

(Revised 3/9/02)

## CHAPTER 1: TOWARDS A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF UNIVERSALISM

### A Brief Autobiographical Note

As a young man growing up in a conservative evangelical church, it never occurred to me even to question the widespread assumption that, according to the Bible as a whole, a host of sinners, including some of my own loved ones, would eventually be lost forever without any further hope of redemption. Indeed, all of my early theological reflections and immature struggles took place within the context of this one unquestioned assumption—which was also the context, therefore, in which I first began to reflect seriously upon the nature and character of the Christian God.

The early catalyst for such reflection was the historical debate between the Augustinians (or the Calvinists, as some of my Augustinian friends liked to call themselves) and the so-called Arminians.<sup>1</sup> The Augustinian idea that salvation is wholly a matter of grace, and an irresistible grace at that, did not seem initially compelling to me, even though it seemed to accord perfectly with Pauline theology. St Paul himself, I thought, could not have made the point any clearer than this: ‘For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this [the faith] is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast’ (Eph. 2:8-9).<sup>2</sup> But whenever I tried to combine in my own mind this doctrine of free and irresistible grace with the traditional understanding of hell, the idea of grace seemed to evaporate altogether. For where is the grace in a doctrine of limited election? Is God being gracious to an elect mother, for example, when he makes the baby she loves an object of his ‘sovereign hatred’<sup>3</sup> and does so, as in the case

of Esau, even before the child has done anything good or bad?<sup>4</sup> To my mind at least, such a combination of beliefs carried the obvious implication that God is anything but just, anything but loving, and (contrary to repeated declarations in the New Testament) every bit the ‘respector of persons’. So despite the clear doctrine of grace that so pervades the New Testament, I found myself rejecting Augustinian theology almost from the time I first encountered it; and during my undergraduate and seminary days, I therefore put all of my energies into working out, as well as I could, an essentially Arminian, if not outright Pelagian, theology.

But though Arminianism seemed initially plausible, especially as encountered in someone like C. S. Lewis (one of my early heroes), it too eventually led to a dead end. For even though the Arminians, with their emphasis upon free will, seemed to offer the best possible *philosophical* explanation of hell, I could never quite escape the suspicion that their biblical exegesis, especially in the case of a text such as Romans 9, is at times contrived and artificial. Because I was already persuaded, even as my Arminian friends were, that free will and determinism are incompatible, I was perhaps less concerned than I should have been that the central Arminian understanding of free will is not obviously a biblical idea at all. My point is not that the Bible in any way *excludes* the so-called ‘incompatibilist’ understanding of free will;<sup>5</sup> to the contrary, I continue to believe that indeterminism is essential to the process whereby God, first, brings rational agents into being, and second, reconciles them to himself over time as sons and daughters.<sup>6</sup> But the harder I tried to work out a consistent Arminian theology and to harmonize it with the New Testament writings, the harder I found it to escape the fact that, according to Paul, our final destiny is already foreordained and not a matter of free choice at all. Lest I be misunderstood, I should perhaps reiterate my conviction that in no way did Paul exclude free choice or the importance of moral effort altogether; far from it. Paul himself repeatedly exhorted his readers to exert

moral effort. But at the same time, Paul consistently insisted that one's election (and therefore one's ultimate destiny) 'depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy' (Rom. 9:16). So in the end, I had to admit that Arminian theology fails to explain how free will might plausibly figure into the divine scheme of foreordination, as we encounter it in the New Testament.

