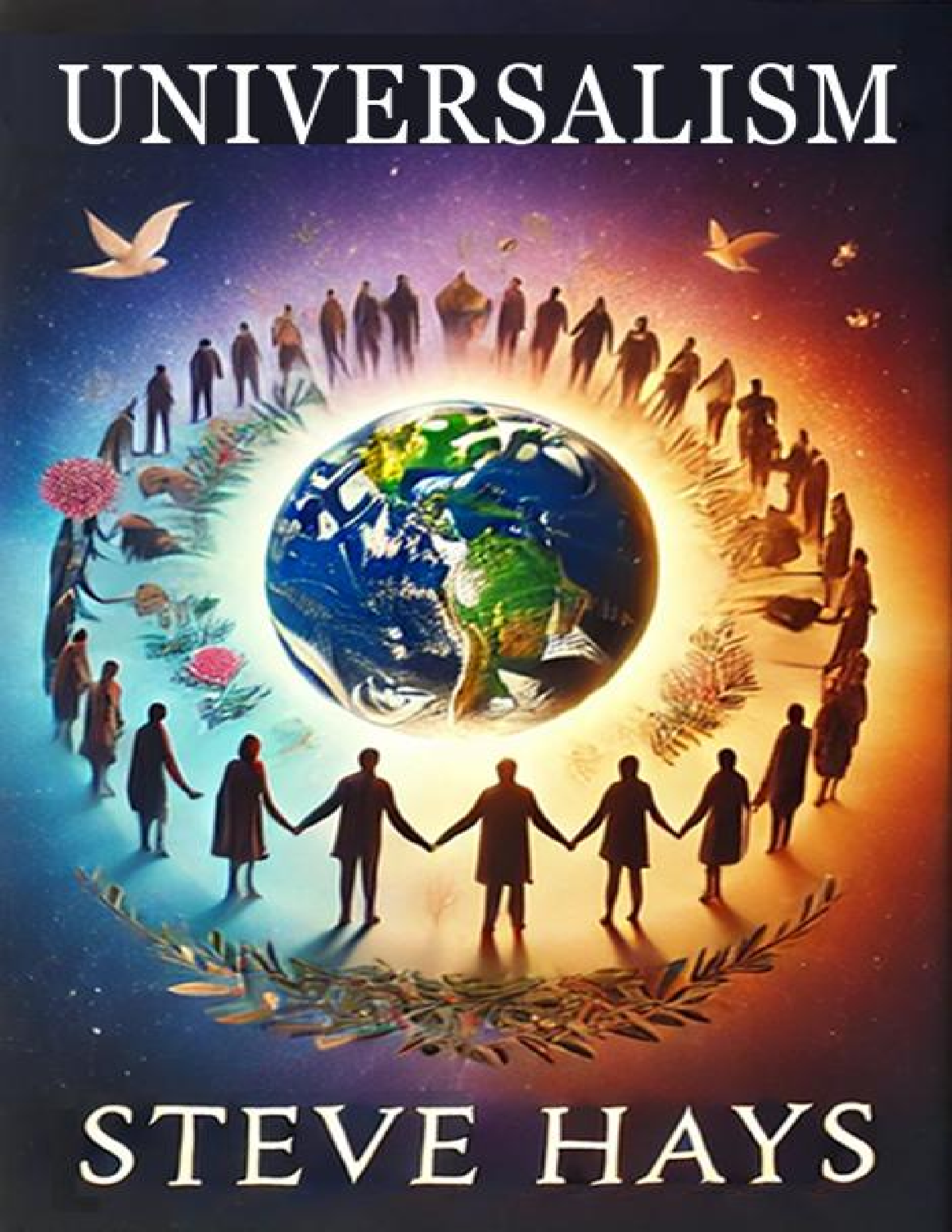
UNIVERSALISM



STEVE HAYS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Universalism

The One Purpose of God

Jan Bonda's **The One Purpose of God** (Eerdmans 1998) is the third book-length monograph in defense of universalism that I've reviewed, the other two being Adams' **Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God**, as well as Talbott's **The Inescapable Love of God**.

I've chosen these three books because they present the most astute defense of universalism on the market. Adams is more philosophical, Talbott philosophical and exegetical, while Boda is basically exegetical, with a certain amount of historical and pastoral theology thrown in. It is striking that Talbott and Boda both hail from the Dutch Reformed community. This bears out Chesterton's old quip that universalism is an optimistic form of Calvinism!

Although conditionalism was the initial alternative favored by "evangelicals," it is being overtaken by universalism. This is not surprising. Conditionalism is a compromise position transitional to universalism. Anyone who finds everlasting torment to be morally or emotionally repugnant will find annihilationism about as distasteful, for the difference is a difference of degree, not of kind.

Conditionalism is a negative position, a reactionary position. But universalism entails a drastic deconstruction and reconstruction of traditional Christian theology. It presents a positive, albeit radical alternative to the traditional reading of Scripture.

Bonda's book comes highly recommended. Of course, the

author can’t be held responsible for what they say, but they’re an important barometer of the theological climate.

On the back cover, Michael Bauman tells us that "what Charles Chauncy did for Rom 5, Bonda’s volume does for the entire epistle." Ah, yes, good old Charles Chauncy, the gadfly of Christian revival and Presbyterian turned Unitarian. Not all of us would regard that historical endorsement as altogether auspicious.

John Hick pipes in with the admonition that "the traditional doctrine of eternal punishment shatters the Christian conception of a limitlessly loving God. Many of us have rejected the doctrine for that reason."

But given Hick’s Kantian religious epistemology, how is he in a position to know what God is like? To know that God is a loving God--much less a limitlessly loving God (whatever that might mean)? Isn’t it essential to Hick’s pluralism that God be unknowable? We may know "that" there is a God, but not "what" he (she? it? them?) is/are like?

For his part, John Sanders informs us that this is "easily the most biblically grounded case for universalism to appear in some time." For that reason alone, the book is worth reviewing.

The book comes with a foreword by Sierd Woudstra. His foreword doesn’t add anything substantive to the argument, but merely highlights certain strands in the body of the text.

Bonda also has a preface. He and Woudstra indulge in a bit of name-dropping as they mention their encouraging

correspondence with Herman Ridderbos and Hendrikus Berkhof. This is a telling commentary on the sorry state of the church in Holland.

As you might expect, Bonda's book was originally written in Dutch. I'll be referring to the English translation by Bruinsma. It is possible that this will result in my seizing upon certain words or connotations thereof that do not reflect the original text.

However, the audience for the English edition is not the same as the audience for the Dutch edition. And the audience for the English edition is, potentially, at least, far wider than the audience for the original text. It is entirely appropriate, therefore, to review the English edition on its own terms, as it stands. My only interest is with the argument, and not its degree of correspondence with the original. Whether the argument is identical with the case made by Bonda is irrelevant. For convenience, I'll attribute the argument to him. And I'll confine my comments to what I regard as the leading strands of his argument.

Bonda begins with a couple of tearjerkers. This is a softening-up exercise to win the reader's sympathy in advance of any argument.

One is the case of a parishioner who was heartbroken over the fate of her brother, who had died outside the faith. Says Boda,

> "Did this mean that all she could do was accept God's judgment? Was that what I was to say? I could not bring myself to do that" (2).

This is, of course, one of the most wrenching situations in pastoral ministry. We see a person in pain. We'd like to offer some words of consolation, but we can't. Yes, any reader can empathize with that situation.

But this is not a problem for pastoral ministry alone. There are many professions where you must be the bearer of bad news, where you are called upon dispense devastating, soul-crushing news. The oncologist who must tell the parents that their five-year old has terminal cancer. The policeman who must tell a widow that her husband was just shot to death. The commanding officer who must write a letter of condolence to grieving parents. The doctor who must go into the waiting room to tell the parents that their only son died of an overdose. The fireman who must tell a child that her mommy didn't make it out of the house in time. The detective who must tell the parents that their abducted daughter was raped and murdered. And the list goes on.

Tragedy is a fixture of life in a fallen world. We can't put a happy face on everything that happens just to make the orphaned and the abandoned, the victims and the bereaved feel better. Not every story has a happy ending. You can't rewrite the ending if you don't like how it comes out. Turn every tragedy into a comedy. The knight rescues the princess from the dragon, and they live happily ever after. The princess breaks the spell with a kiss, and they live happily ever after.

Of course, there's a sense in which universalism is a fairy tale come true–if you believe it. But that's a separate argument. My immediate point is that terrible things happen every day. If a pastor can't bring himself to state a hard truth, he should leave the ministry.

And suppose, for the sake of argument, that her brother were a convicted killer. Everyone is related to someone. What would he say to the mother of the victim? Would what is comforting to a relative of the convict be comforting to a relative of the victim? It isn't possible to make everyone happy all of the time.

Bonda also introduces the case of a life-long friend who broke with the faith. His friend found the text of the baptismal service especially offensive: "O almighty, eternal God. Thou who hast according to Thy severe judgment punished the unbelieving and unrepentant world with the flood, and hast according to Thy great mercy saved and protected believing Noah and his family; Thou who hast drowned the obstinate Pharaoh and all his host in the Red Sea and led Thy people Israel through the midst of the sea upon dry ground--by which baptism was signified... (5)"

This his friend characterizes as "unashamed sadism" (5). And what is the reader to make of that reaction?

To begin with, there’s nothing wrong with our having a soft spot for a friend or family member. That's only natural. Such fellow feeling goes with being a member of the human race, with our emotional codependency as needy creatures.

We don’t have to feel the same way about everyone. At the same time, there are limits–even to friendship. It’s one thing to fix a parking ticket for a friend, quite another to buy him an airline ticket so that he can skip the country if he’s complicit in a fatal hit-and-run. Friends and family do not command our ultimate allegiance--or if they do, then our loyalties are seriously skewed.

God is not kin to us. God is not subject to emotional arm-twisting. This is one reason that God is a just judge. And

that is why, by the same token, a human judge must recuse himself if the defendant is a friend or family member.

This is a book in defense of universalism, but notice what his friend finds so very outrageous. There is nothing in the text of the baptismal service–at least the portion seized upon by his friend, that addresses eternal punishment. Rather, the punishment in view is a historical judgment. Do Bonda and his friend take equal exception to any form of divine judgment whatsoever? Does Bonda deny the historicity of the Flood and the Exodus?

Bonda is incensed at a God "who did not show his goodwill toward humankind" (5) in general. So be it! But I don't see Bonda's friend in the same light that Bonda does. Instead of waxing indignant that God didn't save everyone, his friend ought, instead, to be humble and thankful that God favored him with birth and life and length of days in a Christian land. Indeed, the damned will judge Bonda's friend all the more harshly for doing so much less with so much more (Mt 11:21-24). It is often the blesséd who take their blessings for granted. Those that lead a charmed existence within the walled garden of the church, shielded from the full fury of the wilderness, bite and spite the hand of a loving providence–like a pardoned offender who lashes out at the judge because the judge did not pardon every other offender. To be such an ingrate does despite to the very marrow of mercy.

From there, Bonda switches to a primer in historical theology, with many interesting quotes from Augustine. Bonda finds the Augustinian argument downright "shocking." I, however, find the argument to be, in the main, reverent and reasonable. It is true that one can pick apart some of the detailed exegesis, as well as his privative theory of evil, but his theodicy is broadly and deeply

Scriptural.

It is not as though the Reformed are unacquainted with the Arminian side of the argument. This is very well trodden ground. In every generation, the same threadbare criticisms are voiced, as if they'd never been answered before. For what it's worth, I myself have written lengthy reviews of books by Geisler, Picirilli, and Walls in which these men marshal their best arguments against Calvinism and in favor of Arminianism.

It is funny to see Bonda take Augustine to task for his Neoplatonic theory of evil when he goes on to oppose Origen to Augustine–even though Origen is far more indebted to Neoplatonism than Augustine ever was.

Bonda takes umbrage at the idea that

> "God uses this lostness to reveal how, through his grace, he freely gives them his salvation. Does this mean that salvation is bought with the lost state of the doomed; that it is enjoyed at the expense of their lostness?...What would we think of someone who would bring happiness to others in such a way? And what would we think of people who want to be made happy in such a way?" (24).

By way of comment:

i) This is the wrong question to ask. The first question to ask is not, "What would we think?" but, "What does God think?" Reality is not a designer dress, cut-and-tailored to suit our personal prejudice.

ii) Salvation is bought by the blood of Christ, not the lost state of the damned. To say that God uses the state of the damned to reveal the gratuity of grace does not attribute redemptive value to their demise.

iii) Bonda disregards the crucial distinction between innocence and guilt. God does no wrong to sinners by damning them. Their damnation is just punishment for sin.

iv) The eschatological reversal of fortunes in a common theme in Scripture. The godly who suffered in this life will prosper in the afterlife, while the ungodly who prospered in this life will suffer in the afterlife. If Bonda has a problem with that, he is at war with a major theme of Scripture.

Bonda tells the reader that Barth convinced him of the unbiblical character of Calvinism (25, n.33). Needless to say, a number of Reformed theologians (e.g., Frame, Klooster, Van Til) have indicted Barth for an unbiblical doctrine of election.

Even a very sympathetic mediating theologian like Berkouwer has leveled many of the same criticisms. For that matter, Jürgen Moltmann, who's the greatest living universalist, has this to say:

> "Calvin wrote disciplined commentaries in addition to his Institutio. Barth's Epistle to the Romans does not fit into the category of scholarly New Testament commentaries...Barth's dialectical doctrine of predestination cannot be found in this form in the

> Bible, nor can the magnificent structure of his doctrine of reconciliation," **God Will Be All in All**, R. Bauckham, ed. (T&T Clark (1999), 231.

Bonda summarizes, with evident disdain, the view of Dante that "here piety can exist only when there is no more compassion and vice versa: No one can have faith if he allows himself to be compassionate" (26).

This calls for a couple of comments:

i) What Dante has in view is the state of the damned, not the state of the living. Yes, there comes a point at which continued compassion is out of place–when continued compassion is a synonym for sympathy with evil. In hell, there is no distinction between the sinner and the sin.

ii) Again, this is not about compassion in general, but compassion for the damned. Even in this life, mercy or empathy for the wicked can be out of place. It is morally deranged to feel the same way about Stalin and his innocent victims.

Bonda summarizes, with palpable disapprobation, the view of Aquinas that "the saved will in fact rejoice at the pains of those who are condemned" (26). It should be unnecessary to point out that you can find exactly that same sentiment expressed at length in holy scripture (e.g., Rev 16-19).

But, of course, universalism is committed to this amoral attitude. Like the übermensch and the psychopath, the universalist is beyond good and evil. For the universalist, morality is a vice, not a virtue, for too much morality is judgmental. To be a universalist you must gouge out your eyes and cultivate a state of moral blindness. Once you

repudiate the principle of retributive justice in favor of remedial punishment, you are wedded to moral relativism.

He goes on to say:

> "We have grown up with Augustine's arguments...we listened to this teaching and accepted it. It was horrifying, but nothing could be done about it. Who were we to argue with God...You had no option but to accept it passively. But it kept churning in your thoughts. You could not voice it because to do so was sinful. Nonetheless, it was always there: How marvelous would it be if God were different!" (27).

Notice the sudden shift from the autobiographical third-person to the compulsory, inclusive second-person. This is so characteristic of the moral conceit of the universalist. He assumes that everyone feels the same way as he does, only a universalist has the courage to cast off his shackles.

Unlike Bonda, I didn't grow up in the Reformed church, much less a Reformed culture and country. I do not find the Augustinian picture to be at all horrifying. Sobering? Yes. Humbling? Yes.

Actually, we need not be passive recipients of the Word. To the contrary, we should follow the motto of Anselm: I believe so that I may understand. We happily and trustfully submit to whatever God tells us, and then proceed to seek out the wisdom of his ways.

If you can't trust in God, if God is not trustworthy, then the game is up. If you can't bring yourself to trust in God, then you're not a believer. It's a simple as that.

This is not a choice between a questioning or unquestioning

faith. It is because we have an unquestioning faith in the goodness of God, in his wisdom, veracity, and justice, that we are free to ask questions. But we ask questions the way a child will ask a question of his father. You don't question someone you don't trust? If you can't trust him, you can't trust the answer. We never question God's answers; rather, his answers supply the raw material for our follow-up questions.

I do not wish that God were other than he is. The assumption here is that if I were God, hell would not exist. Now, there are many men who feel that way. This is a great dividing line.

There are people who never get it. For them, sin is not a big deal. No matter what they see, no matter what they hear, they can never bring themselves to take sin all that seriously. They are a little too nice for their own good. This is the dividing line between Augustine and Pelagius, Erasmus and Luther, Salodeto and Calvin, Butler and Whitefield, Chauncy and Edwards.

The stranger to grace is oftentimes a more likable man than the champion of grace. He oozes with charm. He's magnanimous and gregarious. He has a deep and unshakable faith in the goodness of man. If you were sharing a dorm or ship cabin, poor old Jeremiah wouldn't make the cut!

The nominal Christian is a half-breed–having the church for his mother and the world for his father. If he were a purebred pagan, he wouldn't be half so gentle and generous. But as a half-breed, he's used to living off the fat of the Motherland, basking in the radiant warmth of maternal grace, dining on the tender morsels and juicy appetizers from the oven of Mother Church. It is easy for

this cornfed freeloader to be easy-going because he’s had it so easy all the days of his life. But by the same token, it only takes a little adversity to scratch the pretty coat of paint and instantly expose a very cold and steely frame beneath.

It’s like the life of a rich man. When you’re rich, everyone goes out of their way for you--but as soon as you lose your fortune, you lose your friends.

No one really wants to see everyone saved. Ironically, the appeal of universalism is far more provincial than that. The only people any of us care about at a personal level are those close to us. Everyone else is an abstraction. We project our feelings for our loved ones onto strangers, but this extension is purely intellectual, for we don’t truly feel the same way about a stranger as we do about a friend or family member–not unless we get to know them, to befriend them.

Not only do we not wish to see everyone saved, but as Wouldstra is candid enough to admit, "all of us can think of individuals we would ‘hate’ to see go to heaven" (xviii). So let us, once and for all time, drop all the mock sentiment, all the false piety, all the perfunctory and hypocritical cant about how hard it is to stomach the doctrine of hell.

It is important, here, to distinguish between guilt and modesty. A Christian is very self-conscious about being an object of grace. That is good. We ought to feel self-conscious, even to the point of embarrassment, about how God visited his mercy and grace upon the likes of you and me, of all people.

But we should not, on that account, feel survivor’s guilt. We should feel infinitely humbled by grace. We should feel our

guilt. We should sense how undeserving we are of grace. But we should never act as though we were in the wrong to be favored by God when others were passed by. A Christian is a trophy of God's grace. This reflects badly on us, but well upon God.

Bonda introduces the nonsensical charge that hell is blasphemous. Nonsensical, I say, because hell and blasphemy are both Biblical categories to begin with. This is just a rhetorical ruse–a calculated ploy to put the Bible-believer on the defensive by charging him with heresy before he can charge you with heresy.

Bonda takes issue with Piper's contention that there are two types of divine love. This is, however, a separate issue from either reprobation or damnation. Not every Calvinist would agree with Piper's bifurcation. It depends on how you define common grace.

Bonda also trots out Talbott's objection that a parent can't love a God who would predestine his child to hell. I've already written a lengthy review of his book, so I'll just confine myself to a few brief comments:

i) As a practical matter, countless Christian parents do love God despite the fact that some of their errant children may well be hell-bound.

ii) Conversely, there are parents who spoil their kids rotten; who lie, cheat and steal for their kids; who will brook no discipline or breath of criticism, who will sue if their delinquent kids are expelled from school, who will buy a plane ticket if their kids

commit murder. Surely we need to draw a distinction between good parenting and bad parenting, between godly love and godless love.

iii) In addition, is this an objection to hell, or to reprobation? Since a universalist would take exception to hell whether or not you plug the fire and brimstone into a predestinarian scheme, it's a red herring at this point for Bonda to bring Calvinism into the argument.

iv) Actually, predestination makes hell easier to defend, because it means that hell serves a purpose in the wisdom and the justice of God.

v) The universalist is committed to a deterministic scheme of some sort himself–otherwise he cannot guarantee the salvation of all. So predestination is not the salient issue.

vi) Everyone is someone's "child." Charles Manson was someone's child. To be someone's child is hardly exculpatory. If a grown man commits rape and murder, can he hope to be acquitted by lifting his shirt and pointing to his navel? Innocent by reason of

a belly-button? If this is the best that a universalist can do, he does more damage to the credibility of his cause than anything I could ever hurl at it.

Bonda says that we should ditch the doctrine of hell because it induces anxiety in insecure believers. To this a couple of replies are in order:

i) This is a perfect illustration of just how mindless and childish univeralism really is. You might as well say that we should stop believing in natural disasters or fatal accidents or terminal illness or violent crime for fear the belief in such a dire possibility might give us bad dreams, panic attacks, depression, hypertension, and the like. And, indeed, some people are plagued by irrational worries and crippling phobias.

But that has nothing to do with the reality of the risk. These dangers do exist. Whether the peril is great or vanishingly slight is quite independent of my anxieties. And whether there is a hell is quite independent of my blood pressure or insomnia. Is a cliff not sheer because I'm afraid of heights? For better or worse, the world I inhabit isn't all that

accommodating!

ii) The solution is to put fear into its proper perspective. Some professing believers have good reason to fear, for they are only nominal believers. Some true believers lack the assurance of salvation because their theology is defective. As with a disease, the cure is not to pretend there is no illness, but to correctly diagnose and treat the disease.

When Bonda says that some believers become so despondent over hell that they kill themselves, this evinces their unreasonable state of mind, for if you're really afraid that you might be hellbound, then suicide would be a fate worse than death! A real pastor would talk them through their confusion and despair.

This is all before Bonda gets around to exegesis. One methodological flaw in his analysis is the way in which he jumps about. Instead of interpreting each author on his own terms, he will start with one author, then insert material from another author. Frankly, this looks like a way of caulking the gaps where his argument breaks down.

Boda devotes the first two sections to the intercession of Abraham and Moses in order to show that the final judgment is not the final word on the fate of the lost. But there are several problems with this line of argument:

i) His examples involve historical judgments, not the final judgment.

ii) His examples illustrate the value of intercessory prayer. But in Scripture, as well as church history, you also have the phenomenon of unanswered prayer. Just as God is sovereign in judgment, so is he sovereign in prayer.

iii) As a matter of fact, God did visit his judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah, and in quite spectacular fashion, as a future deterrent.

iv) Bonda tries to get around this by appeal to Ezk 16:53,55. However, this appeal falls flat on two counts:

a) It disregards the allegorical character of Ezk 16.

b) It would, in any event, have reference to future "Sodomites," and not to those who perished in the past. If anything, this allegory is prophecy of the New Covenant.

v) As a matter of fact, Israel did incur the judgment of God, many times over. What survives is a remnant. A remnant survives the flood (Noah's family). A remnant survives Sodom (Lot's family). A remnant survives the Exodus (Caleb, Joshua). A remnant survives the Assyrian deportation. A remnant survives the Babylonian captivity.

vi) Intercession has its limits (e.g. Jer 7:16; 11:14; 14-15).

Boda then spends a few pages on the parable of the prodigal son. But, once again, he's grasping at straws:

i) Even if this parable were consistent with universalism, it is hardly a prooftext. It doesn't imply universalism.

ii) For that matter, it is equally consistent with

Calvinism. The prodigal is the backslider. The elect can backslide. But by the grace of God, the backslider, if elect, will be restored.

iii) And although the younger son is reconciled to his father, the older son is estranged from his father–and for the very same reason. The action of restoring the younger son results in the equal and opposite reaction of the older son, who is alienated by reception accorded his younger brother.

iv) Such a one-sided appeal turns a blind eye to the parables of judgment (Mt 24-25; Lk 12:35-46).

In passing, Bonda takes the distinction between many stripes and few stripes (Lk 12:47-48) to indicate a temporary punishment. But how does that follow?

i) If you take "few" stripes to indicate temporary punishment, in contrast to "many" stripes, then you would have to infer that some of the damned suffer for a while, while others suffer forever. But if you soften the contrast, then you no longer have an argument at all. This illustrates the limitations of

figurative language.

ii) Why not cash out the contrast in terms of degree rather than duration? As intensive rather than extensive? The duration is the same, but the severity is not. Surely this is a familiar distinction. Some forms of punishment are sterner than others. A shorter punishment may even be harsher.

He then turns, as he must, to Mt 25:46. His interpretation is nothing short of remarkable:

> "Yet it is clear that the sins Jesus lists in this passage do not constitute the blasphemy against the Spirit. Assuming that Jesus did not utter this severe word with the intention of contradicting what he said moments before, we must accept that the sins mentioned in this passage will eventually be forgiven. This means, however strange this may sound to us, that this statement of Jesus about eternal punishment is not the final word for those who are condemned," 70.

Strange indeed! By way of reply: to single out the unpardonable sin, committed in this life, does not imply that everyone will be forgiven of every other sin even if they die impenitent. To say that sins are forgivable is not to say that sins are forgiven. That is to confuse a necessary condition with a sufficient condition. In Scripture, remission is contingent on contrition and atonement.

Bonda then tries to shore up his assertion in a footnote:

> "the Greek word for eternity (aion) is translated both ‘age’--’this age,’ and the ‘future age’ (Mt 12:32)–and world ‘the end of the world’ (Mt 13:40,49; 28:20). In both cases a time period is intended that has an end" (70).

By way of comment:

i) This would not be an argument for universal salvation, but universal annihilation. Based on the symmetry of Mt 25:46, "eternal" life as well as "eternal" damnation would each enjoy a limited shelf-life.

ii) Bonda offers no semantic evidence that "aion" bears this singular import. He says he consulted a number of reference works, but it doesn’t show. All the reference works that I consulted (*BAGD*, *DNTT, EDNT*, Louw-Nida, Turner: *Christian Words*) boil down to much the same thing: you have a handful of occurrences of the aion/aionias word-group where the it bears a past temporal sense ("ages ago"); another handful where it bears a past atemporal sense ("before the world"); and yet another handful where it bears a spatial sense ("world without end").

In most occurrences it either bears a future temporal sense ("never ending"), or an eschatological sense ("the age to come"). In Johannine usage, the future temporal sense ("eternal life") takes its inception in the present. Now the future temporal sense is operative in at least some of the traditional prooftexts for everlasting punishment, while the eschatological sense is operative in the others.

iii) Even if we limit the force of "aion" to the "age" or the "world" to come, that only pushes the question back a step, for we then must ask, how long is the age to come? And

surely one of the distinguishing features of the two ages, in Biblical eschatology, is that the present age is characterized by mortality, as over against the future age. The future age is ageless.

iv) In the Apocalypse, you even have a duplex form ("to the ages of the ages"), which is repeatedly applied to God as well as creaturely agents.

The universalist is in a bind. Unlike the conditionalist, the universalist must affirm that the hellbound will live forever, but disaffirm that they will live forever in hell. He needs the eternality, but not the fixity, of the afterlife, to make room for postmortem conversion. There are, however, no passages of Scripture, whether individually or in combination, that drive a wedge between fixity and perpetuity, or teach, or even permit, a postmortem reversal of fortunes.

Sensing, I guess, the inadequacy of his exegesis, Bonda takes another bite at Mt 25:46 later on:

> "Now his blood will be given as a ransom for many (Mt 20:28). His blood will be poured out for many (26:28). Twice we read 'for many.' who are these 'many'? They are the many who have entered the wide gate and walk the easy road that leads to destruction (Mt 7:13; cf. Mt 22:14). These are the same people of whom he just said that they will end in 'eternal punishment'" (218).

By way of reply:

i) This interpretation is nonsensical on its own grounds. In Mt 7:13-14 & Mt 22:14, the "many" are relative to "the few." But in universalism, such a contrast is meaningless. In

universalism, the choice is not between the comparative contrast of the many over as against the few (a la Calvinism), but between the superlative contrast of the salvation of all (inclusivism) as over against the salvation of some (exclusivism).

ii) It clearly does violence to Mt 7:13-14 to turn two divergent roads into one convergent road.

iii) The "many" is Mt 20:20 & 26:28 is not an antonym for the few or a synonym for all. Rather, it is a literary allusion to Isa 53:11-12. In this chapter, "many" and "all" are interchangeable designations for the covenant community. The Messiah lays down his life for his people.

Bonda goes on to claim that

> "eternal punishment does not forever continue, since that punishment itself, is not his goal. When God's purpose has been achieved, there is no need for further punishment--for sin no longer exists!" (219).

By way of reply: notice how this turns the word of God on its head. In Bonda's interpretive alchemy, "eternal" punishment is temporary. "Unquenchable" fire is quenched. The "undying" worm dies of hunger. Bonda systematically converts Biblical affirmations into Biblical negations, and Biblical negations into Biblical affirmations. This is exactly how the Devil would rewrite Scripture.

Continuing,

> "Let us review: The word 'eternal' has played a major role in the doctrine of eternal punishment. But what Scripture tells us about God's purpose with this punishment remained a secondary concern. We have

> seen that this divine purpose must be our first interest in any Biblical discourse about the eternity of the punishment. Never is there any other purpose than that the unbeliever return to obedience to God. Nowhere in Scripture do we find a statement that tells us that God wants those who are punished to suffer without end–that is not the purpose for which God created humans! If we keep this singular purpose of God in focus, we understand that eternal punishment is punishment that has as its only purpose an obedience return to the God of love...When Jesus refers to this punishment as eternal, he simply underlines...the eternal seriousness–of God in pursuing his one and only purpose" (219).

By way of reply:

i) In what sense did the divine purpose remain a secondary consideration in formulating the traditional doctrine? Is the administration of justice not a purposeful activity?

ii) Even if it were a secondary concern, is there something wrong with deriving a doctrine from passages of Scripture which directly and primarily address the subject-matter of the doctrine in question?

iii) This is an ironic complaint to lodge against Calvinism, for no theological tradition shows the same respect for God’s inviolable purpose.

iv) Bonda is using this appeal as an inner canon and winnowing fan to demote and deny the witness of Scripture whenever it comes into conflict with "his" primary concern.

v) Nowhere in Scripture? Isa 66:24? Dan 12:2? Mt 25:41? Mt 25:46? Mk 9:48? 2 Thes 1:9? Jude 7? Jude

9? Rev 14:11? Rev 20:10?

vi) Isn't it simplistic to insist that God can have only one purpose for what he does? Why can't the revelation of his justice be one such purpose? Why can't the revelation of his mercy be another such purpose?

vii) It is difficult to divorce the temporal end of God's creatures from the teleological end of his creatures. Their final destination in time answers to his final design outside of time. And their eternal destiny marks the climactic realization of any ends-means relation.

viii) To equate the threat of eternal punishment with eternal seriousness in God's pursuit of every lost sinner is a form of words which bears no resemblance to the wording, import, or intent of our Lord's usage. This is a wholly artificial gloss that fails to connect at any point with what our Lord ever said or ever meant.

In fairness, though, Bonda defends this reinterpretation by recourse to prophetic usage. By way of reply:

i) Once again, Bonda is confounding historical judgements with eschatological judgments. We need to distinguish preexilic prophecies that have reference to the Exile and Restoration from postexilic prophecies which have reference to the eschaton.

ii) We also need to distinguish oracles that pronounce a common judgment on the nation of Israel from those that pronounce judgment on one party, but deliverance upon another (Isa 26:14,19; 66:24; Dan 12:2)..

iii) On a related, we further need to distinguish judgment on the nation of Israel from the impending or eventual

redemption of the remnant (Isa 1:9; 4:3; 6:11-13; 10:22; 45:20) .

iv) On another related note, also need to distinguish between the end of the old covenant and the inauguration of the new (Jer 31:31-40).

v) Bonda pedals in half-truths. The logic of Isaiah is thus: just as there is but one Maker of men, there is but one Judge and Redeemer of men. Whoever would be saved can only be saved by the one true God.

vi) Bonda is very selective in his citations. In Isaiah you can see inclusivity and exclusivity side-by-side. In Isa 45:22-23 you have a universal form of address, but this is immediately followed, in vv24-25, by a dichotomy between the enemies of God, who shall suffer shame (24), and the people of God, who shall be justified (25). Likewise, in Isaiah 66:23, you have a general expression, immediately followed by a dire pronouncement upon the damned (24).

It isn't hard to relate the two: if there is only one true God, then there is only one true knowledge of God. The God of the Jews is the God of mankind. The saving knowledge of God disclosed to Israel must be revealed in due time to the Gentiles. But just as salvation did not extend to every single Jew, neither does it extend to every single Gentile.

vii) Bonda divorces 45:23 from the taunt-song in 46:1-2. But it's all of a piece. The ancient world was not a democracy. You bowed the knee before your lord and swore fealty to him because he was your lord. What you thought of him was quite beside the point. He was your sovereign, and you were his subject. Even the high "gods" of Babylon must bow before the Lord's emissary (Cyrus). The kingdoms

of Egypt and Mesopotamia were absolute monarchies. This is where we get the phrase "oriental despotism." And the God of Israel is the king of kings.

Bonda rushes by Dan 12:2 in a couple of sentences:

"The text does not deal with a judgment over all the dead...our interest here is limited to the term 'eternal'" eternal life and eternal shame and contempt. Jeremiah mentioned redemption following eternal shame, but Daniel does not" (216).
By way of reply:

i) The comparison with Jeremiah disregards the fourfold distinction I drew above, viz., mass/remnant; old/new covenant; pre/post-Exilic perspective; common judgment/divergent destiny.

ii) Dan 12 is part of a larger oracle targeting the end-time (11:35,40).

iii) For the rest, one can hardly improve on Joyce Baldwin at this juncture:

> "Hebrew rabbim, 'many,' tends to mean 'all,' as in Deut 7:1; Isa 22, where 'all nations' becomes 'many peoples' in the parallel v3; and in Isa 52:14-15; 53:11-12, where this key-word occurs no less than five times, with an inclusive significance. As Jeremias points out, the Hebrew word kol, 'all,' means either 'totality' or 'sum'; there is no word for 'all' as a plural. For this rabbim comes to mean 'the great multitude,' 'all'; cf. 'Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth...' (NIV). The emphasis is not upon many as opposed to all, but rather to the numbers involved.

> In the light of this usage our author can be seen to be thinking of a general resurrection prior to judgment. Jesus almost certainly had this verse in mind in Mt 25:46 & Jn 5:28-29," J. Baldwin, **Daniel** (IVP 1978), 204.

Moving from the prophets to Paul, he cites Rom 14:10-11 & Phil 2:10-11. Yet is hard to see how the passage in Romans is a prooftext for universalism. To begin with, it is on the theme of judgment. In addition, it takes the Christian as the object of divine judgment. But if even the believer must stand before the tribunal of God, what hope is there for the unbeliever?

Although the judicial role is unstated in Phil 2:10-11, that is implicit from the parallel passage in Rom 14:10-11. The person and work of Christ in Phil 2:6-9 have qualified him to be the judge of all the world. I've already discussed the Isaian background of both passages. This is what is meant by the Lordship of Christ.

We have gone from the age of absolute monarchy, to constitutional monarchy, to titular monarchy, to popular sovereignty. We have forgotten what it means to "reign." But the dominion of Christ is the antitype of the oriental despotism. Either submit willingly or be forcibly subjugated.

You can see this theme in the Messianic Psalms (2:9; 110:1-2), which is, in turn, picked up in the NT (1 Cor 15:24-28; Rev 12:5; 19:15). Indeed, the Apocalypse is a NT version of OT holy war. Christ is a warrior-God and conquering king (Rev 19). Hell is a permanent POW camp. His enemies are vanquished and taken captive. The camp has an entrance, but no exit.

