out some unhappy implications that such a claim has for theology; then, in the second, I shall try to show how these implications give rise to a purely logical paradox, and I shall defend my harsh judgment that no one who loves God with all his heart and his neighbor as himself could possibly believe the Reformed doctrine of predestination.

Consider now what follows from the claim that God chooses not to redeem some of those he could have redeemed. If, God forbid, there are such unfortunate persons, if there are some who are not elect, it immediately follows that they are not an object of God's eternal love; and one Reformed theologian who has seen this quite clearly is Herman Hoeksema, who forthrightly admits that the nonelect are an object of God's "eternal hatred." Nor is it possible in any way to soften this implication. Certainly divine love is sometimes expressed as wrath, as anger, as judgment, perhaps even as a judicial hardening of the heart; certainly the Bible in no way permits us to be sentimental about the concept of love. God's love as portrayed in the Bible is what might be called a hard-nosed kind of love; to use C. S. Lewis's happy expression, divine mercy is a severe mercy. But wrath, anger, judgment, and the judicial hardening of a heart can be seen as an expression of love only insofar as they serve a redemptive purpose. If the nonelect not only experience God's wrath and judgment but are also rejected altogether, eternally rejected and subject to eternal punishment, punishment that serves no further redemptive purpose; and if God, by working in their hearts, could have brought them to repentance and life, could have redeemed them just as he does in the case of the elect, but instead bars them forever from the joys of reconciliation-if these things are true, then no sense at all can be made of the claim that the nonelect are an object of God's eternal love. For what could the concept of love possibly amount to here? If love (or charity) is to have any meaning at all, if it is to be distinguishable at all from its contrary hatred, then one point is surely obvious: a person whose intention is the ultimate harm of another simply cannot be motivated by love for the other; and if punishment in hell, however just, serves no further redemptive purpose, another point is equally obvious: in inflicting such punishment upon a person, God's intention is the ultimate harm of that person. It makes no more sense, surely, to say of the nonelect that they are an object of God's eternai love than it does to say of the elect that they are an object of God's eternal hatred. In either case, words simply lose their meaning. So one implication of the Reformed doctrine of predestination is that some persons are not an object of God's eternal love, and this implication in turn has a number of very awkward consequences for theology. Given some of the moral injunctions in Scripture, it follows that

(1) God himself fails to love some of the very persons whom he has commanded us to love and also that
(2) The very God who commands us to love our enemies fails to love his enemies.

Now I certainly have no logical proof that the Creator would never command us to love those whom he himself refuses to love, but it hardly makes good psychological sense. At the very least, such commands would suggest that the Creator is playing a rather vicious game with us, pretending to love those he really doesn't love; that he is very much akin to Descartes' Malevolent Demon. So these consequences, (1) and (2) above, are, for me, enough to discredit the Reformed doctrine of predestination, quite apart from any other consideration. But even more awkward-indeed utterly disastrous for theology-is the consequence that

(3) Loving-kindness is not an essential property of God, not part of his essence;

and this follows from the very nature of an essential property. If omniscience is an essential property of God, then it is logically impossible for God to hold a mistaken belief; if justice is an essential property of God, then it is logically impossible for him to act in an unjust way; and similarly, if loving-kindness is an essential property of God, then it is logically impossible for him to act in an unloving way. So if the nonelect are not an

Would the Creator command us to love those whom he himself refuses to love?

object of God's eternal love, if God ultimately acts towards them in an unloving way, then loving-kindness is not an essential property of God and some alternative explanation must be found for the claim, in I John 4:16, that "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him." But worse yet, not only is

loving-kindness not an essential property of God, it seems in fact that

(4) God is less loving, less kind, and less merciful than many human beings;

for example, that he is less loving than the Apostle Paul. For consider Paul's attitude towards his unbelieving kinsmen:

I am speaking the truth in Christ, I am not lying; my conscience bearing witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race. (Rom. 9:1-3).

Paul's love for his unbelieving kinsmen is so great that, if he had the power and if it would really do some good, he would cut himself off from Christ for their sake. Paul's love is that great, but God, we are supposed to believe, simply passes them over, or at least passes some of them over. Paul's love for them is evidently greater than God's. Indeed, if God has no love at all for the nonelect, as the doctrine of predestination implies, then Paul's love for his unbelieving kinsmen, at least those who are not elect, is infinitely greater than God's. Indeed, the real problem, as far as the nonelect are concerned, is what might be called the problem of good, just the opposite of the well-known problem of evil. For if God has no love at all for the nonelect, one is inclined to ask why he has permitted them to experience so much that is good in life. Perhaps, however, the solution to this problem is exactly parallel to the solution to the problem of evil, as far as the elect are concerned. For perhaps the good that the nonelect experience in this life is just what enables them to appreciate more fully the misery and torment prepared for them in the next!

Can we love God with all our heart :if God does not love some of our own loved ones?

II

Now these four implications-that God himself fails to love some of the very persons whom he has commanded us to love; that the very God who commands us to love our enemies fails to love his enemies; that loving-kindness is not an essential property of God; and that Paul's own love for his unbelieving kinsmen, his love for the world, if you will, is greater than God's-these four implications should be quite enough to reduce the Reformed doctrine of predestination to a complete absurdity. But there is, I believe, a stronger argument still to be made, a purely logical paradox that the doctrine of predestination generates. Let us pose a question to ourselves about our own psychological makeup: Would it be possible to love God with all our heart, to continue loving God with all our heart, if it should turn out that God does not love some of our own loved ones? For me, this question is easy to answer: It is not possible. If there be a single loved one of mine whom God could redeem but doesn't-if it should turn out, for instance, that God fails to love mv own little daughter-then I can think of no better response than a paraphrase of John Stuart Mill: "I will not worship such a God, and if such a God can send me to hell for not so worshiping him, then to hell I will go." Of course, this may mean simply that I am not one of the elect, or, if I am one of the elect, that God will someday transform my heart so that I can be just as calloused towards my loved ones as he is. But consider, in this connection, the mother who must contemplate the possibility that her rebellious daughter, whom she is so worried about, just might not be one of the elect. Of course she can never know for certain that God has already rejected her daughter, but neither can she rule out that possibility. And if God has indeed passed over her daughter, how can the mother possibly believe that he is worthy of her worship? Here it is perhaps illuminating that so many in the Reformed tradition have worried so much about their own election and have worried so little about their loved ones. In this regard their attitude is quite different from that of the Apostle Paul; and in this regard, they illustrate nicely the selfishness built right into the very heart of Calvinistic theology.

But the difficulty in worshipping a God who refuses to love our own loved ones is not merely psychological in nature; for if worship logically requires love and respect, then there is a purely logical paradox here. To see this, one need only consider some of the ways in which love of God must be different from love of fellow man. Notice first that if God is self-sufficient, then there is an important sense in which we simply can't harm him, or conversely promote his interest-except, perhaps, indirectly by harming other created beings, or promoting their interest. One might, to be sure, have a view that because God is perfectly loving, every sin harms him in this sense: it is infinitely painful to him. But surely my actions don't affect God in the direct sort of way that they might, say, my daughter; and this difference has an important consequence for our concept of love. Because my actions do affect my daughter, because I can even encourage her to change for the better, my love for her in no way requires that I approve of everything about her as she is, only that I seek to promote her true interest. And similar remarks could be made about God's love for us: it in no way requires that he approve of us as we are, only that he seek to perfect us, so that the time will come when he can approve of us as we are. In the case of our love of God, however, there can be no question of our trying to perfect him, or of our encouraging him to improve his character; so in this case, our love logically requires absolute respect, absolute approval of everything about him. That, then, is one important difference between love of God and love of fellow man: love of God, unlike love of fellow man, requires absolute approval of, and absolute respect for, God himself. Another difference is that an essential

ingredient of love of God is heartfelt gratitude, gratitude to God for what he has done for us. My love for my daughter need not, to be sure, imply any gratitude towards her at all (though it no doubt does imply gratitude towards God for the gift of her presence). But love of God surely does imply heartfelt gratitude; as the Bible insists, "We love Him because He first loved us." Love of God, in the form of gratitude, is precisely our proper response to God's love for us.

And now for the paradox. If perfect love of God implies absolute approval of him, absolute respect for him, and if it also implies heartfelt gratitude in response to what he has done for us, then not only is it in fact true that we love him because he first loved us: it is logically impossible to love him unless he first loves us. I simply can't love God unless he first loves me. But suppose now that I also love my neighbor as myself-or, better yet, that I love my daughter as myself. It follows, surely, that God simply can't love me without also loving my daughter; his failure to love someone whom I love as myself is surely inconsistent with any genuine love for me. So if God doesn't love my daughter, then-he doesn't love me, and if he doesn't love me, then I can't love him. Moreover, even if that point be rejected, even if God could love me without loving my daughter whom I love, I surely can't love God unless I at least believe that he loves my daughter. For consider again the case of Paul and his unbelieving kinsmen. Were Paul a selfish individual, to the extent that his love for his kinsmen is less than perfect, he might indeed be grateful that God would love him, and might continue to approve of God even if God refuses to promote the interest of his unbelieving kinsmen. But the, very fact that he would still be filled with gratitude towards God and still continue to approve of God would precisely demonstrate that his love for his kinsmen is less than perfect. For how could Paul possibly love his kinsmen, desire the good for them, and simultaneously approve of a God who refuses to promote the good for them? The whole thing is an impossibility. Either Paul's love for his kinsmen is less than perfect, or his love of God is less than perfect, or he simply can't believe that God chooses not to love his unbelieving kinsmen.

That is why I have said that the Reformed doctrine of predestination is an expression of human rebelliousness. Only a person who fails to love his neighbor as himself could possibly believe, on the basis of an alleged revelation or on any other basis, that this doctrine is in fact true. Now I must confess at this point to a degree of embarrassment about such a moralistic conclusion; but the fact is that some beliefs can be understood only as an expression of sin. Consider the racist who seriously believes that blacks are less than fully human and must therefore be treated as an inferior species. If the racist is a Southern gentleman, he may be very gracious, very loving towards his family and friends, and a person of many good qualities; but if he is so much as capable of holding his racist ideology, then he simply can't love his black neighbor as himself and therefore does have a moral defect. Perhaps all of us, when our love for others is finally perfected, will find that we are required to give up some of our most deeply engrained beliefs. Of this much, I am convinced: When the racist learns, as we all must, to love his neighbor as himself, he will then discover that he is no longer a racist; and similarly, when the Calvinist learns to love his neighbor as himself-when John Calvin learns to love Servetus even as he loves himself-he will then discover that he is no longer a Calvinist.