Now curiously, even as I began entertaining the possibility that Paul really was serious about predestination, I also began questioning, for quite independent philosophical reasons, the very idea of a freely embraced eternal destiny in hell. In an understandable effort to preserve God's loving character and to defend the New Testament teaching that 'God is no respecter of persons', the Arminians grant ultimate sovereignty, at least in the case of the damned, to an utterly irrational human choice. As C. S. Lewis put it, 'I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful, rebels to the end; that the doors of hell are locked on the *inside*.'<sup>7</sup> But Lewis also recognized that union with the divine 'Nature is bliss and separation from it horror';<sup>8</sup> and if that is true, then a *free* choice of the kind he attributed to the damned seems deeply incoherent, even logically impossible. For no one rational enough to qualify as a free moral agent could possibly prefer an objective horror—the outer darkness, for example—to eternal bliss, nor could any such person both experience the horror of separation from God and continue to regard it as a desirable state. The Augustinian idea that the damned are subjected to punishment against their will at least makes coherent sense, but the Arminian idea that the damned freely choose horror over bliss, hell over heaven, makes no coherent sense at all.<sup>9</sup>

In any event, the Western theological tradition seemed to leave me with a choice between an unjust and unloving God, on the one hand, and a defeated God, on the other. But of course this hardly exhausts the logical possibilities; there remains the additional possibility that it is

God's very nature to love, as I John 4:8 and 16 appears to declare, and that he is also wise and resourceful enough to accomplish *all* of his loving purposes in the end. Why, after all, should an assumption concerning everlasting punishment be the only unquestioned assumption in a context where some are limiting the extent of God's love and others are limiting the scope of his ultimate victory? Why not at least examine the pros and cons of universal reconciliation alongside those of limited election and those of a limited victory over sin and death? When my brother Stephen, who had come under the influence of George MacDonald,<sup>10</sup> finally persuaded me to do just that, something remarkable happened with a kind of breathtaking suddenness. Almost from the moment I began to examine the doctrine of universal reconciliation with an open mind, something akin to a paradigm shift in science, as Thomas Kuhn has called it, or a Copernican Revolution in philosophy, as Immanuel Kant called it, took place in my theological outlook. Suddenly, everything seemed to fall into place. Paul's theological essay in Romans 9-11 finally began to make sense to me, as did the warnings against apostasy in Hebrews 10 and Jesus' remarks about the unpardonable sin. Whole areas of tension between faith and reason, between the supposed teachings of the Bible and my philosophical reflections, between theology and ordinary common sense, simply dissolved and evaporated. But above all, I finally understood why the gospel really is good news, indeed the best possible news for those in our present condition, and why it should not be confused with the twisted message of fear that we humans sometimes make it out to be.

Finally, I should perhaps also point out that I now view universal reconciliation as something more than a vague hope of some kind. To the contrary, I now view it as essential to a proper understanding of salvation, essential to a Pauline understanding of grace, and essential to the inclusive nature of election. For even as many Augustinians are utterly convinced that God's

salvific will cannot be defeated forever and many Arminians are utterly convinced that God at least wills the salvation of all human sinners, so I am equally convinced that *both* claims are true. In that respect, I now feel a kinship with the New Testament scholar William Barclay who could write: 'I am a *convinced* universalist.'<sup>11</sup>

### **Three Competing Systems of Theology**

When I first began interpreting the New Testament along universalistic lines, I was struck by how many regarded such an interpretation as not only mistaken, but utterly unreasonable and heretical as well. I found that a good many of my Augustinian friends, who did not regard the Arminian view as heretical (only mistaken), and a good many of my Arminian friends, who did not regard the Augustinian view as heretical (only mistaken), were united in their conviction that universalism is both mistaken and heretical. This curious response started me thinking. Why should the Augustinians regard universalism as any more heretical than the Arminian view?--and why should the Arminians regard it as any more heretical than the Augustinian view?

As I began to reflect upon such questions, I observed an intriguing phenomenon. With a few notable exceptions, my own interpretation of specific texts in the Bible always seemed to find support either in the writings of a first rate Augustinian scholar or in those of a first rate Arminian scholar. The exceptions, of course, were the standard proof texts for a doctrine of everlasting separation, which the Augustinians and the Arminians both accept. But the remarkable thing is this: If you simply take the Augustinian idea of God's sovereignty in the matter of salvation—that is, the idea that the Hound of Heaven cannot be defeated forever—and put it together with the Arminian idea that God at least wills or desires the salvation of all, then you get universalism, plain and simple. And though some will no doubt reject the propriety of following

such theological reasoning to its logical conclusion, it is perhaps worth comparing the kind of reasoning that leads to universalism with the kind that leads to competing theological positions.