In the section on Revelation, Bonda says the following:

> "All nations will come and will worship God (15:4)...In other words, the 'forever and ever' of 14:11 was not the final word! Just as the prophecy about Edom in Isaiah 34:10--from which this imagery of the eternally ascending smoke is borrowed--was not the final word. Isaiah's prophecy and this vision are both related to the destruction of Sodom (Gen 19:24,28). We saw that God's judgment over this city did not imply the end of his compassion for it" (230).

By way of reply:

i) He maunders the meaning of Rev 15:4. As Beale remarks,

> "'All the nations' is a figure of speech (metonymy) by which the whole world is substituted for a part of it in order to emphasize that many will worship, which is in line with 5:9; 7:9ff.; and 14:3. The whole for the part is clearly the meaning where pas ('all') occurs with ethnos ('nation') elsewhere (5:9; 7:9; 13:7; 14:8; 18:3,23)," G. Beale, **The Book of Revelation** (Eerdmans/Paternoster 1999), 797-98. Cf. Bauckham, **Climax of Prophecy** (1993), 238-337 (esp. 312-13.

ii) I've already dealt with the judgment upon Sodom.

iii) The last word on the fate of Edom is Mal 1:1-4, which is decidedly less than sanguine!

iv) The fate of the damned (14:10-11) presents an antithetical parallel to the rest of the saints (14:13). The saints are forever at rest while damned are never at rest.

v) The fate of the damned (14:10-11) presents an antithetical parallel to the adoration of the angels (4:8). As long as the angels shall praise God, the damned shall suffer.

vi) The same time-maker ("forever and ever") is applied to the very life of God (4:9-10; 10:6; 15:7). As long as God shall live, the damned shall suffer.

vii) The fate of the devil and his minions (20:10) presents an antithetical parallel to the reign of the saints (22:5). As long as the saints shall reign, the damned shall suffer.

For better or worse, the state of all parties is fixed for all time. The timeline is isochronic for God and Christ, saints and angels, devils and idolaters. And once the die is cast, there is no reversal of fortunes.

Bonda then says that those outside the New Jerusalem (22:11) are invited to come inside (22:17). But this commits a level-confusion. The invitation is directed, not to the narrative characters, but to the reader, the audience, the congregation (of the seven churches of Asia Minor) to whom the prophecy is addressed.

> "God has created man with the intention that all should love one another, as he loves them. This love allows of no exception: One is even to love one's enemies, since God loves them all (Mt 5:44-45)...In God's law the single command of love, given to all human beings, we find the answer to the doctrine of eternal punishment. This law makes it crystal clear that we are dealing with a doctrine that clashes with God's commandment" 102.

By way of reply:

i) Mt 5:44-45 doesn't say that God loves everyone. Rather, the point of Mt 5:44-45, like the parable of the wheat and the tares (note the same agricultural setting), is that God dispenses common grace to all as a way of dispensing special grace to the elect. Because the elect and the reprobate inhabit in the same world, living under same roof (as it were), sun and rain cannot discriminate. All must prosper to some degree for any to prosper at all.

ii) It is illicit to invoke Mt 5:44-45 in order to negate everything else the Bible might have to say on the subject.

iii) This is not the only command that God has given to man. He also commanded the Israelites to execute the Canaanites.

iii) Mt 5:44-45 does not address the destiny of man, but rather, the Christian code of conduct for the duration of the church age.
iv) A divine command is not equally binding on God and man. God is the judge. He bears a different relation to man than man to his fellow man.

v) Bonda has a very flat-footed concept of love. There are different degrees and species of love. Conjugal love is not the same thing as neighborly love. Love can be exclusive as well as inclusive, intensive as well as extensive.

> "What has this doctrine of Israel's rejection brought about? The great catastrophe of our century tells us: The murder of almost six million Jews from 1940-45 in post-Christian Europe would not have been possible without the preparatory work of this ecclesiastical

> tradition. The genocide was not committed by Christians, but by pagans who had rejected faith in Jesus. However, this would not have happened in Europe if through the centuries the church had been taught to see Israel as the apple of God's eye," 132.

By way of reply:

i) This is a form of emotional extortion: either interpret Romans my way or else you've got the blood of six million Jews on your hands! That brand of blackmail is irrelevant to the meaning of Romans, and given that the Book of Romans was penned by a devout Jew, no authentic interpretation could possibly be anti-Semitic, so we should follow the text wherever it takes us, without fear of consequences, without dragging in extraneous anxieties or imposing extraneous filters on the material.

ii) It would take a lot of documentation to substantiate Bonda's charge–none of which is forthcoming. What is the relation between church and synagogue in Reformed, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, and Orthodox theology? Is it all the same? Is it all anti-Semitic?

iii) Even if the church had been more philosemitic, how would that have restrained the Nazis?

iv) What about the effect of German Bible criticism, with its evolutionary view of religion, which necessitated a low view of the OT and OT piety?

v) In what sense is the Reformed tradition anti-Semitic? Wasn't Holland a haven for the Jews? Weren't the Jews well-treated by the Puritans? Doesn't Reformed theology stress the continuity of the covenants? Doesn't Reformed theology speak of OT saints as well as an OT church?

Supercessionism isn’t a racist doctrine. It doesn’t mean that Gentiles replace Jews. It doesn’t even mean that the church takes the place of Israel. There’s a very real sense in which Reformed theology regards an OT saint as a Christian. To be a Messianic Jew is to be a Christian, whether Abraham, Asaph, Moses, or David; Isaiah, Daniel or Zechariah; Peter, James, or John; Paul or Matthew, Simeon or Anna, Mary or Elizabeth, Zecharias or John the Baptist.

vi) What about Jews who are not Messianic Jews? you ask. What about gentiles who are not Christian gentiles? I ask. It's all the same.

vii) I get a little tired of all the complaints about the gentile complexion of the church. No doubt the church would be better off if it were more Jewish. But let us remember that the church is mostly gentile because most Jews chose to opt out. And let us not write off two thousand years of church history as very large and very long mistake. To do so dishonors the plan and providence of God.

In dealing with the imagery of damnation, a couple of cautionary notes are in order.

i) There is not a great deal in Scripture on the eternality of hell. And yet the eternal duration of hell is far better attested than, say, the Virgin Birth. There are many "evangelicals" who affirm the Virgin Birth, but disaffirm the eternality of hell. For example, John Wenham, in his autobiography, uses this statistical approach to minimize the Biblical witness to everlasting punishment. Yet he would never employ that same methodology to minimize the testimony of Scripture to the Virgin Birth--even though that is built on a much thinner database than hell.

ii) It is important not to over-analyze the imagery. Scripture doesn't speak with technical precision. The imagery is intended to convey a general impression. The attempt to break down the general impression into atomistic word-studies and isolated images does violence to the authorial intent. The general impression which popular as well as scholarly imagination has always taken away from these passages is one of unending misery.

These passages were never meant to be subjected to minute analysis. They don't demand much in the way of interpretation. To overinterpret is to misinterpret. The broad brush, and not the fine brush-stroke, is what counts. This is not the time and place for finesse, nuance, or sophistication. Blunt, brutal, graphic and primitive picture-language was used to drive home a dire and unmistakable admonition. And it succeeded, for century upon century.

Those who construe the passages otherwise always do so, not because the imagery is suggestive of another interpretation, but because the conditionalist and the universalist find the idea of eternal punishment intolerable. What they give us is not the exegesis of the text, but a hermeneutic of emotion.

Bonda tries to find universalism in Paul. One obvious objection to this construction is that faith is, in Paul, a prerequisite for salvation. Bonda attempts to get around this by positing postmortem conversion on the basis of Rom 4:17; 5:15; 14:9! That is certainly a novel interpretation of the verses in question. If nothing else, we must give Bonda some credit for ingenuity!

But the point of these passages is that God will save those who die in faith, such as Abraham--the paradigm of sole fide. Everyone dies, including the faithful. What happens to

us when we die? If death is a penal sanction for sin, then salvation must apply to the living and the dead, but not all the living and not all the dead. The God who saved the OT saints shall save the NT saints. To die in the Lord is to live in the Lord.

Bonda denies original sin. Instead, he reverts to the old Pelagian position. He blames original sin on Augustine's use of the Vulgate rendering of Rom 5:12. By way of reply:

i) It is unclear to me why Bonda rejects Federalism in favor of individualism. If, after all, you were going to concoct a doctrine of universal salvation, then some form of corporate solidarity would afford a more promising mechanism than radical individualism.

ii) Is it a fact that Augustine relied on the Vulgate rather than, say, the Old Latin version or Ambrosiaster? For that matter, Augustine was conversant with the Greek text of Rom 5. (See the commentaries by Cranfield and Fitzmyer.)

iii) It is inexcusably ignorant for a Dutch-Reformed pastor to allege that the Reformed doctrine of original sin derives from the Vulgate. Even if Bonda has left his hereditary tradition far behind, he should at least know what he has left behind.

iv) His interpretation of Rom 5:12 disregards the five-fold emphasis, in Rom 5, on the one sin of the one man (Adam) as the basis of common condemnation. (See Murray's commentary.)

Borrowing yet another page from Pelagius, Bonda says,

"it is utterly impossible that God reveals his will to human beings, and simultaneously wills that they should not reach

the point of doing God’s will. Yet, this is what tradition tells us. It suggests that he would reveal his will to people who were destined not to comply with it" (101).

By way of reply:

i) Needless to say, the Calvinist has heard all this before. It is not in ignorance of this objection that Reformed tradition can exist. The objection has been addressed on numberless occasions.

ii) In Reformed theology, revelation is the rule of faith. The God who reveals his preceptive will is the same God who reveals his decretive will.

iii) Whatever the common sense appeal of this objection, it has no force in theology, for we can only know the will of God insofar as God has made his will known to us.

iv) The objection equivocates over the identity of God’s "will." Bonda is really talking about God’s "law." No doubt God wills his law, as well as the revelation of his law. But that does not, of itself, tells us what purpose is served by the law of God. The law may be instrumental to an ulterior purpose, as a means to a higher end, rather than an end in itself. The revelation of the law brings with it the revelation of sin. The law can serve to harden as well as soften. The law teaches us right from wrong, but by that same token, you can choose to do wrong, to go out of your way to make the wrong turn and go down the wrong road or the wrong lane, just to be spiteful and rebellious. This contentious and contrarian spirit is on display throughout the pages of Scripture.

v) The law is a moral guide, but more than a moral guide. It is also a tool used by God to exhibit the depravity of sin

and the gratuity of grace.

Bonda rejects the Reformed reading of Rom 5 on the grounds that, in this event, "it is not true that Christ, through his obedience, more than compensates for the havoc wreaked by the first human's disobedience" (105).

By way of reply:

i) This objection is not distinctive to Reformed theology, but would, if valid, apply with equal force to any soteric system which falls short of universalism.

ii) The problem with Bonda's truncated allusion to Rom 5:20 is that it omits the introductory reference to the law. The sin in view is not sinful mankind in general, but lawlessness, where the "law" is the Law of Moses. In other words, Paul has in mind the national apostasy of Israel. And yet, not only was there a gracious remnant, but Israel was host to the Savior of the nations as well.

Bonda rejects the idea of a "hidden election" on the grounds that "If that were true, no one in Israel would be able to depend on God, and the question would always be: 'Am I like Esau?" (146). By way of reply:

i) It is illogical to reject something just because you don't like the consequences. Many things are true regardless of the consequences.

ii) The short answer is that our warrant for the assurance of salvation should not exceed the warrant of Scripture. If certain Scripturally stipulated contingencies are met (e.g. repentance & faith), then we are entitled to the assurance of salvation. But if such conditions are flouted, then we are not entitled to the same assurance.

iii) Election is hidden in eternity, but revealed in time, in the mirror of faith.

iv) Given the eye-popping maledictions of Deut 32, as well as the dire forewarnings and forebodings of the preexilic prophets, the average Israelite had good reason to examine himself and not take his blessings for granted!

Bonda appeals to Isa 19:21-22 to prove that the hardening of Pharaoh is temporary. But this prophecy is about the future, not the past. It has nothing to do with the Pharaoh of the oppression. He had been dead for 600 years when Isaiah spoke, and its fulfillment awaited the Christian era–awaited the living, not the dead.

Bonda says that "if God destines most people to eternal perdition, it would have been better if he had not created the world at all" (151). By way of reply:

i) Better for whom? Better for the damned? Yes! Better for the redeemed? No!

ii) Within the Reformed tradition, there is no received view on the relative number of the elect and reprobate. Actually, the question of how many are saved or damned has less immediate relation to predestination than it does to the condition of faith. Is faith in Christ is a prerequisite of salvation? To do away with hell, Bonda must not only do away with reprobation, but do away with faith in Christ. Of course, he has his pet theory of postmortem conversion, but I've already dealt with that.

Regarding Rom 9:23ff., Bonda says:

> "To whom does he want to reveal this [the riches of his

> glory]? To the objects of his mercy? He would not need these objects of wrath for that purpose...No...he wants to show these objects of his wrath something of his mercy for the disobedient, for the heathen [Rom 9:25-26]. Once they were "objects of wrath"--"children of wrath," as we read in Eph 2:3...He wants to do the same for those who are now the objects of his wrath" (151).

By way of reply:

i) In this very passage, Paul expressly affirms what Bonda denies: the vessels of mercy are the object of his glorious riches (v23).

ii) The vessels of wrath are instrumental to this aim, for mercy and justice are correlative. To withhold mercy and exact justice is illustrative of the wholly gratuitous character of grace.

iii) The way that Bonda draws the contrast, Jews are to objects of wrath (albeit temporarily) as Gentiles are to objects of mercy. But that is not how Paul draws the contrast. For Paul says that God is calling a people to himself from Jews and Gentiles alike (v24). So we have a part/whole relation here. It is not Jews as over against Gentiles, but some Jews and some Gentiles as over against other Jews and other Gentiles.

iv) Eph 2:3 alludes to original sin, whereas Rom 9:20ff. is spinning off the OT motif of the potter and the clay (Isa 29;16; 45-9-11; Jer 18:1-6). They are not interchangeable ideas.

Bonda quotes Ridderbos as denying that Rom 9 teaches the reprobation of Pharaoh or Esau.

By way of reply:

i) Citing scholarly opinion is no substitute for argument. Perhaps Ridderbos has a supporting argument for his conclusion, but, if so, Bonda doesn't quote it. So all the reader is left with is a baseless assertion.

ii) The predestinarian force of Rom 9 has received a detailed defense by the likes of Murray, Piper, and Schreiner.

iii) Even if what Ridderbos says is true, it is irrelevant. The case for reprobation and/or damnation does not depend on Scripture naming every reprobate. All that is needed to draw a conclusion in any specific case is a general statement concerning the preconditions of salvation (e.g., grace, faith, regeneration), in conjunction with enough information about an individual to draw a reasonable inference regarding his compliance, or not, with the requisite conditions. To be saved, one must be a believer. The burden of proof is on the believer. What is needed is not positive evidence that the individual is damned, but positive evidence that he was in a position and disposition to meet the preconditions of salvation.

iv) Again, even if what Ridderbos says is true, it misses the point. It is sufficient for Paul's argument that an Esau, Ishmael or Pharaoh should *typify* the state of the reprobate, whether or not they themselves were reprobate.

Bonda glosses Rom 9:20 as follows:

"The point here is not that God has the absolute sovereignty to do as he pleases with his creatures and that he tolerates no protest. It is rather: Who are you, a mere human being, that you should tell God what he ought to do...to make all

people, the living and the dead, want to come and be saved" (155).

By way of reply:

i) The question at issue is not how God deals with his creatures, but how he deals with sinners.

ii) Bonda's interpretation assumes that Paul's was teaching universalism, and his sparring partner took offense at that. But what evidence is there that this is how Paul's words were generally understood? After all, Bonda believes that the church as a whole is guilty of misinterpreting Paul. Assuming, for the sake of argument, that this is so, then why presume that Paul's opponent thought otherwise?

iii) And if, moreover, Paul did not teach universal salvation, then Paul would be correcting his theological opponent.

Bonda asks,

> "Where does Scripture speak about…[a] God who punishes people, and continues to punish people who have repented and have ceased to sin?" (228).

By way of reply:

i) This is a strawman argument. There are no penitents in hell.

ii) As a matter of fact, there are Scriptures in which men repent of their sins, yet still suffer the consequences (e.g., 2 Sam 12:7-12; 2 Kgs 23:26-27; Heb 12:16).

In my opinion, Bonda is no more successful in making a case for universalism than Adams or Talbott. And it isn't for

want of scholarly sophistication. But they are handicapped by the falsity of their position. Ability, however great, cannot overcome the disability of a crippling error.

Horrendous Evils and the Love of God

Universalism has always had a small, but popular following in liberal churches, and it has enjoyed a more prominent, albeit unofficial, standing in the Greek and Russian Orthodox tradition.

In general, its appeal is overtly and ultimately sentimental. Recently, though, two trained philosophers have come to the defense of universalism. In examining their case we are reviewing the most rigorous case that can be made for universalism. The two books are **Horrendous Evils & the Love of God** (Cornell 2000) by Marilyn McCord Adams and **The Inescapable Love of God** (Upublish.com, 1999) by Thomas Talbott. I'll begin with Adams.

Although a number of Bible scholars have tried to make an exegetical case for conditional immortality, I know of no philosophical theologian who has tried to make a stringent case for conditional immortality. From an apologetic standpoint, this puts universalism in a class apart from annihilationism. So let us examine the argument for universalism, beginning with Adams.

Some of her criticisms of opposing positions are right on the mark. She says that,

> "At a minimum, God's goodness to human individuals would require that God guarantee each a life that was a great good to him/her on the whole by balancing off serious evils" (31).

And it seems to me that this is a perfectly just criticism of all soteric schemes that are universal in intent, but not in effect.

She takes issue with glib appeals to divine passibility. She agrees with Paul Fiddes that even if God were literally empathetic, this would not entail divine suffering, for we only suffer if we suffer against our will, under some form of outward constraint (170).

Likewise, she agrees with Richard Creel that two subjects can have the same sensations without the same emotions, for one subject may be able to place his unpleasant sensations in a larger and disarming context (171). In addition, God cannot suffer loss in the same way that a creature can (172). As such, there remain significant respects in which God lacks the vulnerability that is a prerequisite of true suffering.

She is also critical of a libertarian version of postmortem evangelism:

> "Walls meets his Wesleyan worries, that not everyone has a fair antemortem chance, with the proposal that God will extend the 'deadline' for such individuals, to guarantee each the opportunity to make a 'settled response' under 'the most favorable circumstances.' Yet, where created agency is twisted by horrors (as above), this fresh start would require massive miraculous repairs, drastic alterations of a sort Walls otherwise thinks we have a right against God not to produce" (48).

Along the same lines, she takes aim at Hick's soul-building theodicy:

> "the sacrifice of participation in horrors is pedagogically inept as a first lesson because it can damage the person so much as to make much further antemortem progress from self-centeredness to other-or God-centeredness virtually impossible" (53).

Taking another swipe at a libertarian theodicy, she says that

> "a parent or teacher can be 'good to' a three-year-old in awarding it the dignity of self-determination with respect to issues slightly beyond its cognitive and emotional grasp. But benevolent pedagogy allows this to take place only within a controlled framework in which neither choice courts disaster" (47).

Often, though, her criticisms glean some good in the position she chooses to critique. She says, for example, that

> "God could feel torn with anger and grief at the way we treat each other…God might also feel exasperated at our individual and collective inability to discern the benevolence at divine intentions" (173).

To which I'd say that a God, if "God" is the right designation for such a being, who feels inwardly torn and exasperated with the work of his own hands, is a God who would richly deserve our inability to discern his benevolent intentions, and if any exasperation is due, it is the creature who would be entitled to be exasperated with such a inept and ineffectual Creator. One might as well worship Zeus or Wotan or nothing at all—which amounts to much the same thing.

Likewise, she tells us that Christ suffered in both natures (174), leaning, it would seem, on the flimsy reed of

Moltmann's exegesis of Mk 15:43 (176), which entirely overlooks the fact that Christ is quoting a question, not asking a question—not to mention the relation of that question to the steady progression of Ps 22 from despondency to triumph.

But after dispatching or tweaking some of the alternatives, what are her positive arguments for universalism?

To begin with what ought to be the most important issue, and the only issue that really counts, what Biblical support does she find for her position, and how does she square that with evidence to the contrary? Her solution is to distinguish between two different plotlines in Scripture, and favor one over the other. There is, on the one hand, apocalyptic eschatology:

> "Apocalyptic theology offers us two one-dimensional collective characters; the righteous and the wicked. Likewise, its plot recognizes two opposite conditions—one all good…and the other all bad—and two ages. Its plot line moves from one age to the other via the intervention of a heavenly rescuer who effects a simple reversal…the wicked [will be consigned' to torture chambers either eternally or until they wither away… evil is not defeated, but balanced off in a retributive ordering: the sufferings of the righteous are canceled (without being seen to have contributed to any good) by heavenly joys, while the crimes of the wicked are balanced off by their torment in hell…The two collective actors swap positions, but do not change character. The wicked are not redeemed, nor does suffering come to an end. Sharing as it does all the aesthetic defects of a grade B Western, apocalyptic theology pays the price of limited plot resolution" (137-38).

Before turning to her alternative, this description calls for a number of comments:

i) She treats the witness of Scripture as though she were a film critic. But even at that level, she might as well complain that a movie about WWII shares all the defects of a grade B Western and pays the price of limited plot resolution.

To favor universalism over apocalypticism on aesthetic grounds sidesteps the question of truth entirely, and plays into the deep-seated suspicion that universalism is nothing more than make-believe and wishful thinking. The course of the future is not a novel in which we get to write the ending to our own artistic satisfaction.

ii) It is a travesty of Scripture to insinuate that the redeemed are heaven-bound because they are virtuous while the damned are hell-bound because they are vicious. This leaves out of account the status of the redeemed as sinners saved by grace.

iii) Scripture does not depict hell as a torture chamber. That is reading Scripture through the lens of Dante. It conjures up all sorts of invidious images and connotations that are not a necessary part of the Biblical witness. If Adams can't make her case without tilting the scales, then she has no case to make.

iv) The sufferings of the righteous contribute to the good by manifesting the mercy and justice of God as he delivers the righteous and judges the wicked.

v) To say that evil is not defeated follows from a very idiosyncratic definition of "defeat." Although the Nazis were not redeemed, they were surely defeated. Of course, if you

choose to define success and failure according to universalism, then you can say this about the apocalyptic vision, but that begs the question by assuming what it needs to prove. To merely contrast the one with the other does not justify a comparative judgment, for it has to take one as the standard of reference, which is viciously circular.

She then sets the apocalyptic denouement over against the Passion account:

> "This plot does not rest content with a simple reversal of fates. The human enemies of God are not left one-dimensional: for the worst they do in the passion narrative to their role as instruments of the devil, is turned by God into a fresh opportunity for them to step out of this role, through repentance, a change of heart…those who consented to the death of Jesus and repent afterwards have the opportunity to enter into the covenant blessings with the consolation of recognizing the worst thing they ever did as making a positive contribution to God's plan to spread his glory to the ends of the earth" (139).

But to oppose this "storyline" to the apocalyptic outlook is another straw man argument:

i) The redeemed are redeemed from the ranks of the wicked. That's what makes them the redeemed. So there's room for members of one side to cross over to the other side. This can happen in both directions.

ii) The timeframe of the Passion is obviously different from the timeframe of the general judgment or the death of any particular sinner. So there is no apparent tension between these two storylines, for these events occur at different points in the story.

iii) It is true that the apocalyptic scenario has a predestinarian element, but so do the Gospels and the Book of Acts.

iv) The plan of God both opens and closes the door on the range of opportunities. But, of course, it's not as though universalism offers any freedom of opportunity. Everyone ends up in the same place, so universalism can hardly fault apocalypticism on libertarian grounds.

v) Assuming, for the sake of argument, that these present contradictory endings, why choose one ending over another? Why choose either ending? Whether some are saved, everyone, or no one, is a question that can only be settled by revelation, or not at all.

Adams can only play one Scripture off against another on one of four assumptions:

a) Scripture is uninspired.
b) Scripture is intermittently inspired
c) Scripture is fully inspired by a fallible God.
d) Scripture is inspired, but in the form of open-textured and formally discordant metaphors that do not point in any uniform direction.

Under none of these assumptions, whether individually or in some combination thereof, is Scripture a reliable source of information about the afterlife.

Elsewhere she says that "In the crucifixion, God identified with all human beings" (166), but no exegetical argument is offered for this sweeping claim. She goes on to say that by becoming a curse for us, God enables "human perpetrators of horrors to accept and forgive themselves" (107).

But whatever the subjective value, if any, of this result, Scripture nowhere attributes to the atonement either this intent or effect. Rather, the consequence of the atonement lies with divine forgiveness and divine acceptance of the redeemed.

She also mentions, as if supportive of her thesis, "the power of horrendous evil to make participants with (like Judas, according to Mt 26:24 & Mk 14:21) never to have been born" (42). Yet this is hard to reconcile with universalism, or even annihilationism.

In another gesture towards the witness of Scripture, Adams extracts a divine code of honor and then deploys that in defense of universalism:

> "The code of honor allows even universalists to accommodate the biblical threat that Judgement Day will put us to shame. For whatever else it means, Judgment symbolizes God's making plain and public the truth about Who God is, who we are, and the evaluative truth about what we have been and done" (127).

But this is open to several crippling objections:

i) Her version of the honor code is a highly abstract and generic construct. It cannot be used to negate the specifics of Scripture regarding the afterlife.

ii) Judgment Day is a symbol, but more than a symbol. It is a symbolic event. So it cannot be manipulated like a merely conventional emblem.

iii) To say that "whatever else it means," this particular aspect is consistent with universalism is, even if true, a transparent fallacy, for the universalist can only accommodate the biblical threat if his own eschatology is consistent with everything meant by Judgment Day. There is more to judgment than a guilty verdict. There is the sentencing phase and meting out of a just punishment. It's about truth and consequences, not truth without consequences.

iv) She fails to distinguish between a pedagogical reward and a meritorious reward. A parent will often reward a child as an incentive. This is not a meritorious reward. This is just a way of training a child to form good habits. He is encouraged to do the right thing. Heavenly rewards serve the same function. It says nothing about our intrinsic value to God or his gratitude to us (127-28).

She admits that the OT teaches limited atonement:

> "More often than not, the Hebrew Bible understands this solution to be exclusive. The explicit purpose of the holiness code is to separate Israel out from the other nations" (97).

Yes, and you could say this same thing about the NT holiness code. And if you have a contrast between Israel and the world in the OT, you have a parallel contrast between the Church and the world in Pauline and Johannine theology. So this doesn't seem to be very encouraging to universalism.

But in speaking on the scope of redemption, she says that,

"My criterion is universalist in insisting that God be good to each created person" (157).
The problem with her criterion is twofold:

i) This is a not a criterion for judging universalism, but a criterion by which universalism judges the alternatives. And this leaves unaccounted for the criterion by which she judges universalism to be true in the first place.

ii) Her insistence that God be good to every rational creature is inconsistent with her position that God sustains no moral obligations to any rational creature (204).

Given her disdain for the authority of Scripture, it is not surprising that Adams has ready recourse to extra-canonical sources. She makes free use of the apocrypha. And her general method is to conduct a running discussion with various philosophers and theologians, past and present.

Now there is nothing necessarily wrong with being in dialogue with a philosophical or theological tradition. But sound theology does not enjoy the creative freedom of a literary tradition. This is not an internal debate in which we compare and contrast one man's ideas with another's, and stake out a mediating position.

No, the basis of theology is historical revelation—which comes to closure in the NT. This will, indeed, draw us into a hermeneutical and ecclesiastical tradition, but Scripture is both the source and standard of reference. It forms an external check on tradition. And the hermeneutical circle is not a vicious circle, for a high doctrine of Scripture goes hand-in-hand with a high doctrine of providence.

Theology isn't supposed to be reducible to the play of ideas. What is at issue is the relation between revelation and reality. If our beliefs don't square with revelation, they don't square with reality. And what's the point in having beliefs about the world that don't correspond to the world? If I don't bring food with me on a trip to the moon, believing that the moon is made of green cheese, then I'll starve to death.

Let us remember what we're talking about. We're talking about nothing less than the future fate of the entirety of humanity. And that is neither an intuitive question nor an empirical one. It is not a truth of reason or a sense datum. It will be an observable event, but not at present. So armchair speculation is impotent to adjudicate this issue.

Adams puts a lot of stock in the effusions of Julian of Norwich. This is noteworthy on a couple of grounds:

i) Why does she think that a mystic is more reliable than the canonical prophets and apostles?

ii) Julian's mystical theology represents a paradigm-shift from a paternal to a maternal model of God. This is a natural move for a universalist to make. And it's not coincidental that Adam and Julian are both women.

Generally, women favor mercy over justice, and people over principles—whereas men generally reverse the priorities.

Universalism naturally goes hand-in-hand with a different doctrine of God. We're no longer talking about Christianity, but a different religion altogether —albeit a Christian heresy.

But, other issues aside, why believe that God is feminine rather than masculine? What is the rational basis for this belief? What's the evidence? What would count as evidence? What's our source of information? These are not unreasonable questions to ask a philosopher such as Adams.

I would add in passing that Christianity has a central place for the feminine. The relation, though, is not Madonna and child, but husband and wife. Yahweh assumes the role of husband in relation to Israel, and Christ in relation to the Church.

In attacking retributive justice, Adams says that,

> "As critics of retributivism commonly point out, retribution is a matter of proportion, whereas the notion of proportionate return demanded by the lex talionis already breaks down in ordinary cases where numbers are large. For example, suppose I knock one tooth out of the mouth of each of thirty-two people each of whom has a full set of teeth and then the authorities knock out all thirty-two of my teeth by way

> of punishment. Is my having no teeth not much worse than their each having thirty-one teeth? Or suppose I interrupt television transmission of the superbowl game, thereby causing twenty million fans one hour of fury and frustration each; surely, my suffering twenty million hours of fury and frustration is much worse" (40).

This is an interesting criticism, but it suffers from several flaws:

i) It raises the question of the editorial viewpoint and implied reader. Is Adams writing as a believer to unbelievers? As a believer to fellow believers? Or as an unbeliever to fellow unbelievers?

I ask because a Bible-believing Christian does not require an independent argument for everything he believes. As long as something is taught in Scripture, that is sufficient argument for believing it. The veracity of the teacher verifies the teaching.

Now, some Scriptural teachings may be capable of independent justification. And doing so may be worthwhile as an apologetic exercise.

But if Scripture teaches the doctrine of hell, and if the principle of retributive justice figures in the Scriptural rationale for hell, then it is highly improper for a professing Christian to attack either the doctrine itself or a supporting argument—or to demand additional warrant on the part of the church. This is only an open question of Scripture leaves it an open question. Otherwise, there's nothing to debate. Case closed.

ii) Adams is operating with a very wooden, numerical

concept of retribution. Morality is a qualitative rather than quantitative category. It only takes a rapist a few moments to rob a little girl of her innocence and scar her for life.

Yes, there is a spatiotemporal disproportion between guilt and retribution. But that is not the relevant point of comparison.

iii) Indeed, the disproportion works the other way. Once you do something, you can't undo it. If you did wrong, what you did will always be wrong. Guilt has no built-in shelf-life. Guilt is eternal. So this is really an argument for hell, rather than against it.

Continuing her criticism,

> "Matching the prima facie ruin of the victim's life with the prima facie ruin of the perpetrator's would not make the world a better place, much less defeat the disastrous harm to the victim…To return horror for horror does not erase but doubles the individual's participation in horrors—first as victim, then as the one whose injury occasions another's prima facie ruin" (41).
>
> "Retributive justice is powerless to either compensate [the victim] or to make the total state of affairs morally better" (61).

By way of comment:

i) As above, this still suffers from an overly literal construction on an eye-for-an-eye. The point is not that the victim should necessarily reenact every detail of the crime against the victimizer. The Mosaic code never held that if you rape my child, then I get to rape your child. The

principle of retribution is not necessarily imitative. Sometimes direct compensation is a suitable form of restitution (e.g., theft/repayment), but that depends on the nature of the crime, not the nature of retribution. Justice determines the crime, crime doesn't determine justice.

ii) Adams' objection reflects the characteristic arrogance of universalism. One, who is not the victim, presumes to speak on behalf of the victim. As a practical matter, many victims to take moral and emotional satisfaction in seeing the victimizer suitably punished. Who is Adams to say they have no right to feel that way or see that justice is done?

iii) Retribution is not necessarily compensatory. Compensation can take other forms, such as eternal beatitude.

iv) Justice is not a means to an end, but an end in itself. Justice is good in and of itself. It is not merely instrumental to a higher good.

Proceeding with her assault,

> "As for Divine goodness to created persons, some grim hell advocates simply conceded that Divine Goodness finds its primary expression in the world as a whole, so that Divine government may sacrifice the well-being of individual created persons as much as that of particular swallows and ants for the benefit of the common good" (41).

Although briefly stated, this is the core objection of universalism to particularism. And her summary is another caricature of the opposing position:

i) Even if we don't regard teleological ethics as an all-

sufficient value-system, it hardly follows that part/whole or means/ends relations have no role in the moral value and valuation of a given state of affairs. Adams is a goal-oriented agent. She wrote this book as a means of winning readers over to universalism.

Although the end doesn't justify any means whatsoever, moral deliberation is a purposeful activity. A moral agent has a reason for what he does, and whether he has a good reason for what he does figures in the moral value and valuation of the act. Misuse or abuse presupposes a right and natural use.

ii) To speak of sacrificing the few for the many ignores a number of moral distinctions. To begin with, it disregards the fundamental distinction between guilt and innocence, which is the basis of justice and just deserts. Is it wrong of Patton to sacrifice 500 Nazis to save 50 GIs? Is it wrong of Bonhoeffer to sacrifice the Führer to save a whole nation?

iii) Adams overlooks a possible tradeoff between the common good and the greater good. What if it's a choice between a lesser good for the many and a greater good for the few?

For example, in Scripture, polygamy sometimes serves the common good (i.e., Levirate marriage), but monogamy is a greater good. Exclusive goods may be more valuable than inclusive goods. Second-order goods may be higher goods than first-order goods. To be a redeemed creature may be better than to be sinless or impeccable.

However, Adams may also object to an Augustinian theodicy on other grounds. She says, for example, that

> "where entrenched horrors are figured into the bargain, however, it is far from obvious that a perfectly good God would accept them as the price of a very good world with as favorable a balance of moral good over moral evil as God could weakly actualize" (30).

Yet the question at issue is not what is "obvious." The reason the problem of evil is called the "problem" of evil is because the relation between God and evil is not obvious. That is the inspiration for a theodicy, whether Leibnizian, libertarian, soul-making, supralapsarian, reincarnational, or universalist. Certainly her own theodicy is a very complicated piece of business.

Many things are true which are inevident. Either their truth can only be known by revelation, or teased into a more comprehensible form by rational reflection and analysis.

She goes on to say of the Leibnizian version that,

> "Such government would thereby show itself to be at best indifferent, at worst cruel. Rather, I contend that God could be said to value human personhood in general, and to love individual persons in particular, only if God were good to each and every human person God created" (31).