Readers respond
Tilting with Talbott,
Vancouver

Thomas Talbott's article "On predestination, reprobation, and the love of God" (RJ, Feb.) is noteworthy for its almost entire lack of biblical reference (7 John 4:16 and Romans 9:1-3 being the only exceptions). Predestinarians have been accused of pushing logic beyond the limits of biblical revelation. judged by this standard, Talbott falls into exactly the same trap as those whose views he terms "blasphemy." His entire argument is based on a philosophical and psychological understanding of the nature of God, often measured by the yardstick of our own self understanding (as in the father/daughter, mother/daughter relationships). Witness the following quotes:

"***I shall divide the discussion into two sections. In the first, I shall draw out some unhappy implications that such a claim [that God does not redeem some of those he could have redeemed] has for theology; then in the second place, I shall try to show how these implications give rise to a purely logical paradox, and I shall defend my harsh judgment that no one who loves God with all his heart and his neighbor as himself, could possibly believe the Reformed doctrine of predestination.***"

"***But the difficulty in worshipping a God who refuses to love our own loved ones is not merely psychological in nature; for if worship logically requires love and respect, then there is a purely logical paradox here.***"

The dangers of building a doctrine of God upon pure logic should be evident both from the history of scholasticism and the Calvinist/Arminian controversy. What could one not do, for instance, with one of the possibilities at least implied in Talbott's article, that of a God who wishes to but cannot save all men because of properties within his creatures?

Reformed theology at its best has always recognized a tension, unresolvable by the human mind, of differing biblical data such as God's ability to love and hate simultaneously, divine election and human responsibility, etc. It is the maintenance of this biblical balance without attempts to reconcile or disprove either or both

elements of the tension that marks fidelity to the Scriptures and to the God of the Bible whose judgments are unsearchable and whose ways are unfathomable (Rom. 11:33; cf. Deut. 29:29). No amount of philosophical reasoning will do away with such biblical passages as Prov. 16:4; Matt. 11:25, 26; 13:11; Luke 2:34; John 9:39; Rom. 9:13, 17, 22; 2 Cor. 2:14, 15; not to mention the more "positive" statements of predestination in Rom. 8:28; Eph. 1:4, 5, 11; 2 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 1:9; and 1 Peter 2:8. Any serious study of predestination and reprobation must deal with the exegesis of these passages. There is nothing really new in Talbott's argument. It is the kind of attack based on emotion and logic (albeit of a more sophisticated kind) that one would expect of a Fundamentalist in the tradition of the late John R. Rice. It is not the kind of careful scholarship one would expect in a Reformed journal. Certainly, it does nothing to advance the cause of truth.

J. Cameron Fraser, Hobart, Ind.

Thomas Talbott apparently describes a God he has created, not the God revealing himself in history according to Scripture. The God of revelation, says Scripture, is the God whose love in his only Son is particular, not a philosophical abstraction. Agape is God's "in spite of" love for each of those whom, among the unworthy and unlovable, he chooses to be his graciously adopted children in his redeeming Son. The God of revelation wills Adam's and Eve's fall, foreordains Cain to kill Abel, hardens Pharaoh's heart, decrees Judas to betray Jesus, arranges such things as Hitler and the holocaust, cancer and the threat of nuclear destruction-yes, employs Satan and his minions-in order to bring honor and glory to his Name as the Holy One, the One like no other in his "being, wisdom, and power, in his holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." Only against the dark background of evil, sin, and death can we appreciate life, love, and good. Only in the Creator's becoming our Saving Brother-only in crucified and risen Jesus-can we know God as love, because we stand in awe of him as holy. God requires and deserves more than our approval and respect: He evokes our awe. We must not presume to judge the judge. We cannot decide for the Decider. Until we reverently appreciate Romans 9:14, 11:36, we cannot understand Paul's words in 9:3. Instead of following the reasoning of Talbott and the medieval schoolmen, we need to take God at his Word and regard him with awe. We properly and effectively love our neighbor only with God's agape love: "He like me deserves to be damned, but if he is one of the elect, the Holy Spirit will enable him to take God at his Word in crucified and risen Christ. If I love the Lord, and I love my neighbor, I will share with him particularly this awesome, undeserved love. But he, as I am, is in the hands of God."

-RichardW.Hudelson,SouthHolland,Ill.

Permit me to say a word in defense of Professor Talbott's charge that the Reformed doctrine of double predestination is a blasphemy (R/, Feb. 1983).

This is no defense of the truth of his charge. On the contrary, charging blasphemy, he blasphemes. But B. J. Brouwer before him has alleged blasphemy against the doctrine of predestination in the Canons of Dordt, to the synod of the Gereformeerde Kerken of the Netherlands; and the synod has responded that it is justifiable to "entertain and to publicize such objections as Dr. Brouwer brought against the passages in the Canons of Dordt" (see G. C. Berkouwer, A Half Century of Theology, pp. 104, 105). More importantly, if the God of the gospel is a God of universal love in Jesus Christ who desires the salvation of all sinners (if, that is to say, the God of the gospel is not the God of the Canons of Dordt), the doctrine of (double) predestination is, in fact, blasphemous. Professor Talbott's article is another warning to the Reformed community in North America that it will not forever, comfortably or uncomfortably, be able to~ keep one foot in creedal predestination and the other in universal grace.

--David Engelsma, Milwaukee

I would like to suggest a response to Thomas Talbott, though I am not sure I accept the response myself. Talbott ... argues that if we accept the doctrine of predestination, then we are committed to a paradox and to four propositions that many would find very unattractive. Importantly, in each case his argument is premised upon his holding that God does not love the nonelect. Only if God does not love all people are we committed, for example, to holding with Talbott that "God himself fails to love some of the very persons whom he has commanded us to love." Even if these four unattractive propositions really are abhorrent and even if Talbott's paradox is the worst sort (a real contradiction), I would like to suggest that his arguments are mistaken because his premise is false. God does love the nonelect.

Talbott knows as well as I, of course, that there is scriptural warrant for believing that God in fact does love the whole world. Talbott's difficulty, I take it, is in figuring out how God's loving a person is consistent with his not predestining ("saving") them. Talbott's reasoning seems to be something like this: If God loves some nonelect person, John, then God desires and seeks John's welfare as much as it is in God's power to do so. John's welfare is best served by God's saving him. Furthermore, it is in God's power to save John. Therefore, if God loves John, he will save John. But since God does not save John, he does not love him. I suggest that the second premise in the above argument, the premise which says "John's welfare is best served by God's saving him," is mistaken.

Consider what it is to have your welfare served. Suppose that you have just consumed three bottles of Coke and someone buys you another. Does it serve your welfare? Normally not, because another sixteen ounces of Coke is not good for you. But if you are homeless in a Wisconsin winter and someone offers you shelter, is your welfare served? Normally it is, because getting out of the cold is good for you. One's welfare is served, it seems, by something that is good for her. And, I would claim, something is good for a person to the degree that it respects and fulfills a person's nature. Now the most important feature of a person and his nature is a

person's freedom, his freedom to order his life as he chooses, to develop his abilities as he chooses, to enter into relationships as he chooses (each within limits, of course). "Loving" God, after all, is not really love unless it is free. If God is to desire and seek a person's welfare, therefore, he must respect and aid in the fulfillment of a person's freely choosing how his life is to be run. Consequently, the greatest love God can show a person consists not of God's saving that person, but of God's respecting a person's freedom, of God's "giving everyone what she wants." And in this world, unfortunately, not everyone really wants to love, serve, and enjoy God. Because God's love for each person is so great, therefore, he ultimately grants everyone the goals she has freely sought in this life, even if that goal is not the goal God had in mind for her. And, sadly, even the greatest of earth's pleasures when "enjoyed" for eternity and without God's grace is hellish. On this view, then, God does love all people, but God does not save all people. To save one who does not want to be saved would not be an act of love at all.

To complete the suggestion, I should bring this back to predestination. On this suggestion God offers his grace to all, loves all, and foresees the free choices each person will make about the orientation of his life. And those who hunger and thirst after righteousness he predestines to be filled. Nonelection, therefore, arises not from God's failure to love the same persons he commands us to love, but from the free choice of persons and from a depth of love in God so great that he respects persons and their free choices to the end, even to an unfortunate end. ***- Paul Faber***

How Does a Sovereign God Love?
a reply to Thomas Talbott by John Piper

Reading Thomas Talbott's article 'On predestination, reprobation, and the love of God' (R), (Feb.,1983) brought back a grievous experience I had when some of George MacDonald's sermons were published in 1976 (Creation in Christ). I had relished three of MacDonald's novels and the Anthology compiled by C.S. Lewis. Then I read this sentence, and the budding friendship collapsed: 'From all copies of Jonathan Edwards portrait of God, however faded by time, however softened by the use of less glaring pigments, I turn with loathing' (Creation in Christ, P. 81). I was stunned. George MacDonald loathed my God! Over the last fifteen years since I graduated from college all my biblical studies in seminary and graduate school have led me to love and worship the God of Jonathan Edwards.

So to read the words of Thomas Talbott brought up all those feelings of sadness and loss again. He writes: 'I will not worship such a God, and if such a God can send me to hell for not so worshipping him, then to hell I will go' (p. 14). Can Christian fellowship have any meaning when we view each other's God like this? I hope some wiser reader than I will write and tell us how we can be brothers in Christ and loathe each other's God. And if this is impossible, what does it imply for our standing in the church?

My purpose here is simply to do what a pastor is supposed to do when 'men rise from among our own number speaking perverse things to draw away the disciples after them' (Acts 20:30). I want to try to defend the doctrine of God's sovereign predestination against Talbott's criticisms and so 'preserve the truth of the gospel' and magnify God's glorious grace. I hope no one clucks his tongue, saying, 'God does not need our defense.' I know that. But the sheep do. That's why there are shepherds. I would recommend as an articulate antidote to Talbott's nonbiblical argumentation the biblically saturated essay by Geerhardus Vos, 'The Spiritual Doctrine of the Love of God, ' now found in Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation (ed. Richard B. Gaffin). First I will try to restate Talbott's arguments fairly, and then I will reply.

Restatement:
Talbott says, 'The whole point of the doctrine of predestination, therefore, is that there are persons whom God could redeem but whom, for one reason or another, he chooses not to redeem' (p. 12). (By 'could' he means that 'nothing beyond God's own will or nature prevents him from redeeming' a person.) These people whom God chooses not to redeem are the non-elect. 'It immediately follows that they are not an object of God's eternal love' (p. 13). 'A person whose intention is the ultimate harm of another simply cannot be motivated by love for the other' (p. 13).

This has four consequences for theology, the first two of which are for Talbott 'enough to discredit the Reformed doctrine of predestination, quite apart from any other consideration' (p. 13).