Consider the following inconsistent set of propositions:

- (1) God's redemptive love extends to all human sinners equally in the sense that he sincerely wills or desires the redemption of each one of them.
- (2) Because no one can finally defeat God's redemptive love or resist it forever, God will triumph in the end and successfully accomplish the redemption of everyone whose redemption he sincerely wills or desires.
- (3) Some human sinners will never be redeemed but will instead be separated from God forever.<sup>12</sup>

If the above set of propositions is logically inconsistent—and it surely is—then at least one of the above propositions is false. But which one? Because Christian universalists accept both proposition (1) and proposition (2), they reason deductively that proposition (3) is false. But suppose, for a moment, that they should be mistaken in this matter; suppose that proposition (3) should in fact be true. It would then follow that at least one of the other two propositions, either (1) or (2), is false. Of course someone who believes in eternal punishment and therefore accepts proposition (3) could always leave it at that, pleading ignorance concerning which of the other two propositions is false. Similarly, someone who believes in the universality of God's love and therefore accepts proposition (1), or someone who believes in the sovereignty of God's salvific will and therefore accepts proposition (2), could also plead ignorance concerning which of the other two propositions is false. Beyond that, a Christian might even plead ignorance concerning all three of our propositions. But I know of no reputable theologian who both accepts proposition (3) with some degree of certitude and remains content simply to leave it at that. For the ob-

vious questions are simply too pressing: Does God truly love those who are lost forever? Does his loving will then suffer an ultimate defeat? Because the Augustinians accept both the traditional understanding of hell (proposition (3)) and the sovereignty of God's salvific will (proposition (2)), they reason deductively that God's redemptive love is restricted to a limited elect; hence, proposition (1) is false. And because the Arminians accept both the traditional understanding of hell (proposition (3)) and the universality of God's love (proposition (1)), they reason deductively that God's redemptive love can be defeated forever; hence, proposition (2) is false. So there is an initial symmetry, at any rate, between the kind of reasoning that leads the Augustinians to limit the scope of God's love, the kind that leads the Arminians to limit the scope of God's ultimate victory, and the kind that leads the universalists to reject the idea of unending punishment altogether.

Of course any good Augustinian will insist that the Bible itself limits the scope of God's love, and any good Arminian will likewise insist that the Bible itself limits the scope of God's ultimate victory. Similarly, many Christian universalists will also insist—and believe me, I know many who do—that the Bible itself excludes the idea of unending punishment. So yes, of course. *Everyone* who looks to the Bible as an authority will insist that his or her theology represents the most reasonable interpretation of the Bible as a whole. But if you simply pick up an English Bible and read it naively—that is, if you read it without bringing to it a lot of theological expectations and without imposing upon it a well worked out theology—you will find texts that initially appear to support each of our three propositions. So let us set aside, for the moment, sophisticated exegetical disputes and simply review the obvious.

In support of proposition (1), a naïve reader of the English Bible would likely cite such texts as II Peter 3:9: 'The Lord . . . is not willing that any should perish, but [wills instead] that

all should come to repentance' (KJV); I Timothy 2:4: God 'desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth'; Ezekiel 33:11: 'As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but [desire instead] that the wicked turn away from their ways and live'; and perhaps the clearest of all, Lamentations 3:22 & 3:31-33: 'The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end . . . For the Lord will not reject forever. Although he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone.' All of these texts seem to suggest that God sincerely wants to achieve the reconciliation of all sinners, and other texts, such as I John 2:2, suggest further that Jesus Christ suffered and died precisely in an effort to achieve that end. For here we read that Jesus Christ 'is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the entire world'. But then, if the God who seeks to reconcile the entire world to himself (see also 2 Corinthians 5:19) were to fail in the effort, this would seem to represent a tragic defeat of his own redemptive purpose for the world.