By way of reply,

i) No consequentialist theodicy, be it Leibnizian, supralapsarian or otherwise, implies the indifference of divine government. To the contrary, the teleology of a consequentialist theodicy implies very carefully planning and execution on God's part.

ii) Even if it were cruel, Adams has said that God is not

morally obligated to human beings. She compares the metaphysical and moral distance between God and man to the distance between man and maggots (94-95).

iii) Since cruelty exists in the world, and figures very prominently in the problem of evil, it follows that—absent atheism—no theodicy can avoid positioning God in some sort of relation to the cruelties of life on earth.

iv) In addition, some cruelties counterbalance others. The cruelties of the wicked are balanced out by the cruelties of hell.

v) Doesn't her embrace of the evolutionary process commit her to a governance of the world that is indifferent at best and cruel at worst? Is evolution especially kind to individual men, women, and children?

vi) The charge of cruelty overlooks elementary distinctions of innocence and guilt. Evildoers deserve harsh treatment.

vii) It is precisely because men and women are personal agents that they are morally accountable for their deeds.

viii) It is precisely because God is a moral agent that he is capable of exercising individual, moral, and rational discretion. He is not bound by mechanical uniformity in his governance of the world.

ix) It is illogical to say that God cannot be good to anyone unless he is good to everyone. This demands a supporting argument.

In yet another objection, she says that,

> "We cannot bear full responsibility for something to the extent that—through no fault of our own—'we know not what we do.'…we cannot be fully responsible for those dimensions of horrendous evil that are inevitably inadequately conceivable by us. Insofar as culpability is directly proportional to responsibility, we cannot be fully to blame either…This would be true in spades for Adam and Eve who—prior to the fall—would have no experience at all of evil or suffering.
>
> Suppose a parent introduces a three-year-old into a room which contains gas that is not harmful to breathe but will explode if ignited and also contains a stove with brightly colored knobs which if turned will light the burners and ignite the gas. Suppose further that the parent warns the child not to turn the knobs and then leaves the room. If the child turns the knobs and ignites the gas, blowing up the room, surely the child is at most marginally to blame, even though it knew enough to obey the parent, while the parent is both primarily responsible and highly culpable" (38-39).

Yet this line of argument is liable to two major objections:

i) She faults the freewill defense for being too indeterministic, but the Augustinian theodicy for being too deterministic. But is there a coherent compromise position?

ii) She fails to see how her story of the gas stove undercuts her Arminian ethic. The mother didn't know that this would happen. And the mother had no prior personal experience of the consequences. Yet her reckless disregard is, by her own admission, morally censurable.

The mother's comparative ignorance does precious little to mitigate her guilt. Indeed, there's such a thing as culpable

ignorance. There are some things you either ought to know, or if they cannot be known, demand that appropriate precautions be taken.

Of course, if she knew more she'd be even more culpable, but distinguishing between degrees of guilt doesn't distinguish between one theodicy and another, for everyone, including the Calvinist, admits cases of aggravated guilt as well as diminished responsibility. And even extenuating circumstances are not the same as exculpatory circumstances.

In another apparent criticism of hell, she confesses to us that,

"My own view resonates with C. S. Lewis's suggestion, in **The Problem of Pain**, that vice in the soul preserved beyond death eventually brings about a total dismantling of personality to the torment of which this worldly schizophrenia and depression (much less Swinburne's lost souls) are but the faintest approximations" (47).

By way of reply:

i) This is not a Scriptural objection.

ii) I'm not in a position to speculate on the mental state of the damned. And if I were to conjecture, it is easy to imagine that the damned are hardened into a state of utter callousness.

iii) Even if what she said is true, how is that an objection to hell? Isn't hell supposed to be unpleasant, and more so than anything on earth? I'd expect the damned to be clinically insane, whether manic-depressive, psychopathic,

or what-all.

If this is the best case that a modern philosopher, ordained minister, and student of Scholastic theology can make on behalf of universalism, then its prospects seem pretty dim. But perhaps our next book can do a better job.

The Inescapable Love of God

Now let's examine Thomas Talbott's **The Inescapable Love of God**. His treatment is quite different than Adams'—more popular, more expository, more confrontational. I can imagine the receptive swept away by his arguments, and the uninitiated left speechless.

It is striking that although Talbott and Adams have both been publishing articles on universalism for a number of years, and wrote both books in the same year, that they never quote each other—not even once. One would think that if the argument were so clear and compelling, there would be some measure of agreement on what form such an argument should take.

Talbott opens his book with an autobiographical section explaining how he arrived at his belief in universalism. I ordinarily avoid ad hominem judgments, but since Talbot includes this material as part of his overcall case, it calls for some comment.

He explains how he grew up in a large, loving, tight-knit Christian home, and attended a fundamentalist church. He will return to his familial experience time and time again. This is, for him, a principal point of reference. He says,

> "I knew instinctively that I could never worship a God who is less kind, less merciful, less loving that my own parents…And I could not imagine my parents refusing to will the good for anyone…There were no favorites, period; we were all equal objects of our parents love and equally precious to them. So it is perhaps not

> surprising that I should have found myself unable to worship a God who, unlike my parents, was quite prepared to play favorites" (8-9).

I'll have more to say about this later on, just as Talbott will have more to say about this later on. But for now I'll confine myself to the following observations:

i) Why should I or anyone else accord canonical status to Talbott's home-life?

ii) Talbott never bothers to compare and contrast his experience with the Biblical model of the family. Hebrew culture was a tribal culture and a shame culture. They had a sense of corporate responsibility. Misbehavior by one member of the clan brought dishonor on the entire clan (cf. Gen 34; Judges 20; 2 Sam 13; 21). Parents could have incorrigible teenagers executed for insubordination (Exod 12:15; Lev 20:9; Deut 17:12; 21:18-21). Moses ordered the faithful Levites to execute their faithless kinsmen (Exod 32).

Talbott, by contrast, operates with a Mafia ethic: my son—right or wrong. He treats it as axiomatic that a grown child can never cross a line of no return. He treats it as self-evident that parental duty is absolute in its unconditional allegiance to any family member.

Talbott never defends his Mafia ethic. He never discusses the Biblical theology of the family. He simply takes his personal experience for granted as the norm in all other matters.

iii) But even if, for the sake of argument, we play along with his Mafia ethic, it is easy to imagine situations that force a choice, for family loyalty is no criterion when one family member abuses another. Suppose a brother rapes a sister? Suppose an older brother is a drug dealer, and tries to recruit his younger brother? The question is how you protect one family member against another? If you are merciful and forgiving to an impenitent victimizer, you are unloving, unjust, and unmerciful to the victim.

iv) One of the occupational hazards of having had a sheltered and caring Christian upbringing is that it can foster a sense of spiritual entitlement and blind you to the breadth and depth of human depravity, beginning with your own. Talbott acts like the spiritual equivalent of a spoiled rich kid who's always had it easy and feels deserving of his lavish standard

of living.

And, of course, that's what universalism is all about. In universalism, no one is ever lost.
So a universalist has no sense of what it means to be saved.

As Talbott makes abundantly clear, on more than one occasion, he will only believe in God on his terms, or not at all. Is that supposed to be some sort of threat? "God, if there is a God, I double dare you to be just what I want to you be, otherwise I'll have nothing to do with you!"

To polish off this section, Talbott takes the side of Bertrand Russell in attributing Christian persecution to belief in hell. And what are we to make of that accusation? The obvious thing to be said is that persecution respects no creed but its own, whether the creed be religious or irreligious, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Marxist, Maoist, Nazi, or what have you.

The OT had holy war. The OT classified some religious offenses as capital crimes. Does Talbott affirm or deny the inspiration of the OT? One thing is

for sure, Jesus and the apostles affirmed its full inspiration.

Talbott says that belief in hell "has had disastrous consequences in the life of the church" (30). But as a matter of church history, churches that deny the doctrine of hell are dead or dying denominations. Like Talbott, they may begin by paying lip-service to a residuum of evangelical piety and quaint liturgy, but ere long they become Christ-denying denominations, draped in musty cobwebs, the haunt of screech owls and other creatures of the night.

In the next chapter, he accuses Augustine and Calvin of indulging in ad hoc interpretations of 1 Tim 2:4 and Ezk 33:11 (49-52). And I'll grant that their reading savors of special pleading. But it's a simple matter to redress these passing lapses.

In 1 Tim 2:4 and like passages, we need to ask ourselves who Paul's opponents were. Paul indicates that his opponents were the Judaizers who limited salvation to Jewish bloodlines (1 Tim 1:4; Tit 1:10,14; 3:9). In that event, Paul's point is that salvation is not a birthright, is not a matter of Jewish

pedigree.

As to Ezk 33:11, this was addressed to backslidden Israel. Israel does not stand for the world. Indeed, Israel's calling was to stand apart from the world. Her sin was when she fell in with her pagan neighbors.

In the next chapter, Talbott treats the witness of Paul as the leading evidence of universalism. Talbott has a habit of repeating himself and jumping back and forth between one argument and another, so let us cite one line of argument:

> "To all appearances, Paul here [Rom 5:18] identifies one 'all'—that is, all human beings—and makes two distinct but parallel statements about that one 'all'; and to all appearances, the second of these statements implies that all human beings shall receive 'justification and life' and hence shall eventually be reconciled to God" (56-57).
>
> "Every time he uses 'all' in the context of some theological discourse, he seems to have in mind a clear reference class, stated or unstated, and he refers distributively to every member of that class" (58).
>
> "This 'all' (Rom 3:23) may not include dogs and birds and unfallen angels…but it does include all the descendants of Adam" (59).

> "In each of these texts, we encounter a contrast between two universal statements, and in each case the first 'all' seems to determine the scope of the second" (59).
>
> "Following Charles Hodge, a number of commentators have sought to avoid the clear universalistic thrust of Rom 5:18…by pointing to at least one exception—namely the man Jesus…But a little reflection will reveal that this entire line of reasoning is spurious because it attributes an unwarranted theological significance to a perfectly familiar way of talking…In most contexts I would have no need to state the…obvious exceptions" (60-61).
>
> "If anything, the second 'all' of 1 Cor 15:22 is less restrictive than the first; for in the following verses Paul immediately expands the second 'all'" (64).

Now, let's go back and see where Talbott goes wrong. He goes wrong in two respects. Actually, we could readily accept his distinctions, but apply them quite differently.

To begin with, he rightly draws attention to the use of parallelism in Paul's argument. So what about parallelism? Does that ring a bell? Any precedent for that mode of argument? This is typically Jewish. It goes back to the dialectical rhetoric of OT ethical discourse. It is pervasive in the Book of Proverbs, but also a regular feature of the Psalter, and scattered throughout the whole of the OT.

As a rabbi and lifelong student of the OT, Paul was steeped and drilled in this method of reasoning. In some cases, the pairings are synonymous, in other cases antonymous. But what we need to keep in mind for the moment is that this is, after all, just a rhetorical device. In balancing one party

off against each other, either by way of comparison or contrast, we need to avoid a wooden handling of literary conventions.

Many simple believers make this mistake when they come to Proverbs. Because of the absolute form of the statement or stated antithesis, they are inflexible in their expectation of what is taught.

The other thing we need to be clear on is the nature of a universal quantifier ("every," "all"). Talbott sometimes draws the right distinctions, but then proceeds to slip and slide and swing back and forth between clarity and confusion.

On the one hand, he correctly says that a universal quantifier designates a general reference class. This is very important to fix in our minds. "All" doesn't denote "everyone" or "everything" whatsoever, but all of something in particular, all the members of a given class of individuals.

The mere use of the quantifier does not spell out the concrete range of reference. It tells us "that" all of such-and-such are covered, but not "what" all are covered. That is a blank to be pencilled in by the surrounding context. Taken by itself, the quantifier is simply neutral on the specific scope of the claim.

This is clear from his own caveats. He himself denies that "all" denotes dogs and birds and angels. Notice, though, that the mere use of the word "all" does not discriminate between one class and another. This is supplied by the context, not the quantifier.

But if the quantifier doesn't tell you what is excluded, neither then does it tell you what is included. By itself, the

quantifier doesn't favor any particular position, whether Arminian, Augustinian, and universalist.

Many people seem to think that the quantifier has a maximal default setting. The presumption of an unrestricted domain can only be overcome if the text or context supplies specific lines of demarcation. They therefore accuse the Calvinist of tampering with the plain sense of Scripture.

But this is muddle-headed. Taken by itself, the quantifier merely flags a general, unspecified class. You need to plug in other words from the text or context to fill in and delimit the concrete content.

Everyone does this. The Calvinist does it, but so does the Arminian or Lutheran or Roman Catholic or universalist.

But having rightly stated and rightly applied the distinction in some instances, Talbott then goes back on his own words and confuses the issue. On the one hand, he informs us that the first use of the quantifier determines the scope of its second occurrence. The first class is coextensive with the second.

On the other hand, he informs us that, in 1 Cor 15:22, the second "all" is more expansive than the first. And he also admits that, as a matter of idiomatic usage, folks often indulge in generalities that allow for unstated exceptions. Indeed, he himself makes exceptions when he exempts dogs and birds and unfallen angels.

By his own definition, admission, and inconsistent practice, the universal quantifier does not control the scope of the parties in question. Hence, his leading line of evidence dribbles away into nothingness. On this point, the main difference is that the Calvinist is consistent, where the

universalist is inconstant, in theological method.

The basic distinction drawn in these Pauline parallels is between the fate of Adamites and the fate of Christians. Whether the second class is conterminous with the first, or else a subset thereof, must be determined by other considerations—and to two other considerations in particular: (i) the doctrine of reprobation and (ii) the doctrine of final judgment.

Now, it may be objected that my own distinctions prove too much. For if the quantifier is that indeterminate, then I cannot prove the universality of sin. This charge is both true and false. It cannot be proven by the quantifier alone. But Paul has many other ways, besides the quantifier, to establish the universality of sin. Just reread Rom 1-3. And the fact that all men are descended from Adam is a presupposition of his argument, deriving from the creation account (Gen 1-2).

But although that breaks the back of his case, Talbott has a few subsidiary arguments. He appeals to "all Israel" in Rom 11:25-26. But one problem with this appeal is that "all Israel" is an idiomatic phrase that Paul has lifted from OT usage. And if you study the Septuagintal occurrences you will see that it can stand for representative units: elders, chieftains, tribes, or some other part/whole relation, rather than every member of the clan (e.g., 1 Chron 9:1; 12:38; 21:5; 2 Chron 1:2; 10:16-17, LXX). The solution to the problem of Jewish unbelief is to be found, not in universalism, but double predestination.

Second, Talbott appeals to passages such as 1 Cor 15:28, Phil 2:10-11 & Col 1:20, which talk about the subjection and confession of God's enemies, as evidence of universal reconciliation. But the problems with this appeal

are several:

i) The imagery is taken from OT warfare. But when a people were conquered by the Egyptians or Assyrians or Babylonians, there was no cultural expectation that captives would love their captors, or vice versa. Did the Jews love life under Roman occupation and domination?

All that Talbott has done is to define the triumph of good over evil as universalism draws the lines, then read that back into his prooftexts, in utter disregard for their historical horizon. Because of his own charmed existence he can fantasize about the reaction of subjugated people without respect to their actual experience.

ii) Talbott is very selective in what he chooses to quote. He cites Phil 2:10-11, but ignores Phil 3:18-19: "Many walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction." He cites Col 1:20, but ignores Col 1:23: "If you remain in the faith," and Col 2:15: "He put them to open shame." He cites Isa 45:23 (69), but ignores Isa 45:24: "Everyone who was incensed against the Lord shall come to him and be ashamed."

iii) Indeed, his prooftexts ought to be correlated with the tradition of taunt-songs in Scripture (e.g., Col 2:15; Ps 2:4; Isa 14; Ezk 28), where the defeated forces are demeaned and exposed to public humiliation.

iv) In Isaiah, general statements of final vindication can stand right beside specific statements of final judgment (cf. 66:23-24). Indeed, the two go together. The faithful are vindicated by the subjugation of the faithless—a pervasive theme in the Book of Revelation.

And there is something else that Talbott leaves out of

account. Paul's gospel was a cross-centered and Christ-centered Gospel. But when Talbott denies penal substitution, when Talbott denies retributive justice, and when he instead says that God is obliged to save everyone as a parental duty, then what Talbott is really telling us is not that everyone is saved by the cross of Christ, but that no one is saved by the cross of Christ. The cross of Christ is simply and wholly unnecessary.

Finally, Talbott invokes the hardening of Pharaoh, which he glosses as a case of God giving him the courage to sin so that he would perceive his own sinfulness (74-75). But this is devoid of textual warrant. God hardens Pharaoh as a witness to the Egyptians (Exod 7:5; 14:17-18). Pharaoh is just a pawn on God's chessboard.

If chapter 5 represents his best case for universalism, chapter 6 represents his major case against the opposing position. One of the most striking features of this chapter is the thinness of his coverage. He seems to have not the slightest idea of what-all the traditional prooftexts are for the doctrine of hell. No doubt that makes it much easier for him to be a universalist.

Much of what little Talbott does address in chapter 6 is simply beside the point, and fails to establish his own position. Although everlasting punishment would disprove universalism, it isn't necessary to prove everlasting punishment to disprove universalism. On this score, all that is necessary to disprove universalism are passages clearly affirming an eschatological judgment resulting in two final, divergent destinies. The passages don't have to say in detail what happens to both parties. They only have to say that, in the end, everyone will not be saved. Although an Augustinian will affirm and defend the stronger thesis (everlasting torment), this is not the place in which he

needs to do so, for the weaker thesis is sufficient to falsify universalism.

Now Talbott's argument falls short on a couple of counts: (i) he fails even to address all the verses that specify the endless duration of torment (e.g., Mk 9:43,48; Rev 14:11), and, what is more, (ii) he fails to address the many verses that lay out two divergent and permanent destinies. These can be found both in the OT and NT.

Talbott begins by faulting Leon Morris for, as he sees it, arbitrarily blunting the scope of Jn 12:32 (82). But there are several reasons why Morris might wish to do so:

i) Morris wrote a whole book on The Biblical Doctrine of Judgment.

ii) In context, Jn 12:32 has reference to the inclusion of the Gentiles. Reference to a people-group does not necessarily cover every single member thereof.

iii) The Fourth Gospel alternates between themes of salvation and judgment. The advent of Christ is a decisive and divisive event, by turns redemptive and damnatory.

iv) There is, indeed, a predestinarian and eschatological dualism running the length of the Fourth Gospel. (We find the same thing in yet another Johannine writing—the Apocalypse.)This is documented in the magisterial commentary on John by Ramsey Michaels.

Turning to the parable of the sheep and goats (Mt 25), Talbott says that these stories were intended to awaken the spiritual imagination rather than providing final answers to theological questions (84). But this is, on the face of it, a false dichotomy, and he offers no supporting argument to

prove otherwise.

He next says that the parabolic details are not to be taken literally (85). That is true, but irrelevant:

i) Not all parabolic details are picturesque details. There is nothing inherently figurative about time-markers and the nouns they modify (eternal life, eternal punishment). These are not metaphors, like the sheep and the goats. They don't stand for anything.

ii) Not all picturesque details are incidental details. Even a metaphor has a literal referent, and some metaphors are not merely window-dressing, but vehicles of moral and doctrinal significance.

iii) How can a universalist be so very literal about his own prooftexts, but so figurative about opposing prooftexts? Heaven is literal, but hell is figurative; reconciliation is real, but separation is picturesque.

Talbott then tries to limit the didactic content of the parable to the "main point" (85). But every parable is not reducible to a single point." Parables vary in their length and complexity.

Talbot says that "the issue of temporal duration is not at issue here and not relevant to the point of the parable" (90).

i) But the duration of the punishment is highly relevant in a parable on the last judgment, especially at a time when conditional immortality was a live option in some Jewish circles (e.g., Mt 22:23ff.; Acts 23:8).

ii) Mt 25:46 is not the only passage that has a divergent

destiny of parallel duration. For this has its OT counterpart in Dan 12:2.

Talbott glosses the adjective to mean that "both the fire and the punishment are eternal in the sense that they have their causal source in the eternal God himself" (88). By way of reply,

i) Talbott offers no argument from Greek syntax or semantics to demonstrate that the adjective refers to the subject of the action (God) rather than the object of the action (the damned). When Isa 1:18 says that God will wash Israel whiter than snow, are we to infer that the color white is a divine attribute?

ii) Let's plug his convoluted redefinition back into the passage and paraphrase it accordingly: "these will go away into a form of punishment that has its causal source in the eternal God."

What sort of sense does that make? Is that how any of the Greek Fathers construed the passage?

Moreover, it doesn't sound like much of a threat. If duration has nothing to do with the punishment, then surely human tormentors have devised methods of torture that are at least as severe, if not more so. Yet Christ says that we have more to fear from God than man (Mt 10:28).

In fact, Talbott doesn't appear to have much confidence in his own rendering, for he offers a fallback definition: "both in the sense that its causal source lies in the eternal God himself and in the sense that its corrective effects last forever."

Okay, let's plug this roundabout redefinition back into the

passage and paraphrase it accordingly: "these will go away into a form of punishment whose corrective effects last forever."

It's amazing how much meaning Talbott can extract from one temporal adjective. But he can only unpack that much meaning because he overstuffed the word in the first place. This has nothing to do with the dictionary definition of the word.

Talbott justifies his rendering by his gloss on Jude 7. But this is merely to prop up one misinterpretation with another. The point in Jude is that temporal punishment is a type and token of eschatological punishment, and in Biblical typology the antitype intensifies the type. Talbott further disregards the corroborative evidence of Jude 13.

Talbott says that "eternal" is a qualitative rather than quantitative term, based on Jn 17:3.

By way of reply:

i) This commits an elementary semantic fallacy by investing one word with the cumulative content of all the surrounding words. Yes, there's more to the Johannine doctrine of eternal life than sheer duration, but that is derived from his whole teaching, and not from isolated word-studies.

ii) To say that there's more to it than mere duration is not to say that there's less to it.

iii) In any event, it is illicit to map Johannine usage back onto non-Johannine usage.

iv) To describe annihilation as "everlasting" is nonsensical. A time-marker is a property of an existent, not a nonentity.

Even an effect is only an effect of something. It must inhere in something—take an object.

v) If the NT writers intended to teach the annihilation of the wicked, they would just say that the damned are "destroyed," and leave it at that.

On the next page, Talbot says that the Christian hope of immortality turns, not on the meaning of "eternal," but on the doctrine of the Resurrection (Jn 6:40). But unless the glorified body is eternal, it is not immortal.

Talbott cites William Barclay as saying that "in all of Greek secular literature, kolasis is never used of anything but remedial punishment" (91).

But that doesn't automatically mean that "kolasis" is a technical term for remedial punishment. And even if it did, isn't NT and LXX usage more pertinent at this point? When, for example, Jeremiah talks about the punitive measures which his enemies to plotting to take against him (Jer 18:20, LXX), are we to view this as remedial therapy? That is assuredly not how Jeremiah understood it! His creative lexicography is also at odds with 1 Jn 4:18, where punishment (kolasis) is productive of fear rather than love.

Moving onto 2 Thes 1:9, Talbott takes issue with the traditional rendering of the preposition (apo=away from). But as one scholar explains:

> A second reason for thinking that “destruction” refers to the end of any prospect of a meaningful relationship with God is that Paul expands the concept of “destruction” with just this idea: People are “shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his

might" (2 Thess. 1:9b). This tniv translation, it must be pointed out, reflects a key decision about the meaning of the Greek preposition apo that occurs at the beginning of the phrase. The tniv translators, following most commentators, take the preposition to denote separation and thus translate as "shut out from." To be sure, other options are possible; it could denote source ("destruction that comes from the presence of the Lord"), cause ("destruction because of, or through, the presence of the Lord"), or even time ("destruction when the Lord comes"). But apo is most often used in the New Testament in the sense of separation. Confirming this meaning is the almost certain dependence of Paul on Isaiah 2:10–11. . . . Three times in this passage, the wicked are said to hide "from the dread of the Lord and the splendor of his majesty." The wording of the lxx is almost identical in each case to 2 Thessalonians 1:9 (the only difference is that Paul drops phobos, translated "dread" in the niv). The point, then, is this: Paul elaborates the meaning of "eternal destruction" with the idea of being separated from the presence of God. Not only does this suggest that our interpretation of "destruction" is on the right track; it also implies that the people who are the objects of destruction continue to exist in some form. It makes little sense to describe people who have been annihilated as being separate from the presence of God. D. Moo, "Paul on Hell," in **Hell under Fire** (Zondervan 2004), 106–8.

He also glosses "just penalty" in terms of penance and purgatory. But he can only justify his interpretation with the following disclaimer:

> "It is not that every biblical writer saw clearly the deeper meaning in the symbols of divine judgment, or even that Paul saw this clearly all of the time…And though the author of this letter, particularly if it were someone other than Paul, may not have had the idea of purification explicitly in mind at the time of writing, that is irrelevant" (98).

Is it now? This last-ditch disclaimer is a backhanded admission that Talbott has given up trying to do serious exegesis. By waiving aside original intent, Talbott is making the verse say something that the author didn't mean it to say. And he would only resort to this desperate and duplicitous expedient if the verse were irreconcilable with his own position.

Everyone understands that fire is a flexible metaphor that can either signify cleansing or destruction. Which is operative is a question of context. It is illicit to say that because a given metaphor is flexible, we can choose or substitute any import we please in studied defiance of the setting or original intent.

In 2 Thes 1:9, the image of punitive fire goes back to Isa 66:15. That this does not imply annihilation is clear from 66:24: "their worm will not die, nor their fire be quenched."

Commenting on the unpardonable sin (Mt 12:31-32), Talbott once again tries to turn this into a prooftext for penance and Purgatory. But, of course, the key to the passage lies not in the abstract meaning of the verb, but in its negation and in the extension of that negation to the afterlife. It does not open up the possibility that the debt will be paid off at a future date. To the contrary, it expressly forecloses that option.

In chapter 7, Talbott begins by scattering a number of verses to prove the universality of divine love: 2 Tim 2:4; Mt 5:43-48; 18:14; Rom 2:11; Eph 6:9; Col 3:25; Acts 10:34; 2 Pet 3:9.

One is struck, first of all, by the random quality of the evidence. Is this really the best he can cobble together? Apparently so.

I've already dealt with 2 Tim 2:4. For the rest:

i) Mt 5:43-48. Two points:

a) Not everything that holds true in the church age holds true in the world to come. In this life, the wheat and the tares share a common field and are so ingrown that one cannot dig up the tares without uprooting the wheat. But there will be an end-time harvest and winnowing process (Mt 13:24-30,36-43).

b) By that same token, God sends his sun and rain on the wheat and tares alike, but for the benefit of the wheat, and not the weeds.

ii) Mt 18:14. Talbott glosses this to mean that "God is unwilling that a single child (and hence that a single human being who ever was a child) should perish." But this subverts and perverts the proper force of the passage. In dominical usage, "children" do not stand for anyone and everyone. Children are set over against child-abusers, who are the objects of divine judgment (18:6). And children symbolize believers, not unbelievers.

iii) Rom 2:11. God is a just judge. No one will get worse than he deserves. But some get better. Equal treatment presupposes equal claims. No one has a claim on divine

mercy. Mercy, unlike justice, is inherently inequitable. The standard of judgment is quite different from the character of salvation, just as law and grace differ in kind.

iv) Acts 10:34. The passage is concerned with the inclusion of the Gentiles in the Gospel. But that represents a change in the status quo. It presupposes the prior exclusion of most Gentiles. So Talbott's appeal either proves too much or too little.
2 Pet 2:9. Two points:

a) Talbott misses the OT background. As one commentator —not a Calvinist— observes,

> "God's patience with his own people, delaying the final judgment to give them the opportunity of repentance, provides at least a partial answer to the problem of eschatological delay…The author remains close to his Jewish source, for in Jewish thought it was usually for the sake of the repentance of his own people that God delayed judgment. Here it is for the sake of the repentance of 2 Peter's Christian readers," R. Bauckham, **Word Biblical Commentary: Jude, 2 Peter** (Word 1983), 312-313.

b) Let us also not overlook the fact that Peter has a doctrine of reprobation, in tandem with his doctrine of election (1 Pet 2:8-9).

Talbott goes on to say,

"It is hard to avoid the conclusion that those Christians who would restrict God's love and mercy to a chosen few really have no clear idea of what to do with 1 Jn 4:8,16…If this expresses a truth about the essence of God, then it is

logically impossible that the person who is God should fail to love someone" (113).

By way of reply:

i) At most, this would not be a question of what is logically impossible, but ethically or ontologically impossible.

ii) By this "logic," if a man is naturally loving, then he must make love to every woman he meets. Is Talbott a loving or unloving man? If loving, is he a polygamist? Does he maintain a harem?
After all, it's not enough, on Talbott's score, to be merely loving. You must be equally loving.

iii) Isn't marital love an exclusive love? And isn't marital love an exemplum of divine love (Isa 54; Ezk 16; Hosea; Eph 5; Rev 19-22)?.

iv) If essential love means that God must love everyone, then does essential omnipotence mean that God must do everything?

v) Isn't there a logical relationship between loving good and hating evil, or loving evil and hating good? If we love one thing, is it not natural to hate its antithesis?

vi) In the Johannine epistles, love is a closed circle: the Trinity loves itself, the Trinity loves the elect, the elect love each other, the elect love the Trinity. It is not a love that breaks out of the exclusive circle. It is not love of the world. Love of the world is antithetical to Johannine love.

vii) Talbott deliberately omits the oft-repeated faith-condition, as well as the emphatic dualism, in 1 John.

If Talbott is going to stake his claim in the Johannine epistles, then he has chosen hardpan for planting the seeds of universalism.

Talbott also tries to sneak Heb 12:29 into his brief, as though that were a prooftext for universalism: "If God is love and his purifying love, like a consuming fire (see Heb 12:29), destroys all that is false within us…" (118). Now Talbott has done nothing whatsoever to lay the foundation for this equation.

I assume he brings in Heb 12 by this sideways maneuver because it is a powerful passage of judgment, and so he has to do something with it to deflect its force. And he is evidently unable to present a serious exegetical finding. And so he slips it in under the cover of a common metaphor, with the innuendo that if one writer writes about fire, and another writer writes about fire, then they both mean the same thing, and they both mean just what the universalist means. Of course, this inferential chain breaks down at so many points that it's hardly surprising if Talbott declined to lay out, much less weld together, each little link. But if he has so little confidence in his own argument, why should we have any higher confidence?

In addition, to foist a universalistic spin on the eschatological threats in the Book of Hebrews ill-accords with the author's a fortiori style of argument, in which the postmortem punishment awaiting unbelievers is even more unremitting than their premortem punishment.

Moving on to Mal 1:1, Talbott regards the love/hate language as anthropomorphic. I agree with him. However, it is a vivid way of expressing election and reprobation, which are quite literal.

Talbott tries to dodge this by laying stress on the reconciliation of the two brothers. But that's beside the point. Talbott is reading narrative theology against the grain of the intertextual commentary supplied by Malachi and Paul.

To say that "the remnant is always a pledge on behalf of the whole" (121) suffers from a fatal equivocation. There is a collective remnant distributively represented in every generation. But that is not identical with the entire mass of humanity. As one theologian has said, commenting on Isa 6:9-13,

> "He has the promise of a remnant, a remnant which will in turn be eaten away, but of which the holy seed shall be the substance. In other words, the real object here is the remnant and that holy seed. But precisely for the sake of the salvation of that holy seed the preaching of Isaiah must serve for the blinding and hardening of the reprobate shell. If you keep in mind the organic idea, you will understand this very well. There come times in Israel's history when the ungodly segment of the nation gets the power and has the upper hand; times when it becomes well-nigh impossible for the elect kernel to exist within reprobate shell. In such times judgement must come upon Israel: Israel must be eaten away, precisely in order to save it from the domination of the ungodly. However, if this is to happen, if a portion of that reprobate shell is to fall away, then it must first become ripe for judgment. And Isaiah's preaching must serve exactly to accomplish that ripening process. Then the tenth part will be preserved, and the remnant of which the holy seed

shall be the substance," H. Hoeksema, **Believers & Their Seed** (RFPA, 1977), 129-30.

Talbott tries to reduce Rom 9-11 to an ad hominem debate over Jewish exclusivity. But the problem in Rom 9-11 is not the inclusion of the Gentiles, but the exclusion of the Jews. It is the problem of Jewish unbelief. How could God's chosen people reject God's chosen Messiah? Does their rejection of him imply his reject of them? And how does that comport with his promises to Israel? Has God gone back on his word? That's the problem. And Paul's answer is found in double-predestination, which he traces all the way back through the prophets and the patriarchs. There is an inner elect.

Talbott makes the very odd statement that Exod 33:19 "is an idiomatic expression that stresses not the indeterminacy of God's mercy, as some Augustinians have supposed, but rather its intensity and assuredness" (126).

To begin with, what Augustinian ever construed it along indeterminist lines? Does Talbott know what he's talking about? The question is not whether it's determinate, but whether it's discriminate rather than indiscriminate. Does God enjoy sovereign discretion over the objects of mercy. Paul says "yes," Talbott says "no."

In the next chapter, Talbott tries to generate the paradox of exclusivism. God cannot love me unless he loves my loved ones, and I cannot love God unless he loves my loves ones, otherwise I'd be torn in two opposing directions.

This calls for several comments:

i) It reeks of emotional blackmail. A sinner is hardly in a

position to extort concessions from God, as though he'd be doing God a big favor by allowing God to love and save him. This is just another instance of Talbott's petulant and prideful self-absorption.

ii) There is some truth to what he says, but its logic is reversible. Sometimes it does come down to a choice of opposing loves and ultimate loyalties.

iii) Nothing is more striking, in this regard, than the complete omission of Mt 10:21,34-37 to Talbott's discussion.
If Talbott had his way, Abraham would never have left Ur since, in so doing, he undoubtedly left many kinfolk behind. Ruth should have stayed behind with Orpah rather than left with Naomi.

And while we're on the subject of dominical omissions, on several occasions the author employs the phrase "chosen few" as an invidious characterization of Calvinism. But there are a couple of problems with this tactic.

i) The notion of a chosen few that are saved goes directly back to the words of our Lord (Mt 7:14; 20:16; 22:14). So to whom does the odium belong—Calvin or Christ?

ii) There is no official position within Calvinism on the proportion of the damned in relation to the redeemed. That turns on separate questions, such as eschatology (amil/postmil) and the salvation or not of all who die before the age of discretion.

iii) Even if only a fraction of humanity is ultimately to be saved, a fraction of a multiple billions is still a large absolute number.

As to the question of how heaven will be heaven without all of our loves ones, Talbott is indulging in a diabolical game in which it puts the reader to the test and tempts him to defy God.

This may be a natural enough question to ask, but a Christian is under no obligation to answer it. We simply entrust the matter to God's surpassing wisdom and leave it there.

But one can venture a couple of comments. Whatever good we find in others is but a shadow of God's goodness, and in heaven we will see the sun in all its glory.

Many believers have found that the family of God took the place of their natural family. It is not that they rejected their family, but their family rejected them. And the company of the like-minded is the final foundation of love and fellowship.

Talbott anticipates and endeavors to answer an obvious objection to this "paradox."

> "At this point, however, one might begin to wonder about those who are not our loved ones…If my capacity for love is not yet perfected…and God wants me to experience supreme happiness, then he must continue to teach me the lessons of love until it is perfected" (138-39).

Talbott says more than this, but you get the point. Although this way of putting the matter represents a skillful modulation from one key to another, it is not a natural modification or logical extension of his original premise. To the contrary, it represents a flat contradiction, but conceals

the sleight-of-hand like a deft magician.

The original principle was the so-called paradox of exclusivism, according to which heaven would not be heaven for me unless all my loved ones join me there. Now he addresses the question of whether heaven would be heaven if those who are not my loved ones were missing.

Now, on the face of it, it seems pretty obvious that this is a completely different question with a completely different answer. And he has disguised the difference by putting it so blandly. But let's rip of the mask.