1. 'God himself fails to love some of the very persons he has commanded us to love.'
2. 'the very God who commands us to love our enemies fails to love his enemies.'
3. 'Loving-kindness is not an essential property of God, not part of his essence,'
4. 'God is less loving, less kind, and less merciful than many human beings. '

'These four implications,' he says, 'should be quite enough to reduce the Reformed doctrine of predestination to a complete absurdity' (p. 14).

In the second half of his essay Talbott refers to a purely logical paradox that the doctrine of predestination generates.' He defines love for God as our 'approval of everything about-him' and 'gratitude to God for what he has done for us' (p. 15). Then he says, 'it is logically impossible to love [God] unless he first loves us. I simply can't love God unless he first loves me.' You can't feel gratitude to a God who decrees your damnation. I suppose the unstated premise between this observation and the inconsistency of Calvinism is that Calvinists summon all men to love God, even the nonelect.

Finally, Talbott argues that perfect love for our neighbor would prevent us from believing the doctrine of predestination; and the fact that so many people do believe it shows their deep rebellion against God's command to love their neighbor. There are three options: either we love our neighbor less than perfectly, or we love (approve and thank) God less than perfectly, or we can't believe God chooses not to love our neighbor.

Reply

Though I might want to say things differently, I accept Talbott's statement that the doctrine of predestination implies that there is nothing beyond God's own will and nature which stops him from saving people. What stops him from saving some is, in fact, ultimately his own sovereign will. 'In order that the purpose of God according to election might remain' he loved Jacob and hated Esau (Rom. 9:12,13). Therefore, I also accept the inference that there are people who are not the objects of God's electing love.

I did not always believe these things. And my journey toward this doctrine of.predestination was not along philosophical or confessional routes. It has been the route of biblical exegesis. I believe in the doctrine which Talbott calls blasphemy primarily because I cannot escape its presence in God's Word, nor do I any longer want to escape it. But I do want to see its consistency if possible. I also believe it is an essential part of a pure gospel. Therefore I will try to answer Talbott's several criticisms.

Talbott objects that this doctrine implies that 'God himself fails to love some of the very persons whom he has commanded us to love. ' In order for this to be a telling criticism we must assume (1) that the love we are commanded to show our neighbor is identical with the love God fails to show him, and (2) that there is nothing in the different natures of God and man that would make it right for God to reserve prerogatives for himself that he denies to us. I think the first assumption is at least biblically questionable and the second is biblically false.

It is questionable that we are commanded to love in a way which God fails to love. We are never commanded to dispense electing love. We are not given the assignment of ultimately determining anyone's destiny. We are commanded to show kindness and patience. We are commanded to call men to repentance. We are commanded to do all manner of good deeds that people might be won over to give God glory (Matt. 5:16). Of course, this is all within the context of a fallen world where kindness to one man is limited by justice to another.

But God does not fail to show this love to all men. 'He makes the sun to rise on the evil and the good' (Matt. 5:45). 'He did good and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness' (Acts 14:17). There are riches of divine kindness, which beckon all men to entrust their souls to the faithful Creator (Rom 2:4).

But even more important, Talbott seems to assume that the difference between God and man would not justify God acting differently toward people than he commands us to act toward people. Surely this assumption is wrong. First of all, God knows all things and is all wise. We are not only finite but sinful. As Jonathan Edwards said concerning God's right to do what we are forbidden to do, "It may be unfit and so immoral, for any other beings to go about to order this affair; because they are not possessed of a wisdom, that in any other manner fits them for it; and in other respects they are not fit to be trusted with this affair; nor does it belong to them, they not being the owners and Lords of the universe." (Freedom of the Will, New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 41 1)

When God says 'See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand,' he is claiming moral prerogatives which we are denied. Where God takes the prerogative of putting a hardening upon part of Israel until the full number of the gentiles comes in (Rom. 11:25), his command to the entering gentiles is, Do not boast over the branches' (11: 18). Instead, we are to be like Paul, who magnified his ministry 'in order to make my fellow Jews jealous and thus save some of them' (11: 14). God's command concerning the Israel whom he had hardened (Rom 9:18), 11:7-10, 25) is that we strive for their salvation; that is, love them. In this age we are to love whom he hardens. This is not inconsistent because God is God and has wise purposes for both his sovereign hardening and our evangelism.

Talbott's second objection to predestination is that it implies that 'the very God who commands us to love our enemies fails to love his enemies.

I don't think this is essentially different from the first objection. The answer is the same. Yes, God does withhold electing love from his enemies, but we are not commanded to show them electing love. Yes, we are commanded to love our enemies in many ways, but God also loves these enemies in the same ways (Matt. 5:45).

But Talbott will no doubt stress that our intention should be for the eternal welfare of our nonelect enemy; yet God's intention (we say) is for his enemy's perdition. Two observations weaken this objection: (1) Our intention concerning another person's eternal destiny is always conditional. Since we are not God, we acknowledge that the loved one for whom we pray may not be elect. We pray and we strive 'that they be saved' (Rom. 11: 14), but finally we bow to the divine decree (Acts 13:48). (2) God's intention is not simple but complex. It is not psychologically or

biblically adequate to say God wills the perdition of his enemies. 'He wills all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth' (1 Tim. 2:4). 'I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God; so turn, and live' (Ezek. 18:32). The historic distinction between God's will of command and will of decree (or: revealed will and secret will) is not a philosophic creation to justify determinism in the face of opposing evidence. It is the necessary outgrowth of sustained exegetic labor that tries to take all Scripture seriously. It receives classic statement from the biblically steeped Jonathan Edwards:

So God, though he hates a thing as it is simply, may incline to it with reference to the universality of things. Though he hates the sin in itself, yet he may will to permit it, for the greater promotion of holiness in this universality, including all things, and at all times. ('Misclaneous Remarks,' WorksII, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, P. 528)

Therefore, in one sense God does love his enemies and in one sense he does not. In the sense that he does, so should we. In the sense that he does not, we are now in no position to follow as mere creatures. The potter has rights, which the pots do not have.

Talbott's third objection is that 'loving-kindness is not an essential property of God, not part of his essence.' He reasons that 'if loving-kindness is an essential property of God, then it is logically impossible for him to act in an unloving way' And if God ultimately acts toward the nonelect in an unloving way, then some alternative explanation must be found for the claim, in I John 4:16, that 'God is love. ' Talbott assumes that God's character of love is inconsistent with his treating any individual in a way that is not loving. But this assumption is not defensible from Scripture. We are not encouraged even by Johannine theology to infer from the statement 'God is love' that God relates to individuals only in terms of love. John is probably the most 'Calvinistic' writer in the New Testament. 'No one can come to me unless it is granted to him by my Father' (John 6:65, given as a reason why Judas did not come, a clear instance of reprobation, also implied in the term son of perdition that the scriptures might be fulfilled,' 17: 12). 'The reason why you do not hear [my words] is that you are not of God' (8:47). 'You do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep' (10:26). 'Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice' (18:37). Both in the Gospel (1: 12, 13) and the first epistle (5: 1, cf. 4:7) regeneration is 'not of the will of man' but precedes and enables faith. This prior electing work is what it means to be ' of God ' and ' of the truth ' and ' of my sheep. '

John also makes clear that those who are not born of God and therefore do not believe but do evil, are punished by God. In the end all men will be raised, 'those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment' (John 5:29). And if we let Matthew (25:46) and John of Patmos (Rev. 14: 1 1) speak, we learn that this judgment is not remedial or temporary but punitive and everlasting. It is precisely the loving Father of the disciples of Jesus who cuts off the unfruitful branches and throws them into the fire to be burned (John 15:2,6).

If Talbott responds that God is still dealing with the condemned in hell in terms of love (wishing he could save them but being 'unable' to because of other commitments, e.g., to their free will), then my answer would be: (1) Calvinists could say the same thing (God wills their salvation in one sense but is 'unable' to save them because of other commitments, e.g. the preservation of his glorious freedom and the maximizing of his mercy to the elect); but (2) it is biblically unwarranted to speak of God's loving those condemned to hell because nowhere is the final judgment viewed as remedial or temporary.

The meaning I would attach to the statement 'God is love' is this: it belongs to the fullness of God's nature that he cannot be served but must overflow in service to his creation. The very meaning of God is a being who cannot be enriched but always remains the enricher. To be God is to be incapable of being a beneficiary of any person or power in the universe. Rather, Godness involves a holy impulse ever to be benefactor. But it is not for us to insist that the best or only way for God to exert maximum love is to treat no individuals unlovingly. On the contrary, Scripture teaches us that 'to make known the riches of his glory for the vessels of mercy' God does prepare vessels for destruction (Rom. 9:23; see John Piper, The Justification of God, chapters three and ten, for the exegetic evidence that this text refers to the eternal destiny of individuals).

Talbott argues further that the Reformed doctrine of predestination makes God less loving, less kind, and less merciful than many human beings. Specifically, he argues that in Romans 9:3 Paul out loves Calvin's God when he says, 'For I wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race. ' Paul is willing to go to hell for them, but God just passes over them.

One of the questions Paul tries to answer in Romans 9-11 is why most of God's chosen people are accursed and cut off from Christ. It appears as though the word of God has fallen (9:6). He gives two answers. First, the Jews failed to fulfill the law of righteousness because 'they pursued it by works, not faith. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone' (9:32). And second, 'Israel failed to obtain what it sought. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened' (11:7). Unlike Talbott, the apostle Paul acknowledges, indeed praises (Rom. 1:33-36), the sovereign plan of God which involves the hardening of his kinsmen. Therefore, he does not cry down God's decree in Romans 9:3 but rather says that if God could allow it, he would be willing to relinquish his place as 'elect' so that 'the rest' could become

elect. Paul does not deny the wisdom or love of God in making 'vessels of wrath' (9:22); he simply expresses what David and many (Calvinistic!) parents have felt for unrepentant children and loved ones: '0 my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, 0 Absalom, my son, my son! (2 Sam. 18:33).

If Talbott cannot imagine the psychological possibility of praising God's sovereignty over men's lives and yet weeping over an unrepentant son, it is owing to the limits of his simple emotional capacities, not the impossibility of the two emotions in one godly heart. It would be worth his while to ponder how Paul can say, 'Be anxious for nothing' (Phil. 4:6) and also say, 'There is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches' (2 Cor. 11:28). There is a profound implication here for how we experience the sovereignty of God in our every day affairs.

In the last half of his essay, Talbott says that we cannot love our neighbor perfectly if we approve of a God who refuses to promote our neighbor's interest. Therefore, to love our neighbor as ourselves. The answer to this criticism is already contained in the preceding paragraphs. But I will stress it again. The reprobation of any individuals is not part of God's revealed will. Therefore, we are in no position to eliminate people on that basis from our love. We are to strive with Paul by every means to save some (I Cor. 9:22); Rom. 11: 14), and leave the limitations of electing love to God.