Similarly, in support of proposition (2), a naïve reader of the English Bible would likely cite such texts as Ephesians 1:11: God 'accomplishes all things according to his will and counsel'; Job 42:2: 'I know that you [the Lord God] can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted'; Psalm 115:3: 'Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases'; and Isaiah 46:10b & 11b: 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose . . . I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it.' These texts seem to imply that God is able to accomplish all of his purposes—including, therefore, all of his redemptive purposes—and others seem to imply that God not only has the power, but will in fact exercise his power, to bring all things into subjection to Christ (I Cor. 15:27-28), to reconcile all things in Christ (Col. 1:20), and to bring justification and life to all persons through Christ (Rom. 5:18).



But finally, in support of proposition (3), a naïve reader of the English Bible would likely cite such texts as Matthew 25:46: ‘And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life’; II Thessalonians 1:9: ‘They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might’ (RSV); and Revelation 21:8: ‘But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, as for murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their lot shall be the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.’ These texts may seem to imply that at least some persons will be lost forever and thus never be reconciled to God.

Lest there should be any confusion in the matter, I should perhaps point out at this juncture that I make no claim, in the present context, about the correct interpretation of any of the above texts that our imaginary naïve reader might cite. Neither do I make any claim about the appropriateness of lifting isolated texts from very different contexts and setting them side by side, as if one could somehow adduce evidence thereby for the content of revealed truth. I merely make the point that various texts in the Bible may initially appear to support, and in fact have been cited on behalf of, each of our three propositions. With respect to each of them, some theologians and Bible scholars have concluded that it is a fundamental—not a peripheral, but a fundamental—teaching in the Bible. The point is important enough to bear repeating: You can line up some of the most famous names in Western theology—and also some of the most famous names in the conservative evangelical tradition—in support of each of our three propositions. But as a matter of logic, not all of them can be true; at least one of them is false.

Accordingly, if we consider the matter purely as an exercise in logic—that is, without considering any textual evidence at all—we confront this alternative: We can say, on the one hand, that the Bible teaches all three propositions and is not, therefore, infallible in all of its teachings;

or we can say, on the other hand, that the Bible is indeed infallible in all of its *teachings*, but does not really teach all three propositions.<sup>13</sup> In either case, those who believe that God has revealed himself in the Bible will face essentially the same hermeneutical problem, that is, essentially the same problem of interpreting the Bible as a whole: They must provide an interpretive structure that avoids a fundamental logical inconsistency in what they take to be the revealed truth about God. And that is just what each of our three competing theological systems seeks to do; each of them rejects at least one proposition in the inconsistent set with which we began.

### **Is Universalism Heretical?**

So herein lies the context in which I would now address the question of heresy. The Augustinians, the Arminians, and the universalists are all in the same ‘theological boat’, at least in one important respect: They all end up rejecting a proposition that not only has some *prima facie* biblical support, but also has the support of other scholars who would defend it as a clear teaching of Scripture. In such a context one might wonder, quite apart from the general silliness of the matter, how a charge of heresy could even be expressed coherently. If it is not heretical for the Arminians to believe that God, being unlimited in love, at least wills (or sincerely desires) the salvation of all (proposition (1)), why should it be heretical for the universalists to believe this as well?--and if it is not heretical for the Augustinians to believe that God, being almighty, will in the end accomplish all of his redemptive purposes (proposition (2)), why should it be heretical for the universalists to believe this as well? And finally, if it is not heretical to accept proposition (1), as the Arminians do, and not heretical to accept proposition (2), as the Augustinians do, why should it be heretical to accept both (1) and (2)?