It isn't just a question of those I don't love. What about those I positively despise? We can upend his whole paradox and ask if heaven would be heaven if a rape victim finds her rapist in heaven. And one can multiply many other examples of the kind.

At a merely intuitive level, what makes heaven heavenly is the company we keep, not merely who is there, but who is not. That's a traditional difference between heaven and hell, is it not?

Talbott papers over the contradiction by saying that God makes us more loving, and makes our enemies more loving in return, so that, eventually, even our enemies are our loved ones, and vice versa.

And I don't deny that this sometimes happens. In heaven, there will sometimes be the victim and victimizer side by side, owing to the miracle of grace and redemption.

But that has nothing to do with natural affections and the

logic of internal relations. That is an extremely unnatural and counterintuitive state of affairs.

One more time, let us contrast the two questions and two answers. The original form of the paradox was predicated on the idea that I have a natural affection for some people, and that would come into conflict with my love of God unless I was saved along with all my family and friends.

That is utterly different than saying that some people are not my loved ones, people I dislike or intensely despise because they wronged me or my family or my friends, and that God must teach me how to love them.

What we have is not a paradox but a vicious circle. Heaven wouldn't be heaven unless everyone makes it to heaven. Why, because heaven wouldn't be heaven for you and me unless our loved ones were there. But what if my loved ones are not your loved ones? What if having your loved ones in heaven would make heaven a living hell for me? What if what makes heaven heavenly for me is having my loved ones, but not yours? Then God must make me love your loved ones as well. Instead of a preexistent condition generating the so-called paradox, the condition has to be generated to generate the paradox in the first place. Premise and conclusion trade places. But this is sheer sophistry.

His book has four more chapters, but I'll only review the next one because the remaining three involve quarrels between the Arminian, universalist, and Molinist which are of no immediate interest to me, seeing as all three positions are wrong and wrong-headed. They are more than welcome to attack one another's positions.

In his next chapter, Talbott begins by saying a couple of strange things. On the one hand, he regards the Scholastic doctrine of divine simplicity as incoherent. On the other hand, he endorses a doctrine of moral simplicity. And guess which moral attribute comes out on top? Love, or at least his pet definition thereof.

But there are a couple of problems with this. It isn't clear that one can affirm moral simplicity but deny metaphysical simplicity. Ultimately, all God's attributes are mental attributes, for God is a spirit.

In addition, what is the Scriptural warrant for ranking the divine attributes, and then reducing all the moral attributes to one, and then choosing love as the standard of reference. There are several steps in the process of abstraction, none of which Talbott tries to justify, either exegetically or philosophically.

As far as I'm concerned, each attribute characterizes every other attribute. I don't prioritize the divine attributes.

As is his wont, Talbott also parodies the opposing position. He suggests that the traditional view sets the justice and mercy of the Father in a state of tension, which the Son must relieve.

But this is no part of Calvinism. All the members of the Trinity share the same attributes. All were party to the plan of redemption. And different attributes take different objects: mercy takes the elect as its object while justice takes the reprobate as its object.

Talbott also claims, as he did once before, that the purpose of the atonement was not to change the attitude of God towards man, but man's attitude towards God (145). As usual, this distorts the opposing position. A Calvinist does not maintain that the atonement "changes" the attitude of God. Rather, the atonement supplies the judicial grounds for our justification with God. The atonement presupposes the love of God for the elect.

In addition, there are exegetical arguments for the theological paradigm Talbott rejects. Cf. Simon Gathercole, **Defending Substitution: An Essay on Atonement in Paul** (Baker 2015).

But this is just a warming up exercise. Talbott's target is the principle of retributive justice. In an opening volley, Talbott levels the following charge:

> "If an action were so heinous, so dire in its consequences for others, that its perpetrator would deserve to suffer everlastingly in return, then a loving God would never permit it in the first place; his love for the potential victims would require him to protect them from such irreparable harm" (150).

Well, I don't wish to come across as ungenerous, but it seems pretty presumptuous for a universalist to get on his high horse about the problem of evil. His own theodicy tries to justify the existence of evil by the eschatological defeat of evil. But one of the primary problems with his theodicy is not only the way it relates the present to the future, but the present to the past. Why does the present need to be balanced off by the future?

The world we live in looks very much like the sort of world predicted by a Calvinist. It doesn't look very much like the world predicted by universalism. For if God is such a tenderhearted fellow as all that, surely he could and should and would intervene much more often than he does on behalf of the innocent.

Here we can turn universalist reasoning in on itself. There are many occasions when we would intervene if given the opportunity. How can we be so much more merciful than the God of universalism?

From the standpoint of a universalist, why must a little girl suffer at the hands of a child molester so that she can get a celestial lollipop in the world to come? Or share a celestial lollipop with her one-time rapist in the world to come? To repeat his own choice adjectives, would that "make amends, make up for, cancel out, undo the harm, and repair the damage" (157)?

How does this really square with Talbott's stated ideal of fatherhood? Would he stand by if his five-year-old daughter was raped—as long as she'd be rewarded with a bigger birthday party in heaven?

Adding insult to injury, Talbott faults the retributionist for his adherence to original sin. Now, let's be clear on this. Talbott appeals to Rom 5 and 1 Cor 15 to prove universalism. But, of course, each text is also a locus classicus of original sin. So what is his own position on original sin? Is this consistent or inconsistent with universalism?

Underlying his criticism is the apparent assumption, for

which he offers no justification, that an Augustinian begins with an abstract theory of retributive justice, which he deploys to defend the doctrine of hell. Talbott then takes issue with what he regards as the nature of retribution, more by way of assertion than argument, in relation to other Augustinian doctrines.

But the truth is otherwise. An Augustinian derives his theory of retributive justice from the witness of Scripture, especially in relation to the doctrine of hell, as well as OT law (with its 18 capital crimes) and penal substitution. This is not an artificial construct, but one which takes the witness of Scripture as its building materials.

There is, then, no tension between an Augustinian doctrine of retribution, hell, or original sin, for they were all developed in tandem, taking their respective demands into account and making the necessary adjustments. Of course, different theological traditions have different conceptions of what is fair, just, and equitable. But that goes beyond retributivism, per se. That is a separate debate, with is own supporting arguments and counterarguments. The theory of retributive justice has a philosophical as well as theological rationale:

https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/justice-retributive/

Talbott is of the opinion that original sin would constitute a mitigating rather than aggravating offense. But although that enjoys a shallow, commonsense appeal, it is no part of Paul's argument. Paul does not treat original sin as an attenuating or exculpatory circumstance. Quite the contrary, he treats original sin as culpable.

And this goes to the burden of proof. For a Bible-believing Christian, he is justified in believing as he does if his belief is exegetically well-warranted. He needs no extra-canonical reason to justify his article of faith. Sola scriptura is the sufficient condition and necessary criterion.

It may be useful, in the field of apologetics, to have supporting arguments from natural reason. And some articles of faith are susceptible to rational defense. But arguments independent of Scripture are not necessary to verify the doctrine in question, or faith in said doctrine. If the Bible is divine revelation, then revealed truths are self-validating. The word of God is reason enough, for God is supreme reason.

Talbott's objection runs deeper than a theory of retribution, as such. Rather, he's raising all the stock Arminian objections to the Reformed doctrine of spiritual inability. Here the moves and countermoves are well-rehearsed. If he was interested in a serious debate, he could engage the Edwardian distinction between moral and spiritual ability. He could also field a libertarian theory of freewill against Edwardian objections.

In addition, the current debate has moved far beyond the 18C framework. Consider the work of John Martin Fischer. For more philosophically up-to-date defenses of theological determinism, cf. Guillaume Bignon, **Excusing Sinners and Blaming God: A Calvinist Assessment of Determinism, Moral Responsibility, and Divine Involvement in Evil** (Pickwick 2017); Heath White, **Fate and Free Will A Defense of Theological Determinism** (Notre Dame 2019).

But all his contention really boils down to boasting that "my intuitions are better than your intuitions"! This makes it difficult to rebut much of what he says in chap. 9, because he doesn't give the reader much to rebut. Much of what he says does not take the form of reasoned argument, but is nothing more than the venting of his personal feelings and tendentious opinions. There's nothing to disprove because there's nothing to prove.

For the moment, though, let us try to play the game by his own rules. Now Talbott seems to be extremely sure of his ethical reflexes. As a consequence, he is very sure of what he'd do in a given situation, such as how he'd deal with a wayward daughter.

So does his self-assurance undermine his freedom? If he knows in advance what he will do, is the future open or closed to him? Does his certainty rob his actions of moral meaning?

And if this first-order form of certainty is compatible with freedom or responsibility, why, then, should a second-order form of certainty be incompatible with freedom and morality as well? In other words, if his personal certitude is compatible with the above, then if God ensures his future actions, how would such supervenience undermine authentic freedom or moral incumbency? What difference does it make if second party renders the action of the first party to be certain, rather than the self-determination of the primary party? It doesn't differ at the level of the outcome. So wherein, if anywhere, lies the moral differential?

What is more striking, though, is the incongruous mix of moralizing and amorality in his defense of universalism. When he nominates Adolf Eichmamm, Ted Bundy, and Jeffrey Dahmer as his poster-boys for universalism, I rather doubt he'll be making many recruits to the cause. It is never survivors of the death camps who pen starry-eyed books on universalism. Rather, it's pampered and protected elites like Talbott and Adams who deny the victims their justice, their outrage, and—yes—their vengeance. How many victims are looking for the love of Adolf Eichmann?

Nothing is more immoral than an incapacity for moral indignation. Nothing is more unjust and cruel than telling the victim that she must forgive her unforgiving assailant. Imagine Adams or Talbott as crisis counselors at a rape clinic or safe-house for battered women.

Talbott's attack also suffers from a simple-minded quality. For instance, he fails to distinguish between sins and crimes. A crime, to be a crime, generally has a victim. It assumes the infliction of harm in one form or another. And that, in turn, determines the nature and scope of the punishment.

In the case of property crimes, some form of financial restitution may be appropriate, as we see in the Mosaic law. This admits a quantitative penalty.

However, certain religious offenses and crimes of aggravated violence do not admit gradations of punishment. A financial loss is measurable in a way that, say, the loss of a child to murder is incommensurable.

Even this has exceptions. Under the Mosaic law, it was a

crime to curse the deaf (Lev 19:14). Although no harm is done to the deaf—since he cannot hear the abuse—yet such an act is disrespectful.

But a sin, to be a sin, need not have a victim. Some sins are crimes, and some crimes are sins, but they are not coincident. God can suffer no harm, but God can be wronged.

So there is a difference between criminal guilt and sinful guilt. Like cursing the deaf, it dishonors the offended party.

And there are degrees of dishonor, for social obligations are concentric. I have fewer obligations to a stranger than a neighbor, fewer to a neighbor than a friend, fewer to a friend than a parent, sibling, or child, and fewer to family than to God.

Every child is not my child. Jeffrey Dahmer is not my child. And if he were, I'd disown him.

Degrees of dishonor imply escalating degrees of guilt. Cursing a deaf father is worse than cursing a deaf stranger. Cursing God is worse than cursing man.

Because social obligations are concentric, they are also asymmetrical. Although a father and son share some mutual obligations, they do not share identical obligations. The paternal role is not interchangeable with the filial role. The father owes nothing to the son, but the son owes everything to the father. Yet Talbott's paternal role-models seem to be drawn from the ranks of Eli and David—men who failed in their paternal duties by being so very weak, permissive and indulgent.

Talbott also overlooks a truism in ethics: one act may be more harmful, but less culpable; while another act may be more culpable, but less harmful. Intent is the deciding factor. This is what distinguishes murder from manslaughter.

Talbott cites 1 Jn 1:9 out of context (163). In this verse, forgiveness is predicated on several conditions:

i) The subject is a Christian

ii) The subject is contrite

iii) Christ has redeemed the Christian (2:2; 4:14).

To turn this into a prooftext for universalism is a willful misreading of the text. Likewise, he says that the imago Dei renders the sinner deserving of divine forgiveness (161). But this is yet another example of brazen Scripture-twisting, for the imago Dei is expressly made a condition of punishment, and not of forgiveness (Gen 9:6).

In attacking retribution, and with it, the doctrine of hell, he says that the sinner must "see clearly the choice of roads, the consequences of their actions, and the true nature of evil" (154).

This brings us to a fundamental divide between two different conceptions of sin, and along with that, two different types of religion. Is evil a result of ignorance or ill-will? Eastern religion attributes evil to ignorance. Hence, salvation is a matter, not of redemption, but illumination.

Evangelical religion attributes sin to ill-will, to a spiteful and malicious hatred of the good. Hence, salvation is a matter of redemption and regeneration. Rebirth may bring enlightenment, but enlightenment does not bring rebirth. And rebirth, alone, does not right the scales of justice.

To take the paradigm-case, Lucifer sinned against the light. There was nothing deficient in Lucifer's theology.

This is also a running theme in the Fourth Gospel. The reprobate sin, not in darkness, but in the full light of day. They turn to darkness by turning their back on the light of Christ. This is not what makes them sinners, but exposes the true nature of sin. If they are ignorant, it is not for lack of knowledge, but due to their culpable and invincible ignorance.

The difference between Calvinism and universalism is not a difference of eschatology, like the difference between amil, premil, and postmil. No, it's nothing less than the difference between one religion and another. Universalism is a soul-brother of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Classical ethics (Plato, Aristotle), in which evil is a result of ignorance, in which evil-doers are misguided do-gooders, in which no one wittingly chooses evil over good. By contrast, the Christian faith views the sinner, not as an innocent child, but as a proud and stubborn rebel. He sins, not from love of sin, but hatred of God. Although this is radically irrational, even to the point of criminal insanity, it is a common place of human experience. Hell merely makes of them more of what they already are. The gates of hell are locked from both the inside and the outside.

Universalism v. Calvinism

This is an edited debate between universalist Tom Talbott and me:

http://dangerousidea.blogspot.com/2007/10/morg-and-nivlac.html

Hays
There are a lot of things I could say about Talbott's parable, which is studded with straw man arguments about Calvinism, but for now I'll confine myself to one observation:

Talbott is putatively attacking double predestination, but this is clearing the ground for his alternative—which is universalism. And universalism no doubt enjoys a certain superficial appeal. But it's only appealing to pampered folks like Talbott who've led a charmed existence. I daresay that universalism is not the least bit appealing to the victims of horrendous violence and galling injustice.

It loses its superficial appeal the instant you swap in a very different illustration. For example, instead of a mother's love for her "little albino child," suppose we substitute a psychopath who rapes and tortures her little girl to death.

According to Talbott, the psychopath will eventually be saved, even though he may have to undergo a hellish process of purification. What would a normal mother have to say about his heavenly prospects?

"Look, Nivlac, I love Morg with all my heart, and I believe that the Book of Morg is indeed his holy Word. And I don't know what to say about your fancy arguments that seem to

imply such awful things about Morg. But I do know this. No holy or just or loving Creator like Morg, no Creator of the kind that I worship, could possibly love and save the rapist and tormenter and killer of my little girl. Indeed, if he loves my little girl, as you say he does, then he cannot also love the rapist and tormenter and killer of my little girl. So if you are right about the meaning of these verses--mind you, I'm not saying you are right--but IF you are right, then these verses are just wrong; they are not a true revelation from Morg."

Talbott
"It therefore seems to them that albinos have reason to expostulate with Morg if they are hated solely by his decision, apart from their own merit."

http://www.willamette.edu/~ttalbott/nivlac.html

Hays
This parabolic statement is supposedly analogous to the Reformed doctrine of reprobation. However, there is, in Reformed theology, an asymmetry between election and reprobation. Election is unconditional. Merit doesn't figure in election, in part because sinners have no merit to contribute.

By contrast, demerit does figure in reprobation. Demerit is a necessary, albeit insufficient, condition of reprobation. (Insufficient inasmuch as everyone would be reprobated if demerit were a sufficient condition.)

Talbott
"Look, Nivlac, I love Morg with all my heart, and I believe that the Book of Morg is indeed his holy Word. And I don't know what to say about your fancy arguments that seem to imply such awful things about Morg. But I do know this. No

holy or just or loving Creator like Morg, no Creator of the kind that I worship, could possibly hate this little albino child of mine that I love so much. Indeed, if he loves me, as you say he does, then he must also love my baby. So if you are right about the meaning of these verses--mind you, I'm not saying you are right--but IF you are right, then these verses are just wrong; they are not a true revelation from Morg."

http://www.willamette.edu/~ttalbott/nivlac.html

Hays
Here's another problem with Talbott's parable. He uses the example of a little child. Now normal men and women—unlike pedophiles, abortionists, and psychopaths—are naturally protective of young children. So this illustration plays upon the emotive connotations of a "little child" or "baby."

But children ordinarily grow up to be adults. Suppose we compose a different parable.

Once upon a time there was a Jewish physician who had dreams. And, unlike most folks, his dreams came true.

One night he had a dream about a sick little German boy who visited his clinic. The little boy would grow up to commit genocide against the Jewish people.

The next day, a sick little boy by the name of Adolf Hitler was brought into the clinic to receive treatment for a life-threatening childhood illness. The doctor could cure him or he could let him die by administering a placebo. He knew that by healing this child, he would be condemning thousands of other innocent children to death—including his very own children.

Should he save this child, and thereby condemn thousands of other children to suffer an unjust and premature death, or should he let this child die, and thereby save the prospective victims? Who should he allow to live, and who should he allow to die? I'll let you decide how you wish to finish the story.

Point being: our moral intuitions are context-dependent. It all depends on the illustration. Change the illustration, and you may suddenly find yourself contradicting your previous intuition. You were very sure of yourself until

Tearjerkers cut both ways. For it's easy to compose tearjerkers that illustrate opposing positions.

Talbott
"May I presume that by 'a revelatory claim' you simply mean *the claim* that some proposition is true because it is part of a revelation from God?"

Hays
In the context of this discussion, I mean something that claims to be divine revelation, whether or not the claim is true. It could either be a true claim or a false claim.

I'm also assuming that divine revelation is true. However, there are theological positions, like open theism, in which something could be genuinely revelatory and yet be mistaken, inasmuch as God could be mistaken. But that is not my own position.

Talbot
"And may I also presume that by 'moral intuition' you simply mean *a moral conviction*?"

Hays
No, that's too simple. Moral intuition isn't synonymous with moral conviction, for moral conviction is a broader category. I'd define a moral intuition, like intuitions generally, as a pretheoretical conviction. And moral intuitions would be a subset of moral convictions. However, a moral conviction may be a refined intuition—refined by subsequent analysis.

Talbott
"But here is my question: Given that your present moral convictions and mine are both fallible, to what should we appeal, or perhaps lift up, as a corrective for our fallible moral convictions? And why?"

Hays
God's word (i.e. the Bible) would be the moral arbiter of our moral convictions. A full explanation would be complicated, but briefly, I regard saving faith as a mode of knowledge rather than opinion.

Therefore, while some of my religious beliefs may be mistaken, I don't think a Christian can be systematically mistaken in his Christian faith—including his conviction that Scripture is the word of God.

If I were going to defend this philosophically, I might formulate this in terms of reliabilism. Scripture is divine testimony. It is possible for belief in testimony to count as knowledge if the belief-forming process is reliable. As a philosopher, you know how the argument goes.

Hence, while moral intuition can stand above a false revelatory claim, it will necessarily stand below a true revelatory claim.

Talbott

"Of course, as you know, Osama bin Laden might make a similar claim, provided that we replace 'the Bible' with 'the Qur'an.' So perhaps the bottom line is this: If you have saving faith and through it God produces in you a belief that the Bible is the Word of God, then this belief qualifies as knowledge rather than merely as an opinion; and similarly, if Osama (or perhaps some more reasonable Muslim cleric) has saving faith and through it God produces in him a belief that the Qur'an is the Word of God, then this belief also qualifies as knowledge rather than merely as an opinion."

Hays

i) Your question is predicated on the hypothetical assumption that a Muslim can exercise saving faith. I deny that assumption. A Muslim can convert to the Christian faith, and thereby exercise saving faith, but a Muslim qua Muslim is not in a position to exercise saving faith. From a Biblical standpoint, Islam is just another form of idolatry.

ii) Moreover, belief in a false proposition or set of false propositions wouldn't count as knowledge. For something to even be a possible object of knowledge, a necessary precondition is that it be true. And God wouldn't produce saving faith in a false prophecy (prophecy in the broader sense in which Scripture distinguishes between true and false prophets.)

A reliable belief-forming process is not a sufficient condition to produce knowledge. There must also be a true object of knowledge.

Talbott

"So far, so good. But now I am wondering whether your saving faith, assuming you have it, also enables you to believe infallibly (or to know) that Paul actually wrote I and II Timothy or that every decision of the great councils

concerning which books truly belong in the canon were correct. Beyond that, I'm wondering how you would assess two kinds of revelatory claims: First, on its face the claim that the 66 books in the Protestant Bible are the very Word of God seems quite consistent with the claim that additional books in the Catholic Bible, or perhaps the Gospel of Thomas, or even the Qur'an and the Book of Mormon are likewise genuine sources of revelation in the world. So as you see it, does your saving faith enable you to believe infallibly (or to know) that some of these writings are not, despite many claims that they are, genuine revelations from God? Does your saving faith enable you to know, in other words, that the Bible, and only the Bible, is the Word of God?"

Hays
One has to sort out a number of issues here.

i) Islam and Mormonism are Christian heresies. They take the Bible as a standard of comparison. If, therefore, their "scriptures" contradict the Bible, then they have falsified their own revelatory claims. Therefore, we can discount Christian heresies on their own grounds, since they are at loggerheads with their own frame of reference.

ii) The Gospel of Thomas disqualifies itself in a different way. We' talking about a 5C Coptic MS, which we can trace back, in some form, to a mid-2C Greek exemplar. Since the date of the original would postdate the life of the Apostle Thomas by many decades, we're dealing with a pious fraud or forgery. It can't be written by Thomas since it was written long after he died. Therefore, it's not what it claims to be.

iii) As to the Catholic canon, I assume you're alluding to differences between the Catholic OT canon and the

Protestant OT canon. This, in turn, involves debates over the status of an Alexandrian/LXX canon in relation to a Palestinian/Hebrew canon. I think that scholars like Roger Beckwith, Robert Hanhart, and David DeSilva have convincingly demonstrated the originality of the Palestinian canon, whereas the Alexandrian canon is something of a scholarly legend.

iv) I could also discuss the authorship of 1-2 Timothy, but you are using all these examples to illustrate a larger issue, so I think it's more efficient if I graduate to your larger issue. I think the question you're angling at is whether knowledge is compatible with probabilistic evidentiary arguments. We associate evidentiary arguments with probability, we associate probabilities with degrees of uncertainty, and we associate uncertainty with a belief that falls short of knowledge. Is that the point you're making?

v) One thing I'd say is that even flimsy evidence can sometimes point us in the right direction. Suppose I believe that one of my correspondents lives in Cincinnati. I believe that because the letter I received from her is postmarked from Cincinnati.

Of course, that isn't compelling evidence. Maybe she lives in Boca Raton, but was visiting Cincinnati at the time she mailed the letter.

On the hand, suppose she does, in fact, reside in Cincinnati. In that event, I formed a true belief about her whereabouts, even though I did so on the basis of a very flimsy piece of evidence.

Now, I'm aware of the fact that true belief is not equivalent to knowledge. I simply use this example to illustrate the

fact that while I might have been mistaken, I wasn't mistaken.

At the very least, it is possible for a probabilistic argument to yield a true belief. So the appeal to evidence does not, of itself, undermine the possibility of knowledge. If, in light of the evidence, I truly believe something, then it's possible that I can also know it—even if an additional condition must be met to raise true belief to the status of knowledge.

vi) Put another way, we could say that, counterfactually speaking, my belief (in the whereabouts of my correspondent) could have been erroneous, but—as a matter of fact—my belief was not erroneous. So unless someone can either demonstrate the counterfactual or shift the onus, I think it's illicit to cast doubt on every noetic claim merely on the grounds that it's hypothetically possible that the evidence is less than compelling.

vii) Moreover, the status of certain religious beliefs doesn't exist in a vacuum. It is God's will that his people come to saving knowledge of truth.

And before you accuse me of vicious circularity in my implicit appeal to Scripture at this point, I would note that this proposition (regarding God's will) is redundantly attested in Scripture, so it doesn't depend on any particular verse or book of the Bible.

viii) Furthermore, I, as a Calvinist, have a robust doctrine of providence—which is also redundantly attested in Scripture.

I also think one could mount a transcendental argument for divine providence as a precondition of knowledge. As Plantinga and others have argued, (naturalistic)

evolutionary psychology undermines rationality. The logical alternative would be a doctrine of creation and providence.

ix) Apropos (vii)-(viii), it is God's will that his people come to a saving knowledge of the truth. We form our beliefs, in part, on the basis of the available evidence. And the evidence available to us is not a historical accident, but the evidence that God has preserved for us.

When I form critical judgments on canonicity or authorship, I'm using the best evidence I have at my disposal, and that is also the evidence that God has left at my disposal. It's like one of those spy novels in which a covert insider wants to expose government corruption, but he doesn't want to expose himself in the process, so he feeds a number of anonymous tips and clues to an investigative reporter. He is guiding the reporter every step of the wait, until the reporter discovers the "shocking" truth.

Taken by itself, each piece of evidence is less than compelling, but the reporter is also aware of the fact that someone in the know is feeding him one lead after another. So beyond the evidence itself is the directed process by which the evidence is being leaked—like a treasure hunt.

Or perhaps the reporter knows his source. He knows that his source is a reliable, well-placed informant. So the reporter's confidence goes beyond the immediate evidence to include the source of the evidence.

Talbott
"Second, and perhaps more important for our present purposes, many Christians have held that the moral law written in our hearts (Rom. 2:15) and even the creation itself (Rom. 1:20) are genuine sources of revelation. Would you reject this idea?"

Hays
I'm inclined to agree with Cranfield, Schreiener and Wright that Rom 2:15 is probably referring to Gentiles Christians. However, I'll concede your general point.

Talbott
"Or, if you would accept it, would you nonetheless deny that these additional sources of revelation can sometimes refine our theological convictions and even correct our understanding of the biblical message?"

Hays
Several issues:

i) Moral conviction as a result of natural revelation would be raw intuition, not refined intuition.

ii) Paul goes on to say that unbelievers suppress the truth in unrighteousness. So natural law doesn't retain its prelapsarian purity.

iii) Exegesis isn't based on moral intuition—although it makes use of logical intuition. The proper way to understand the Bible is to employ the grammatico-historical method.

To take a concrete example, if I find the divine command to execute the Canaanites morally offensive, does that entitle me to reinterpret the account such that God did not order their execution—even if the text explicitly and repeatedly attributes the command to God himself? How do my scruples in any way affect the objective assertions of the text?

Talbott

“Wow, Steve, you really do try to cover a lot of ground with breathtaking speed! But believe me, I don’t need to be informed that a ‘reliable belief-forming process is not a sufficient condition to produce knowledge.’ Nor do I need to be informed that ‘belief in a false proposition or set of false propositions wouldn’t count as knowledge.’ I think we can both agree that no one can know a false proposition! What I do need explained to me, however, is how these comments are even relevant to the context in which they appear.”

Hays
This is not a case of explaining things to you as if I’m teaching you something you don’t already know. Rather, I do it for a number of other reasons. This is for the benefit of lurkers who may be following this thread. This is so that you know what underlies my position. And to head off certain potential objections.

Talbott
“But unfortunately, that response exhibits a two-fold confusion. First, although it may seem like a rather picky point, the quoted passage includes no question at all.”

Hays
I see no confusion on my part. You are asking me questions, and the business about the Muslim *functions* as a question (directed at me), whether or not it takes the literary form of a question.

Talbott
“Second, although the quoted passage does include a couple of conditionals, the same is true for them; neither of these conditionals is “predicated on the hypothetical assumption that a Muslim can exercise saving faith.” The truth of a conditional, remember, in no way entails the truth of its antecedent.”

Hays
Once again, I see no confusion on my part. I say "hypothetical" and you say "conditional." Do you think there's a material difference between a hypothetical and a conditional? Can we move past the semantic quibbles to the substantive issues?

Talbott
"So where does this leave us? We can all agree, I presume, that, if through 'a reliable belief-forming process' God produces true beliefs in us, then those beliefs qualify as knowledge. But once we have acknowledged that obvious point, all the interesting theological and philosophical disputes remain right where they were, whether they be disputes between Christians, between Christians and Muslims, or between Christians and atheists."

Hays
But I didn't leave it where I found it. You attempted to construct a symmetrical claim. I then gave concrete reasons for why your parallel was disanalogous. So I didn't discuss the comparison between Christian and Islamic revelatory claims at a purely abstract level. Rather, I proceeded to show why the hypothetical equivalence was equivocal once we delve into the details.

Talbott
"At the risk of violating one of my own principles and making this post way too long, I also want to clarify the point behind the first set of questions in my previous post. For you seem to have missed that point entirely, no doubt because I failed to make it clear enough…No, that is not the point I was making. Indeed, I was not making any point at all; I was merely asking some questions in an effort to get clearer about your own view.

Hays
You seem to have a very atomistic or compartmentalized notion of what you're trying to accomplish at any particular moment. You're not merely asking me questions to be clear on my own view. Rather, you have your own position to promote, and as a preliminary exercise you want to be clear on my own view so that you can critique it in order to promote your own position. I don't have a problem with that. But I'm puzzled by the consistently defensive tone of your replies.

You have a theological agenda, and I have a theological agenda. Let's be upfront about our ultimate objectives.

Talbott
"But again, we can surely agree about this: If my belief that Neil Armstrong once walked upon the moon rests upon evidence of a probabilistic kind, that in no way excludes it from the category of knowledge. So your long excursus into epistemology, even to the point of mentioning Plantinga's argument for the irrationality of naturalism(!), seemed to me quite unnecessary."

Hays
It's unnecessary if you concede the point. I don't know in advance what you're prepared to concede until I lay it on the table.

Talbott
"As did your spelling out what you take to be compelling reasons for denying that the Gospel of Thomas, for example, belongs in the canon."

Hays

I don’t know why you think that’s unnecessary. It was your example, not mine. If my response was unnecessary, then your example was unnecessary. __You said, “on its face the claim that the 66 books in the Protestant Bible are the very Word of God seems quite consistent with the claim that additional books in the Catholic Bible, or perhaps the Gospel of Thomas, or even the Qur’an and the Book of Mormon are likewise genuine sources of revelation in the world.”

I’m simply answering you on your own grounds. That’s how you chose to frame the discussion. Why do you react this way?

Talbott
“I was instead trying to clarify in my own mind how exclusively you want to identify the Word of God with the Bible. I therefore posed a series of questions that led up to the crucial one, which, despite the length of your reply, you never addressed. The question was this: Does your saving faith enable you to know … that the Bible, and only the Bible, is the Word of God?” I was wondering, in other words, whether you would claim to know that every book in the Bible truly belongs there and also claim to know that nothing outside the accepted canon could qualify as the Word of God. And after reading your latest post, I still have no idea how you would answer that question.”

Hays
That’s partly a chronological question, and partly a terminological question:

i) Not everything that God ever spoke to a prophet or apostle, or inspired him to say, was committed to writing and preserved for posterity. So, historical speaking, the word of God is not conterminous with the Bible. Not every one of his words was canonized.

However, from our contemporary position, in contrast to the situation of an OT Jew or 1C Christian, the word of God is conterminous with the Bible. The history of revelation and the history of redemption run on parallel tracks which converge in the Christ-Event (Heb 1:1-2).

ii) Jews also drew a categorical distinction between canonical revelation and subcanonical forms of revelation like divination. See David Aune's analysis in **Prophecy In Early Christianity**.

Hence, a prophecy could be a word of the Lord without being God's word in the canonical or scriptural sense. So, in terms of this classification scheme, you could have an instance of divine speech that is not Scriptural speech. It falls outside the boundaries of Scripture. Whether the Bible is identical with God's word therefore depends on your relative timeframe as well as your prophetic taxonomy.

You also seem to be bundling two distinct questions in one:

i) *Is* the Bible the only word of God?

ii) Can the Bible be *known* to be the only word of God?

The former is an ontological question, the later an epistemic question. Were you intending to ask two distinct questions? Obviously the answers will differ.

I think I just addressed the former question. In answer to the second, yes I think person can *know* the word of God is *now* conterminous with the Bible (i.e. the Protestant canon of Scripture).

Talbott
"I was also wondering how far you would take your claim of infallibility with respect to beliefs that unquestionably do rest upon probabilistic evidence, that is, beliefs that may indeed qualify as knowledge, provided that they are true…I took this to imply something more than that certain Christian beliefs are properly basic in Plantinga's sense; I took it to imply that many distinctively Christian doctrines—the doctrine of the Trinity, perhaps—are such that Christians cannot be mistaken about them."

Hays
i) It's true that I'm staking out a stronger position than Plantinga insofar as properly basic beliefs only enjoy prima facie warrant, and can be overturned in the light of contrary evidence. I reject that with reference to saving faith.

ii) At the same time, the content of saving faith is, to some extent, person-variable. To whom much is given, much is required. So saving faith varies in some degree with one's natural aptitude, exposure, and the scope of revelation at that point in redemptive history.

Conversely, the Bible also says, on the one hand, that certain beliefs are a necessary precondition of salvation while, on the other hand, certain contrary beliefs are damnatory. So sheer ignorance is not exculpatory.

Talbott
"So I guess one question I would put to you is this: However strong you may think the probabilistic historical evidence for excluding the Gospel of Thomas from the canon, do you claim infallibility in this matter? I wouldn't."

Hays

Since the Gospel of Thomas is a Gnostic gospel, the theology of which is incompatible with Biblical theology, it couldn't be canonical scripture.

Talbott
"But then, I doubt that saving faith requires many distinctively Christian beliefs at all, not even the belief that Christ was raised from the dead; much less does it require the belief that the Bible is the Word of God."

Hays
As a universalist you naturally have a very elastic definition of saving faith.

Talbott
"According to the author of Hebrews, after all, Abraham had saving faith, and Abraham held neither of these beliefs, at least not during his earthly life."

Hays
i) As I've said before, we make allowance for one's historical position in the course of progressive revelation.

ii) At the same time, the author of Hebrews is warning his readers that the history of revelation is irreversible. They can't turn back the clock. What was saving faith for Abraham ceases to be saving faith for 1C Jews living on the other side of the cross.

Talbott
"If you believe that I have somehow misrepresented Calvin in the section where I actually discuss him, I invite you to point out where I have done so; and if you would like to challenge some specific point in my critique of Calvin, I invite you to do that as well."

Hays
Case in point. You said:

> "The only problem is that his assumptions also undermine the Christian faith entirely, because they undermine the very possibility of trust in God. If God can 'justly' do anything whatsoever, including predestine some to eternal perdition, then he can also 'justly' engage in cruelty for its own sake, "justly" command that we torture babies or that we produce as much misery in the world as we can, and 'justly' punish acts of love and kindness. So why should we even care whether God is just or righteous if his righteousness excludes nothing at all? And on what grounds can we trust him? If, as Calvin claims, there is no answer to the question, 'Why does God act from one set of motives (e.g. love) rather than from another (e.g., hatred or deceitfulness),' then nothing in God's nature precludes him from lying or breaking promises or deceiving all Christians regarding the conditions of salvation. For all we know, therefore, perhaps God has deceived all Christians regarding the conditions of salvation in order that he might display the true nature of his righteousness."

You're claiming that Calvin is a theological voluntarist. And this is central to your critique of Calvinism. I believe that this identification is incorrect. For starters, read "The Power Dialectic" in Paul Helm's book on **Calvin's Ideas** (Oxford 2004), chapter 11.