But if Talbott argues that in principle we cannot love all perfectly because we approve the reprobation of some, then the answer I suggest is that 'perfection' of love cannot be measured by the happiness of all men nor of any individual person. The measure of perfection must begin with God. Perfect love toward all and toward any is love which accords with God's loving purposes. And God's loving purposes toward creation involve the hardening of some and the bestowing of mercy on others (Rom. 9:18). His purpose is also that we not know which are the hardened but that we show love to all by seeking their salvation.

Finally, Talbott argues that it is logically impossible to love God if he does not first love me, because love to God includes heartfelt gratitude for what he has done for me. One problem with this criticism is that it assumes that love to God can happen logically only when some benefit (other than beholding God's character and action) comes to me. This is a problem because, as Jonathan Edwards says, the first and basic ground of true worship is the 'transcendently excellent and amiable nature of divine things, as they are in themselves, and not any conceived relation they bear to self' (Religious Affections, New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 240). If this is so, then it is not logically impossible even for a nonelect person to worship God. It would not be logically contradictory for such a person to approve of God's glorious plan of redemption and to be thankful that he has a part to play in magnifying the glory of God's mercy (Rom. 9:22,23). Of course, this sounds absurd to us because we know from Scripture that precisely such worship would mark a person as elect and born of God. The old test of whether we love God enough to be damned for his glory does not create a logical but a biblical and theological problem. A God who would damn a person who loves him enough to be damned for his glory is not found in the Bible and would not be worthy of worship because in damning such a person he would belittle his own glory.

Of course, in one sense, it is impossible for the nonelect to love God. But it is a moral impossibility, not a logical or a physical one. 'They loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil' (John 3:19). Men cannot love God if they 'hold down the truth in unrighteousness ' (Rom. 1: 18) and are blind to God's glory 'due to their hardness of heart' (Eph. 4:18). Therefore when I John 4:19 says that 'we love God because he first loved us,' the point is that God's love had to regenerate our hearts (John 1: 13) and demonstrate atoning love in Christ (I John 4: 10) in order to enable us to love him. This verse cannot be used, as Talbott uses it, to show that love to God is logically impossible for the nonelect. The verse only confirms the moral inability to love God apart from his prevenient grace.

A Personal Conclusion

I know this reply presents a very lopsided view of biblical predestination by focusing on reprobation. I do not apologize for focusing on what Geerhardus Vos calls 'The Biblical Importance of the Doctrine of Preterition' (in Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation, pp. 412-14). But I must emphasize that the overwhelming emphasis of Scripture is on the appointment to eternal life and on the true guilt of those who are lost.

Talbott refers several times to his own daughter. In one place he says, 'If God has indeed passed over her, how can the mother possibly believe that he is worthy of her worship?' (p. 14). I can hardly escape the impression from this and many other statements that God does not stand as the measure and judge at the center of Talbott's thought and affections. I have three sons. Every night after they are asleep I turn on the hall light, open their bedroom door, and walk from bed to bed, laying my hands on them and praying. Often I am moved to tears of joy and longing. I pray that Karsten Luke become a great physician of the soul, that Benjamin John become the beloved son of my right hand in the gospel, and that Abraham Christian give glory to God as he grows strong in his faith.

But I am not ignorant that God may not have chosen my sons for his sons. And, though I think I would give my life for their salvation, if they should be lost to me, I would not rail against the Almighty. He is God. I am but a man. The potter has absolute rights over the clay. Mine is to bow before his unimpeachable character and believe that the Judge of all the earth has ever and always will do right.

Talbott vs. Piper

Articles from THE REFORMED JOURNAL
On Predestination, Reprobation, and the Love of God
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God's unconditional mercy
a reply to John Piper
Thomas B. Talbott

John Piper's thoughtful and eloquent reply (RJ, Apr. 1983) to my recent article on predestination (IZJ, Feb. 1983) poses somewhat of a dilemma for me. On the one hand, it seems to me that he misinterprets almost every passage of Scripture he cites. He badly misinterprets for instance, Paul's teaching concerning the vessels of wrath fit (or prepared) for destruction (Rom. 9:23), an in my view he has completely misunderstood the hardening that came upon part of Israel (Rom. 11:25). But on the other hand, I am fully aware that Piper will no more be convinced by my interpretation of these matters than I am by his. If the typical proponent of reprobation is confident of anything, it is that he has the Bible on his side. The mere suggestion that, according to Paul, God's hardening of a heart is itself an expression of mercy, or that the destruction of a vessel of wrath is itself a redemptive idea, will no doubt seem scandalous not only to Piper but to many other readers of The Reformed Journal as well. And yet, it does seem to me that Paul's teaching on these matters is as clear as it is glorious.

Before turning to the matter of exegesis, however, I have two preliminary comments to make on Piper's critique. In the first place, Piper has clearly misconstrued the paradox that I tried to formulate.Idid indeed say that we (logically) cannot love God with all our heart unless he first loves us, and I said this for what still seems to me the strongest of reasons: if God could destroy the evil in us but refuses to do so, there seems to be no conceivable form that true gratitude might take.

But that's perhaps a debatable matter and, God cannot both love me and hate my daughter I love. contrary to what Piper would have us believe, not an essential part of the paradox at all. For the paradox, as I formulated it, involves not just two parties (myself and God) but three parties (myself, my neighbor, and God), and it involves an idea that Piper ignores altogether: the idea that I am commanded to love my neighbor as myself. Now what would it mean for me (in obedience to Christ) to love another person, my daughter for example, as myself? It would mean, presumably, that I have (correctly) come to see my daughter's real interests as so intertwined with my own as to be inseparable from them, that I have come to see my daughter as a virtual extension of myself; and it would mean, furthermore, that any harm that befalls my daughter is in fact harm that befalls myself as well. So put in a nutshell, the paradox is this:

If I love my daughter as myself, God simply can't love me without loving my daughter as well and I can't love him unless I at least believe that he loves her as well. In both cases, however, the impossibility in question is the impossibility of a conjunction. God cannot both love me (perfectly and fully) and hate my daughter whom I love, and I cannot both love my daughter as myself, desire the good for her, and simultaneously approve of a God who refuses to promote the good for her. I may indeed, in feigned humility, continue to love and worship God even if he rejects (and hates) my own daughter. But if I should continue to worship God under such conditions, as Piper suggests he would (p. 13), I would thereby prove that I do not love, in fact have never loved, my daughter as myself. For I couldn't possibly worship God under such conditions without thereby endorsing God's own hatred for my daughter.

And this brings me to a second comment. Because Piper begins with what I believe is an impoverished conception of God's love for the world, he inevitably ends up with an impoverished conception of the Christian's duty to love his fellow man. With respect to God's love for the world, Piper insists that it is

"biblically unwarranted to speak of God's loving those condemned to hell" (p. 11),

and he thus concedes one of the main contentions of my original article. the nonelect, if there are such, are not the object ot God's eternal love. But then, to repeat the question of my original article, why has God commanded us to love the very ones he himself refuses to'love?

Piper's answer:

"it is questionable that we are commanded to love in any way which God fails to love" (p. 10).

In what sense, then, are we commanded to love?

"We are commanded to show kindness and patience. We are commanded to call men to repentance. We are commanded to do all manner of good deeds that people might be won over to God's glory" (p. 10).

That is Piper's conception of love. Not a word about loving one's neighbor as ones self Not a word about the words of Jesus in Matthew 22:39! Is it any wonder that Piper can say:

"God does not fail to show this [impoverished] love to all men" (p. 10)?

On Piper's view, our duty to love others is nothing more than the duty to perform acts of kindness towards those who are essentially unrelated to ourselves (and as C. S. Lewis points out, we shoot horses as an act of kindness). On Piper's view, therefore, seventy years of sun and spring rains, even when followed by a" eternity of torment, can nonetheless be called an expression of divine love!

Here is what is wrong with Piper's conception of love. A parent who loves his child as himself will do everything within his power to protect that child from harm. He will even, contrary to what Piper suggests (p. 10), dispense electing love to that child (that is, he will display the very kind of love that leads God to reclaim lost sinners). Now either God loves all men in this sense or he does not. If he does, then he will do everything within his power to reclaim every lost sinner. If not, then (in light of Matthew 22:39)

Piper is simply wrong when he says that God loves all men in the same sense he has commanded us to love them.

My main quarrel with Piper, however, concerns his method of exegesis. His strategy seems to be to put before the reader as many of the familiar proof texts as possible in as short a space as possible, and he adopts this strategy, I presume, in an effort to show that the Reformed doctrine of predestination is an inescapable consequence of Scripture. Well, as one who was raised on these same proof texts, I find his method of splicing passages together utterly unconvincing. I offer the following comments:

(1) First of all, Piper too often ignores the context from which a passage is lifted, and perhaps the best example of this is his use of Romans 11:7, where Paul writes: "Israel failed to obtain what it sought. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened." If taken by itself or spliced together with other harsh-sounding statements, this verse may appear to teach reprobation. But in fact it doesn't; for in the very next paragraph, almost as if he had anticipated Piper's error, Paul asks: "Have they stumbled so as to fall?" And his 'answer is most emphatic: "By no means!" (11:11). "Is this a doctrine of reprobation?" he in effect asks. "By no means!" Nor can one explain this away, as is so often attempted, by claiming that Paul is here speaking of collectives, of Israel as a whole. The "they" of which Paul speaks in verse 11 clearly refers to the same "nonremnant" Jews of which he speaks in verse 7. The remnant were saved by grace and the nonremnant hardened; but while the nonremnant were hardened and therefore stumbled, they did not stumble so as to fall. Rather, they stumbled and became "enemies of God" in order that they too might receive mercy (11:30). Evidently, then, God does love his enemies after all. Indeed, the strategy of jealousy of which Paul speaks in Romans 11 makes sense only on this assumption: when God himself hardens a heart, that too is an expression of mercy, the first step in the direction of a person's ultimate redemption. That is why, according to Paul, the hardening that came upon part of Israel is one of the means by which all of Israel will be saved (11:25-26)-all of Israel including those who were hardened. So Piper is right when he says: "Paul acknowledges, even praises (Rom. 11:33-36), the sovereign plan of God which involves the hardening of his kinsmen" (p. 12).
But how often Paul's ecstatic praise of God is quoted out of context! How rarely it is quoted in context, directly following one of the most glorious passages in all of Scripture: "For God has consigned all men to disobedience that he may have mercy on all" (11:32-my emphasis). And let no one depreciate the all-pervasive character of God's mercy as taught in this passage. If the first "all" is universal in scope, if all are "shut up" to disobedience, then the second is also universal in scope; all are objects of divine mercy. And if one should insist, as some have, that neither "all" literally means "all without exception," the obvious rejoinder is that it's the parallelism that's important here, not the scope of "all." According to Paul, the very ones whom God "shuts up" to disobedience are those to whom God is merciful; God's former act is but the first expression of the latter. That is the conclusion of Romans 9-11, and everything else in this theological essay must be interpreted in light of that conclusion.
Now of course there are standard arguments against much of what I have written in the preceding paragraph. But that is really beside the point. The point is that Piper lifts Romans 11:7 out of context and ignores those parts of Romans 11 that indicate the true extent of God's mercy. He thus manages to leave an impression that a reader couldn't possibly get simply by reading the chapter from beginning to end. In like manner, Piper cites Romans 9:12-13 as evidence that God literally hated Esau; but though he cites this passage, he presents not a stitch of evidence in support of his assumption that Esau was eternally rejected by God. If Paul teaches that Esau was "hated" as regards election, he also teaches that the disobedient Jews were beloved "as regards election" (Rom. 11:28); and one can no more infer from Paul's teaching concerning Esau that Esau was eternally rejected by God than one can infer from his teaching concerning the disobedient Jews that they were saved by their election. Nor does Piper even consider, in this context, the familiar Jewish use of hyperbole-a use that Jesus illustrates nicely when he says: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters . . . he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). In this sense, "hating" a person is compatible even with loving that person as oneself; and similarly, I would argue, God's so-called "hatred" of Esau is compatible even with his loving him to the point of saving him. God's "hatred" here implies nothing whatsoever beyond the mere fact that, in violation of certain Hebrew conventions of justice, the blessing that should have gone to Esau went to Jacob instead.

