

## UNIVERSAL RECONCILIATION AND THE INCLUSIVE NATURE OF ELECTION

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Christians have traditionally believed that, because they are saved by grace, they can take no credit for their own salvation or even for a virtuous character (where such exists). All credit of this kind goes to God. And understood properly, this doctrine of salvation by grace has three important virtues, among others: It can undermine pride and self-righteous feelings of superiority in the Christian believer; it can encourage the believer to acknowledge his or her solidarity as a sinner with the entire human race, including the most monstrous and deranged criminals; and it can provide the believer with the greatest possible assurance that all will be well in the end.

But once one postulates a final and irrevocable division within the human race between the company of the redeemed in heaven, on the one hand, and the hopelessly lost and eternally damned, on the other, an obvious question arises: Given that we all start out equally as sinners, just what accounts for this final division among us? And no appeal to the mysterious counsels of God can conceal the obvious answer: Either the explanation lies in the will of God—that is, in God's freedom to extend his mercy to some and not to others—or it lies in how we humans exercise our own freedom with respect to the mercy that God freely extends to all. The Augustinians, as I shall call them, take the first alternative, opting for a doctrine of limited election; and the Arminians, as I shall call them, take the second, opting for a doctrine of conditional election. Christian universalists, by way of contrast, insist that election is neither limited in scope nor conditional in nature; election is, after all, an expression of God's love for the world, the whole world, and God's love is neither limited in scope nor conditional in nature. Against the idea that God's love is limited in scope, the New Testament declares that God at least wills or desires the

salvation of all humans (I Tim. 2:4) and is not willing that any of them should perish (II Peter 3:9); indeed, it is precisely for this reason that God sent his Son into the world to be “the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the entire world” (I Jn. 2:2). And against the idea that God’s love is conditional in nature, St. Paul in particular proclaimed the good news that no failure, no deceitfulness, and no lack of faith on our part can “nullify the faithfulness of God” (Rom. 3:3-4).

Accordingly, in opposing a doctrine of limited election, Christian universalists stand shoulder to shoulder with their Arminian brothers and sisters who share their view that God, whose very essence is perfect love, extends his love and mercy to every person equally; and in opposing a doctrine of conditional election, they also stand shoulder to shoulder with their Augustinian brothers and sisters who share their view that God will eventually accomplish *all* of his will in the matter of salvation. But in opposing the idea of unmitigated tragedy, such as is implicit in any doctrine of everlasting separation from God, they part company from both their Arminian and their Augustinian brothers and sisters.

I shall divide what follows into four parts. In Part I, I shall argue, first, that a doctrine of limited election is inconsistent with the Johannine declaration that God *is* love, and second, that it is riddled with logical impossibilities in any case; in Part II, I shall argue further that a doctrine of limited election flatly contradicts St. Paul’s teaching in Romans 11 and also requires an utterly fantastic construal of Paul’s statements about all human beings; in Part III, I shall argue that the Augustinians have totally misunderstood Romans 9, in part because they do not interpret this chapter in light of Paul’s own conclusion in Romans 11; and finally, in Part IV, I shall argue that the Augustinian understanding of unconditional election and irresistible grace, unlike the Augustinian understanding of limited election, accurately reflects Paul’s own teaching on the matter.

## PART I: LOVE AND THE NATURE OF GOD

"God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God and God abides in him." (I John 4:16b)

I begin with the declaration in I John 4:8 and 16 that God not only loves, but *is* love. How should we interpret this Johannine declaration? Most Christian philosophers writing today would probably interpret these texts, as I do, to mean that love is part of God's very nature or essence; using philosophical jargon, we might say that, according to these texts, loving-kindness is an *essential* rather than an *accidental* property of God.

The author of I John was not, of course, a philosopher and did not, fortunately, employ philosophical jargon in his writings; nor was he likely even familiar with the philosophical distinction between an essential and an accidental property. But he clearly employed "God" as a proper name (as opposed to a title), the name of a distinct person whom we ought to adore and worship, and he said concerning *this* person that he *is* love. The point, then, hardly seems to be that God just *happens* to love us, as if it were a happy accident that he does; the point seems to be that it is his very nature to love us. In a broadly logical (or metaphysical) sense, it could not have been otherwise.<sup>1</sup> That this is, at the very least, a natural interpretation seems indisputable. Commenting upon I John 4:8, the conservative New Testament scholar, Leon Morris, thus wrote:

*God is love.* This means more than 'God is loving'. It means that God's essential nature is love. He loves, so to speak, not because he finds objects worthy of His

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<sup>1</sup> That is, it is logically impossible that God should *both* create someone *and* fail to act in loving ways towards that person.

love, but because it is His nature to love. His love for us depends not on what we are, but on what He is. He loves us because He is that kind of God.<sup>2</sup>

But this interpretation, which seems to me exactly right, is in fact more controversial than some might expect. Many theologians, most notably some of the Augustinians, reject the idea that loving-kindness is an essential property of God; John Calvin, for example, explicitly considered this idea and explicitly rejected it, as we shall see. And the reason for his rejection is clear: If God freely chooses to make *some* persons, but not *all*, the object of his love and mercy—if, that is, he freely bestows his love and mercy upon a limited elect, as Calvin insisted—then it must be possible for God not to love someone; and if that is so much as possible, then loving-kindness is not one of his essential properties. Unfortunately, not all theologians in the Augustinian tradition are as clear on this point as Calvin himself was (and in the end even Calvin contradicted himself). According to Daniel Strange, for example, “God does not have to love all of humanity... for Him to be love.”<sup>3</sup> But you might as well say: “God does not have to believe all true propositions in order to be omniscient.” If it is so much as possible that God should not believe a true proposition, then omniscience is not one of his essential properties; and similarly, if it is so much as possible that God should not love someone, then love is not one of his essential properties either. So clearly, the question of whether loving kindness is an essential property of God is not merely academic, but goes to the very heart of Augustinian theology. Let us therefore pose a two-fold question: How *do* the Augustinians interpret the Johannine declaration that God is love?—and what, if any, are the exegetical and theological merits of their interpretation?