Talbott
"But the more general line of criticism, not necessarily reflected in the paper, would be this: Either Calvin is a theological voluntarist in the relevant sense, or he is unable

to block moral objections to his understanding of predestination and reprobation."

Hays
i) Suppose, for the sake of argument, that Calvin cannot block the moral objections to his position. What would follow from that admission?

Calvin was not a philosophical theologian in the sense that Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and Scotus were. He's not making a philosophical case for reprobation.

So there's a certain asymmetry in this debate. Calvin subscribes to reprobation on exegetical grounds, but he's fielding philosophical objections to reprobation. Now it may be that Calvin lacks the philosophical aptitude or sophistication or conceptual resources to offer a philosophically satisfying counterargument. That isn't his métier.

ii) This is an issue that shades into the Euthyphro dilemma and the problem of evil. As you know, many theologians representing varying theological traditions wrestle with these issues.

Reformed theology is a species of Protestant theology. It subscribes to the Protestant rule of faith (sola Scriptura).

To successfully attack Calvinism, you would have to attack it on its own (exegetical) grounds. In principle, there are two ways you could do this:

a) Challenge Reformed exegesis;

b) Challenge the Reformed rule of faith.

In the present thread you seem to be doing the latter. That is to say, you appear to be mounting a sort of transcendental argument against Calvinism by claiming that if, ex hypothesi, Calvinism were true, then divine revelation would be untrustworthy.

Of course, that's a very different objection than Calvin was dealing with, so it would be anachronistic to look for answers in Calvin to questions which he never had to confront.

One more point (maybe more than one) before we move to your next point:

i) There's no doubt that Gordon Clark was a theological voluntarist. And that position is sometimes attributed to William Twisse—although I think that attribution is suspect. In general, though, theological voluntarism is not a defining tenet of Calvinism.

ii) Now, the will of God came up in the conflict with Rome. Why does God elect A, but reprobate B?

In the traditional context, Calvinism is opposing Catholic synergism. The ultimate answer is not to be found in the sinner, but in the will of God.

That may **sound** like theological voluntarism, but that interpretation is misleading because it overlooks the concrete framework of the debate, in which certain assumptions were a given.

Since all sinners are worthy of damnation, sin or demerit is not, in and of itself, the reason that God reprobates A rather than B. For if that were a sufficient condition, then God would reprobate A and B alike.

So, in that particular respect, Calvinism appeals to the will of God as the ultimate explanation since there is no morally distinguishing property in the sinner to differentiate one sinner from another for purposes of reprobation.

iii) However, reprobation does take demerit into account. Just not in that particular respect. But it's still the case that sinners are damned.

(I'd add that in Reformed theology, you don't have to be guilty of actual sin to be guilty. You can be guilty of original sin.)

iv) In theological voluntarism, by contrast, God is free to damn the innocent. That is not the position of Calvinism.

v) I'd also add that even when we appeal to the will of God as the final explanation, this doesn't mean that God no reason whatsoever for discriminating between one sinner and another. Election and reprobation aren't brute facts.

Rather, God elects some and reprobates others to underscore the gratuity of grace; to wit, that God owes no one his saving grace.

vi) Finally, to indulge in a bit of speculation, there may be other reasons, irrespective of merit, why God elects A and reprobates B. ("Irrespective" in the sense of being over and above that consideration.)

A world in which God elects A rather than B will be a different possible world than one in which God elects B rather than A, or a world in which God elects A and B, or a world in which God reprobates A and B. So who is elect or reprobate does make a difference in the history of the

world. These are not identical scenarios. Rather, they're distinct alternatives.

Hence, God's will in this matter is not arbitrary or inexplicable in the sense of violating Leibniz' law. So while the distinction between elect and reprobate is morally indiscernible, it isn't metaphysically indiscernible.

In that respect, God may have a reason for choosing person A over person B because he has a reason for choosing world A over world B.

Talbott
"Anyway, setting aside for a moment the label 'theological voluntarism,' here is the question I would like someone to answer, whether it be Calvin, or you, or Helm, or someone else. If God can justly predestine Esau to eternal damnation, why can't he also justly break his promises or justly send all Christians to hell as well? And if he cannot justly do the latter, how is it that he can justly do the former? What is it about the nature of divine justice, in other words, that permits predestination to damnation but precludes breaking promises and sending Christians to hell?"

Hays
i) I may already have answered your question. Demerit is a necessary, but insufficient, condition of reprobation. Demerit is a morally sufficient condition for reprobation. The reprobate merit their damnation on account of sin.

It is not unjust for God to discriminate between the elect and the reprobate since neither group has a prior claim on the mercy of God. Since no sinner is entitled to salvation, God wrongs no sinner by damning a sinner—for God has not

denied him his rights when he gives the sinner exactly what he deserves.

ii) In a supralapsarian theodicy, moreover, there is reason for electing some sinners and reprobating others. God is good, and knowing God is good. God's justice and mercy are goods. But an existential knowledge of his justice and mercy presupposes the fall, and subsequent redemption. The experience of God's mercy towards the elect, and justice towards the reprobate, enriches our knowledge of God.

iii) As to why, on a Calvinistic scheme, God can't break a promise, I'm not sure that justice is the most relevant attribute. Wouldn't truth be a more pertinent attribute? Or perhaps the wisdom of God. God is not a rationally capricious being.

iv) In Reformed theology, it would be unjust of God to send all (or any) Christians to hell since the Jesus died to redeem the elect from their sins.

Talbott

"But unfortunately, in asserting that 'all sinners are worthy of damnation,' you are already assuming the very point at issue between us. Why suppose that God could justly treat Esau as worthy of damnation when, even before Esau was born or had done anything good or bad, God had already predestined (or causally determined) that he would be a sinner? If God could justly predestine, first, that Esau would be born a sinner, second, that he would never repent of his sin, and third, that he would nonetheless be punished with eternal damnation for his sin, why couldn't God likewise justly consign all Christians to hell and grant to all non-Christians the eternal bliss of heaven? So far as I can tell,

you have not so much as addressed this question; much less have you provided a persuasive answer to it."

Hays
I haven't addressed this question before because, to my recollection, this is the first time that you've raised that particular question—in the course of the current thread.

This is, of course, a stock objection to Calvinism. There are different ways of broaching the answer:

i) It isn't clear to me what, exactly, you're objecting to. Do you distinguish between determinism and predeterminism? Do you find predeterminism more objectionable than determinism?

ii) Or is your objection, not to determinism/predeterminism, per se, but to a particular (odious) outcome?

iii) Likewise, as a universalist, is your objection specifically to a Calvinistic version of everlasting punishment? Or would you be equally opposed to a libertarian version of everlasting punishment?

iv) Is your objection specific to Calvinism, or do you object to any form of determinism, whether it's hard determinism or soft determinism?

At one level, you—as a universalist—'are raising the same objection to Calvinism that a libertarian will raise to determinism. Unless we are free to do otherwise, we can't be blameworthy.

As a philosopher, you're well aware of the fact that there are astute representatives of semicompatibilism (e.g. John

Martin Fischer) and hard incompatibilism (Derk Pereboom) who—on the one hand—field standard objections to soft/hard determinism while—on the other hand—lodging objections to libertarianism. Likewise, there are distinguished proponents of libertarianism like Peter van Inwagen who ultimately retreat into mystification.

On the face of it, you're leveling an objection that has already been addressed, in considerable detail, by a number of sophisticated philosophers. Perhaps you find their explanations unsatisfactory, but I don't feel the need to reinvent the wheel unless you can refine your objection.

v) So what, once more, is the precise point of your objection?
a) Is your objection that an agent is not responsible for his actions unless he is free to do otherwise?
b) Or is your objection that a particular outcome—in this case, everlasting punishment—is morally unacceptable?

In theory, you might reject (a), but affirm (b). Perhaps you don't think there's anything wrong with a deterministic outcome per se, but only with a hellish outcome.

vi) Are you merely objecting to the idea of original sin, or to the idea of original sin when it leads to damnation?

vii) Are you merely objecting to the idea that Esau couldn't repent, or to the idea that his inability was predestined? Or to the consequence of impenitence (i.e. damnation)?

viii) As to the question of causality, the Bible, being a practical book, pitched at a popular level, doesn't offer a theory of causation. And as you know, there is no theory of causation that commends the general consent of the philosophical community.

The Bible gives a number of examples of what we would identify as cause-and-effect relations, but it offers no theory of causation to explain the nature of that relation. On the face of it, the decree (i.e. predestination, foreordination) doesn't cause something to happen in the way that the cue-ball causes the 8-ball to move.

Predestination specifies a particular outcome, and ensures a particular outcome. The outcome is certain. But the decree, in and of itself, doesn't cause anything to happen. Everything happens according to the decree, but the decree isn't causing it to happen. Rather, the decree is implemented by such causal modalities as creation, providence, and miracle. And providence involves second-causes. Esau is an agent in his own right.

Talbott
"You will agree, I presume, that having a reason to do something in no way guarantees having a just reason; even a demonic god, after all, would have a reason for his tyrannical actions. So let us suppose that Belial should construct the following parallel to your statement above: 'In demonic theodicy, moreover, there is a reason why God punishes Christians and extends his mercy to non-Christians. For God is good, and knowing God is good. God's justice and mercy are goods. So the experience of God's boundless mercy towards non-Christians and of his severe justice towards those whom he deceives and consigns to hell enriches our knowledge of God'."

Hays
The problem with invoking Cartesian demons to undercut Calvinism is that your incantation cuts both ways. Cartesian demons are mercenaries. You can hire a Cartesian demon to bedevil any theological option.

For example, in your book, **The Inescapable Love of God**, you attempt, among other things, to mount an exegetical defense of universalism. And in another book, **Universal Salvation: The Current Debate**, you defend your exegesis against the objections of I. H. Marshall.

But let's suppose, for the sake of argument, that your exegesis is correct. The Bible does, indeed, teach universalism. Unfortunately, this is a diabolical deception. The Cartesian demon inspired St. Paul to teach universalism.

So it seems to me that this line of argument either proves too much or too little.

Talbott
"When judged by our fallible human intuitions, the deceiving God that Belial here describes no doubt seems terribly unjust."

Hays
I have the same problem with fallibilism that I have with Cartesian demons. This is just another double-bladed sword. If fallibilism undermines Calvinism, it equally undermines universalism.

Talbott
"But against those Christians who trust such intuitions and begin to doubt God's justice, Belial could simply quote the words of Calvin and castigate 'these venomous dogs" who "spew out more than one kind of venom against God.' Then, still using Calvin's own words, he might continue: 'But we deny that they [the Christians whom God deceives and

sends to hell] are duly excused, because the ordinance of God, by which they complain that they are destined for destruction, has its own equity [or justice]—unknown, indeed, to us but very sure' (INSTITUTES, Bk. III, Ch. XXIII, Sec. 9)."

Hays
I don't know why you're hung up over Calvin's invective. Invective was common coinage in the polemical theology of that day in age—whether Catholic, Lutheran, or Reformed.

Talbott
"Nor will it do to quote, at this point, those Scriptures according to which God can neither lie nor deny himself. For according to Belial, God is in no way denying himself; to the contrary, he is precisely being true to his own deceptive nature. And besides, so Belial might also contend, the lie that God cannot lie is but one of the means by which he justly plays his joke on Christians, deceives them to their own destruction, and finally sends them all to hell."

Hays
And, as I've said, one can redeploy the Cartesian demon to deceive the universalist. It's a wash.

Talbott
"So here, perhaps, is another way of putting my question: If I cannot trust my seemingly clear and decisive intuition that a perfectly just (not to mention a perfectly loving) God would never cause Esau to sin and then damn him eternally for it, how can I trust my seemingly clear and decisive intuition that a perfectly just God would never deceive all Christians and damn them eternally for their deception?"

Hays

Several more issues:

i) We need to distinguish two questions: (a) Is Scripture true? (b) What's the true interpretation of Scripture?

Assuming, for the sake of argument, that your intuition is sound, that would not call into question the Reformed interpretation of Scripture, but rather, the veracity of Scripture. Can Scripture be trusted?

ii) Even if, ad arguendo, our intuition tells us that God would never reprobate Esau, this doesn't mean our intuition also tells us that God will save Esau—much less everyone else.

iii) I don't think intuition tells us that:

a) An agent is blameless unless he *could* do otherwise.

Rather, I tend to think people confuse this with a more plausible principle, to wit:

b) An agent is blameless if he *would* have done otherwise.

In other words, I think the popular intuition you appeal to is, at best, a truncated intuition. If we spell it out, the full formulation would be something like:

b-ii) An agent is blameless unless he could have done otherwise—provided that he would have done otherwise.

I'm not saying if this intuition is correct. But, when you unpack it, that's the moral intuition. The intuition instantly loses its intuitive appeal when you insist that an agent is

blameless if he couldn’t do otherwise even if he wouldn’t do otherwise given the chance.

iv) Let’s take a Lady and the Tiger scenario. Behind door A is the princess. Behind door B is the tiger. Do both doors need to be unlocked for this to be a fair ordeal? Does the suitor need the freedom to open either door for this to be a fair ordeal? Why would that be the case? He has a choice. He can only choose one door or the other.

Suppose he chooses to open door A, but door A is locked. As a fallback, he tries to open door B. Door B is unlocked. As a result, he is devoured by the tiger. Intuitively speaking, I suppose most-all of us would regard that outcome as unfair.

Take 2: suppose, once again, door A is locked. But, this time, door A isn’t his first choice. Door B is his first choice.

Now, unbeknownst to him, door A is locked. So he couldn’t open door A even if he wanted to. Since, however, he never wanted to open door A, why is it necessary for that to be a live option?

We could run through the various permutations, but you get the drift. The fact that a dire outcome awaits him if he opens door B, and the further fact that door A is secretly locked, is not, of itself, morally significant. His fate is not unjust if wasn’t free to make a choice he was never going to make in the first place.

So, for your intuition even to get off the ground, you would need to demonstrate that, if Esau had been given the opportunity to repent, he would have seized the opportunity to repent.

v) Let's take another example. We generally view a stacked deck as unfair. As cheating. The game is rigged.

However, in a game of chance, the odds are that—sooner or later—a randomly shuffled deck will have the same sequence as a stacked deck. In that event, the outcome will be the same whether or not the order of the cards is a result of determinism or indeterminism.

The same player will play the hand he's dealt, whether the dealer is a card sharp or an honest broker. And there are situations in which random circumstances just so happen to yield the same result as controlled circumstances. A player could win or lose under either scenario.

So, once again, for your intuition to even get off the ground, you need to explain why a predeterminate outcome is unfair if an indeterminate outcome would be identical with a predeterminate outcome. Or, to put it another way, you need to show that the outcome would differ in any particular case.

vi) And that's assuming that intuition is the deal-breaker. The limitation of moral intuition is that it's like a brute fact. You can try to explicate your moral intuition and defend it. But it ultimately comes down to your personal impression that something *just seems* to be right while something else *just seems* to be wrong. So intuition really can't justify itself. You rapidly get to the point where you can't *argue* for your moral intuitions. __Like the old Kennel Ration commercial ("My dog's better than your dog!"), it boils down to the claim that "My intuition is better than your intuition!"

vii) And that's also the problem when you say that I'm "already assuming the very point at issue between us." Can

you yourself offer a non-circular justification for your own intuitive appeal to universalism? Or does your objection quickly and inevitably degenerate into a stalemate?

viii) On a final point, I find the Bible intuitively compelling. There are no moral intuitions that trump my intuitive faith in Scripture. (My faith in Scripture isn't limited to sheer intuition, but for purposes of this discussion, that's the aspect I'll accentuate.) Therefore, on intuitive grounds alone, there is no intuitive defeater to my intuitive conviction that Scripture is the word of God.

Talbott
"And now here is my question for you, Steve. Why not just address a question simply and directly? I still have no idea of what your answer to my question, repeated several times in this post, might be. If you think that a confusion lies behind the question, just spell it out, one step at a time, so that your post does not wander all over the map, so to speak. Do you really believe that a post such as your latest one, or several others you have written, is conducive to an intelligent discussion? I'll let you answer that question in any way you see fit without any further comment from me."

Hays
Well, you've peppered me several questions in the space of this one paragraph. By way of answer:

i) I'm puzzled by the anti-intellectual character of your reply. You are, after all, a philosophy prof.

ii) Why don't I just address a question simply and directly? Because your questions are loaded with ambiguous, theory-laden assumptions. For example, this was one of your questions:

Talbott
"Why suppose that God could justly treat Esau as worthy of damnation when, even before Esau was born or had done anything good or bad, God had already predestined (or causally determined) that he would be a sinner? If God could justly predestine, first, that Esau would be born a sinner, second, that he would never repent of his sin, and third, that he would nonetheless be punished with eternal damnation for his sin, why couldn't God likewise justly consign all Christians to hell and grant to all non-Christians the eternal bliss of heaven?"

Hays
But that's hardly a "simple" question, which is why I tried to break it down into its component parts and treacherous assumptions.

When you say, "If God could justly predestine, first, that Esau would be born a sinner," that's presumably an allusion to the doctrine of original sin, and—by implication—, you're evidently taking the position that it would be unjust of God to damn Esau on account of original sin. So this is why I asked you if that's a correct interpretation of the element of your question.

When you also say, "second, that he would never repent of his sin," the apparent implication is that you think it would be unjust of God to damn Esau if he could not have done otherwise (i.e. repented of his sin). So that's why I asked you if you regard libertarian freedom as a necessary precondition of culpability.

When you also say, "and third, that he would nonetheless be punished with eternal damnation for his sin," it's unclear whether you think the injustice lies in the *duration* of the punishment, or in the fact that Esau was *predestined* to

this particular fate—which is why I asked you to distinguish and relate the two.

You ask, “If [I] think that a confusion lies behind the question, just spell it out, one step at a time.” That’s exactly what I was doing.

When you say, “You will agree, I presume, that having a reason to do something in no way guarantees having a just reason; even a demonic god, after all, would have a reason for his tyrannical actions. So let us suppose that Belial should construct the following parallel to your statement above,” you seem to be invoking the specter of Cartesian demons as a defeater or undercutter for Calvinism.

If so, I point out that a parallel argument can be constructed for universalism. Indeed, you yourself were trying to construct a parallel argument with reference to Calvinism, so I’m merely taking my cue from you and doing the same thing in reverse. Why do you think your argument would count against Calvinism, but not against universalism?

Finally, when you say that “judged by our fallible human intuitions, the deceiving God that Belial here describes no doubt seems terribly unjust,” you appear to be invoking fallibilism against Calvinism—but if that’s a cogent objection to Calvinism, then why isn’t that a cogent argument against universalism.

These are just a few examples. If I’m “wandering all over the map,” that’s because my GPS is keeping track of all your circumnavigations. __When you ask if I “really believe that a post such as [my] latest one, or several others [I’ve] have written, is conducive to an intelligent discussion?”

I can't think of a tactful response since your accusatory question is so self-incriminating. When my replies are pegged to your questions every step of the way, and you then ask if my replies are "conductive to intelligent discussion," the only candid answer is that if my replies are not conductive to intelligent discussion, then that's because they follow the counters your chosen framework. I guess that answers can only be as intelligent or unintelligent as the questions.

At this point I really don't know what your problem is, Tom. Are you unable to follow your own argument? And why do you object when I follow every twist and turn of your own argument, even if you are unable or unwilling to do so?

Why do you react in this fashion when I merely address you on your own terms? If you think I'm going down too many rabbit holes, that's because I'm chasing down a wascally wabbit by the name of Tom Talbott. The hunter goes wherever the prey takes him.

iii) As to your oft-repeated question, you ask:

> "I have a strong intuition, as you presumably do as well, that God could not justly deceive all Christians and send them all to hell as a kind of divine joke. I also have a strong intuition that God could not justly predestine Esau to an everlasting hell. So my question is: Why should I trust my intuition in the first case, but not in the second?"

Actually, I reject your intuition in the first case. I have no *intuition* against God deceiving Christians and damning them to hell. Rather, I have a *revelation* against God deceiving Christians and damning them to hell.

I have no idea why you think that intuition speaks to the fate of Christians. Apart from revelation, intuition tells me absolutely nothing about Christians. If I were born on a desert island, in the proverbial state of nature, intuition wouldn't even speak to me about the existence of Christians, much less their eternal fate—for better or worse.

There's nothing the least bit intuitive about that belief. You've been so conditioned by your upbringing and your particular interpretation of *Scripture* that you've long forgotten where the source of your confidence comes from, and you now mistake your *acquired* conviction for *intuition*. It's nothing of the kind.

And that's' one reason you can never appeal to your intuition to trump a revelation regarding the fate of humanity. For your putative intuition is, in fact, contingent on your interpretation of God's revelation in Scripture. Throughout this thread, you overestimate intuition, and underestimate revelation.

Now, I think it's possible to have an intuitive faith in Scripture, if we define intuition along the lines of an illative sense or tacit knowledge—a la Newman, Polanyi, and Mitchell. But intuition is not the *source* of that knowledge. Rather, it takes Scripture as its *object*.

So—as you set up the question—even if there were a parallel between the two cases, yet since—as a matter of fact—your faith in the first case cannot be informed by intuition, but only by revelation, then—by parity of argument—there is likewise no support for the second case.

iv) Apart from the Bible as a whole, I'd find myself in the same situation as Solomon, in Ecclesiastes. There's plenty

of natural evidence for the existence of God. But the distribution of blessing and bane is so disparate and apparently random at best, or perversely unjust at worst—with the wicked prospering at the expense of the righteous—that l'd be in a complete quandary. Left to my own devices, I could discern a providential pattern to the natural order, but not to the moral order.

Elect in Christ

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace (Eph 1:3-7).

I'm going to comment on this post, by a Barthian universalist:

http://acthe.wordpress.com/2014/02/02/predestination-in-eph-1/

> In the first place, there is no obvious why the predestination here being described could not possibly be understood in an inclusive as opposed to exclusive way.

Only if we isolate the passage from Paul's statements about eschatological judgment.

> Secondly, the predestinarian affirmations are always qualified by the important locution “in Christ” (or also

> "in him"). The repetition of this phrase over and over again throughout the span of a few verses suggests that this is a critical aspect of Paul's understanding of God's predestination. As I understand Paul, he is speaking about a revelation of God's plan and intentions which have been revealed through the story of Christ — his incarnation, life lived in obedience, death, resurrection, and ascension. Now because the election of Christ is understood from the very title christos — anointed by God for some task — it seems to me proper to understand Paul's deriving our election from the election of Christ who acts for us; we are elect because Christ is chosen to act for us, on our behalf, in our stead, for our sake.

i) 1:4 doesn't say Christ is chosen. Christ is not the object of the verb. Christians are.

ii) It's certainly possible that to be chosen in Christ is a compact way of saying that Christians were chosen in union with Christ, as their federal head, who acted on their behalf. That, however, doesn't furnish any evidence for universalism.

iii) Moreover, I think that contextually, it's best to understand v4 in relation to v7. We were chosen in Christ to be redeemed in Christ. We aren't elected apart from the work of Christ. Rather, election and redemption are tightly correlated. Those, and only those, whom the Father elects, the Son redeems.

This is your brain on Barth

I'm going to comment on this post by Steven Nemes:

http://acthe.wordpress.com/2013/12/31/johns-gospel-and-classical-calvinism/

I believe Nemes is currently a Barthian universalist. There are many problems with his analysis of John:

i) He ignores Johannine dualism, which is present in both the Gospel of John and 1 John. We can depict this in terms of three overlapping circles. In the center is the world. The elect intersect with the world on one side, while the reprobate intersect with the world on the other side.

Nemes is oblivious to the subtleties of kosmos in Johannine usage. He seems to think this is a universal expression. Yet that fails to take into account the way John often sets "the world" in antithetical contrast to believers. But if the world encompasses everyone, then there's no room for contrast.

ii) As we see in the prologue, Christ enters a world that isn't open to the Gospel, or even neutral. Rather, the world of the Jews and Gentiles is already hostile to its Creator. In the Fourth Gospel, Christ has many personal encounters, both with individuals and groups. The reaction to Christ exposes a preexisting rift, a predisposition to shrink from the light and withdraw into the shadows. The open revelation of God in Christ has a hardening effect on many.

iii) But some individuals respond in faith. Their positive response also exposes a preexisting mindset. The differential factor is the Father's choice and the Spirit's renewal.

Both faith and disbelief are effects of something more ultimate. Unbelievers reveal their diabolical paternity while believers revealed their divine paternity. Children of God and children of Satan.

Left to their own devices, everyone would be under the spell of Satan. Only the Spirit can break the diabolical spell.

As the Good Shepherd, Christ comes to rescue lost sheep who were marked out for salvation by the Father antemundane election. Like branded sheep who've strayed. The Son comes into the world from outside the world, to implement a redemptive plan which conceived outside the world. Before creation.

Cf. A. Köstenberger, **A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters**, 458-64; J. Ramsey Michaels, **The Gospel of John**, 40-42. Herman Ridderbos, **The Gospel of John**, 46-47.

God's goodness in judgment

I'm going to comment on this post by Steven Nemes:

http://acthe.wordpress.com/2014/01/17/the-goodness-of-god-and-the-damnation-of-all/

> "But salvation is gracious and so not obligatory." That is right, it's not obligatory from the perspective of desert; but the claim is not that God's not saving anyone is incompatible with his commitment to retribution (who would deny that anyway?). Crisp goes wrong when he supposes that goodness is somehow defined by desert. Not at all: goodness is defined by the bringing about of good, regardless of desert. Retribution is one thing, and goodness is another.

Notice that Nemes artificially segregates justice from goodness. But even though divine goodness is broader than divine justice, justice is a necessary component of divine goodness. Likewise, exacting justice is an expression of divine goodness. It is good to be just, and it is good to act justly. Absent a just character, God would not be good. Absent just conduct, God would not be good.

> Furthermore, goodness is particularly ascribed to persons who do good to those who are undeserving, so that goodness is especially about going beyond desert in the favor of the undeserving. You're good if you reward those who deserve it, but you are really good if you are kind to your enemies, if you are willing to listen to someone who is annoying and abrasive, if you show mercy to persons who otherwise have spit upon you and hurt you. In a way goodness is defined against desert and retribution, rather than by them: you're not

> all that good if you only give people what they deserve; you’re really good if you do good to those who don’t deserve it.

i) Actually, that confuses goodness with mercy. Although mercy is sometimes good, goodness is broader than mercy. Punishing the wicked is good.

ii) Being kind to my enemies has limits. That doesn't obviate the right of self-defense. It's not my duty to let someone murder me.

iii) In addition, even if it's good for me to be kind to *my* enemies, that doesn't mean it's good for me to be kind to *your* enemies. Even if I can afford to put myself at risk, that doesn't automatically mean I have the right to put you at risk.

Put another way, I'm not doing *you* good by showing kindness to someone who will do you harm. My kindness empowers him to harm you. Showing Ted Bundy mercy rather than justice is merciless to his future victims. Doing good for him is bad for others. *Very* bad.

In that respect, it is positively evil to show some people mercy. You are merciful to them at the expense of others.

God is not himself today–come back tomorrow

I'm going to comment on this post, by a Barthian universalist:

http://acthe.wordpress.com/2014/01/23/eschatology-and-the-character-of-god/

> In fact we object to violence and to the destruction of our enemies because this is precisely what God does too; this how God manifests himself when he is in us. The virtue lists in the New Testament depict human likeness of God in fundamentally nonviolent, benevolent terms: poor in spirit, mourning, meek, hungry for righteousness, merciful, pure, peacemakers, persecuted (Mt 5.3-10); lovers of enemies (Mt 5.43-8); loving, joyful, peaceful, forbearing, kind, good, faithful, gentle, self-controlled (Gal 5.22-3); not angry, not malevolent, beneficent in speech and deed, not bitter or rageful, kind and compassionate and forgiving (Eph 4.25-32); pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and goodness, impartial, and sincere (Jas 3.17). Persons who embody and manifest these traits are not violent; they are not descriptions of persons acting violently or malevolently. If this is what it means to have God present in you, then we infer that this is what God is truly like.

i) Nemes is burning a straw man when he equates retributive justice with violence. And the fumes rising from his straw man become even more acrid when he equates retributive justice with rage, bitterness, and malevolence.

He isn't even attempting to accurately characterize the opposing position.

ii) Then there's his flawed theological method, where he resorts to non-eschatological, common grace passages to negate passages specific to eschatological justice and judgment. But our primary source of information about eschatology ought to come from passages directly concerned with eschatology.

> "But God is demonstrably violent and malevolent to some." Yes, but he is not being himself. This is an important insight Jon D. Levenson mentions in his analysis of Torah in Creation and the Persistence of Evil: in his battle against sin and the forces of evil, God is forced to behave himself in a way with which he does not identify, which he does not desire. His ultimate goal is to be the benevolent, sovereign ruler of a freely cooperative world in which all flourish; but when evil threatens to destroy everything, he must cease to be benevolent to work towards preserving his threatened sovereignty.This is why it is important that we do not accept depictions of divine violence, of divine judgment, of damnation, etc., as final and definitive realities: God must be himself, he must be his true self in the end, and his true self is not the damning God but the saving God. Like Levenson says, God may not be proximately good, but he must be ultimately good.

That's an arresting notion of God. It reminds me of movies in which the villain gives the protagonist a choice: he can shoot one of his friends to save the other, or if he refuses to choose, the villain will shoot both of them.

To judge by this, the God of Barth, Torrance, and Moltmann is a finite deity at the mercy of a rebellious creation; a God

who is "forced" to act out of character–forced to commit heinous crimes in the short-term as he struggles to regain control of the situation.

Cheap forgiveness

I'm going to comment on a post by a Barthian universalist:

http://thecrucifiedgod.blogspot.com/2015/03/wimpy-universalism.html

> I happen to think universalism is quite morally demanding, and requires a kind of strength that the ordinary person does not have.

Like Josef Mengele. Apparently, Nemeș is talking about how morally demanding universalism is for *universalists*. It requires "extraordinary strength."

Problem is, if universalism is true, then it's true for everyone–yet everyone is not a universalist. Only an infinitesimal elite.

Clearly, then, universalism isn't morally demanding on Mengele, even though universalism, if true, is equally beneficial to everyone. It makes no moral demands on anyone in particular.

> But this conception of the world is morally demanding, because it requires that we conform ourselves to God's image.

No, it means God will conform everyone to himself, resorting to coercive remedial punishment when necessary.

> Universalism is hardly wimpy; it demands an ethic of unilateral goodness which is beyond the strength of those who fancy themselves harder, stronger, in touch

> with reality because they believe some will be deservedly damned forever. They care about themselves and their "justified" sentiments of resentment and moral condemnation too much to open themselves to the demand of forgiving the wicked, of praying for bastards like the ISIS decapitators, to feel for the pain of those who deserve punishment.

Why should I "feel for the pain" of ISIS decapitators?

> This is an excuse for them to be unforgiving and mean, for them not to make efforts and sacrifices for the sake of reconciliation and forgiveness.

What heroic sacrifices is Nemeș making?

It's just like rich liberals who consider themselves virtuous because they seize money from one group and give it to another, while they have tax shelters for their own fortune.

All I'm getting from Nemeș is self-congratulatory rhetoric. What does he actually have to show for his high-sounding words?

The entire post is larded with self-deceptive self-flattery. Nothing is easier than forgiving perpetrators for atrocities they committed long ago and far away. Suppose I say: "I forgive Attila the Hun."

See how easy that was? He died 1500 years ago. His victims weren't friends or family of mine. He did nothing to me personally. Forgiving people in history books. Abstract victims of abstract perpetrators. That's morally demanding? That requires a kind of strength which the ordinary person doesn't have?

Likewise, suppose I say "I forgive Pablo Escobar" (of the Medellín Cartel). How hard is that? He didn't order the torture and/or murder of any relatives of mine. The victims pay the price for my cheap forgiveness. Didn't cost me a thing. To the contrary, it's self-congratulatory.

Notice, too, how Nemeș has cast the universalist in the role of a Nietzschean Übermensch. A spiritual superman. Unlike mere Christian mortals.

It's revealing how some people can work themselves into this moral posturing. It's very tempting to think better of ourselves than we ought to.

Selective universalism

The most winsome argument for universalism goes something like this: Most Christians only believe in hell because they believe Scripture, and they believe the Bible teaches eternal punishment. So we believe in hell because it's our Christian duty to believe in hell. It's our duty to believe whatever the Bible says.

But that's the only reason we believe in hell. Left to our own devices, we wouldn't believe in hell. If we were in God's place, we would save everyone.

That's a wedge argument for hell. However, the emotional appeal of universalism is overextended by the universalist.

Mind you, I don't think that feelings dictate doctrine. I'm merely addressing the universalist on his own turf.

1. At a purely emotional level, do I wish that everyone would be saved? No. At a purely emotional level, I only feel the loss of lost loved ones. Of people I know and love.

For example, thousands of people die every day. Do I mourn their death? Not really. Most of the time we don't give it a second thought.

And that's because we never knew them. As a matter of personal experience, they don't exist for you and me. Had they never been born, we wouldn't register the difference.

We don't grieve for their passing. We only grieve for our loved ones.

At a purely emotional level, I'm a selective universalist. I

wish that all of my loved ones were saved. But, frankly, I don't feel the same way about your loved ones. I don't know them, and I don't know you.

Suppose you're the daughter of Genghis Khan. For all I know, he was a loving husband and father. Maybe he doted on his daughter.

So you're broken up at the prospect that dear old dad went to hell when he died. But you'll have to understand if I don't feel the same way.

As I say, thousands of people die every day, but you and I don't register the impact of their death the way we register the death of someone we know and love. We aren't grief-stricken by the death of a perfect stranger.

I don't mourn the death of an ancient Egyptian. I don't mourn the death of a nameless peasant who lived in Medieval Provence.

I know, at an abstract level, that a great many human beings die every century. But I don't know who they were. I don't usually know that a particular individual, with a unique personal history, lived and died at that time and place. I only know that in the case of a few famous people who make it into the history books.

Everyone else is just an abstraction to me. I don't miss them because they were never a part of my life. I don't know enough to know what I'd be missing by not knowing them. There is no sense of personal loss.

2. Incidentally, one of the stock objections to hell is that we can't be happy in heaven knowing that anyone is in hell. But when I get to heaven, will I notice who isn't there?

I don’t know the vast majority of human beings who ever lived or died, or shall ever live or die. So I wouldn’t even be aware of their absence. For all I know, they never existed. I won’t compare the company of heaven against a missing persons list to see who didn’t make the cut. The Book of Life is classified.

The only people whose absence I’d notice are people I know, or knew about. Either celebrities or acquaintances of mine.

3. Each generation is like a chapter in a book. God puts certain characters in certain chapters. These are the people we know. The people we care about. The people we pray about. That’s how God made us.

4. But what about compassion? Even though you may be a perfect stranger to me, yet since you’re human, and I’m human, I can extrapolate from my experience to yours. I can imagine what it would be like to be in your situation.

And I think that’s wonderful. Compassion is both a cardinal virtue and a theological virtue.

But compassion is concentric. It comes in degrees. I may care about the mother of my best friend, but her death wouldn’t hit me as hard as the death of my own mother.

Then again, it’s possible that I can’t stand my best friend’s mother. The only reason I put up with her is that I can’t cut her out of my life without cutting him out of my life. So she’s the price I have to pay to maintain my friendship.

5. This brings me to the next point. There are people we positively dislike. Would it detract from our enjoyment of

heaven if they didn't join us there? No. And you know that's true. Admit it. Spare me the mock pieties.

Now, someone might object that this reflects the wrong attitude towards the lost. Aren't Christians supposed to love neighbors, enemies, and strangers?