(2) But suppose now, just for a moment, that God's redemptive love does extend to all men, as I think Paul clearly teaches in Romans 11. Does it follow, according to Paul, that everyone will always experience that love as kindness?
Not at all, for there is nothing sentimental about Paul's conception of God's love for the world, a love that we would do well to fear. Although the obedient may indeed experience this love as kindness, the God's "hatred" of Esau is compatible with his loving him to the point of saving him.
the disobedient will typically experience it as severity and will continue to experience it as severity for as long as they remain disobedient (Rom. 11:22). For how else could God's love and mercy reach the disobedient? Is it ever an act of mercy to ignore sin or to condone it? The question virtually answers itself. The whole point about the theme of mercy, as Paul develops it in Romans 9-11, is that God's mercy requires him to deal severely with the disobedient; it requires him to mold the disobedient into vessels of wrath; and it requires him to prepare these vessels of wrath for destruction.

But consider more closely this idea of a "vessel of wrath fit for destruction," one of the most misunderstood ideas in all of Scripture. As one might expect, Piper cites Romans 9:22-23 as conclusive evidence that God acts in an unloving way towards some persons (p. 11). But is he right about that? Is there any reason whatsoever to believe that, on Paul's view, those who are molded into vessels of wrath are anything other

Where in the Bible
is there even a hint
that those in hell
have finally escaped God's love?

than objects of God's redemptive love? Clearly not. In the first place, the vessels of wrath that Paul has in mind here are unbelieving Jews; and as we have already seen, Paul also teaches that God's purpose in dealing with these Jews is to be merciful to them (Rom 11:28-32). Paul clearly assumes, moreover, that the same individual can be a vessel of wrath at one time and a vessel of mercy at another; for as he says elsewhere, using a slightly different metaphor, all Christians were at one time "children of wrath" (Eph. 2:3). But then, if Paul himself is a vessel of mercy who was at one time a vessel of wrath (known as Saul), a paraphrase that captures part of the meaning of Romans 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 only what Paul himself explicitly states elsewhere; namely, that those whom God has "shut up" to disobedience-that is, molded into objects of his wrath-are precisely those to whom he is merciful. Of course at any moment in history (and Paul wrote at a moment in history), the obedient and the disobedient, the faithful and the unfaithful, will in general be separate groups of people; but if every vessel of mercy is at one time a vessel of wrath, then every vessel of mercy also represents the destruction of a vessel of wrath. And was not Saul, for example, utterly destroyed on the road to Damascus? Was he not destroyed in the only way possible short of annihilation?

If Piper's view is that the vessels of wrath are both destroyed and maintained as vessels of wrath, then he owes us some explanation of what this could possibly mean. And if his view is that God plans to keep sin alive throughout an eternity of hell, then he should reflect long and hard on Paul's assertion that all things, including every evil will and opposing power, will eventually be brought into subjection to Christ (I Cor. 15:27-28). Everyone (except the Father) will then be in subjection to Christ in exactly the same sense that Christ will place himself in subjection to the Father-a sense that clearly implies voluntary obedience. When God thus becomes all things to every person (15:28), there will then be no more separation from God, no more estrangement from each other, and no more reason for God's boundless love to take the form of a consuming fire that both judges and purifies at the same time. (On this point, I highly recommend George MacDonald's great sermon, "The Consuming Fire.")

(3) We thus approach the most basic point of contention between Piper and myself. I contend that because the essence of God is love, every act of God, whether it be the hardening of a heart or even punishment in hell, must be construed as an expression of love. According to Piper, however, "it is biblically unwarranted to speak of God's loving those condemned to hell because nowhere is the final judgment viewed as remedial or temporary" (p. 11). Here, then, is a rock bottom disagreement: I believe that the final judgment is both remedial and temporary, whereas Piper rejects this idea altogether. But what does Piper mean when he says that "nowhere is the final judgment viewed as remedial or temporary"? Does he mean (a) that no biblical writer gives explicit expression to this idea? or does he mean (b) that there is in fact no biblical warrant for the idea? If he intends to make the first claim, a relatively weak claim, his remark is not quite to the point; for there can always be biblical warrant for a doctrine, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, even though no single writer gives explicit expression to it. But if, on the other hand, he intends to make the second, much stronger, claim, then he faces an enormous difficulty the proportions of which he has simply failed to appreciate. There are really two parts to Piper's argument.

He argues, first, that the proposition:

(P) God loves all men is true only if (Q) The final judgment is remedial or temporary is also true; and he argues, second, that there is no biblical warrant for believing (Q) and therefore no biblical warrant for believing (P) either. Now I am prepared to accept the first part of this argument, though it too is controversial and often challenged.

I am prepared to concede, in other words, that (P) entails (Q) (with the understanding that (Q) is a disjunction). But there is the difficulty that Piper fails to appreciate. If (P) entails (Q), then any evidence against (Q) can indeed be construed as evidence against (P); but by the same token, any evidence for (P) must likewise be construed as evidence for (Q). So Piper's argument is easily reversed. There is, in my opinion, every biblical warrant for believing (P), and there is, therefore, every biblical warrant for believing (Q) as well. And the one form of argument is just as valid as the other. Accordingly, all those universalistic passages-call them proof texts if you will-that people like Piper struggle so hard to explain away are in fact, given Piper's own assumption that (P) entails (Q), a powerful, reason for thinking that the final judgment is either remedial or temporary or both. When one reads, for instance, that God is unwilling that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9), or that God is merciful to all (Rom. 11:32), or that God desires the salvation of all (1 Tim. 2:4), or that Jesus will draw all men to himself (John 12:32), or that through one man's act of righteousness all receive acquittal and life (Rom. 5:18), or that the very same "all things" created in Christ (Col. 1:16) are also reconciled in Christ (Col. 1:20), or that Christ will reign until he overcomes all his enemies including death (separation from

God)when one reads these things, one has extremely powerful reasons, I submit, for thinking that the final judgment is either remedial or temporary or both.

Of course I fully realize that each of the above passages must ultimately be interpreted in its own context and that taken collectively these passages are among the most controversial in Scripture. And well they should be! After all, proponents of reprobation must explain them away, and Piper's way of explaining away 1 Timothy 2:4 is to endorse the traditional distinction between God's revealed will and his secret will.

But why, I ask, must we always assume that hell is eternal retribution and then reinterpret all the universalistic passages in light of that assumption? Why not allow the clear New Testament proclamation of God's unbounded love to influence our understanding of hell? I do not suggest here that we repeat the mistakes of those Protestant liberals who, because of a sentimental concept of love and an absurd bias against the supernatural denied the reality of hell altogether. There is indeed no biblical warrant for that. But where in the Bible is there even a hint that those in hell have finally escaped the love of God and are therefore lost without any future hope of redemption?

Insofar as the Bible provides a few telescoped glimpses of the "ages upon ages" and the end beyond the ages, it consistently teaches a final destruction of evil and an ultimate reconciliation of all things; and one can hardly counter this teaching simply by citing., as Piper does, Matthew 25:46 and Revelation 14:11.

For one thing, the language of these passages is too imprecise to justify the universal negative: God will never, throughout the ages, bring punishment to its proper conclusion. As has often been pointed out, the word aionios, which appears twice in Matthew 25:46 and is usually translated "eternal" or "everlasting," literally means "pertaining to an age" or simply "age-enduring" and typically refers to an indefinite, though very long, period of time. On many occasions of its use for example, when Paul speaks of a "mystery which was kept secret for long ages (chronois ai(5niois) but is now disclosed" (Rom. 16:25-26)-

this term couldn't possibly imply "unending duration" (see also 2 Tim. 1:9 and Tit. 1:2); and on many other occasions of its use, such as in Matthew 25:46, it functions essentially as a convenient reference to the age to come. "Eternal life," in other words, is simply life that comes from God, the special mode of life associated with the age to come; and "eternal punishment" is likewise punishment that comes from God, the special form of punishment to which some (we are warned) may be subjected in the age to come. But strictly speaking, neither concept entails that of unending duration, and nothing in Matthew 25:46 (taken by itself) entails a doctrine of immortality. At the end of this age, says Jesus, some will enter into fellowship with God and some will be subjected to punishment; that is what gives a quality of seriousness to the choices we make here and now. But the words of Jesus here address only one chapter in a much longer story. Elsewhere in Scripture we find that Christ will continue to reign until all his enemies are defeated and all separation from God is finally overcome, until in the end there is but God. And one who accepts this glorious vision is fully justified, I submit, in concluding that hell is remedial or temporary or both.

I conclude, therefore, that Piper has failed altogether in his effort to provide a sound biblical argument against the thesis of my original article. He provides no reason for thinking that God sometimes acts in an unloving way, no reason for thinking that divine judgment and divine wrath are incompatible with divine love, and no reason for thinking that a doctrine of eternal rejection follows from any of the New Testament references to punishment in the next life.

Universalism in Romans 9-11?
testing the exegesis of Thomas Talbott
John Piper

For Thomas Talbott the command "Love your neighbor as yourself" teaches universalism. You cannot desire the good of your neighbor and simultaneously approve of a God who refuses to promote that neighbor's good. But God does command us to love our neighbor. And we must approve of God's ways. Therefore, God does omnipotently promote the good of all men, and so all men will be saved.