Now as a matter of logic, there is a possible answer to this latter question and a possible way for someone who regards the Bible as a kind of final authority to argue that universalism is

indeed heretical. For if the biblical warrant for proposition (3), or a doctrine of everlasting separation, were overwhelmingly greater than that for our other two propositions, then one might be in a position to argue that you could reject (3) only at the price of falling into heresy. One might then argue, in other words, that anyone who wants to escape heresy would have to reject one of the other two propositions in our inconsistent triad.

But nothing like that seems to be true at all, and here, at any rate, is how I see the matter. The biblical warrant for proposition (1), that God at least wills the salvation of all, is simply overwhelming—so overwhelming, I believe, that those who worry about heresy, as I do not, ought to regard St Augustine as an early Christian heretic. For surely, Augustine represented a far more radical departure from tradition than did such early Christian universalists as St Gregory of Nyssa, Theodore of Mopsuestia, or even Origen. The biblical warrant for proposition (2), that almighty God will eventually accomplish all of his will in the matter of salvation, is also exceedingly strong, as Augustine himself rightly insisted. And proposition (3) is the weakest of the three. For only (3) seems to rest upon controversial *translations* as well as controversial *interpretations*; and whereas (1) and (2) seem to rest upon systematic teachings in Paul, the texts cited on behalf of (3) are typically lifted from contexts of parable, hyperbole, and great symbolism.

But that is merely how I see the matter. Others will no doubt see things differently. I. Howard Marshall, for example, concludes a vigorous critique of universalism with these words: ‘if the evidence for everlasting punishment . . . were as palpably weak as the actual evidence for universalism is, no reputable scholar would treat it seriously.’<sup>14</sup> I wonder, however, whether Marshall has thought through the ‘strength of evidence issue’ in light of our three propositions above. Suppose we concede, as Marshall himself does, a strong biblical case for the Arminian belief that God at least *wills* or *desires* the salvation of all (proposition (1)). In Marshall’s own

words: 'The question is not really one of the extent of God's love; that he loves all and does not wish any to perish is *clear biblical teaching*'.<sup>15</sup> If we accept that claim, as I think we must, then Marshall's further claim that the biblical case for universalism is 'palpably weak' is, for all practical purposes, equivalent to the claim that the Augustinian case for irresistible grace and for the ultimate triumph of God's salvific will (proposition (2)) is also 'palpably weak'. For if there is a strong biblical case that God 'loves all' and therefore wills the salvation of all and likewise a strong biblical case that God's loving will shall triumph in the end, then there is also a strong biblical case for universalism. In fact, a universalist could, if he or she so desired, simply leave it to the Augustinians, who are in no way universalists themselves, to shore up that part of the case for universalism, namely proposition (2), that Marshall evidently rejects as 'palpably weak'.

My point is that you cannot properly evaluate any one of our three propositions in isolation from the other two; indeed, you can weaken the case for any one of them simply by strengthening the case for the other two. Because Western theology includes, moreover, two *respectably orthodox* traditions, one of which holds, as Marshall does, that proposition (1) is a clear teaching of Scripture and the other of which holds, as the Augustinians do, that proposition (2) is a clear teaching of Scripture, we are entitled to conclude, I think, that the case for universalism is not nearly as 'palpably weak' as Marshall and others would have us believe. For if it were so 'palpably weak', you would expect that the respectably orthodox among us would at least agree on which part of the case *is* 'palpably weak'. So which is it, proposition (1) or proposition (2)? Should we limit the scope of God's love, as the Augustinians do? Or should we insist that God's loving will suffers an ultimate defeat, as the Arminians do? If neither of these options seems acceptable, then one is left with the belief that God loves all equally and that his loving will cannot be thwarted forever. And that is universalism.