True, but as soon as you introduce that consideration, which is a valid consideration in its own right, you've shifted from feelings to duties. And a duty is something we're obligated to do despite how we feel about it.

The question I'm addressing is not how you ought to feel, but how you actually feel. For the appeal of universalism is ultimately emotional. Even sentimental.

Once you shift the issue from feelings to duties, universalism instantly loses its emotional pull. For that's a completely different argument.

And while we have an obligation to care for the lost, we have no obligation to care for the damned.

6. But perhaps someone will say that once a disagreeable person gets to heaven, he will be agreeable. No doubt that's true.

But, once again, that shifts the argument. The emotional appeal of universalism is that I supposedly can't bear the thought of parting with someone.

But if it's someone I actively dislike, then I can obviously bear the thought of spending eternity in his absence. And if he never makes it to heaven, I'll never know what it was like to share his company in heaven. If he got to heaven, he would be a wonderful companion, and only at that point

would I miss him were he to disappear.

7. Universalism has a certain undeniable appeal, but it also has a Mephistophelean catch to it. Like those horror shows in which a lover strikes a bargain with the dark side to get his beloved back.

Yes, he gets her back, but in exchange for something else. A two-for-one sale. She returns from the grave, but something else comes back from the dead as well. Something that should have stayed put. The lovers try to resume the blissful existence they had before her premature demise, but that other thing which came up from hell literally bedevils any attempt to turn back the clock.

If you prefer, let's consider something more realistic. An armed man breaks into your home. He ties you up. Then he rapes, tortures, and murders your wife right before your eyes.

Your wife was not a believer, so you have no hope of ever seeing her again. That compounds the tragedy.

Although this is a hypothetical case, there are real life examples.

Suddenly a universalist appears on the scene, in his top hat and Van Dyke. He offers to reunite you with your wife, in the world to come—but only on condition that her tormenter and killer will also spend eternity in heaven.

In your inconsolable grief you might be tempted to accept the Faustian deal, but can anyone honestly say that's an emotionally satisfying solution to the tragedy?

Will a universalist presume to tell you that you can't be

happy in heaven as long as your wife’s assailant is unhappy in hell?

Suppose the assailant would be a wonderful person in heaven. But you want to see him suffer for what he did. You want revenge. You want God to exact retribution.

And the Bible endorses that emotion. Even in heaven, the saints pray that God will punish the wicked. Empathy isn’t always a good thing. It’s evil to be equally empathetic with a child and a child rapist.

A vindictive emotion can be sinful. But a vindictive emotional can also be a sanctified emotion, or even a glorified emotion.

Universalism plays on the suggestion that every Christian is a universalist at heart, yet his head is at war with his heart. But that, at best, is a half-truth.

Emotionally speaking, a Christian is, at most, and only, a selective universalist. It’s his heart’s desire that all his loved ones are heaven-bound. And, all things being equal, he will extend that desire to your loved ones.

But all things considered, there are many people whom he would just as well receive their just deserts. There’s a point at which the friend of your friend transitions into the friend of your enemy—or the enemy of your friend. At that juncture, natural compassion loses its grip. Sympathy changes to antipathy.

For me, the joy of heaven isn’t dimmed by the prospect that Genghis Khan is wiling away the hours of eternity in the delightful company of Old Horny and Attila the Hun.

By trying to be too much of a good thing, universalism ends up being too much of a bad thing. Everyone gets what he wants, but at the cost of getting something he doesn't want.

Rev 21:4 is a very precious promise. And I'm very curious to see how God will fulfill that promise. I know that universalism is the wrong answer. I look forward to the right answer.

All dogs go to heaven

Robin Parry, originally writing under the pseudonym of Gregory MacDonald penned a book entitled **The Evangelical Universalist** (SPCK 2008). I'll be commenting on the 1st ed. rather than the revised 2nd ed (2012).

Parry managed to garner some striking endorsements. The endorsement by Talbott is predicable enough, both because Talbott is a fellow universalist, and because he's quoted extensively and favorably by the author. Also, the recommendation of a theology prof. from George Fox University is less than earth-shattering.

However, Joel Green and Andrew Lincoln are major names in NT scholarship. Mind you, they don't say he convinced them. Indeed, Green says otherwise. But they're very laudatory.

He also snagged a glowing blurb from Oliver Crisp, who was, at least up until now, a rising star among Reformed philosophers.

So, that's quite a build-up. It definitely raises your expectations. Of course, high expectations can be hazardous.

When I turn to the actual content of the book, I'm a bit puzzled by why the reviews think this work marks such a significant advance in the case for "Evangelical" universalism.

In defusing prooftexts for everlasting punishment, he borrows some moves from standard annihilationist literature. His prooftexts for universal salvation parallel Arminian prooftexts for universal atonement. So there's a deja-vu quality to his treatment.

Let me say at the outset that whether or not you're impressed with a book like this depends in no small measure on whether you're predisposed to agree with the author. How much preexisting room do you have in your belief-system to accommodate his claims?

An Arminian has more room than a Calvinist. An annihilationist has more room than a Calvinist—just as an Anglican is more inclined to Catholicism than a Baptist.

I'm a Calvinist. And I've been doing apologetics for several years now, so my beliefs are battle-hardened. There's no opening in my belief-system for him to exploit. No crack in the wall.

This is not a choice between open-minded and closed-minded beliefs. If Lincoln or Green is more sympathetic to his thesis than me, it's not because they're more open-minded than me, but because they come to the book with their own theological precommitments which predispose them in favor of his arguments.

I don't plan to comment on every chapter of the book. There's a repetitious quality to books defending universalism. A predictable set of well-worn arguments. I'm only commenting on this book since it will probably be touted as the standard defense of universalism.

Reviewers will remind us at nauseating intervals that this is a “challenging,” “thought-provoking” book. That thoughtful Christians can’t afford to ignore it. That we must be prepared to “wrestle,” “grapple,” and “come to terms” with his argument. To think “long and hard” about it as we “tackle” his arguments. Well, let’s see about that.

> “Have you ever felt that soul-sickening feeling when you know you cannot worship God with sincerity any longer” (1)?

Can’t say I have.

> “Have you ever experienced the painful knowledge that the noble words of praise coming from your lips are hollow” (1)?

If he’s alluding to Wesleyan hymns which contain Arminian errors, I simply make allowance for the fact that hymns are fallible.

> “I can recall one Sunday morning when I had to stop singing for I was no longer sure whether I believed that God deserved worship. For a believer, that is a moment of despair. Ever since I had been a Christian, I had never waved in my conviction that God loved people, but on that Sunday I didn’t know if I could believe that anymore. I was having a doxological crisis—wanting to believe that God was worthy of worship but unable to do so. The crisis was brought on by my reflections on hell” (1).

What he apparently means by this is the following: God doesn’t love anyone unless he loves everyone; God doesn’t love everyone unless he saves everyone; unless God saves everyone, God is unworthy of our worship.

I agree with Parry's self-diagnosis. He couldn't worship God with sincerity. Up until then, he was worshiping a false God.

In fact, he still is. All he's done since then is to shore up his false preconception of God. He's an idolater.

The question at issue is whether God is worthy of worship unless he saves every sinner.

Let's think about that for a moment. Suppose I commit mutiny. And suppose I have no good reason. Maybe it's sheer greed. I don't rebel against Capt. Bligh. In fact, I rebel because the captain is a man of honor. He's crimping my style. I want to rape and pillage at will.

My fellow sailors and I decide to become pirates. The captain and firstmate are decent men who oppose our evil schemes, so we murder them and commandeer the ship. Eventually, we're captured and sentenced to death.

Yet I receive a pardon. Why? My father did the king a favor, and so the king returns the favor.

But I refuse the pardon. Unless the king extends the royal pardon to all my mutinous cohorts, then he's not worthy of my respect.

The ironic thing about men like Parry who badmouth hell is that they always manage to badmouth hell in such a way as to justify the very thing they reprobate. Their attitude is such a damnable attitude to begin with. It's not God who's unworthy of their worship, but they who prove themselves to be unworthy of a worthy and worshipful God.

> "I began my Christian life by affirming with a vengeance the mainstream tradition of the Church that hell was eternal conscious torment" (1).

Throughout this book, Parry will use the word "torment." This, of course, conjures up the image of hell as an everlasting torture chamber.

In my opinion, this owes more to literary tradition, augmented by a cinematic tradition, than to the exegesis of Scripture. So his entire book is burning a straw man. The fundamental principle of everlasting punishment isn't torment but retributive justice.

> "After a few years, a friend of mine managed to wean me onto a version of hell-as-annihilation...Not long after that John Stott 'came out' as a tentative annihilationist, giving considerable credibility to our position—a position that is now thankfully considered as a legitimate 'evangelical option' by many" (1-2).

Why should a universalist regard annihilationism as a legitimate option? Moreover, is Christianity a Turkish Bazaar in which we go from booth to booth—dickering over the various "options," or is Christianity a revealed religion?

> "My crisis began some years later whilst I was reading a superb book the philosopher William Lane Craig...defending a philosophical position known as 'middle knowledge' (or Molinism)...this is a tremendously appealing view, because it enables the Christian to hold together the biblical themes of predestination and free will" (2).

Is freewill a biblical theme?

> "However, as I read the book a question crossed my mind: 'If God can allow us freedom and still ensure that he gets his will done, why is it that he allows anyone to go to hell?' If William Craig is right, I reasoned, God could saved everyone without violating our free will!..." (2).

Christian libertarians have, indeed, backed themselves into a corner on this issue. Why didn't God simply instantiate a possible world with only heavenbound agents? Some possible worlds have both heavenbound and hellbound agents, other possible worlds have only hellbound agents, while still other possible worlds have only heavenbound agents. For that matter, some possible worlds are unfallen worlds.

While the totality of agents involves a mix of sinful and sinless agents, hellbound and heavenbound agents, why didn't God instantiate the subset of heavenbound agents? Why not limit his selection to the free agents who only do good?

(Admittedly, Plantinga tries to solve the problem by positing transworld depravity. But it's implausible to first attribute libertarian freedom to human agents, then insist that there's no possible world free of sin. It's an odd sort of libertarianism that commits you to an inevitable outcome.)

However, you can relieve a contradiction in more than one direction. It's not as if univeralism is the only game in town.

> "The problem Craig's book raised for me was that the main argument I had used to defend hell, at least when not going through a Calvinist phase, was that God had given humans free will, and if people choose to reject the gospel, then God would not compel them

> to accept it. Craig's book began to remove that argument from my armory, leaving me defenseless" (2).

Notice how apologetics is driving Parry's theology. Our main argument for hell should be divine revelation. What do we really know about the afterlife apart from revelation? At best, philosophical arguments and parapsychological evidence might give us some reason to believe in the survival of the soul. But when it comes to the detailed content of the afterlife, how would anything short of revelation fill the gap?

This doesn't mean that a revealed truth can't be defended on rational grounds. But Perry is making that secondary exercise the primary reason we should either accept or reject a revealed truth. The divine authority of revelation itself doesn't figure in his calculations.

> "The problem was that over a period of months I had become convinced that God could save everyone if he wanted to, and yet I also believed that the Bible taught that he would not. But, I reasoned, if he loved them, surely he would save them; and thus my doxological crisis grew. Perhaps the Calvinists were right—God could save everyone if he wanted to, but he does not want to. He loves the elect with saving love but not so the reprobate" (3).

Which relieves the tension.

> "He may love me, but does he love my mother? I was no longer sure. Could I love a God who could rescue everyone but chose not to? I could and did go through the motions, but my heart was not in it. And that was what happened—I sang and prayed; but it felt hollow

> and so I stopped. I no longer loved God, because he seemed diminished" (3).

Several issues here:

i) Should we only sing and pray when we feel like it? If anything, it's when we don't feel like it that we need to sing and pray all the more. The walk of faith has its dry seasons. It isn't strewn with lilacs and butterflies.

ii) The emotional dimension of the issue is undeniable. And I'll have more to say about that as we progress. At the same time, this all depends on what example you choose. It's easy to come up with tearjerkers that make universalism very winsome. But one can come up with counterexamples, no less realistic.

Take the battered-woman syndrome. No matter how often the husband or boyfriend beats her to a pulp, she can't bring herself to leave him. She's emotionally dependent on him. She's hopelessly in love with her abuser.

In the eschatology of wife-beaterism, a battered-woman can't imagine the prospect of eternity without her abusive husband or boyfriend, so she constructs a heaven for wife-beaters. In heaven, the wife-beater will continue to get drunk and slap her around—cuz heaven wouldn't be heaven without him. If God didn't save her abusive boyfriend, he wouldn't be worthy of worship.

Should we reformulate our eschatology to accommodate the psychology of the battered woman? If she can't face the prospect of life without her abusive boyfriend, should we remodel heaven to include abusive boyfriends?

iii) This may well be a deal-breaker for the universalist.

They would rather spend eternity in hell with their friends than spend eternity in heaven with a God who didn't save their friends. Mind you, their friends won't be very friendly in hell.

> "According to the traditional doctrine, hell is everlasting, conscious torment" (11).

i) I'm less concerned with the traditional doctrine or traditional formulation that with the Scriptural doctrine.

ii) Apropos (i), I wouldn't define hell as everlasting, conscious *torment*. Rather, I'd define it as everlasting, conscious *punishment*.

It isn't necessary to define the punishment as *torment*. It isn't necessary to specify or narrow down the nature of the punishment, as if "torment" is synonymous with retribution, which is obviously not the case. The retributive theory of punishment does not entail "torment." Torment may or may not be punitive, but punishment isn't inherently tortuous, and retributive justice doesn't necessitate "torment." This is a straw man argument.

Now, it's possible that the damned torment each other, which would be a case of poetic justice rather than retributive justice. And to say the damned torment each other is not equivalent to saying that God torments the damned.

I'd add that you don't have to be tormented to be miserable. Or suffer. To constantly cast the opposing position in terms of "torment" is prejudicial.

> "What possible crime is a finite human capable of committing that would be justly punished in this way?

> Many find the idea absurd, because it is hard to see how even the most hideous crimes humans commit could be balanced by the traditional eternal punishment. The upshot of this is that the traditional doctrine seems to require a theory of punishment that ends up undermining it" (11).

i) Where's the argument? He poses a rhetorical question, which begs the question. He then asserts that many find the idea absurd—which doesn't give us a reason to agree with them.

ii) He then objects to the idea of infinite demerit. But this represents a popular confusion. The fact that something is of endless duration doesn't make it infinite. That would make it a potential infinite rather than an actual infinite. And a potential infinite is an actual finite.

iii) The damned do not experience infinite punishment. They only experience finite punishment. They are punished moment by moment. Of what is conscious punishment conscious? The present. While—to some degree—we remember the past, and while—to some degree, we anticipate the future—we are directly aware of the present. Each instant of the specious present.

He also attacks the idea that hell is a vicious cycle. The damned are sinners. They continue to sin. So God continues to punish them.

He raises a couple of objections to this argument:

> "this view seems incompatible with a biblical theology according to which in the coming age God destroys sin from his creation" (14).

i) But that objection merely begs the question in favor of universalism. On the traditional view, God doesn't eradicate sin from every square inch of his creation. Rather, he quarantines the damned in the penal colony of hell.

Parry is smuggling an assumption of universalistic eschatology into his critique of hell. But that grants the very question at issue.

ii) More to the point, guilt has no decay rate or expiration date. If you're guilty of wrongdoing, you're not half as guilty five years later. The passage of time is irrelevant to your culpability. You'll be just as guilty a billion years from now as you were the hour you did it. In Scripture, it's redemption, and not the lapse of time, that atones for sin.

> "Why would God wish to create a situation in which many of his creatures rebel against him forever? Hell didn't have to be that way" (14).

That's not a bad question to ask. And we'll get around to the answer in due course. But in the meantime, we could pose a parallel question for the universalist: Why would God wish to create a situation in which many of his creatures rebel in the first place?

How does universalism justify the Fall? Why must they go through hell to get to heaven?

Remember, Parry is a libertarian. He believes that God can save everyone without infringing on their freewill.

But in that event, God doesn't actually need to save anyone. Salvation presupposes sin. God only needs to save everyone if everyone is lost—apart from salvation.

But why, on libertarian grounds, should we grant the operating assumption? Why didn't God populate the world with the subset of free agents who never sinned? Think of how much pain and suffering that would avert—both in this life and the next (assuming postmortem salvation via a hellish Purgatory).

Hell didn't have to be that way. Neither did life on earth.

> He also discusses the suggestion that "Hell is everlasting; but, from the perspective of the damned, it is not that bad a place to be" (14).

It depends on how this is formulated. Hell is where sinners sin to their heart's content—or discontent. They sin without restraint. They give free rein to their evil impulses.

I don't see how God is wronging a wrongdoer by giving him what he wants. If he makes himself miserable in the process, that's poetic justice. If he wrongs another wrongdoer, that's poetic justice.

Even in this life we see men and women who dedicate their every waking moment to the pursuit of an utterly vapid, godless existence. Tallulah Bankhead comes to mind.

Parry then presents a syllogism with some of the following premises:

> "Supremely worthwhile happiness cannot...exist if there are people we know of but do not love" (15).

Yes, well, I see no Scriptural or intuitive ground for thinking that supremely worthwhile love cannot exist unless I love

Attila the Hun. All Parry is doing here is to beg the question in favor of universalism.

> "I can only know the fate of those I love and remain happy if their fate is ultimately a blessed one" (16).

But what about the fate of those I don't love? Attila the Hun is not one of my loved ones.

> "Therefore, the redeemed can only have supremely worthwhile happiness if ultimately no one they love is damned eternally" (16).

Parry is trying to bundle two different arguments into one:

i) I can't be happy in heaven if one (or more) of my loved ones is in hell.

ii) I can't be happy in heaven if anyone is in hell.

But (ii) doesn't follow from (i). I don't feel the same way about Attila the Hun that I feel about my father or mother grandmother or best friend.

The emotional appeal of universalism is actually quite provincial. It's limited to *my* loved ones. Selective universalism.

Now, everyone is related to someone else. Attila may have had a devoted daughter who was grief-stricken at his death. That doesn't mean that I mourn for his death (or damnation). His death is no loss to me.

Frankly, it's none of my business. He had his life and I have mine. I'm responsible for what I do with my life.

Of course, this doesn’t prevent me from caring about other people who are not my loved ones. But there’s no logical or psychological connection between ordinary compassion and the counterintuitive claim that I couldn’t or shouldn't be happy in heaven in the knowledge that Genghis Khan Joseph Mengele or Vlad the Impaler will spend eternity in hell.

And let’s remember that once you get to hell, all common grace is gone. In hell, everyone may be just as evil as Genghis Khan or Joseph Mengele or Vlad the Impaler. Indeed, even worse.

I think Parry scores some valid points against Craig on 16-17. But that’s not an argument against hell. That’s just a criticism of certain rational arguments for hell. But the doctrine of hell is ultimately based on the witness of Scripture. Of God speaking to us in Scripture.

> “God could stop me loving those I love at present. He could make my heart callous so that I am not tormented by their pains” (17).

One of Parry’s problems is a failure to distinguish between virtuous love and vicious love. Not all forms of love are virtuous. Some forms of love are sinful.

Take an adulterous couple. They love each other. Yet their love is sinful.

And they may take it a step further. Because they’re in love, they want to spend all their time together. But the spouse gets in the way. They have to conceal their affair.

So they hatch a plot to murder the inconvenient spouse. This is all done in the name of love. And the love is genuine.

Passionate. All-consuming.

Suppose I were a juror at their murder trial. Would I be a "callous" juror because didn't buy the plea that love excuses all? Would I be callous if I vote to convict them of murder?

To the contrary, I'd be callous to the murder victim if I acquitted the adulterous, murderous couple in the name of "love."

Should we restructure heaven to create a heaven for adulterous lovers who can't bear the thought of eternal separation from their beloved? Should we eternify adultery in the name of love?

What about the doting, ambitious mother of a cheerleader who hires a contract killer to murder a rival cheerleader so that her own daughter can become the prom queen. Her mother does it out of love. Maternal love. She loves her daughter. She'll literally do anything for her daughter. Anything to advance her career. And that's the problem. Love like that is immoral.

> "But would the God who love his enemies (Mt 5:43-48) perform such heart-hardening surgery" (17).

Does God love his enemies? All his enemies? He loves some of his enemies—but does he love all of them? There are many passages of Scripture in which God treats his enemies in a way that seems less than loving—to say the least.

What about Mt 5:43-48?

i) Mt 5:45 doesn't say that God loves his enemies. The passage does draw a broad analogy between the way in which God deals with his enemies, and the way in which we

are to deal with our enemies. But it doesn't turn that into a one-to-one correspondence.

ii) And when it speaks of love, this has reference, in context, to actions rather than attitudes.

iii) But, more to the point, what God actually does for his enemies in 5:45 is limited to the provision of natural resources. That's hardly a prooftext for universal salvation. And, in fact, that doesn't prevent God from raining down judgment on at least some of his enemies—both in this life and the life to come (e.g. Mt 10:15; 24:39;25:41,46).

iv) Finally, why does God treat some of the wicked better than they deserve? Is it for their benefit? According to the parable of the wheat and the tares, God does it for the benefit of the wheat, not the tares.

In this age, the lives of the elect and the reprobate are intertwined. It's not possible to judge one without harming the other (Mt 13:29). Only at the end of the age will it be possible weed the world (v30).

> "If God himself does not rejoice in the death of the wicked..." (Ezk 33:11).

i) In context, this is talking about death, not damnation.

ii) Apropos (i), does Parry think that God can't prevent the wicked from dying? If he takes no "pleasure" in their death, why does he allow them to die when it's within his power to save them from the Grim Reaper? God himself is responsible for the fact that sin is a capital offense.

iii) It's easy to come up with passages of Scripture in which God seems to be fairly enthusiastic about his judicial role

(e.g. Ps 2:4-5; Is 30:27-30).

iv) In context, this isn't talking about the wicked in general, but the Babylonian exiles. Members of the covenant community.

> "...or in the pain he sometimes had to inflict (Lam 3:31-33), how could his people" (18)?

God doesn't inflict pain for the sake of pain. The purpose is either remedial (for the elect), or retributive (for the reprobate).

He then has a section on Calvinism.

> "It seems to entail a denial of the claim that God's nature is to love his creatures (as 1 Jn 4:8,16b seems to teach)" (19).
>
> "That Christ died for all people (as 1 Jn 2:2 seems to teach)" (19).

If 1 Jn 2:2 is a prooftext for universal atonement (or universal salvation), then is 1 Jn 5:19 a prooftext for universal possession? Is every human being a demoniac?

In Johannine usage, kosmos is generally qualitative rather than quantitative. If refers to the kind of people we are. The kosmos represents the fallen world order, at enmity with God.

> "And that God desires to save all (as 2 Pet 3:9, 1 Tim 2:4, and Ezk 33:11 seem to teach)" (20).

i) 2 Pet 3:9 doesn't denote all human beings. As Bauckham points out,

> "God's patience with his own people delaying the final judgment to give them the opportunity of repentance, provides at least a partial answer to the problem of eschatological delay…The author remains close to his Jewish source, for in Jewish though it was usually for the sake of the repentance of his own people that God delayed judgment," **Jude, 2 Peter**, 312-13.

ii) 1 Tim 2:4 doesn't denote all human beings. As Towner points out,

> "The purpose of the reference to 'all people,' which continues the theme of the universality in this passage, is sometimes misconstrued. The reference is made mainly with the Pauline mission to the Gentiles in mind (v7). But the reason behind Paul's justification of this universal mission is almost certainly the false teaching, with its Torah-centered approach to life that included either an exclusivist bent or a downplaying of the Gentile mission…Paul's focus is on building a people of God who incorporate all people regardless of ethnic, social, or economic backgrounds," **The Letters to Timothy and Titus**, 177-78.

As Schreiner points out,

> "It may be that they [the false teachers] were consumed with genealogies because they restricted salvation along certain ethnic lines (1 Tim 1:4)…When Paul says that God desires all to be saved (1 Tim 2:4), and that Christ was the ransom for all (1 Tim 2:6), he may be responding to some who excluded Gentiles

> from salvation for genealogical reasons…Titus 2:11 should be interpreted along similar lines…Paul counters Jewish teachers (Tit 1:10,14-15; 3:9) who construct genealogies to exclude some from salvation," **Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ**, 184-85.

Ezk 33:11 doesn't denote all human beings. In context, it has reference to the exilic community.

> "In light of the biblical emphasis on the supreme value of love, it seems plausible to think that a being that loves all is greater than a being who loves some but not others" (20).

i) But the Bible doesn't prioritize the divine attributes in this fashion. It doesn't say that God's love takes precedence over his justice or holiness or wisdom, &c.

ii) Moreover, the attribute of love doesn't imply the love of everything. If I love goodness, I hate evil. If I love virtue, I hate vice. So Parry's argument undercuts his universalism.

> "Thus, it seems plausible, from a Christian perspective, to see the Calvinist solution to the problem of hell as requiring a diminished view of God's greatness, and a diminished view of God's greatness is the last thing a Calvinist wants to do" (20).

This argument is cute rather than acute. For it equivocates on how we define God's greatness. Obviously a Calvinist doesn't define it the same way as a universalist, so Parry is merely begging the question—something he does on a regular basis.

“A God who loves all seems more worthy of worship than a God who does not” (20).

A God who loves Satan doesn’t seem more worshipful to me than a God who damns Satan.

In fact, you can tell a lot about a person by who or what he loves. If I went into someone’s home and saw a swastika over the fireplace, that one thing would reveal a lot about the homeowner—and the revelation wouldn’t be flattering.

What does it mean to love both the Nazi and the Jew? Aren’t there situations in which you have to choose? What if a Nazi prison guard is about to execute a Jewish child, and you’re in a position to prevent it by killing the Nazi. What’s the loving thing to do? Who lives and who dies? Whom do you save?

Like so many critics of Calvinism, Parry never appreciated just how counterintuitive and even scandalous is the love of God for sinners. That God loves anyone who’s wicked is not something we should take for granted. Not something that seems to come naturally to God. Just the opposite.

> “The Calvinist may say that by saving some and not others God is making clear that salvation is of grace and thus undeserved. God did not have to save anyone. That he chooses some is wonderful. That he does not choose all is not unjust” (20).

Well put.

> “In reply, let me note, first, that it is unclear why the ‘grace not works’ aspect of salvation requires any be damned” (20).

i) It doesn't. But notice how Parry is inverting the issue from whether God is required to save anyone to whether he is required to damn anyone. Even if God is not required to damn anyone (which is a straw man argument), this doesn't mean he's required to save anyone, much less that he's required to save everyone.

ii) And notice another bait-and-switch. He originally framed the issue in terms of God making clear the gratuity of grace by saving some rather than all. He then switches to the question of whether salvation by grace alone requires God to damn anyone. But that's a different question. And that doesn't negate the other question.

Even if it isn't necessary for God to damn anyone for salvation to *be* gracious, it might be necessary for God to damn some to *demonstrate* ("make clear") that salvation is gracious.

> "Surely we could all be recipients of such grace without it becoming less gracious" (20).

That depends. One thing that makes saving grace gratuitous is that it's merciful. And mercy is not obligatory. Mercy is not automatic. Mercy is not a uniform property. Mercy is optional—discretionary.

> "We could also all realize that we are saved by grace apart from works without anyone being eternally damned" (20).

i) Even if that were true, God is still entitled to withhold his mercy. The wicked don't deserve forgiveness. They deserve retribution.

ii) Parry may say in the abstract that we could all realize the gratuity of grace even if no one were damned, but it's quite clear, as a practical matter, that Parry doesn't realize that at all. There are fundamental elements of law and gospel that have never penetrated into his theology. At the end of the day, he thinks that God wouldn't be good unless God saves every evildoer. That betrays a perverse and subversive notion of divine goodness.

> "Second, the scenario seems frighteningly close to the following analogy: imagine a man whose sons suffer from a disease that makes them constantly disobey him (original sin)" (20).

i) Parry is treating original sin as if it were an extenuating or even exculpatory circumstance. That original sin puts us in a state of diminished responsibility—or even excuses our conduct (like the temporary insanity defense). But Scripture never treats original sin as a mitigating factor. If anything, original sin is an aggravating factor.

Of course, we could get into a debate over whether or not this is fair, but it shouldn't be necessary, in an intramural debate between professing believers, to defend revealed truths.

ii) Does Parry believe in original sin? If so, he must think it's just. Otherwise, God would wrong us by afflicting us with original sin. If not, then why does he introduce the subject?

Indeed, there's something ironic about sinners who rail against the debilitating effects of original sin. Evidently, the noetic effects of sin haven't kept them from railing against the noetic effects of sin. So that's one effect it doesn't have. They're sufficiently conscious of their condition to complain

about it. So either they're better off than they thought they were, or else they're self-deluded.

iii) In addition, a human father/son relationship is not identical with a Creator/creature relationship. God and I are not two of a kind.

In general, fathers are supposed to protect their children. Yet even at a human level, different men have different social roles. A judge doesn't have the same role as a father. And God is (to some) as well as a father (to others).

For that matter, there are moral restraints on parental love. Consider a rich, powerful father who pulls every string so that his son can commit various crimes with impunity. That kind of love is evil.

> "One day, as a result of this, the sons fall through the ice on the pond their father had warned them not to walk on. They begin to drown. They have brought their fate upon themselves. Being afflicted with the disease, they are too stupid to even respond to their father's calls to grasp the safety ring he ahs thrown in (the gospel). The man has the solution: a ray gun he has will cure his sons of their disobedience and enable them to grasp the ring (irresistible grace). He could, thus, save both; but, to make the point that he does not have to, he only saves one...We would think that if the father could save both and loved both then he would save both" (20).

i) Ironically, his illustration proves the very thing he's trying to disprove. Parry treats sin as if it were a stroke of bad luck—like leukemia. No one blames you for getting leukemia. And if we could cure you, we would. But sin isn't a synonym for misfortune. Because he doesn't understand

sin, he doesn't understand mercy or justice or grace.

ii) As a rule, a human father has an obligation to look out for his children. And if he had a grown child who was retarded, that obligation would remain.

iii) However, Parry is treating original sin as a disease rather than a culpable condition. His vignette is persuasive to the extent that you buy into his assumptions, and—of course—his vignette is tailor-made to illustrate his tendentious assumptions. But it's easy to come up with vignettes that trigger a very different intuitive response.

A pedophile kidnaps a child and locks him in the basement. The father of the child breaks into the home, confronts the pedophile, shoots him, then rescues his five-year-old son.

The father could save both of them. If the pedophile received medical care, he would recover. But the father let him to bleed to death. The father doesn't trust the system of justice to do the right thing. This is a repeat offender. And, in any case, the father is happy to see the man die. He didn't intend to kill him. He shot him in self-defense. But he didn't intend to spare him either. He doesn't love the pedophile. He loves his five-year-old son. And because he loves his son, he hates the man who abducted his son.

> "Is God the Father like that? Even if they deserve what they get, how could a loving father let them die when it is in his power to help" (20)?

i) It comes down to storytelling. Who's a better storyteller. And it all depends on who the characters are. If you want to make a case for universalism, you tell a familial tearjerker about a loving father or mother or son.

But there are stories to illustrate any position you please. We shouldn't begin with stories. We should begin with the truth.

It isn't my obligation to be loving to everyone. Here's another story. Suppose a suicide bomber enters an elementary school. Suppose a policeman has a clear shot. Should the policeman try to talk him out of killing all those children? Or should he shoot him in the head? Should he put hundreds of children at risk for sake of maybe, just maybe, convincing the suicide bomber to reconsider his murderous intentions? I don't think so. Do you?

We should let some people die. In fact, we should help some people die. We should help a suicide bomber die before he has a chance to take anyone else with him.

ii) Moreover, if Parry is going to press the paternal analogy, then there are lots of things a human father would do for his child that God fails to do for his.

If you knew that a natural disaster was going to strike a populated area in a few days, wouldn't you warn the inhabitants? But God doesn't do that. How does a universalist explain the discrepancy?

If you knew that your daughter would be sexually assaulted today when she went somewhere, wouldn't you warn her not to go there? Indeed, wouldn't you forcibly restrain her from going there? But God doesn't do that. How does a universalist explain the discrepancy?

It's child's play to compile a long list of things that God allows to happen which a human father would do something to avert. Consider all the girls sold into child prostitution. Would you turn your young daughter over to the sex trade?

Look at all the orphaned street kids in Rio de Janeiro. If you were omnipotent, what would you do about that situation?

To put it bluntly, if you were God, and you were a universalist, is this the sort of world that you would design?

Of course, a universalist will say this is offset by the eschatological payoff. But, of course, that compensation is only necessary given all the pain and suffering here below. It doesn't begin to explain, on universalistic grounds, why all that pain and suffering is necessary in the first place.

> "There is a specific problem for the Calvinist connected to the psychological possibility of worship: Talbott again: 'I cannot both love my daughter as myself and love (or worship wholeheartedly) a God whom I believe to have done less than he could to save her from a life of misery and torment. For necessarily, if I truly love my daughter, then I will disapprove of any God whom I believe to have done less than his best for her, less than I would have done if I should have the power; and necessarily, if I disapprove of God, then I do not truly love him" (21n28).

i) As a biographical admission, I don't take issue with this claim. There are, indeed, people like Parry and Talbott who, if given a choice, would choose family over God.

Talbott words this as if he were daring God to either save both of them or damn both of them. That's an empty threat, for God has nothing to lose. God can get along very nicely without Talbott's company. Talbott's salvation or damnation has no effect on God's beatitude. God doesn't need us. He doesn't love the elect because he needs them. His love is truly disinterested. And there's something refreshing about that.

ii) This is a coercive appeal rather than a principled argument. Indeed, it's quite cynical. This is not about my love for all of humanity. Rather, it's like standoff in which kidnappers do a hostage release in exchange for a prisoner release. We don't release the prisoners because we love them and wish them well. We release the prisoners because that's the only way to secure the release of our kidnapped friends and family members.

Talbott puts a gun to the head of your loved one and says: If you want your kid brother sprung from hell, then Vlad the Impaler is part of the bargain. It's a twofer.

iii) This draws attention to a fundamental tension in Parry's argument for universalism. For he's attempting to combine two different lines of argument. One is an appeal to his universalistic prooftexts. The other is a sentimental appeal to our natural desire to see our loved ones saved. But these tug in opposing directions.

Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that his prooftexts establish God's universal and efficacious saving will. The problem this introduces into his argument is that, even if God loves everyone, and wants everyone to be saved, the scope of human love is far from paralleling the scope of divine love.

In most societies and subcultures, there's a distinction between in-group attitudes and out-group attitudes. You love your own. Your kin. Your clan. Your countrymen.

At a minimum, you don't love everyone with the same intensity as you love your in-group. And oftentimes, the test of love for your own is group-solidarity at the expense of the outsider. Love and loyalty are synonymous. To love the

outsider is an act of betrayal.

Now, at the moment, I'm not evaluating this attitude. I'm just describing the way in which, as a matter of fact, human beings feel about other human beings. It's not distinguished by uniform benevolence.

And it won't do for the universalist to criticize this attitude, for people either feel a certain way or they don't. An emotive argument doesn't evaluate emotion, but appeal to emotion. As soon as you evaluate emotion, the emotive argument loses any independent value. You're judging it by other criteria. It ceases to be a criterion in its own right.

> "God has to be just, they [Calvinists] maintain, but he does not have to be merciful. He has to punish unforgiven sin, but he does not have to forgive sin" (21).

Sounds good to me.