My first response to this argument (RJ, April, 1983) contained an inconsistency that I should own up to. I said, "It is questionable that we are commanded to love in a way which God fails to love" (p. 10). I had in mind the fact that "we are never commanded to dispense electing love." That is God's sole prerogative. But now I see (thanks to Talbott's counter-response, RJ, June, 1983) that my position does imply that we are commanded to love in a way that God does not love. We are commanded to love people as ourselves. But God does not love people "as himself." He does not esteem people "as himself," for that would be idolatry. And he does not pursue the ultimate happiness of every individual with the same devotion he has to his own happiness, for that would jeopardize the manifestation of his power and wrath for the sake of the elect. I think the main argument of my previous essay still stands, however, because it was in fact not an argument that God must act only as he commands us to act, but that "the difference between God and man would ... justify God acting differently toward people than he commands us to act toward people" (p. 10). That is, divine reprobation is not morally or logically inconsistent with the command that we love our neighbor as ourselves. Talbott's main quarrel with my essay was that its exegesis ignored contextual considerations. So I suppose what I need to do is show as briefly as I can the exegetical basis of my disagreement with Talbott's universalism. The contextual considerations of Romans 9 are these: In verses 1-5 the problem is introduced that Paul's kinsmen are anathema, cut off from Christ. Paul expresses this by saying that if he could, he would be accursed in their place (v. 3). This raises the question (v. 6a) whether God's word of promise to Israel has failed: How can God's word stand if people of promise are under God's curse?

Paul's first answer is that not all Israel is Israel (v. 6b). Or: not all who are descended from Abraham are his true seed or God's children (vv. 7, 8). In other words, God's word of promise has not fallen even though many Israelites are accursed (v. 3), because the promise was not made to every individual Israelite.

God did not simply elect a nation for historical purposes, he also elects individuals within that' nation to become "children of God." The contextual issue of Romans 9 is how God's word can stand when so many individual Jews within Israel are "accursed and cut off from Christ." The only way to honor this context in dealing with verses 6-13 is to recognize that God's election of Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau, apart from any human distinctives (vv. 9-11), is intended to illustrate a principle of unconditional election which supplies the answer to how Israelites can be accursed and God's word of promise still stand. The answer to that question is this: God's saving purpose for Israel has not fallen because he elects unconditionally who in Israel will be the beneficiaries of his saving mercy and who will not (vv. 10-13). "It is not as though the word of God has failed; for not all Israel is Israel" (v. 6). Any effort to avoid this implication does not answer to the contextual demands of Romans 9:1-5. Romans 9:14-23 deals with the question whether God is unjust in this unconditional election. Therefore, the scope of Paul's concern is still governed by the problem that many Israelites are under God's curse (v. 3). Paul says in 9:14-18 that it is not unjust for God to show mercy on whom he pleases and harden whom he pleases (v. 18), because in doing that, he has a regard to the glory of his name (v. 17). The ultimate outrage of justice would be for God not to act in a way that magnifies the fullness of his glory. The fact that not all Israel (v. 6) is Israel but some are accursed and cut off from Christ (v. 3) is owing to God's unconditional mercy and hardening (v. 18), which is not unjust, because therein God most clearly magnifies the fullness of his glory. In Romans 9:19 someone objects that if God is so sovereign then he should not find fault with people who are hardened and not part of true Israel. Paul answers that the sovereign rights of the Creator cannot be impugned by the objections of his creatures and that there is no legitimate objection to his making one vessel for honor and one for dishonor out of the very same lump of clay (v. 21). Talbott's effort to construct the meaning of Romans 9 does not honor its context. For example, Talbott says,

"***God's mercy requires him to deal severely with the disobedient; it requires him to mold the disobedient into vessels of wrath; and it requires him to prepare these vessels of wrath for destruction.***" By destruction he means conversion: "***Was not Saul, for example, utterly destroyed on the road to Damascus?***"

There are three obstacles to this view. God's saving promise applies to true Israel, not to every individual Israelite. (1) If preparing vessels of wrath for destruction simply means preparing disobedient people for conversion (whether in this life or through the purifying fires of hell), then it is hard to see why the issue of God's injustice would have been raised (v. 14). The intense theodicy of 9:14-23 would not have arisen if God was simply using severe discipline on disobedient people in order to bring them to faith. That would not cause any Jew to say God is unjust (v. 14) or to say "Why does God still find fault?" (v. 19). (2) Talbott is wrong to say that God "molds the disobedient into vessels of wrath." Romans 9:21 says God makes "from the same lump" vessels for honor and dishonor. It is not the disobedience of the lump that determines its destiny. There is only one lump and from it the Creator fashions vessels for dishonorable use and vessels for honorable use. The context suggests that we read 9:21 as a restatement of 9:11. Before Jacob and Esau were born or had performed any disobedience God determined in his freedom to mold one for honor and one for dishonor.

(3) To say that "prepared for destruction" means prepared for conversion stretches the semantic range of apoleian (destruction) beyond reasonable possibility. Moreover, there is a very close parallel between 9:22 and 9:17 which shows Pharaoh (not Paul!) as the typical vessel of wrath prepared for destruction. And it is his hardening not his conversion which is in view. Talbott challenges me to explain how a vessel of wrath could be destroyed and yet maintained for wrath in hell. The answer is that the word "destruction" does not have to mean annihilation (TDNT, 1, 396). It is not the opposite of existence but of glorious existence. But here I must cut short our discussion of Romans 9. I plead not guilty to the charge of contextual negligence. In fact, I wrote 300 pages of historical-grammatical exegesis on Romans 9:1-23 to undergird the position taken here. It is found in The Justification of God, An Exegetical and Theological Study of Ronians 9:7-23 (Baker Book House, 1983).

But what about Romans 11? For Talbott Romans 11 teaches universalism: all individuals will finally be saved, for verse 32 says, "God shut up all in disobedience in order that he might have mercy on all." If the "all" of human disobedience is universal so must the "all" of mercy be universal. Does this universalistic reading of Romans 11:32 square with the argument of the chapter? The question Romans 9-11 was written to answer is this: How can God's word of promise to Israel stand (9:6) when so many of Paul's Jewish kinsmen are accursed and cut off from Christ?

The first answer Paul gave was that all Israel is not Israel. God's saving promise applies to true Israel, not to every individual Israelite (9:6-13). So his word stands even though some Israelites are accursed. The second answer Paul gives to the question of God's faithfulness is that some of Israel are Israel; that is, God has not rejected physical Israel (11:1), for there is, and always has been, a "remnant according to the election of grace" (11:5) who have not bent the knee to Baal. Romans 9 says: God's word stands in spite of lost Israelites because the promise did not apply to every Israelite. Romans 11:1-10 says: God's word stands because the promise did guarantee a remnant of believing Jews, and the election of grace has preserved this very thing. "Israel (as a corporate whole) failed to obtain what it sought. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened" (11:7). But there is a third and final answer given to the question of God's

faithfulness to his word of promise (9:6), namely that this corporate Israel will all one day be saved (11:26). But just as Romans 9 showed that the exclusion of certain individuals from true Israel is owing to God's unconditional determination; and Romans 11:1-10 showed that the inclusion of a Jewish remnant in true Israel is owing to an election of grace, so Romans 11:11-32 shows that "all Israel" will be saved in a way that excludes all boasting by Jew and Gentile and gives all glory to God. The first step towards bringing salvation to "all Israel" is to harden them. "Israel failed to obtain what it sought. The elect obtained it, the rest were hardened, as it is written, 'God gave them a spirit of stupor ... "(11:7, 8). Notice that this is not a reference to all Jews but to Israel as a corporate whole conceived as an entity that endures from generation to generation made up of different individuals from time to time. A hardening has come upon this corporate whole until the full number of Gentiles comes in (11:25). As a whole, Israel has been temporarily rejected (11:15); it has been shut up to disobedience (17:32); it has stumbled (11:11). But it has not stumbled simply to fall and be lost. Rather God's purpose (and this is the second step towards the salvation of all Israel) is that through the stumbling and failure of corporate Israel salvation might come to the Gentiles (11:11).

Through the disobedience of corporate Israel mercy comes to the Gentiles (11:30). Israel is counted as God's enemy now for the sake of the Gentiles (11:28). The hardening of corporate Israel will last "until the full number of the Gentiles comes in" (11:25). But the Gentiles who benefit from Israel's hardening do not include every individual Gentile. It is a corporate whole, or a "full number," which must "come in" before the hardening of Israel is lifted. Therefore, this group of Gentiles cannot include those who (on Talbott's scheme) may later be saved from hell. Yet it is the mercy shown to this corporate entity which leads to the third step in the salvation of all Israel. When the "full number" of Gentiles has come in, then "the Deliverer will come from Zion and will banish ungodliness from Jacob" (11:26). Thus when 11:30 says that "by the mercy shown to [the Gentiles] [Israel] also will receive mercy," it is clear that the group of Gentiles in view is the "full number" of verse 25. And the Israel who receives mercy (11:31) as a result of the salvation of the "full number" of Gentiles is also not every individual Jew but the same corporate entity which had for a time been rejected (as 11:15 shows).

Therefore in 11:30, 31 the two groups in view (Israel and Gentiles) do not have reference to every individual Jew and Gentile that exist. The same corporate groups are in view that have been in view since 11:7. The stumbling (11:11), failure (11:12), rejection (11:15), hardening (11:7, 25), and disobedience (11:30, 31) of corporate ethnic Israel lead to the mercy (11:31), salvation (11:11), riches (11:12), reconciliation (11:15), and coming in (11:25) of a "full number" of Gentiles. This in turn leads to the mercy (11:31), acceptance (11:15), and salvation (11:26) of "all Israel," the same corporate entity that had to be temporarily hardened (11:7, 25) and rejected (11:15). Romans 11:32 (the linchpin of Talbott's universalistic construction of Rom. 9-11) is the summary statement of this remarkable plan of salvation by which the full number of Gentiles and all corporate Israel will be saved: "For God has shut up all (tous pawns) to disobedience that he might have mercy on all (tous pantas)." There is no exegetical warrant for construing the two "alls" of 11:32 to refer to anything other than the complete number of Jews and Gentiles in the corporate entities referred to throughout the chapter. A universalistic reading of Romans 11:32 is not exe-getically defensible. Again I plead not guilty to contextual negligence. Romans 9-11 remains a grand pillar in the Reformed doctrine of God's sovereign freedom to have mercy on whomever he wills and harden whomever he wills (9:18).