## **A Concluding Comment**

As our discussion so far should already illustrate, *any* interpretation of the Bible as a whole is a complex affair, where some themes and some texts will inevitably be interpreted in light of others. It is as much an art and an act of the imagination, and as much a product of philosophical reasoning, as it is of historical and linguistic study. Accordingly, our task in what follows will be to examine two prominent New Testament themes: that of Christ's ultimate victory and triumph, on the one hand, and that of divine judgement, on the other. Although these themes may at first seem difficult to harmonize, I believe that Paul explains exactly how to fit them together consistently; it is just that his explanation is so unexpected, and so contrary to some of our natural inclinations, that we are apt to miss it altogether. Once we learn to follow his lead in the matter, however, we will no longer be tempted to explain away his theme of victory and triumph or the clear universalistic thrust of his teaching.

<sup>1</sup> The Arminians are, of course, named after Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609), who opposed the Calvinist understanding of predestination and limited election.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the Bible in my essay are from the New Revised Standard Version copyrighted in 1989 by the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

<sup>3</sup> According to G. C. Berkouwer, the Dutch theologian Hermann Hoeksema described God's attitude towards the non-elect as the 'sovereign hatred of his good pleasure'. For the quotation from *Het Evangelie*, see Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, p.224.

<sup>4</sup> The whole thing is in fact a logical impossibility. God cannot both love me and refuse to love some of my own loved ones. Neither can he both love me and refuse to love someone else, whether I now happen to love that other person or not. For why this is so and for some of the logical absurdities in a doctrine of limited election, see Thomas Talbot, *The Inescapable Love of God*, Chapter 8: 'The Paradox of Exclusivism'. See also 'The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment', *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (1990), pp. 30-34.

<sup>5</sup> Incompatibilism is the philosophical view that free choice is incompatible with determinism and therefore incompatible with any deterministic understanding of divine predestination.

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 3 below, p.....[typescript paragraph that begins on p. 2 and ends on p. 3] For a fuller account of my view here, see 'Universalism and the Supposed Oddity of Our Earthly Life', *Faith and Philosophy* 18 (2001), pp. 105-108.

<sup>7</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, p. 115.

<sup>8</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Surprised By Joy*, p. 232.

<sup>9</sup> I here present a mere sketch of my thinking at this point. For a more detailed discussion of the actual arguments, see 'Craig on the Possibility of Eternal Damnation', *Religious Studies* 28, pp. 500-503; *Inescapable*, Chapter 11, and 'Freedom, Damnation, and the Power to Sin with Impunity', *Religious Studies* 37 (2001), pp. 417-434.

<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the best sources for MacDonald's theological ideas are four volumes of his sermons: *Unspoken Sermons* (originally published in a series of three volumes) and *Hope of the Gospel*. Unedited versions of these sermons are now available online at the following URL: <http://www.johannesen.com/OnlineGMD.htm>. For an edited (and condensed) version, see Rolland Hein (ed), *Creation in Christ*, and Rolland Hein (ed), *Life Essential: the Hope of the Gospel*. For some of MacDonald's universalistic ideas, I would highly recommend the sermons entitled 'The Consuming Fire', 'Justice', and 'Light' in *Unspoken Sermons* as well as 'Salvation From Sin' in *Hope of the Gospel*.

<sup>11</sup> William Barclay, *A Spiritual Autobiography*, p. 65. My italics.

<sup>12</sup> I here express this inconsistent set of propositions rather differently, and perhaps even more precisely, than I have expressed it elsewhere. See, for example, 'Three Pictures of God in Western Theology', *Faith and Philosophy* 12 (1995), p. 79, and *Inescapable*, p. 43.

<sup>13</sup> As an illustration, consider the proposition that the earth is flat, which we now know to be quite false. If we consider the matter purely as an exercise in logic, without considering any textual evidence at all, we can say one of two things: Either the Bible teaches that the earth is flat and is not infallible in all of its teachings, or it is infallible in all of its teachings and does not really teach that the earth is flat.

<sup>14</sup> I. Howard Marshall, 'Does the New Testament Teach Universal Salvation?' ..... p.24

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19. My italics.