> "This is a common view among theologians, but it ought to be seen as problematic for a Christian view of God. To subordinate divine love to divine justice so that God has to be just but does not have to love is odd for a Christian who confesses that God is love" (21-22).

i) How is that any odder than "subordinating" divine justice to divine love? They are both divine attributes. Coequal attributes.

ii) I wouldn't say that we're "subordinating" one attribute to another. We're talking about God's economic role. His relationship to the world. Certain attributes, and corresponding economic roles, are more suitable to a given situation than others. For example, God is inherently just,

but the expression of justice depends on the existence of sin.

iii) Omnipotence is a divine attribute, but this doesn't mean that God must do whatever God can do.

Suppose we apply Parry's logic to omnipotence. It's of the essence of God to be omnipotence. That's his nature. Therefore, whatever he can do, he does. God can damn everyone; therefore, he does.

iv) Notice that Parry is equivocating. Love and mercy are not synonymous. The Son loves the Father. Does this mean the Son is merciful to the Father? No. That would be nonsensical.

Mercy presupposes ill-desert. Love does not.

> "It could be that it is in God's nature that he desires to show mercy to all. After all, Christians claim that God is love and that he loves his enemies" (22).

Does God love all his enemies? Does he love the damned? In fact, one of Perry's arguments against damnation is that damnation is incompatible with the love of God. So his argument is viciously circular.

> "For God to be love, it would seem to be the case that he has to love all his creatures" (22).

And for God to be holy, it would seem to be the case that he must judge his unholy creatures. Notice how utterly lopsided Parry is in his appeal to the divine attribute of love, as if God had only one attribute.

> "This is because if it is God's very essence to love, then God cannot but love, in the same way that if God's essence is to hate evil, then he cannot but hate evil" (22).

Except that Parry has now backed himself into a conundrum. If it's God's nature or essence to hate evil, such that he cannot exercise any personal discretion in the matter, then God can never love an evildoer. Far from constructing an argument for universal salvation, Parry has now given us a logically compelling argument for universal damnation—if you concede the premise.

> "And if God loves all he has created, then he will want to show saving mercy to all his creatures" (22).

Isn't that rather tardy? If he loves all his creatures, why does he wait so long to show them mercy? Why not start by showing them mercy here and now? Mercy doesn't have to be "saving" mercy to be merciful. Why not make life more bearable here-below so that he doesn't have to compensate for all their earthly misery by saving them in the hereafter?

If it's God's "very essence" to be loving and merciful, then it's not just a question of loving everyone, but loving everyone all the time. Sooner as well as later.

Suppose, to tell the sort of story Parry is fond of inventing, a father shows no affection for his son for the first 15 years of his life. Then when his son turns 16, the father showers him with affection.

Does Parry think that deferred version of love would be an adequate model of parenting? Would postponing your paternal affection for your own son, then overcompensating at a later date, somehow make up for your neglect for the

first 15 years of his life?

On pp23-32, Parry scores some excellent points against freewill theism, open theism, and Molinism respectively. Moving along:

> "A deep worry about the traditional Christian views on hell is that the implication of them is that very many people who suffer terrible injustices in this life, indeed perhaps most of them, will not actually have those wrongs righted in the life to come" (157).

I'd merely observe that his worry isn't a Biblical worry. In Scripture, the reversal of fortunes concerns itself with vindication of the righteous and the judgment of the wicked. It's the unjust suffering of the righteous, the suffering of God's people, that's a theodicean issue in Scripture—and not the suffering of the wicked

.

> "On traditional modes of thinking, her suffering and death take away from her any further opportunities for salvation. If the mother says that God allowed her daughter to die because it was the key to her turning to the Lord, it looks very much like God is not treating her daughter as a person valuable in her own right, but merely as a means to someone else's good" (157-58).

i) What about the virtue of altruism? What about a soldier who throws himself on a grenade to save his comrades?

ii) As usual, Parry speaks of "persons" in the abstract rather than sinners. But to be a sinner is to forfeit certain rights and immunities.

> "Such [horrendous] evils, which seem to rip the heart of meaning from a life, provide reason to doubt God's

> goodness towards any individual whom he allows to experience them. It may be that one could argue that by allowing such evils, God does create a better world overall and that those who suffer horrendous evils may be a necessary sacrifice for the benefit of the whole system. However, Adams responds: 'I contend that God could be said to value human personhood in general, and to love individual human persons in particular, only if God were good to each and every human persona God created. And Divine goodness to created persons involves the distribution of harms and benefits, not merely globally, but also within the context of the individual person's life. At a minimum, God's goodness to human individuals would require that God guarantee each a life that was a great good to him/her on the whole by balancing off serious evils'...Sacrificing some individuals for the benefit of the system is not the action of a God who values individuals. If God values individual persons, he will act with goodness towards them; and this requires, first, that he brings about, a better balance of good over evil for every individual and, further, that any horrendous evils experienced by an individual would have to be defeated" (158-59).

i) Notice the purely stipulative character of the reasoning. Parry and Adams posit that God must do thus-and-so. But why should anyone believe them? Do they speak for God? No.

ii) Absent revelation, we can only judge by experience—by the experience of life on this side of the grave. And that sets an ominous precedent for such an optimistic eschatology.

iii) And there's the continual moral blindness of framing the

issue in terms of abstract "individuals" rather than sinners.

iv) Universalism likes to speak in generic terms about eschatological compensations, but how, in particular, does universalism offset various deprivations we suffered in this life?

For example, what if I didn't get to marry my high school sweetheart? She was the love of my life. She's the only woman I ever wanted to share my life with. How does universalism make up for that emotional hole in my life? Does it send me back to high school? Do I get to start all over again? Have kids by her? Celebrate our golden anniversary?

Suppose I was an only child. I always wanted to have a brother. But my parents didn't give me one. So I went through childhood and adolescence without a brother by my side. How does universalism make up for that emotional hole in my life? I can't repeat the life cycle, can I?

Just saving someone from hell doesn't, of itself, explain how you're going to compensate for all the pain or deprivation he underwent here-below. You're sparing him additional pain or deprivation in the world to come. But that doesn't go any distance in explaining how heavenly joys will outweigh earthly sorrows. At this point, universalism must retreat into mystery. Step out on faith.

To say that God will "balance it off" issues a voucher in lieu of an explanation. It's not as if universalism offers a better explanation. It doesn't.

Parry quotes some more Adams:

> "God's becoming a blasphemy and a curse for us will enable human perpetrators of horrors to accept and forgive themselves" (160).

You know, whether Josef Mengele is able to accept and forgive himself isn't all that high on my priority list. And I also don't find that urgent concern in the pages of Scripture.

And if Marilyn Adams had a five-year-old daughter who was the subject of Mengele's experimentation, I rather doubt she'd be so broken up about his infernal fate.

> "Clearly punishing the perpetrators of horrendous evils in hell forever and ever is not going to overcome horrendous evils in the lives of the victims" (160).

Have you ever noticed that the folks who pen morally condescending books on universalism aren't survivors of the Holocaust? You have pampered prigs like Adams and Talbott and Parry who presume to speak on behalf of the victims. They don't allow the victims to speak for themselves. How did Simon Wiesenthal spend his remaining years? Was he trying to track down Nazis so that he could convince them to accept themselves and forgive themselves? To value themselves as individuals.

In my observation, victims often want retribution. They find that morally and emotionally satisfying. Who is Parry to deny them their due? Even Job got his day in court.

> "And it would certainly not be a display of God's goodness to the criminals" (160).

Parry is equivocating. If we define goodness as mercy, then

damnation is not an act of mercy. But justice is another one of God's defining attributes. A good God is a just God.

> "Eternal conscious torment contributes nothing to God's purposes of redeeming creation. In fact, it would 'only multiply evil's victories'" (160).

To the contrary, righting the scales of justice represents the triumph of good and the vindication of the righteous—who persevered in faith in the face of adversity.

> "One constantly danger that a tradition doctrine of hell generates is that God's nature is divided up and set in an internal conflict. The theology goes as follows: God loves humanity and wants to save them but at the same time is holy and cannot stand human sin. Being just, he cannot leave such sin unpunished. So God has an internal dilemma; he wants to save us because he is loving, but he also wants to punish us because he is just. God's love and his justice are set in opposition. This analysis produces a conception of divine justice that has no integral link with divine love and a conception of divine love that is disconnected with divine justice. The joy of the redeemed in the new creation is the result of God's love and mercy, whilst the torment of the damned is the result of God's justice (not his love)" (163).

There is, indeed, a genuine tension in standard evangelical theology. On the one hand, God wants to save everyone, and pursuant to that end he makes provision for everyone's salvation (universal atonement, sufficient prevenient grace). On the other hand, his salvific intentions are thwarted by human freedom.

But there's no dilemma or disconnect in Calvinism—

especially the supralapsarian variant. God, out of sheer generosity, intends to share his beatitude with a race of rational creatures. Knowing God is the greatest good since God is the greatest good. But an existential knowledge of God's justice and mercy is unobtainable apart from evil. So God foreordains the fall and redeems the elect. The reprobate are justly damned, and their damnation reinforces the gratuity of grace.

Universalism and supralapsarian Calvinism both deploy a greater good defense, but universalism cannot explain why there would be an underlying situation that called for this solution in the first place. Calvinism can. Universalism lacks a coherent theodicy. Calvinism has explanatory power at the very point where universalism is empty-handed.

> "How could tormenting sinners forever and ever be seen as a loving action" (164)?

It isn't a loving action. It isn't meant to be. It's an act of retribution. Retributive justice. A God who allows evil to go unpunished is an evil God.

And Parry has never shown that God is "tormenting" the damned. He's punishing the damned.

> "Consider the case of a Christian mother at the funeral of a beloved son who had rejected his Christian upbringing and turned away from the Lord. What hope can Christian faith offer her?...traditional theology can offer virtually no hope at all, for it is more or less certain that her son will be condemned to hell with no hope of redemption" (172).

This is the high card of universalism. This is where it where it taps into something profoundly and undeniably appealing.

What are we to say?

i) Let's take a different example. Consider the case of a mother whose daughter was murdered by a serial rapist. Not only is the mother grief-stricken, but vengeful. She wants to see the rapist suffer for what he did. She wants to see him burn in hell.

But her pastor is a tenderhearted universalist. He tells her that her vindictive feelings are unchristian. God will undoubtedly save the man who murdered her daughter. They will all spend eternity together. She must learn to love him and forgive him.

Universalism sounds nice as long as you're talking about nice people. Saving all the nice guys. The little old ladies who hand out boxes of chocolates. It instantly loses its sentimental charm when we turn to hateful men and women.

ii) Let's go back to the case of the Christian mother. What can an orthodox pastor tell the grieving mother? He can hand her Bible and tell her to read Rev 21:4 aloud. He can then tell her to memorize that verse and recite it to herself every day.

That's the hope he can give her. The promise contained in that verse.

I don't know how God intends to keep that promise. That's something we must take on faith. But that's a promise to live by.

iii) Feelings are mercurial. What about that guy who falls madly in love with a woman (or vice versa). She occupies his every waking thought. He can't imagine life without her.

He’s sure he can’t go on without her.

Yet, five years later, that may all have changed. He doesn’t know what he ever saw in her (or vice versa). What was he thinking?

There are couples who sincerely think they that can’t live without each other. They can’t bear the thought of spending a few days apart.

But after spending a few years in each other’s company, they can’t stand to be in the same room. They can’t bear the thought of spending their lives together. Physical proximity is unendurable. Their honeymoon was heaven on earth, while their marriage is hell on earth.

There are kids who can’t wait to leave home. They find their parents insufferable. They want nothing more to do with them. They hope to put as much distance between themselves as their parents as humanly possible.

Some high school buddies who would die for each other. Fiercely loyal. Inseparable. But then they have a falling out. Maybe they fall in love with the same girl. Friendship turns to bitter betrayal and mutual hatred.

Some brothers and sisters love each other from the moment they’re born to the moment they die. If one were to die prematurely, the sense of loss would be inconsolable. Other siblings hate each other until the day they die.

These are the paradigm-cases of human love. Of our loved ones. And in each case, it cuts both ways.

I’m not evaluating any of this. My point is simply that the emotional argument for universalism is a double-edged

sword.

iv) Finally, Christians tend to emphasize the deity of Christ because that's what makes him unique. All of us are human, but how many of us are God Incarnate? That's sui generis.

Yet, as we also know, Jesus had a human side. Human emotions.

There are lots of domestic details that didn't make into the Gospels. They focus on his public ministry. But he had many relatives. Jewish culture was a tribal culture. Big families. Extended families. Kin and clan.

So he had loved ones, too. Aunts and uncles. Grandparents. Cousins, second-cousins, nieces, nephews, and siblings (by his step-dad).

And he had childhood friends. Don't assume that when he called the fishermen to be his disciples, they never met him before. They fished in the Sea of Galilee. He grew up in Galilee. I'm sure he went hiking and swimming with the local kids as a boy.

Jesus had loved ones, just like us. Felt the same way about them that we do. Were they all pious, God-fearing individuals? No reason to think so.

That doesn't keep Jesus from preaching on hell. More than that, Jesus is the judge of the living and the dead. He puts them there. If, humanly speaking, Jesus can cope with that, then who am I to protest?

Sergeant Pepper's Bleeding Hearts Club Band

Continuing my review of Robin Parry's **THE EVANGELICAL UNIVERSALIST** (SPCK 2008).

The core appeal of universalism is emotional, and that's one of his leading arguments. Even at that level, the emotional appeal of universalism is quite one-sided. We'd like to see our loved ones saved. But that doesn't mean we feel the same way about Josef Mengele. I've addressed his emotional arguments at length.

In addition to the ad misericordiam fallacy, Parry also tries to cobble together an exegetical argument for universalism. Let's review his major arguments.

In chapter 2, he tries to find a prooftext for universalism in Colossians.

> He says "the 'all things' that are reconciled in [Col 1:]20 are, without any doubt, the same 'all things' that are created in v16. In other words, every single created thing" (45).

But there are a couple of basic problems with this claim, even on his own grounds. For one thing, he goes on to say, in reference to 1:22,

> "clearly, the reconciliation spoken of here is the restoration of a harmonious relationship between the believers and God" (45).

Needless to say, that falls far short of "every single created

thing." To the contrary, it's only a tiny subset of "every single created thing." It excludes all inanimate things. Yet the "all things" that God created in v16 would include inanimate things. Hence, Paul's sweeping language is hyperbolic. As one commentator notes:

> This does not indicate "universal salvation," but that at the consummation Christ will bring about a harmony of all things in the new, eternal creation, after decisively judging evil and putting it in its judicial place (as 3:6 indicates; cf. also 3:25), G. K. Beale, **Colossians and Philemon** (Baker 2019), 111.

I'd add that "pacification" is not the same thing as conversion. The Pax Romana didn't make the subjugated races fall in love with their Roman overlords.

In addition, when commenting on Paul's statement that the gospel has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven (1:23), Parry admits that "Of course, this is not a description of the actual state of affairs" (52).

But that's another admission that, in Colossians, Paul uses hyperbolic expressions. His statement is apparently universal in scope, but in reality, that can't be the case. So Parry is forced to concede that, in Pauline usage, universal expressions are not literally universalistic.

Parry also skips over 2:15. But here we have a classic taunt-song, where the victor humiliates his enemies. That's a very different concept than saving your enemies.

As one commentator explains,

> "The general sense of the word is clear: it is a metaphor from the Roman Triumph, in which a

> victorious general led his troops through the city, with the spoils of war displayed for all to see and the defeated enemy paraded before his chariot," R. McL. Wilson, **Colossians & Philemon** (T&T Clark 2005), 212-13.

That's not a very good way of winning hearts and minds. That's not how you befriend your enemies. Rather, that's rubbing their nose in defeat through public humiliation. And, remember, this was a shame culture. Soldiers lived and died for honor, for reputation. So the disgrace would cut to the quick. As such, the theme of cosmic reconciliation in chap. 1 does not imply universal salvation.

In chapter 3, Parry admits, when all is said and done, that the OT doesn't teach universalism (72-73).

Earlier, he quoted Isa 45:23. But the sweeping language of v23 is immediately qualified by the v24.

Parry tries to get around this by saying that v23 refers to Israel, while v24 refers to the nations, and if we took v24 at face value, that would exclude the salvation of the Gentiles —contrary to Isaiah's teaching elsewhere.

But all this demonstrates is his wooden handling of Isaian usage generally. Isaiah has oracles of salvation and judgment for Israel as well as the nations. Yet, when speaking of Israel, an oracle of salvation doesn't mean that every Israelite will be delivered—just as an oracle of judgment doesn't mean that every Israelite will be condemned or punished. By the same token, oracles of salvation and judgment for the nations do not apply to the same set of individuals.

For one thing, oracles of salvation and judgment often refer to discrete historic events like the Babylonian Exile and the post-exilic restoration. As such, they address the generation living at the time of the event. So you couldn't have the same set of people. Due to mortality, there's a turnover from one generation to the next. These oracles aren't directed at the same set of people throughout time. By birth and death, the population undergoes continuous change.

Of course, you can say historical events prefigure eschatological events. But, in that case, you have to project both oracles of salvation and oracles of judgment into the eschaton. The division remains: some are finally saved while others are finally condemned.

Parry also draws attention to the note on which Isaiah ends. In 66:23, you have a passage which, taken by itself, looks like a prooftext for universalism. Yet that is immediately followed by v24, where a clear line of demarcation is drawn between the worshipers of v23 and the rebels of v24.

Hence, in two of Parry's OT prooftexts, Isaiah uses hyperbolic language. So you can't infer universalism from Isaiah's sweeping expressions.

In chapter 4, Parry cites Rom 5:18-19 as a prooftext for universalism. But one of the problems with this interpretation is that, according to Paul, justification is contingent on faith. So justification only applies to believers.

Parry tries to get around this by saying that "Paul needs only to believe that one day all will believe (and I shall

argue later that he did)" (80). But there are two problems with this appeal:

i) That would turn on postmortem conversion. But Romans doesn't teach postmortem conversion. Hence, Romans qua Romans doesn't teach universalism. Therefore, Parry can't very well cite Rom 5:18-19 as a prooftext for universalism. You can't get that from Romans, for Paul has a doctrine of sola fide in Romans. To isolate Rom 5:18-19 from justification by faith does great violence to the teaching of Romans. And there's nothing in Romans to offset that delimitation.

ii) Instead, Parry will try to invoke other Pauline epistles to establish universal salvation. But there are two additional problems with that move:
a) His other Pauline prooftexts do not, in fact, teach universal salvation.
b) Even if they did, they don't teach postmortem conversion. Universal salvation is not equivalent to postmortem conversion. Parry needs a specific, Pauline prooftext for postmortem conversion if he's going to use Rom 5:18-19 to prove universal justification consistent with sola fide.

Parry then discusses the use of "all" in Rom 5:18 (81ff.). One reason for the repetition of "all" is that the parallel structure, of itself, invites the use of parallel terminology. That's a way of creating and reinforcing a parallel. You repeat certain catchwords. So the repetition of terms is partly rhetorical: a literary device.

Paul is setting up an analogy between Adam and Christ. Between Adam's deed and Christ's, as well as their

respective consequences. A is to B as C is to D. Adam is to Adamites as Christ is to Christians. Each set is exhaustive within its domain, but that doesn't make one domain conterminous with another domain.

We have to be sensitive to what parallels actually compare and contrast. Take all of A are like B with respect to C. Everyone in Adam is alike with respect to condemnation. Everyone in Christ is alike with respect to salvation. That parallel doesn't merge the two groups. They may overlap, but they remain distinct.

Paul's argument is an argument from dysanalogy as well as analogy. The headship of Adam over against the headship of Christ.

And that, too, is part of the rhetorical structure. It's easier to see the dissimilarities once you lay out the similarities.

Another concern, lying close to the surface, is to emphasize the ethnically inclusive character of the Gospel. God justifies Jews and Gentiles like—on condition of faith.

Parry then cites 1 Cor 15:22 as another prooftext for universalism. But there are several problems with that appeal:

i) V23 is epexegetical, delimiting the scope of v22 to Christians.
ii) Paul himself, in this very passage, points out that universal expressions in Scripture can be hyperbolic (v27; cf. Ps 8:6).
iii) In v26, Paul says that God will "destroy" (i.e. overthrow, dethrone) his enemies. That's the language of conquest, not

conversion. Parry tries to evade this by limiting the reference to fallen angels. But there are two problems with that move:
a) It could be a reference to human authorities, or human and angelic enemies alike.
b) In any case, Parry's universalism extends to fallen angels as well as fallen men. That's how he construes Col 1:15-20.

Parry then cites Rom 11:26. Of course, that's is a very controversial passage. For now I'd make the following observation: In OT usage, "all Israel" is an idiomatic phrase. It's not just a case of adding a universal quantifier to a free-floating noun. "All Israel" doesn't mean "all Israelites." If you study OT usage, you'll see this phrase is used in a representative sense, such as chieftains who stand for their respective clans.

Parry quotes Richard Bell's claim that it would be "unthinkable that an Israelite could be excluded from final salvation" (96). Of course, it's that sort of spiritual presumption that John the Baptist rails against in Mt 3.

Finally, he appeals to Phil 2:10-11. But here he makes no effort to interact with the detailed exegesis of O'Brien in **The Epistle to the Philippians** (Eerdmans 1991), 243-48.

On p102, he tries to dispose of the Reformed doctrine of special redemption in one paragraph. That isn't a serious attempt to rebut Calvinism.

In chapter 5, Parry appeals to Revelation to prove universalism. The bulk of his argument turns on the conversion of the nations (15:4; 21:24,26; 22:2). But this

reiterates his wooden handling of OT prophecies.

In reference to the nations, John alternates between oracles of salvation in judgment. In that respect he repeats the pattern of the OT prophets, to whom he's indebted.

This only creates a tension if you treat "the nations" as a monolithic unit. But "the nations" is just a conventional synonym for gentiles. And there's no reason to treat every reference to the salvation or damnation of gentiles as denoting a numerically identical people-group. That would be quite unhistorical.

All men don't live and die at the same time. The enemies of the church aren't identical from one decade to another.

And Revelation isn't limited to one-time events. It's partly concerned with endtime events, but it's also concerned with a perennial battle between God and his people, on the one hand, over against the enemies of God—throughout OT history and the church age. Both history and eschatology figure in revelation. Past, present, and future.

In Revelation, its philosophy of history is both linear and cyclical. The church age will come to an end. There will be a final judgment. But every Christian generation may have to face persecution.

John uses this designation ("the nations") because it's a traditional, OT designation, and he's incorporating OT oracles of salvation and judgment into his own prophecy. So he alternates between the two, just as OT prophets alternate between the two—depending on the time and place. OT oracles don't have a uniform referent. That's

historically variable. Israel didn't have the same enemies from one decade to the next. And the pattern repeats itself in church history.

Unless Parry is either a pure preterist or a pure futurist, he can't limit all the action in Revelation to a one-time event—with the same cast of characters. The immortal actors remain in place (the Trinity, angels, devil, demons), but not the mortal actors (human beings).

Parry also appeals to the description of the 144,000 as the "first-fruits" to argue that "the nations" represent the rest of the harvest (188).

i) However, that doesn't necessarily follow. As Beale points out, the first-fruits were dedicated to God. So that can imply a separation between the first-fruits and the remainder of the harvest, which is profane. Cf. G. Beale, **The Book of Revelation** (Eerdmans 1994), 744.

ii) In addition, Parry's argument assumes that the 144,000 are a subset of the redeemed. But that, too, is debatable. Cf. Beale, ibid., 416-23.

Parry then says of 22:17, "But to whom does she speak? One plausible audience is those in the lake of fire (after all, who else is there?)" (119).

How that's plausible, he doesn't say. It would only be plausible to a universalist. Commentators generally identify Christ as the target of this invitation.

Parry misses another point. The invocation in 22:17 isn't limited to an end-time speaker. It applies throughout the

church age.

This coda (22:6-21) is not a part of the narrative (4:1-22:2). It lies outside the narrative. It doesn't come at the end of the chronological sequence, as a final event within the chronological sequence.

Parry says "this universal vision of salvation is confirmed again by the proleptic vision in 5:13" (119).

Actually, it's just a literary antithesis. As Aune points out, "This is a verbal repetition of 5:3, where no one in the entire universe was able to open the scroll," Revelation 1-5 (Word 1997), 366. So it's a literary device: from "no one" to "everyone."

This is another example of Parry's wooden exegesis. He's a heretical version of Tim LaHaye.

Parry must also attempt to defang the verses in Revelation which speak of eternal damnation. One move is to claim that "the expression literally means 'unto the ages of ages' (not 'forever and ever')" (128).

How he arrives at that conclusion he doesn't say. It's as if he were merely transliterating the word—then inferring the sense from the transliterated term: aion>eon>age.

But words often have an idiomatic meaning, conferred on them by popular usage. It's not as if the literal meaning is the real meaning. Rather, meaning is assigned by linguistic convention.

There are passages in Scripture which employ a two-age

schema: this world and the world to come. However, that doesn't work for Rev 14:11 and 20:10, where the world to come is the only world in view. Otherwise, you'd have a world to come after the world to come.

I also notice, both here and elsewhere (e.g. Mt 25:46), that Parry doesn't quote from any standard lexicons to support his semantic claims. Instead, he quotes Edward Fudge, who is—of course—an annihilationist.

He then runs through a number of "possibilities": "First, argue that John was simply adopting stereotypical descriptions of the postmortem life, which formally contradict 21-22 but which are subverted by 21-22 and are thus not intended to be taken strictly literally" (128-28).

There are two problems with this move:

i) The point of exegesis is to offer the best interpretation, not to deflect attention away from the best interpretation by compiling a list of barely possible interpretations.

ii) His logic is reversible. Assuming a formal contradiction, why should we take 21-22 literally? Why should we conform the other descriptions to 21-22 and not vice versa?

Another move is to depersonalize the damned: "the focus of 20:10 is the utter defeat of the systems and not the individuals" (129).

But "systems" are composed of persons, from top to bottom. And no one punishes a "system."

"One could maintain, as some recent theologians have, that

the devil is not a personal being but something more akin to a personification of evil" (130).

I see. So, when Jesus was tempted by the Devil in the wilderness (Mt 4), he was tempted by a personification. Yeah, that makes a lot of sense.

To depersonalize the devil, you have to demythologize the Bible. And once you start down that path, you should demythologize the Book of Revelation. To consistently implement that program, you have to secularize the Book of Revelation. You wouldn't end up with universalism—even if Revelation taught universalism. For that teaching would be part and parcel of an antiquated worldview: the very thing we need to demythologize.

On this view, Revelation wouldn't be about the world to come. About God and heaven and angels and demons. No, it would be about this world. A metaphor for the immanent, recurrent battle between good and evil here and now. There is no hereafter. So this move is fatal to Parry's thesis.

> "One could maintain that the devil will be punished forever, but that Lucifer will ultimately be saved…The devil, like the 'flesh,' must be destroyed…But he dies, and Lucifer is reborn as a redeemed angel. It would still be possible to speak of the devil being tormented forever and ever to symbolize this defeat even though no actual being is still in the lake of fire" (131).

Sounds to me like Parry has been reading too much Alister Crowley or Anton LaVey.

> "It ought to be noted that a debate has arisen within recent Gospels scholarship about whether Jesus

> actually spoke of punishment in the afterlife at all… According to Wright all the passages that warn of the fires of Gehenna speak not of any postmortem punishment but of the premortem events of AD 70 when Jerusalem was destroyed" (141).

One problem with this move is that it would also apply to whatever Jesus said about salvation in the afterlife. The Gospels can't teach universal salvation if they don't teach eschatological salvation.

And what about apocalyptic imagery in the other NT writings? Perry can only undercut some of the prooftexts for everlasting punishment by undercutting some of his prooftexts for universal salvation in the process.

Indeed, Parry goes on to mention that Andrew Perriman applies Wright's approach to the rest of the NT. But that's a double-edged sword. It isn't limited to prooftexts for postmortem judgment.

> "The strongest argument against a universalist interpretation of Jesus' teaching starts by arguing that any adequate interpretation of Jesus' words about final punishment must begin by reading them against the background of beliefs held by his contemporaries. Second Temple Jewish beliefs on the postmortem fate of those outside salvation are not at all uniform… However, none of them expected any kind of universal salvation. Thus, when Jesus spoke about the fires of Gehenna, almost everyone who was listening to him would interpret his words as a reference to the final state of the lost. Few, if any, of Jesus contemporary listeners would have understood his words as leaving any room for hope for those who find themselves in Gehenna…I think that it is quite clear that Jesus'

> contemporaries would not have thought that he was a universalist of any variety" (144-45).

Sounds good to me.

In reference to Mt 25:46, he says,

> "the translation of aionios has been the subject of numerous studies in recent years, but there seems to be a strong case for maintaining that it means 'pertaining to an age' and often refers not just to any age but to 'the age to come'" (147).

He doesn't cite any lexicons to corroborate claim. For example, the entries on aion and aionios in the **Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament** (1:44-46) contradict his blanket claims.

> "Thus 'eternal life' may be better translated as 'the life of the age to come' and 'eternal punishment' as 'the punishment of the age to come'" (147-48).

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that we play along with this rendering. When, in cursing the fig tree, Jesus says "May no fruit ever come from you unto the age [eis ton aiona] (Mt 21:19)," does he mean the fig tree will bear no fruit in the present age, but it will bear fruit in the age to come?

Likewise, when Jesus says that "whoever blasphemes the Holy Spirit has no forgiveness unto the age [eis ton aiona] (Mk 3:29a), does he mean the culprit is unforgivable in this age, but will be forgiven in the age to come? Not according to the Matthean parallel (Mt 12:32).

He then quotes another author's claim that

> "the point is not that the fire will burn forever, or the punishment extend forever, or that the life continue forever, but rather than all three will serve to establish the rule of God" (148).

But assuming, for the sake of argument, that this is correct, then it doesn't teach either everlasting life for the sheep or everlasting punishment for the goats. How does saying, "the point is not that the life continue forever" lend any support to universalism? How would that distinguish between universal salvation and universal annihilation?

> "Any interpretation of Gehenna must be compatible with the claim that God is love and would never act in a way towards a person that was to ultimately compatible with what is best for that person" (148).

Of course, that merely begs the question in favor of universalism. MacDonald has abandoned exegesis, and is now insisting that Mt 25:46 can't teach everlasting punishment since that would conflict with…universalism. Isn't that a wee bit circular? The fact that MacDonald feels the need to make this last-ditch appeal betrays the weakness of his case against the traditional reading of Mt 25:46.

> "The verse [Mk 9:49] has long perplexed commentators, but it seems to indicate that the fires of Gehenna function as a place of purification" (150).

As one commentator notes:

> The suggesting that it refers to the purifying fires of purgatory finds little support in the NT. More likely is the idea that it refers to the final judgment, for the preceding verses refer to "fire" in this manner (9:43,48; cf. also 1 Cor 3:10-15). Yet "salted" is better understood as a metaphor involving purification (Ezk 16:4; 43:24), and in Mt 5:13 "salt" is understood positively. Thus it is best to interpret this verse as a reference to the purifying experiences of Christians in their journey to life/the kingdom. These experiences may involve persecution, for fire is often a metaphor for persecution (1 Pet 1:7; 4:12; Rev 3:18). R. Stein, **Mark**, 450.

Back to Parry:

> "In Romans 9 we saw the division within Israel between those 'elect according to grace' and those who are 'objects of his wrath fitted for destruction.' This division looks very final, but Romans 11 demonstrates it to be temporary. This serves as a warning to those who move too quickly from Paul's claims about an apparently final division between the lost and saved to a traditional doctrine of hell" (151).

i) Of course, I don't concede his interpretation of Rom 9-11. I favor the exegesis of Murray, Piper, and Schreiner. Parry doesn't engage their exegesis.

ii) Moreover, to say it's temporary is ambiguous. The hardening may well be temporary, but not for the generation that's hardened. Rather, one generation is hardened while that's lifted on a later generation.

So far from Rom 9-11 undermining the traditional doctrine of hell, it underwrites the traditional doctrine of hell.

Parry then tries to neutralize 2 Thes 1:6-10. In the process, we're treated to such gems as:

"Were one able to sit down with Paul and discuss the issue with him, he would agree that the [universalistic] qualifications did bring out the fuller dimensions of his theology, even though he never had them in mind when he wrote. Talbott could answer the question, 'Would Paul agree with your interpretation?' with the reply, 'He would if I had an hour to discuss it with him'" (154).

Of course, this isn't exegesis. It's the abdication of exegesis.

But even if, for the sake of argument, we indulge in this imaginary scenario, then that exercise isn't limited to the universalist. Suppose, ex hypothesi, that Parry's Pauline prooftexts apparently teach universal salvation. But I could counter this impression by claiming that if I had hour to sit down with Paul and talk it over, he'd agree with my qualifications.

> "One could interpret the Book of Life in a predestinarian sense: God, before the foundation of the world, chooses whom he will save and records their names. This could be supported by 17:8 and 13:8. If that is correct, then, as Beale notes, universalism will have a problem in Revelation; for the universalist needs a Book of Life with flexible contents—one in which names can be deleted and, more importantly, added…If the context of the book is fixed before creation, then this is impossible" (192).

Parry then tries to evade the force of this argument by appealing to Rev 3:5. But there are several problems with

that line of argument:

i) Parry mentions Beale in passing, but completely disregards his Calvinistic interpretation of Rev 3:5. Cf. G. Beale, **The Book of Revelation**, 278-82.

ii) Rev 3:5 is, of course, a standard Arminian prooftext to undermine the Reformed doctrine of perseverance. But there's no reason in the world why Rev 3:5 would also be a prooftext for universalism. In Arminianism, true believers can lose their salvation; in universalism, everyone will be saved. Christian apostasy has no logical place in universalism.

iii) If universalism were true, then why would the names be penciled in? If universalism is true, then logically, everybody's name ought to be inscribed with indelible ink before the foundation of the world. No names ought to be added or erased.

Parry appeals to other Arminian prooftexts like Heb 6. But this assumes the Arminian exegesis of Heb 6. Moreover, even if the Arminian interpretation were true, that's hardly an argument for universalism. Just the opposite.

Parry also has an appendix on Ephesians in which he tries to extract universalism from Eph 1:10 and 1:22. To some extent, 1:22 unpacks the content of 1:10. However, there's nothing in the terminology of 1:22 that implies universalism. As Hoehner points out,

> "The metaphorical language 'under his feet' has the idea of victory over enemies. It is used of the winner of a duel who places his foot on the neck of his enemy

> who has been thrown to the ground, like Joshua who had his generals place their feet on the necks of the five defeated Amorite kings (Josh 10:24; cf. 2 Sam 22:39). Similarly, everything is subjected under Christ's feet, meaning that everything is currently under his control, both friends and enemies," **Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary** (Baker 2003), 283-84.

In sum, Parry's exegetical argument for universalism is no more successful than his sentimental argument for universalism.

Lost loved ones

The primary appeal of universalism is the belief that we will be reunited with all our loves ones. Now, I've already pointed out that there are internal problems with that facile argument, so I won't repeat myself here. Instead, I'm going to make a different point.

Suppose I'm a consistent universalist. Not merely consistent in what I believe, but consistent in how I act in accordance with what I believe. As a universalist, how would I be inclined to behave towards my loved ones?

I would be inclined to take them for granted. Neglect them. After all, what's the hurry?

There will always be another day, another chance, to make things right or spend more time with them. If not in this life, then in the afterlife. Time is on our side. No loss is irretrievable. In universalism, there's no such thing as "too late!"

If, by contrast, you're a traditional Christian, and you're consistent with your belief in hell, then that introduces a note of urgency into your relationships. You value your loved ones all the more because you don't assume that you will always have them around. The sense of what it would mean to lose them forever is never far from your mind.