Finally, Talbott cannot dispose so easily of passages which teach eternal punishment; for example, Matthew 25:46, "And they will go away into eternal punishment (kolasin aionion), but the righteous into eternal life." Talbott argues that aionios does not mean "eternal" but only characterizes the "mode of life" and "form of punishment" associated with the age to come. This is very unlikely, for while aionios need not always mean everlasting, this is its usual meaning in the New Testament and it does not have the modal sense Talbott wants it to. Yes, kolasin aionion means the punishment of the age to come, but in Jesus' mind that is an eternal age. Jesus thought of reality in two ages, this age and the age to come. In Matthew 12:32, he said, "Whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him either in this age or in the one to come." This is virtually the same as saying that the blasphemer will enter "eternal punishment"-punishment that will not end with forgiveness throughout the whole future age which never ends. When Mark (3:29) records the saying of Matthew 12:32, Jesus says that the blasphemer is guilty of an "eternal sin" (aioniou harnartematos). Thus an "eternal sin" is not one whose "mode" or "form" is associated with the age to come, but one which will not be forgiven in the age to come and therefore is not forgiven forever. Therefore, "eternal punishment" on the lips of Jesus cannot be stripped of the implication that the punishment last forever.

While aionios need not mean everlasting, this is its usual meaning in the New Testament. Nor can Revelation 14:11, "And the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever (cis aionas aionon)." Nor Revelation 20:10, "And they shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever (eis tous aionas ton aionon)." Nor Hebrews 6:2, "Eternal judgment" followed by: "It is impossible (adynaton) to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened ... if they commit apostacy" (cf. 10:25-31; 12:16-17). Nor 2 Thessalonians 1:9, "They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might." These are formidable obstacles to "Talbott's temporary, remedial hell-much more formidable, I think (together with Rom. 9-17), than are the strongest universalistic texts (Col. 1:20; Rom. 5:18; 7 Cor. 75:27, 28) for the orthodox doctrine of eternal retribution. (On the universalistic texts see George Ladd, A Theology of thc New Testament, Grand Rapids: Eerdrnans, 1974, pp. 567-68.)

Two hundred years ago Charles Chauncy of Boston published his defense of universalism (not unlike Talbott's) entitled The Salvation of All Men (reprint: New York: Arno Press, 1969). Five years later Jonathan Edwards the younger published his 300-page rejoinder (Th(, Salvation of All Mcii Strictl,y Fxnmincd, in 611urk~,Vol. 1, Boston: Doctrinal Tract and Book 'Society, 1850). The orthodoxy of Edwards did not prevail in New England. Instead, "From the tradition of Chauncy arose Unitarian and Universalist churches stressing the primacy of human reason, denying the supernatural work of Christ, and viewing the church as a creation of society" (Woodbridge, Noll, Hatch, The Gospel in America, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979, p. 188). The practical Issues at stake in any one intellectual controversy are always more than we realize. This is especially true where fundamentally contrary views of God are in conflict. When the paths diverge at the top, almost everything below will be different.

Vessels of wrath and the unpardonable sin more on universalism
Thomas Talbott

In his recent piece on universalism (RJ, July), John Piper calls into question some of my own exegesis and seems to me to advance our discussion in two ways. First, by challenging my (controversial) claim that the destruction of a vessel of wrath implies the redemption of an individual, Piper forces us to look more closely at the wider context of Romans 9; and second, by citing the notorious "unpardonable sin" mentioned in the Gospels and the warnings against apostasy found in the book of Hebrews, Piper tries to build a stronger case for everlasting punishment than can be found in his earlier article (RJ, April, 1983). I welcome these developments, though Piper does, I think, try to make too many points too quickly. For my own part, I would prefer the single arrow that runs true rather than a handful of hastily thrown darts that are apt to glance off the target. And most of Piper's darts do, I fear, glance off the target, as I shall try to show.

I

One thesis of my previous article was that, according to Paul, the destruction of a vessel of wrath and the redemption of an individual amount to pretty much the same thing. Had I said that according to Paul a person's sanctification requires that his old nature (or the flesh) be destroyed, or that God sanctifies a person by destroying the evil in him, I doubt that Dr. Piper would have had any objection. But since Piper evidently sees no analogy between the destruction of a vessel of wrath on the one hand and the destruction of one's old nature (or the flesh) on the other, he objects vigorously to my thesis concerning the vessels of wrath. He offers three objections, all of which are, in my opinion, badly confused, though one of them does raise an interesting question. In examining his objections, I shall reverse the order in which he raises them.

Piper's final and supposedly clinching objection is unfortunate, to say the least. After attributing to me the absurd view that the term "destruction" means "conversion," he argues in the predictable way: "To say that 'prepared for destruction' means prepared for conversion stretches the semantic range of apoleiaii (destruction) beyond reasonable possibility" (p. 12). Quite so. But then I never said that "destruction" means "conversion," or that the two terms can be used interchangeably in just any context I said rather that in the context of Paul's thought the destruction of a vessel of wrath and the redemption of an individual amount to the same thing-that these are, at the very least, logically equivalent concepts-and that is something else altogether. Consider, by way of illustration, these two concepts: that of sanctification and that of the destruction of one's sinful nature. One who argues that these are equivalent concepts is in no way committed to the absurd view that the terms "sanctification" and "destruction" have the same meaning. The individual, after all, is not destroyed; he or she is sanctified. And her sinful nature is not sanctified; it is destroyed. But the sanctification of the individual and the destruction of her sinful nature may nonetheless amount to the same thing. Similarly, vessels of wrath are not prepared for conversion; they are prepared for destruction. And the individual who is a vessel of wrath is not destroyed; she is converted (or redeemed or sanctified). Of course, in one rather woolly sense, the destruction of a vessel of wrath even implies the destruction of the individual who is a vessel of wrath. That's because an individual may so identify with his sinful nature that its destruction becomes an agonizing process by which all of his plans and ambitions are brought to ruin; and so he may come to see the destruction of his sinful nature as the very destruction of himself. Indeed, it is the destruction of what he is apt to call himself. And here, I think, Piper would do well to reflect upon the significance of name changes in the Bible. In a very real sense-the biblical sense-both Abram and Saul were utterly destroyed and thus no longer existed. But be that as it may, my thesis that every vessel of mercy represents the destruction of a vessel of wrath in no way implies that "destruction" and "conversion" have the same meaning.

Piper's second objection is no better than the one just considered and in fact seems to have no relevance whatsoever to the truth or falsity of my thesis concerning the vessels of wrath. According to Piper, I was wrong to say that "God molds the disobedient into vessels of wrath," and the reason he gives is this: "Romans 9:21 says God makes 'from the same lump' vessels for honor and dishonor. It is not the disobedience of the lump that determines its destiny" (p. 12). But I simply do not understand the confused imagery here or what, exactly, Piper is trying to argue. Evidently he is assuming, without argument, that the distinction between a "vessel unto honor" and a "vessel unto no honor" is the same as that between a "vessel of mercy" and a "vessel of wrath," an assumption that seems to me very dubious indeed. But what is the point of denying that the disobedience of a shapeless lump of

clay determines the destiny of that lump of clay? I find the imagery here baffling. If the one lump represents an individual who might be obedient or disobedient, then it could hardly be divided and fashioned into different vessels; and if it represents the nation of Israel, as I think it does (see Jer. 18:16), then it represents a collection of individuals each of whom already has a history of obedience and disobedience. Perhaps the picture that Paul has in mind, therefore, is something like this. Within the nation Israel there has always been a distinction between the true Israel and those who remain disobedient (9:6-8). But now, says Paul, God is fashioning from the one lump of Israel two vessels: One will be a vessel that brings honor unto himself, and it will consist of the vessels of mercy, the true Israel; the other will be a vessel that brings no honor unto himself, and it will consist of the vessels of wrath. On this interpretation, of course, Paul is concerned both with the destiny of the nation as a whole and with that of the individuals within the nation; but on this interpretation, he makes no effort to posit God as the sufficient cause of human disobedience. At the same time that God divides the one nation into two vessels, he "endures with much patience"

The redemption of Jacob represents the destruction of a vessel of wrath.

the vessels of wrath fit for destruction. And here is a point too often neglected in the interpretation of Romans 9. When used in the context of human affairs, such causal verbs as "molded," "shaped," "fashioned," etc. almost never imply a sufficient cause. When one says, for instance, "Herb Brooks molded a bunch of individual hockey players into a winning team," one uses the causal verb "molded" in a perfectly natural sense; but such a statement in no way implies a rigorous determinism. Similarly, when Paul describes God's way of working among human beings, he always employs very ordinary causal verbs, never the technical language of "sufficient cause"; and for this reason alone, we can be confident that he nowhere teaches the rigorous kind of determinism so often attributed to him.

But all of this is really beside the point. My thesis that the destruction of a vessel of wrath implies the redemption of an individual is compatible with any explanation you please for the origin of the vessels of wrath. And if, for reasons that remain unclear to me, Piper is unhappy with my statement that "God molds the disobedient into vessels of wrath," I am perfectly willing to withdraw that rather incidental statement. The point is that the wrath of God is itself an expression of the love of God, and it is because the disobedient are objects of God's love that they are also objects of his wrath. According to Paul, moreover, all persons (except Christ) come into the world as children of wrath (Eph. 2:3) or vessels of wrath, and that includes both Jacob and Esau. So even if, before Jacob and Esau were born, God had already chosen Jacob for a special purpose, my point about the vessels of wrath remains: the redemption of Jacob, no less than that of anyone else (including Esau!), represents the destruction of a vessel of wrath. Accordingly, Piper's second objection is beside the point altogether. Piper registers one objection, however, that at least raises an important question, though the objection it self is, I believe, no more telling than the two already considered. On my view, says Piper: it is hard to see why the issue of God's injustice would have been raised (v. 14). The intense theodicy of 9:14-23 would not have arisen if God was simply using severe discipline on the disobedient people in order to bring them to faith (p. 12).

Now I find this objection very curious indeed. Paul's teaching concerning the election of Jacob, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, and the hardening that came upon part of Israel is easily distorted and would, if distorted, easily create the appearance of injustice. But the mere fact that Paul has a good reply to the charge of injustice on God's part, as he does on my interpretation, hardly implies that the charge would not be made in the first place; nor does it imply that, in the face of an impertinent challenge, Paul would spell out his reply in great detail (see, for example, Rom. 3:8). Still, the issue here is an important one, and I should like, therefore, to make two additional comments.