That also interjects an element of sadness into some of your relationships, an anxious quality, but by the same token, it deepens the bond. It makes you a caring and compassionate person.

It’s like having a friend or family member with cancer. You’re not sure how it will turn out. So you spend far more time with them, and the time you spend is better time.

In the age of modern science, it’s easy to assume that everyone we know and care about will fill out a normal lifespan. And when they unexpectedly die in an automobile accident, we bitterly regret all the lost opportunities to spend more time with them—when we had the time to spend.

Universalism, if taken seriously, fosters a spirit of indifference and procrastination. Our loved ones are less loved. And our circle of loved ones is smaller. We befriend fewer, and lose contact with others, because we’re sure that everything will turn out fine for them in the long run.

Universalism prides itself on its superior empathy, but practically speaking, it cultivates a callous outlook on life.

It’s like the liberal who subcontracts his charity to a government agency. It relieves him of having to be personally charitable. “That’s not my department!” He can pretend to be oh-so concerned about the plight of others without having to become personally involved.

To some extent, belief in hell casts a long shadow on the Christian life. But under that shadow is a level of love which you will never find in the fatalistic optimism of the consistent universalist.

Does God take pleasure in the fate of the damned?

One of the most popular objections to Calvinism is the allegation that, according to Calvinism, God takes pleasure in the fate of the damned.

The critic of Calvinism treats the specter of divine pleasure in the fate of the damned as though that were self-evidently abhorrent. As if that's the worst possible thing you could say about God. As if that besmirches the character of God.

Now, one superficial problem with this objection is that it seizes upon emotive language. But unless we're going to become Mormons or open theists, we have to make allowance for anthropomorphic usage in emotive ascriptions to God. "Pleasure" is a loaded word, and it's loaded with very human connotations. What is more, human connotations in a fallen world.

But there's a deeper problem. Let's take a comparison. Suppose a terrorist devises a bioweapon. He plans to test that bioweapon on a room full of kindergarteners. But before he has a chance to infect the little boys and girls, he accidentally infects himself, and dies a horrible death in a matter of minutes.

In terms of Christian theology and ethics, is it wrong for you and me to take satisfaction in the fate of the terrorist? Is it wrong for you and me to take "pleasure" in the fact that he suffered the fate he intended for others? That he accidentally killed himself before he could kill anyone else?

Is that a sinful emotion? An evil feeling? Or is that a

righteous emotion?

Put another way, would it be sinful not to take satisfaction in the outcome? If an evildoer gets his comeuppance, why shouldn't we rejoice in that denouement? Isn't it a good thing when villains come to a bad end? Isn't that something to applaud?

For that matter, doesn't Scripture contain a number of scenes involving the fate of the wicked in which the Bible writer adopts a gleeful tone? They escaped justice in this life, but justice awaits them in the afterlife!

Where did some professing Christians ever come around to the notion that it's wrong to take satisfaction in the just deserts of the wicked? By what inversion of moral values do they treat their moral repugnance as self-evidently true? As a reason to disbelieve in such a God?

But if it's proper for Christians to applaud God's just judgment of the wicked, then why would it be wrong for God to be "pleased" with that outcome? Why can't a just judge take satisfaction is doing good? In righting the scales of justice?

What this tells me is that many Arminians share the same value system as the universalist. Deep down, they don't believe the damned get exactly what they deserve.

For if they did think the damned get exactly what they deserve, then why would they be so repelled at the specter of God taking pleasure in the fate of the damned?

Once again, I'm not saying that emotive language is the best way to frame the issue. But I'm just addressing the objection on its own terms.

Happy God vaporized your mom?

randal says:
Saturday, February 19, 2011 at 7:04pm

> I outline the possibilities in the chapter on hell. If one holds on to eternal conscious torment then they have the following options.
>
> 1. They will suffer because their loved ones will suffer but that suffering will be minimized because of the compensating joys of heaven. This is a possible position but I don't know anyone who has held it.
>
> 2. They will be indifferent to the fate of their loved ones. Again this is possible but I don't know anyone who has held it.
>
> 3. They will be unaware of the fate of their loved ones. This position has been suggested by many theologians but it is intolerable for numerous reasons including the fact that it turns the new heavens and new earth into a charade.
>
> 4. They will rejoice in the damnation of their loved ones because those loved ones will be revealed to be despicable God-haters. This has been defended from theologians like Tertullian and Aquinas down to John Piper and J.I. Packer in the present age. It is a logically consistent position but also strikes me (and I think any honest person) as reprehensible and absolutely implausible.

> This leaves us with two possibilities. First there is annihilation. Our unredeemed loved ones will be destroyed. In that case heaven can begin after our healing from their loss. Second, universalism: they too will be redeemed.
>
> It seems to me that only the annihilationist and universalist positions provide a satisfactory response to the problem of loved ones in hell.

http://randalrauser.com/2011/02/happy-with-your-mother-in-hell/

Quite a few issues here:

Since Randal is sizing up the options on purely sentimental terms, let's begin by sizing up his two alternatives on sentimental terms:

i) Per annihilationism, would Randal be happy if God vaporized his mom? Wouldn't that make him bitterly resentful of God?

It reminds me of those revenge movies about the reluctant hero. You know the basic plot. A patriotic Green Beret is court marshaled when his no-good superiors make him the fallguy for their malfeasance.

So he retires to the mountains of Colorado, where he leads a quiet, contented life on his ranch, with his wife, kids, dog, and ponies.

One day there's a knock at the door. His country needs his services. But he refuses.

Then, for whatever reason, the bad guys come after his family. Slaughter his loved ones.

So he hunts them down one by one and dispatches them with Dantean ingenuity.

How would Randal feel about God if God liquidated his mom? Would that foster warm fuzzy feelings? Or would he harbor a grudge?

ii) Per universalism, how would Jessica Lunsford feel if God forgave John Couey? What if your loved ones are hateful to me? Universalism suddenly loses its showroom sheen.

Moving along:

iii) There's no verse of Scripture which says God will damn a Christian's loved ones. Maybe he will, but it's not as if that's a given.

iv) Conversely, we could work back from Rev 21:4: if God will wipe away every tear, then he will restore whatever we need to be whole again.

v) Christians can also pray about the afterlife. We don't have to be passive. Christians are free to pray about the kind of afterlife we'd like to have. What would make us feel fulfilled.

Of course, our prayers may sometimes be off-target, but that's true prayer generally.

vi) In Calvinism, regeneration precedes faith. Even if a loved one didn't die in the faith, that doesn't ipso facto mean he died unregenerate. Perhaps God already planted the seed, but it hadn't had enough time to blossom here-

and-now. What we pray for in this life may blossom in the next.

Inclusivism

I. “The Paradox of Exclusivism”

> Herein lies the paradox that the Augustinians would do well to ponder. If two persons are bound together in love, their purposes and interests, even the conditions of their happiness, are so logically intertwined as to be inseparable T. Talbott, **The Inescapable Love of God**, 137

This is Talbott’s silver bullet argument for universalism.

II. The Inclusivist/Exclusivist Continuum

1. Universalism

Everyone sine qua non will be saved in this life or the afterlife.

2. Inclusivism

Everyone who’s heavenbound will be saved through the atonement of Christ, but not through faith in Christ.

3. Evangelical Exclusivism

Everyone who's heavenbound will be saved through faith in Christ.

4. Reformed Exclusivism

Everyone who's heavenbound will be saved through regeneration.

(4) intersects with (3). In Reformed theology, regeneration is the source of saving faith. Regeneration is geared towards faith in Christ. Regeneration is the seed of faith. Regeneration is the seed while faith is the flower.

But, in principle, there can be a gestation period. Regeneration creates a predisposition to exercise faith in Christ, but other conditions must also be met. These are ordinarily coordinated, but there can be exceptions. In principle the regenerate might die before hearing the gospel. Or the regenerate might die before arriving at the age of discretion. Things like that.

BTW, here's an exegetical argument for the priority of regeneration:

http://blogmatics.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/does-regeneration-precede-faith-in-1-john-by-matthew-barrett-ets-paper-nov-2010.pdf

III. The Social Continuum

At the risk of stating the obvious, we're closer to some people than others. That's how God made us. And that's a matter of degree.

1. A Loved One

Those who make our lives happy, worthwhile, meaningful, fulfilling. If we lose them, the joy goes out of our lives. We may lose the will to live.

At this same time, relationships can be fickle. Take a young couple where one spouse dies two years into the marriage. The widow or widower may stay in love with the late spouse until death.

If, however, the spouse hadn't die, they might have divorced ten years into the marriage. Two years into the marriage they're passionately in love.

Inseparable. Ten years into the marriage they can't stand each other. So what seems to be an indispensable relationship in this life may not necessarily be indispensable.

2. A Pal or Close Acquaintance

People we're fond of. We care about them. We'd be saddened if they come to a bad end. Yet we can go on without them. We can be happy without them. It's just that when we think about their situation, it saddens us. But that's just in passing.

3. Strangers

We have empathy, compassion, or pity for them. We can imagine ourselves in their situation. We share a fellow feeling for their plight.

But we don't affection for them. They don't mean anything to us at a deeply personal level. It's not a loss to us. It's just a sense of what the loss would mean to them.

4. Enemies

Those we dislike, but treat better than they deserve out of Christian duty. We act in their best interest despite what we may feel.

IV. Different Social Bonds

Loved ones are subdivisible into three basic groups:

1. Fellow Believers

2. Believers and Unbelievers

3. Fellow Unbelievers

V. Evaluation

Talbot's argument only applies to a subset of a subset of humanity. It only applies to a subset of loved ones–where one (or more) of a believer's loved ones are unbelievers.

For instance, it may well be the case that Bonnie can't be happy if she is saved while Clyde is damned, or vice versa. But it doesn't follow from their pairing that a Christian can't be happy unless Bonnie and Clyde are saved, for they are not his loved ones.

An argument for universalism must be universal in scope. Talbott's argument falls far short. He needs an argument in which all parties are some believer's loved ones.

VI. Coda

In principle, an exclusivist could concede that there are some relationships in this life without which Christians can't be happy in the next life. And if that's the case, God will save whoever we (as Christians) need to be eternally happy.

That, however, is not an argument for universalism. And it's not an argument for postmortem conversion.

So that no man may boast

I'm commenting on this post:

http://thepietythatliesbetween.blogspot.com/2012/01/damned-sinners-part-ii-can-negative.html

> The problem, in brief, is this: Some theologies (e.g. traditional Calvinist ones) hold that God damns some sinners as a just punishment for sin, thereby repudiating sin clearly and forcefully. But by damning some persons as a punishment for sin, God is responding to the "affront" of sin by guaranteeing that this affront continue for eternity. But how is that supposed to repudiate sin? How can you repudiate something by guaranteeing that it never stop?
>
> In a nutshell, Steve responds to this problem by denying that, on Calvinist theology, there is any meaningful sense in which sin as such is "intolerable" to God. What is intolerable is sin unrepudiated, sin for which just punishment has not been meted out. In other words, he takes it that the main challenge I'm raising in the Problem of Damned Sinners is this: By tolerating the never-ending sinfulness of the damned, the Calvinist God "tolerates the intolerable." He then responds by saying that never-ending sinfulness as such isn't intolerable, so long as it is fittingly punished.
>
> But here, Steve is both misconstruing the main force of the Problem of Damned Sinners and, in responding to the misconstrued argument, relying on a premise I find highly implausible.

I was responding to what Reitan said on Rauser's blog. Reitan is free to improve on what he said there, but my reply is not deficient if it fails to anticipate an argument which he failed to provide at the time.

> Before making these points, I should stress something that my co-author, John Kronen, wants emphasized. The argument I presented first on Randal's blog and then in the previous post—which I've dubbed "The Problem of Damned Sinners"—is adapted from an argument in God's Final Victory and brought to bear on certain Calvinist claims. But it is not identical to that argument. In our book, the argument John and I develop is not premised on God's finding sin intolerable, but on the premise that God would never will sin. We argue that by permanently casting the damned away from the only thing that can save them from their own sinfulness, God does end up willing sin. In the book, we consider and respond to a host of objections to this argument--both to the claim that God would never will sin and to the claim that God would be doing exactly that were He to impose eternal alienation as a punishment.

According to Calvinism, God does will sin. He doesn't will sin for its own sake. He doesn't will sin in isolation. But he wills sin to achieve certain second-order goods.

> In other words, as formulated in our book, the argument doesn't even rely on the premise that Steve attacks. As such, Steve's rebuttal is irrelevant to the argument formulated in our book. That said, it may at least seem as if it is relevant to my formulation of the argument. In either formulation, however, the main

> focus of the argument is on whether imposing eternal damnation as a response to sin makes sense—whether this is a coherent "response" to sin, given what sin is to God (namely, something fundamentally opposed to God's nature).

Notice that Reitan is shifting ground.

> Even formulated in the terms I've used here and on Randal's post, the argument isn't reducible to the claim that, on Calvinist and similar theologies, God tolerates the intolerable. Rather, the focus is on the coherence of damnation as a response to sin. In terms of the tolerable and the intolerable, we might say that what the argument challenges is the idea that eternal damnation can make sin tolerable. In short, it doesn't quite capture my argument to say that sin is intolerable even if repudiated with just punishment. Rather, the argument is that you can't properly repudiate sin with a response that guarantees its continuation.
>
> Think of it this way. Even if Steve holds that punished sin is tolerable in a way that unpunished sin is not, to make sense of this position he has to hold that sin as such has a negative value that needs to be "erased" (if you will) through appropriate punishment. Thus, sin as such is bad, and what just punishment does is somehow "balance the scales" that have been set off kilter by sin. Steve himself uses this language of scale-balancing, which makes sense only on the assumption that sin in its own right throws things off balance.
>
> In short, Steve and other Calvinists would be disingenuous if they claimed that, on Calvinist theology, sin weren't deeply offensive in itself. Its

> profound negative value is what generates the demand for justice, the need to make things right.

Several problems with Reitan's reply:

i) I wasn't presenting a full-blown explanation for how sin functions in the plan of God. I was merely responding to Reitan on his own terms, based on the comment he left at Rauser's blog.

ii) It's not so much that sin has a negative value but an instrumental value. A part/whole, means/ends relation. For instance:

"But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe" (Gal 3:22).

"Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure" (Rom 7:13).

"22 What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, 23 in order to make known the riches of his glory for

vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory" (Rom 9:22-23).

"For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all" (Rom 11:32).

> Put another way, in order to hold that eternal damnation makes things right, you first have to hold that sin "makes things wrong."

It doesn't make everything wrong. It doesn't make the plan of God wrong in planning sin in the furtherance of a higher end.

> In short, Steve has to hold that sin has significant negative value. In fact, if sin is going to warrant endless punishment, that negative value would have to be very grave indeed. In fact, traditional Calvinists follow Anselm in explicitly embracing the view that sin is *infinitely* grave insofar as it affronts God's infinite majesty. Sin—moral wickedness—is that in the created order which is most contrary to God, the gravest "turning away" of the creation from its creator.
>
> Sin is contrary to the holiness of God, but it's not contrary to the plan of God. Consider a novelist who creates a villainous character. A novelist who includes evil events in his story. A virtuous novelist can have a virtuous reason for depicting vice.
>
> One concise way to put all of this is as follows: sin is intolerable.

Now part of what Steve wants to say is that this way of putting things is misleading, since what might be intolerable all by itself needn't be intolerable when combined with something else. Sin may be intolerable without a scale-balancing retributive response; but with such a response, justice has been done and the situation as a whole isn't intolerable.

Even if Steve is right about this, I don't think it solves the fundamental issue at stake in the Problem of Damned Sinners. But before making that point, I want to explain why I think Steve isn't right about this. Take the case of murder. We find murder to be such an "intolerable" crime that, as a society, we respond to it with the strongest punishments we consider intrinsically permissible (life imprisonment or capital punishment). Is it adequate to say that murder unpunished is intolerable, but murder justly punished is just fine since the scales of justice have been balanced?

Think of it this way: Suppose the murder rate in a country of 1 billion people is enormous: say one million murders every year. Does this become a tolerable situation if every murderer is caught and subjected to proportional punishment, but the murders continue unabated at the same rate? Is that state of affairs "just as good" as a society in which no murders happen? When confronted with a horrific offense, is it enough for the offense to be justly punished or does the horrific nature of the offense also entail that it should stop happening?

Intuitively, it seems we should go with the latter. Doesn't it? Given that murders occur, we might agree that proportionately punished murder is better than murder going unpunished. But far better that no murders occur at all. And what would we think about a government that thinks the wrongness of murder is

> communicated most clearly in just punishment—and so, in order to demonstrate how bad murder is, enacts policies that magnify the murder rate so as to have more murders to justly punish? Do you really repudiate murder if you make sure more murders happen so as to have more murders to repudiate? Or is repudiation what you do in response to something that you think shouldn't happen at all?

That depends. We normally think of murder as willfully and maliciously taking the life of the innocent. But suppose you had a country overrun by drug cartels. Suppose the drug cartels have the gov't outmanned and outgunned. The gov't lacks the necessary resources to defeat them directly.

However, a war develops between two rival drug lords. The gov't doesn't intervene to prevent the violence. For it's better to let the rival drug cartels commit mutual annihilation.

In fact, it would be justifiable if the gov't instigated that war, then withdrew and let events take their course. The country would be a safer place after members of rival drug cartels murdered one another into extinction.

> Put simply, if some behavior is so bad as to call for serious punishment, that's a reason to want the behavior to be reduced or eliminated.

That's simplistic insofar as it ignores the teleological function of evil in God's plan.

> As such, it seems you've got a distorted theory of retributive justice if you think there's nothing wrong with the murder rate spiraling out of control so long as every murder is justly punished. In fact, I'd be so bold

> as to insist that any retributive theory that calls for the punitive repudiation of an act would also have to regard the act's non-occurrence as preferable to its occurrence. And if so, there's something amiss in Steve's claim that, for God, there's nothing intolerable with sin as such, but only with unrepudiated sin.

I'm not suggesting that retribution is the sole explanation. That was a limited response to a comment Reitan left at Rauser's blog.

> The point I was making in my comment on Randal's blog was simply this: It doesn't make much sense to suppose that you can erase the negative value sin by acting so as to guarantee that it never stops happening. How do you erase the enormous negative value of sin by propagating it? It seems that you would then be magnifying the negative values that need to be erased, as opposed to erasing them.

I don't agree with how Reitan frames the issue. Among other things, damnation illustrates the gratuity of grace. God is not obligated to save sinners. Reprobation is the flip side of election:

"8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph 2:8-9).

Among other things, hell is an object lesson in the discretionary nature of God's mercy.

> Here's the thing about eternal damnation: Its central feature is eternal exclusion from the beatific vision. Whatever other positive evils might be thought to accompany damnation, the heart of hell is that the damned are decisively cast out of God's presence and cut off from God's grace. But Calvinists (along with other Christians) hold that the only cure for sin is divine grace. Without grace, ongoing sinfulness is inevitable. On this theology, eternally withholding divine grace amounts to eternally withholding the necessary condition for not sinning…and as such guaranteeing that sin continue unabated. The essential feature of the state of damnation—exclusion from the grace of God—can thus be characterized as the act of making sure that a person's sinful state never be overcome.

The fact that the damned continue to sin demonstrates how unworthy they are to be saved. And that, in turn, vindicates the gratuity of grace.

Reitan then illustrates his objection with some creative examples. But these piggyback on assumptions that I don't share.

Finally:

> Now maybe there is some way for the Calvinist to make sense of this. But it is a problem—a pretty big one. And I think the burden of proof lies on the shoulders of the Calvinist to resolve it. Otherwise, those of different theological persuasions have a right to be deeply skeptical. Simply asserting that, mysteriously, God depriving sinners of what they need in order to avoid sin somehow neutralizes sin's negative value—well, that doesn't cut it.

i) Everlasting punishment isn't unique to Calvinism.

ii) Let's not confuse apologetics with our religious duties. We are morally obligated to trust in God's wisdom and justice whether or not we can defend that philosophically.

I have, in fact, defended my position in reply to Reitan, but it's not incumbent on me to do so.

Nauseous universalism

I'll comment on some statements in this post:

http://thepietythatliesbetween.blogspot.com/2012/01/damned-sinners-addendum.html

> My God's Final Victory co-author, John Kronen, has been pushing me a bit on my arguments in this "Damned Sinners" series. Specifically, he's been stressing that there's an idea embraced by supralapsarian Calvinists (not by infralapsarian ones) that I don't seem to take seriously enough in these posts. And he's suggested that it's this failure to take that idea seriously that might've led someone like Steve Hays to think that the Problem of Damned Sinners could be so quickly dispensed with.
>
> I think John has a point. You see, on supralapsarian Calvinism the ultimate purpose of creation is to display God's majesty, which is found both in God's merciful love and in His justice. But this theology assumes that God cannot fully display both together (an assumption that I think wreaks havoc on some of the most important and profound understandings of the Atonement, by the way, but I won't get into that here).

Actually, the double-edged design of Christ's ministry is Biblical. For instance:

And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall

and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed" (Lk 2:34).

Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind" (Jn 9:39).

Back to Reitan:

> Or, put another way, this theology takes it that the act of neutralizing the negative value of sin with a punitive response produces a meta-level good (the display of divine justice) that wouldn't have otherwise existed. On this theology, the problem of explaining why there is so much wickedness in a world created by a morally perfect God is answered as follows: God wants wicked people to be there, because only then can His justice be fully put on display through His smiting of them.

This summary is true up to a point, but one-sided. It's not merely that sin is necessary to manifest the justice of God. Sin is also necessary to manifest the mercy of God.

At first blush that might seem counterintuitive. We associate judgment with justice rather than mercy. Conversely, we associate salvation with mercy rather than justice. However, grace and mercy, to be gracious and merciful, must be discretionary rather than obligatory. As Scripture puts it:

2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God...4

Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due (Rom 4:2,4).

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Eph 2:8-9).

Back to Reitan:

> As such, damnation and reprobation don't simply demonstrate the justice of God, but the grace of God. For salvation and damnation, election and reprobation, are correlative. Mutually interpretive. Each clarifies the nature of its counterpart–like light and darkness.
>
> But here's the thing: this theology strikes me as so morally awful that the thought that there are people out there who really embrace it at a fundamental level (not just playing pious lip service to it out of communal allegiance) makes me spiritually nauseous. I think that if I could get myself to really believe that deep down anyone wholeheartedly embraced this idea, I'd be pushed in the direction of a species of supralapsarian Calvinism in which God created supralapsarian Calvinists so as to have vessels of wrath on which he could heap his just outrage against people who harbor such awful convictions.
>
> I'm kidding of course. I'd remain a universalist even if I could be convinced that anyone wholeheartedly embraced supralapsarian Calvinism. Really. My point is that since my aversion to this theology is so potent,

> part of me doesn't believe that there are people who honestly think it's right; and so I find myself developing my arguments as if there were no such people--and this means that some of what I say may end up begging the question in relation to anyone who really does embrace this theology deep down.

Reitan is a universalist. Universalism is superficially appealing. But think about it for a moment. You can only be found if you are lost. Assuming that God saves everyone, why does anyone need to be saved in the first place? If the God of universalism has the power to save all the lost, does he not have the power to keep them from losing their way in the first place? Why does he put them through hell to get them to heaven?

Is this justified by a soul-building theodicy, in which a fallen world where everyone is saved is better than an unfallen world where no one is lost or doomed? Is so, then the universalist thinks God wills sin for a meta-level good. To cultivate certain virtues or insights unobtainable apart from evil.

Even so, that’s a pretty ruthless process to achieve the desired end. It takes the sheen off universalism. God’s creatures literally take a hell of a beating (albeit a purgatorial hell) to achieve enlightenment.

> One answer I anticipate runs something along the following lines: "It's a mystery we can't understand, but we know it's true because of divine revelation in Scripture." But even if you grant a high view of Scripture according to which Paul's use of the "vessels of mercy/vessels of wrath" language (Romans 9:22) was God-inspired…

I don’t regard that as an appeal to mystery. Rather, Paul is giving a rationale.

> In Romans 11, the "hardening" of Israel against God, and the concomitant divine repudiation, is described as a stage in a process aimed at saving both "the full number of the Gentiles" and "all Israel" (vs. 25-26). This chapter ends with the striking claim that "For God has bound over all men to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all" (vs. 32). This starts to sound as if, on Paul's view of things, each of us is both a vessel of wrath and a vessel of mercy, albeit at different stages in our moral and spiritual evolution--and it sounds as if serving as a vessel of wrath is always in the service of the ultimate goal of mercy being shown to all.
>
> But, of course, at other points it doesn't sound as if he's saying this at all. Limiting ourselves to Paul's epistle to the Romans, sometimes Paul sounds like an outright and blatant universalist (e.g. Romans 5:18-19 and elsewhere)…

That has some traction for Arminians, who generally share the same semantic approach to universal quantifiers. But, of course, Calvinists don’t construe universal quantifiers that way, so that’s not a starting point we share in common with Reitan and his ilk.

> The attempt to read the whole, to understand the parts in light of the whole, and to extract from such a complicated text a coherent theology that does justice to the whole given the apparent tensions and conflicts--that task isn't easy. And it seems to me that part of

> what Christians who pursue such a task need is to recognizing when a particular interpretive effort has, for example, implications that clash with the voice of conscience, or produces internal problems that raise concerns about consistency.

i) Reprobation doesn't clash with my conscience.

ii) Even if it did, my conscience is only as good as the God who produced it. As such, conscience has limited value as a theological criterion, for the appeal is ultimately circular. At best, a God-given conscience mirrors the God who gave it. But what if the Calvinist God gave me my conscience?

Cheaters win

Over the years I've tried to read and respond to the best exponents of universalism. Today I got around to skimming Keith DeRose's case for universalism, just in case he had something novel to add to the stock arguments for universalism.

As I've noted in the past, there are many parallels between arguments for Arminianism and arguments for universalism. Therefore, when a Calvinist reads the case for universalism, there's often a sense of déjà vu. Many arguments for universalism have no particular traction for Calvinists, because we've already been over the same ground with Arminians.

For now I'd like to single out one basic problem with DeRose's case for universalism. He tries to deflect objections to universalism which appeal to Bible passages about eternal punishment by resorting to standard annihilationist strategies. But there are two problems with that move:

i) By blunting the force of passages about eternal damnation, you simultaneously blunt the force of passages about eternal salvation. So that strategy is self-defeating.

ii) But I'd like to focus on a broader issue. A running theme in Scripture is the admonition that what we do in this life makes a difference. Scripture presents two divergent destinies. The godly and the ungodly don't share the same destiny. What you think and do in this life matters to how you end up in the long run.

This is a running theme in both the OT and the NT. It cycles through many different books of the Bible. Many different genres bear witness to this theme.

It's broader than specific language about your eternal destiny. Rather, it's a general statement about two different paths leading to two different outcomes.

Universalism cuts against the grain of this pervasive Biblical theme. Universalism is fatalistic. For if universalism is true, then all paths lead to the same ultimate destination. It makes no difference what you think, say, or do in this life. This life is irrelevant to the afterlife. Whether you live for God, suffer for God, die for God, center your life on Christ– or whether you live a thankless, godless, spiteful life, has no effect on how things finally turn out for you.

The problem for universalism isn't limited to some standard prooftexts for everlasting punishment. Rather, the Bible places massive emphasis on the importance of how, and for whom, we live in the here-and-now as that affects the hereafter.

Universalism trivializes everything we do or fail to do in this life. This life becomes aimless, frivolous, pointless. The faithful and the faithless share a common destiny. It makes a mockery of faith, fidelity, and self-denial. There's no motive to live one way rather than another. No incentive to aspire to a life of godliness.

Universalism is idealistic, yet it cuts the nerve of idealism. It's a recipe for cynicism.

Why do people believe in hell?

I'm going to comment on an article by David Bentley Hart:

https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/10/opinion/sunday/christianity-religion-hell-bible.html

He's an essayist and Eastern Orthodox theologian. One of those chic fashionable theologians like Miroslav Volf or Eugene Peterson with a following among those who view themselves as progressive Christian cognoscenti. This is their idea of intellectually respectable Christianity. The Protestant counterpart to Catholic Thomists.

> It raises a troubling question of social psychology. It's comforting to imagine that Christians generally accept the notion of a hell of eternal misery not because they're emotionally attached to it but because they see it as a small, inevitable zone of darkness peripheral to the larger spiritual landscape that–viewed in its totality–they find ravishingly lovely. And this is true of many.

i) I don't have a precise idea regarding the scale of damnation, but I hardly think it's small.

ii) And I regard eternal retributive justice as a necessary background for a moral universe. That's not peripheral.

> But not of all. For a good number of Christians, hell isn't just a tragic shadow cast across one of an otherwise ravishing vista's remoter corners; rather, it's one of the the landscape's most conspicuous and delectable details.

"Delectable"?

> After all, the idea comes to us in such a ghastly gallery of images: late Augustinianism's unbaptized babes descending in their thrashing billions to perpetual and condign combustion; Dante's exquisitely psychotic dream of twisted, mutilated, broiling souls. St. Francis Xavier morosely informing his weeping Japanese converts that their deceased parents must suffer an eternity of agony.

Hart's tactic is to discredit hell by amalgamating an image of hell based on disparate literary and ecclesiastical traditions. But that's an exercise in misdirection. We can strip away the traditional accretions. The core doctrine goes back to the witness of Scripture.

> Surely it would be welcome news if it turned out that, on the matter of hell, something got garbled in transmission. And there really is room for doubt.

Welcome for *whom*? Welcome for the wicked? No doubt it would be welcome to the wicked to elude justice in the afterlife as well as this life.

> No truly accomplished NT scholar, for instance, believes that later Christianity's opulent mythology of God's eternal torture chamber is clearly present in the scriptural texts.

The principle of hell isn't "torture" but retributive justice. In some cases that may involve torture. It would be poetic justice for someone who tortured (or ordered the torture of) the innocent in this life to be on the receiving end of the

process. But that's not the essence of eschatological punishment.

> It's entirely absent from St. Paul's writings. The only eschatological fire he ever mentions brings salvation to those whom it tries (1 Cor 3:15).

How did Hart miss this passage?

4 Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring. 5 All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. 6 God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you 7 and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. 8 He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9 They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might 10 on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed (2 Thes 1:5-10).

He goes on to say:

> There are a few terrible, surreal, allegorical images of judgment in the Book of Revelation, but nothing that, properly read, yields a clear doctrine of eternal torment.

So he asserts. But that brushes aside exegetical arguments to the contrary

> Even the frightening language used by Jesus in the Gospels, when read in the original Greek, fails to deliver the infernal dogmas we casually assume to be there.

He acts like he's the only person who can read the Gospels in the original Greek.

> On the other hand, many NT passages seem–and not metaphorically–to promise the eventual salvation of everyone.

i) Arminians and universalists help themselves to the same prooftexts. As a Calvinist,
the universalist prooftexts present no new or special challenge for me because I interpret them the same way I interpret Arminian prooftexts. I don't have to make any adjustments. I already have a counter-interpretation.

ii) But over above that, there's also the problem of arranging passages into a particular chronological sequence. Consider two eschatological sequences:

a) The dead pass into the intermediate state. On the day of judgment there's the general resurrection. The saints experience everlasting bliss while the wicked experience everlasting misery.

b) Some of the dead experience postmortem remedial punishment, after which they go to heaven. They pass through a purgatorial hell on the way to heaven.

Biblical eschatology has a consistent (a) sequence. But the universalist sequence is nowhere found in Scripture. Indeed, it requires splicing and rearranging the standard sequence.

> Still, none of that accounts for the deep emotional need many modern Christians seem to have for an eternal hell. And I don't mean those who ruefully accept the idea out of religious allegiance, or whose sense of justice demands that Hitler and Pol Pot get their proper comeuppance, or who think they need the prospect of hell to keep themselves on the straight and narrow. Those aren't the ones who scream and foam in rage at the thought that hell might be only a stage along the way to a final universal reconciliation.

i) Being the demagogue that he is, Hart has engineered a rhetorical dilemma. He imputes an untoward motive to many Christians who uphold hell. In one sense it's hard to defend yourself against the charge. If you really do harbor untoward motives, you'd deny it. So it's a maliciously circular allegation.

ii) Then there's the false dichotomy of insinuating that if you believe something because you're supposed to believe it, you can only do so ruefully or grudgingly. If, however, something is true, it may also be morally, emotionally, and/or intellectually satisfying. We can believe something out of duty but also believe it to be good or admirable. In that event we don't even have to reach for duty.

iii) I suspect that like many Christians, I have mixed feelings about hell. On the one hand I hope all my loved ones are saved. And natural human compassion extends that impulse to many (but not all) strangers.

On the other hand, injustice is galling. A world without ultimate justice mocks the good. Erases the difference between virtue and vice, good and evil. Ironically, universalism is casting the same shadow as atheism in that regard. Nothing you do ultimately makes any difference. Universalism has a nihilistic underbelly in that respect. Like Hinduism and Buddhism, where enlightened reality is beyond good and evil. Nihilism and fatalism go together.

iv) While universalism has an undoubted element of appeal, there's a coercive quality to the universalist bargain. The offer is that God will save your murdered daughter for a price: only if God also saves the man who murdered her. Save both or damn both. Sophie's Choice transposed to the key of universalism.

v) Compassion is the ability to care about the plight of those whose misfortunes you haven't personally experienced. Despite that, you imaginatively project yourself into their situation. What if that was me? Paradoxically, while it may be wrong to harbor vengeful feelings toward your personal enemies, if you have any, it can be commendable to wish the worst for someone else's enemies. That's a disinterested kind of vengeance. A longing that justice be done on behalf of others.

> Theological history can boast few ideas more chilling than the claim (of, among others, Thomas Aquinas) that the beatitude of the saved in heaven will be increased by their direct vision of the torments of the damned.

That's another trope that opponents of hell constantly trot out. Again, it's just an ecclesiastical tradition.

But as long as he brings it up: while it would be wrong for the saints to derive glee from watching the damned suffer forever, there's nothing intrinsically wrong–indeed, there's something intrinsically right–about victims seeing assailants punished. That's not the same thing as hell mounted with cameras so that saints can voyeuristically tune into the miseries of the damned. But when victims see their assailants punished, that's a way to put the ordeal behind them and move on to better things.

> But as awful as that sounds, it may be more honest in its sheer cold impersonality than is the secret pleasure that many of us, at one time or another, hope to derive not from seeing but from being seen by those we leave behind.

Well that depends. Suppose a Muslim woman converts to Christianity. As punishment she is gang-raped and beheaded. On the day of judgment, is there something wrong with her waving goodbye to her assailants? They watch her turn around and enter the everlasting light of paradise while they are left behind. It sinks in that they were blindly following a false prophet. They never once paused to ask whether there was any decent evidence for Muhammad's prophet pretensions? They used Islam as a pretext for sadism. They were the winners in this life but the losers in the next life. Their victim was the loser in this life but the winner in the next life.

> How can we be winners, after all, if there are no losers? Where's the joy in getting into the gated community and the private academy if it turns out the

> gates are merely decorative and the academic has an inexhaustible scholarship program for the underprivileged? What success can there be that isn't validated by another's failure? What heaven can there be for us without an eternity in which to relish the impotent envy of those outside its walls.

i) To begin with, the Bible does have a doctrine regarding the reversal of fortunes.

ii) That said, Hart's imputed motive is twisted. Christian missionaries are like escapees who got out of the war zone but keep going back to rescue others. They don't say, "I made it! To hell with the rest of you!" No, having found the way out, they go back into the hellhole to lead as many of the lost as they can into the light.

iii) Speaking for myself, when I look forward to the afterlife, it has nothing to do with keeping a tally of the losers. It has nothing to do with thinking about the damned at all.