First, just what is Paul's view concerning his unbelieving kinsmen? Is it that they are already, at the time of his writing, irrevocably rejected by God? That would certainly give rise to a (legitimate) question about injustice, and that seems to be Piper's view when he argues that "Paul's kinsmen are anathema, cut off from Christ" (p. 11). But of course Paul nowhere says that his unbelieving kinsmen are anathema or accursed; and even if he were to say this, he couldn't possibly mean that they are irrevocably rejected by God. That, after all, would amount to an implicit prediction that they would never repent, and Paul nowhere makes any such prediction, implicit or otherwise. To the contrary, he consistently holds out the possibility (and retains the hope) that his unbelieving kinsmen will be saved (see Rom. 10:1). And here, I think, is the nub of the matter. Again and again, Piper reads into the text a doctrine of rejection that simply is not there. We are told that God chose Jacob for a special purpose, and so Piper reads in the implication that Esau was irrevocably rejected and destined for eternal perdition. We are told that "in Isaac shall a seed be named" to Abraham, and so Piper reads in the implication that Ishmael was irrevocably rejected and destined for eternal perdition. We are told that God caused Pharaoh to be strong-that he gave this coward the courage to stand in the face of the signs and wonders performed in Egypt-and so Piper reads in the implication that Pharaoh was irrevocably rejected and destined for eternal perdition. It seems never to have occurred to Piper that the hardening of Pharaoh's heart might have been, in the long run, good for him; that the election of Isaac and Jacob might have been, among other things, a blessing to Ishmael and to Esau; or that the election of Abraham might have been a blessing to the entire world.

Second, Dr. Piper seems to assume that a question about injustice would arise only if Paul really had pictured God as acting unjustly (according to any humane standard of justice). But why assume that? Is it not enough that God is prepared to violate an

inadequate cultural standard of justice? By all the conventions governing ancient Hebrew society, the birthright, the blessing, and the headship of the tribal family should have passed from Isaac to Esau, not from Isaac to Jacob; and that alone would suffice to give relevance to a question about injustice. But in fact the question seems to have arisen from a deeper consideration: the implication in Paul's teaching that Gentiles could attain "righteousness through faith" (9:30) and could do so without converting to Judaism, without keeping the Jewish law, and without having their males circumcised. Such a teaching was utterly repugnant to many of Paul's contemporaries, almost as repugnant as his teaching that Israel as a whole had failed to attain such righteousness; and such a teaching seemed to imply that God, having broken his promise to Abraham, was unjustly extending his mercy to the Gentiles. Just how strongly some of Paul's contemporaries felt about this is illustrated nicely by the story in Acts 22 of Paul's defense of himself before some of his Jewish brethren. They listened patiently, we are told, until he informed them of his mission to the Gentiles-at which point "they lifted up their voices and said, 'Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he ought not to live' " (22:22). Many of Paul's contemporaries, it seems, were exclusivists who no more wanted God's grace to extend to the Gentiles than Jonah wanted it to extend to the Ninevites. This, indeed, seems to me the perennial heresy within the Judeo-Christian tradition: the attempt to restrict God's mercy to a chosen few. But to all those who would so restrict God's mercy, Paul replies with God's words to Moses: "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion" (9:15). And let us no longer mistake these wondrous words for an expression of God's right to withhold his mercy from some. The issue here is God's right to extend mercy to the Gentiles, not his right to withhold mercy; as Professor Frederic Bush has pointed out, Exodus 33:19 (which Paul is quoting) stresses the intensity of God's mercy, not its indeterminacy:

In point of fact, the meaning that the expression is normally given in English, i.e., an arbitrary expression of God's free, sovereign will, makes almost no sense in the context lot Exodus 33:79]. Rather, the phrase is equiva lent to "I am indeed the one who is gracious and merciful." ("'I am Who I Am': Moses and the Name of God," Theology News and Notes, Pasadena: Fuller Theological Seminary, Dec., 1976, p. 11)

To all those who would confine God to an inadequate cultural standard of justice, therefore, Paul exclaims: "Consider who God is. His mercy cannot be so confined."

Whatever the correct interpretation of Romans 9:15, however, it seems fair to say that none of Piper's objections poses a successful challenge to my thesis concerning the vessels of wrath. One objection is badly confused, one is beside the point altogether, and the one just considered is simply mistaken. There are many reasons, compatible with my thesis, for why the question of God's injustice might have arisen. Moreover, Piper's own interpretation of Romans 9 is apparently based upon the false assumption that Paul regarded his unbelieving kinsmen as irrevocably rejected by God. If Piper could prove that assumption, I would in fact concede to him the entire controversy over the correct interpretation of Romans 9-11; but he gives us, unfortunately, a bald assertion only and no argument.

II

Consider now Piper's expanded argument for a doctrine of everlasting punishment. Has he in fact made a strong case? If so, I fail to see what it is. He admits that kolasin aionian means "punishment of the age to come," but then goes on to insist that Jesus regarded the age to come as "an eternal age" (p. 13)-a remark that seems to me neither true nor relevant to the issue at hand. So far as I know, Jesus never even addressed the literal meaning of aionios is not "everlasting" but "pertaining to an age."

the question of how long the age to come might last, or how many future ages there might be; and even if the coming age is an everlasting age (which is largely a matter of definition, I suppose), it's a simple nonsequitur to infer that therefore the punishment associated with that age will last for the duration of the age. Moreover, Piper simply hasn't come to grips with these facts:

(1) the literal meaning of aionios is not "everlasting" but something like "pertaining to an age"; so the burden rests with Piper to prove that in the relevant contexts it has the extended meaning of "everlasting."

(2) We know of contexts in which the term can't mean "everlasting," and we have no reason to believe that in these contexts it is being employed in a special or extraordinary sense. Indeed, within the confines of a single sentence (Rom. 16:25-26), Paul uses this term once in connection with God himself and once in a context where it can't mean "everlasting"; so the term evidently does not mark a sharp distinction between limited and unlimited duration.

(3) As anyone familiar with the parables of Jesus knows, Jesus' remarks about future punishment occur in contexts in which there is as much symbolism, and as much hyperbole, as there is anywhere in Scripture. Are we to conclude, therefore, that in contexts such as these aionios must mean "everlasting" and cannot be interpreted as a handy reference to the age to come? That would be a strange exegetical argument indeed.

But what about the notorious warnings in the book of Hebrews and Jesus' remark about the unpardonable sin? Do these imply a doctrine of everlasting punishment? One passage that Piper cites, Hebrews 12:16-17, is clearly beside the point, but should perhaps be mentioned anyway because of Esau's importance to our previous discussion. This passage, however, says no more than can be found in Genesis 27-namely, that once Esau had lost his father's blessing, he was not permitted to regain it even though "he lifted up his voice and wept" (27:38). Nor is Piper altogether accurate when he introduces Hebrews 6:4-6: "For it is impossible to restore to repentance those who have once been enlightened . .

. if they commit apostasy." Contrary to what Piper would have us believe, this passage is neither a comment upon nor an explication of the term "eternal judgment," which appears coincidentally in 6:2. The context is this. After expressing dismay at the immaturity of the Hebrew Christians (5:11-14), the author urges them to "leave the elementary doctrines of Christ and go on to maturity" (6:1). And Hebrews 6:4-6, interestingly enough, is one of the reasons he offers. There is, he seems to say, little point in continuing to review very elementary doctrines for the sake of the apostate; it won't do any good anyway. It's simply not possible, by ordinary means, to restore the apostate to repentance. But what is the nature of the impossibility in question here? Is it a logical impossibility? That will hardly do. Is it, then, that God is unwilling to permit repentance in the apostate? That is not what the text says. The problem with the apostate, we are told, is that they have already been enlightened; having known the truth, they have refused it and have thus become, in a very real sense, unable to repent. The impossibility, then, is a kind of psychological impossibility, one that arises when one sets one's will against the truth and refuses enlightenment.

But that seems to be the very kind of impossibility covered by Jesus' statement about the conversion of the rich: "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26). When one becomes apostate, one can no longer be reached by ordinary methods of preaching or by a revelation of truth; but fortunately, God has more than one means of correction at his disposal!

Consider, in this connection, the so-called unforgivable sin and the warning in Hebrews 10:25-31. I have no doubt that both Jesus and the author of Hebrews are deadly serious here, and I have no doubt that some sins, or perhaps some sinful conditions, cannot effectively be forgiven, at least not in the full biblical sense which implies reconciliation. It's hard to see, for instance, how the deliberate and persistent refusal to accept forgiveness, or the deliberate and persistent refusal to repent, or the deliberate and persistent refusal to accept enlightenment, could effectively be forgiven. The problem in cases such as these does not lie with God's unwillingness to forgive but with the person's unwillingness to accept forgiveness. When from the depths of one's being one deliberately shuts out the Spirit, one opens up a chasm, it seems, that cannot be bridged by forgiveness alone. And Scripture does leave open the possibility, at least, that a person may shut out the Spirit entirely. Then, perhaps, a person must simply bear that punishment which is the inevitable consequence of his sin: "For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire, which will consume the adversaries" (Heb. 10:26-27). Nor should one, I think, tone down the language here or try to soften this terrible image of "a fury of fire." Our God is a consuming fire (Heb. 12:29), as George MacDonald never tired of reminding us, and the fires of hell are but the most terrible expression of the love of God. As a symbol of that which consumes all that is false within us (see Cor. 3:15), the image of fire is one that permeates all of Scripture and cannot be dispensed with. It represents not only the most terrible, but also the most irresistible, form that God's purifying love can take. One way or another, Christ shall defeat his enemies, and his enemies shall in time gladly be defeated, and death itself shall be consumed in the lake of fire.

The main point for our present purposes, however, is this. Piper cites Hebrews 6:4-6 without even considering what kind of impossibility might be in question here, and he cites the unforgivable sin without providing any theory of what that sin might be. Then, he draws an inference that simply doesn't follow: that one who cannot be reached by forgiveness will never in any way be purged of his sin. What we have at this point is essentially a failure of imagination: the failure to see that some people may need punishment, not forgiveness; and if that's what a person needs, then that's just what a God who seeks the perfection of all will give. We thus come full circle back to the question that originally sparked this exchange between Piper and myself. Does God love and seek to perfect all persons? Or does he love and seek to perfect some persons only? If his love truly extends to all, then even the unforgivable sin , and the warnings in Hebrews must be interpreted in a manner that is compatible with that love. But if his love extends to a "fortunate" few only, then we still face the question set forth in my original article (IZJ, Feb., 1983): How can we possibly love (or worship) a God who refuses to love some of our own loved ones? And how are we to distinguish such a God from the devil himself? So far as I can tell, Dr. Piper has yet to provide a convincing answer to these questions.

Piper's last stand
Minniapolis

I have read Thomas Talbott's third article in our exchange, entitled "Vessels of Wrath and the Unpardonable Sin." I am content now to let someone else pick up the debate. The two previous articles that I wrote in response to Professor Talbott's universalism are to my mind a satisfactory answer to his position. I would simply ask that serious readers lay the articles side by side and weigh the relative merits of the arguments. A hearty thanks to the editors for allowing us so much space to debate this tremendously important topic.

- John Piper