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<sup>2</sup> D. Guthrie and J. A. Motyer (eds.), *The New Bible Commentary: Revised* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 1267

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Strange, “A Calvinist Response to Talbot’s Universalism” in Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Partridge, *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), p. 157.

### In Search of an Augustinian Interpretation

When I first began to wonder how the proponents of limited election might interpret I John 4:8 and 16, I immediately encountered three difficulties as I began to search for an answer. First, not all the proponents of limited election seem to regard these texts as particularly important. Louis Berkof, for example, wrote an entire systematic theology without citing either of the texts in question;<sup>4</sup> and though Calvin did comment upon them briefly in his commentary on I John, he evidently did not regard them as important enough even to mention in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. When one thinks about it, this is truly astonishing. Calvin's *Institutes* is a monumental work of over 1500 pages; in it he sought to provide an exhaustive summary of Christian doctrine, as he understood it, along with the biblical support for it. In the Westminster Press edition, the index of Bible references alone is 39 pages of small print with three columns per page. And yet, in this entire work, as massive and thorough as it is, Calvin never once found the Johannine declaration that God is love important enough to discuss. How, one wonders, could this have happened? Here is a statement that, to all appearances at least, provides a glimpse into the very nature of the Christian God, and in his *Institutes* Calvin ignored it altogether; he did not even try to explain it away.

A second difficulty I encountered as I began my search was that the proponents of limited election are sometimes inconsistent in the various claims they make. When he contemplated God's relationship with the redeemed in heaven, for example, Jonathan Edwards wrote:

The Apostle tells us that God is love, I John 4:8. And therefore seeing he is an infinite Being, it follows that he is an infinite fountain of love. Seeing he is an all-sufficient Being, it follows that he is a full and overflowing and an inexhaustible

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<sup>4</sup> See Louis Berkof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1931).

fountain of love. Seeing he is an unchangeable and eternal Being, he is an unchangeable and eternal source of love.<sup>5</sup>

Here Edwards said that God is an “infinite,” “overflowing,” “inexhaustible,” “unchangeable,” and “eternal source of love.” But when he contemplated God’s relationship to the damned, Edwards also wrote: “In hell God manifests his being and perfections only in hatred and wrath, and hatred without love.”<sup>6</sup> By “hatred without love,” he evidently had in mind an attitude quite incompatible with love. So how, I ask, are we to reconcile the second quotation with the first? Suppose Edwards had said, in one place, that God’s *righteousness* is “infinite,” “inexhaustible,” “unchangeable,” and “eternal,” and then had said, in another, that God acts towards some people—say, the nonelect—in some expedient way *without righteousness*. That would have posed a similar problem of interpretation. How could God’s righteousness be both infinite and eternal if it is also limited in the sense that he sometimes acts without righteousness? And similarly, one wonders, how could God be an infinite, inexhaustible, overflowing, and eternal source of love if his love is also limited in the sense that he sometimes acts without love? Like Strange, Edwards appears to have embraced a logical inconsistency.

Perhaps the most serious difficulty I encountered, however, was a seemingly intentional kind of subterfuge. Consider how the Reformed theologian, J. I. Packer, interprets I John 4:8 and 16 in his book *Knowing God*.<sup>7</sup> A strong proponent of limited election, Packer in effect asks whether the proposition, *God is love*, expresses “the complete truth about God.” By way of an answer, he juxtaposes two assertions. He begins one section with this italicized sentence as a

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and its Fruits*, reprinted in Paul Ramsey (ed.), *Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 8: Ethical Writings* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 369.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 390.

<sup>7</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), pp. 106-115.

caption: “‘*God is love*’ is not the complete truth about God so far as the Bible is concerned”;<sup>8</sup>

then, three pages later, he begins his next section with this italicized sentence as a caption:

“‘*God is love*’ is the complete truth about God so far as the Christian is concerned.”<sup>9</sup> From the perspective of a Christian who looks to the Bible as an authority, however, these captions are even more perplexing than Edwards’ apparent inconsistency. If the proposition, *God is love*, does not express the complete truth about God so far as the Bible is concerned, but does express the complete truth about God so far as the Christian is concerned, it would seem to follow that either the Bible or the Christian is mistaken. And what, one wonders, does Packer mean by “the complete truth about God” anyway? In a perfectly obvious sense, the proposition, *God is love*, does *not* express the complete truth about God, not if God is also omnipotent and omniscient; but that would be true, I should think, both so far as the Bible is concerned (at least on Packer’s account) and so far as the Christian is concerned. Does Packer really want to say that the Christian’s perspective is different from that of the Bible?

Clearly not. Like Edwards, Packer has simply stumbled over a text that he finds difficult to incorporate into his overall theological perspective. As a close reading of his discussion will reveal, a recognizably consistent pair of theses lie behind the confused forms of expression in the two captions quoted above. The thesis of his second caption is really this: “According to the Bible, God loves the Christian with a perfect form of love”; and the thesis of his first caption is really this: “According to the Bible, God does *not* love *all* human beings with a perfect form of love.” We can show that these are indeed Packer’s theses in the following way. Packer makes two excellent and very profound points. The first concerns the nature of God’s actions: “This is what God does for those he loves—*the best He can*; and the measure of the best that God can do

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 108.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 111.

is omnipotence!”<sup>10</sup> The second concerns a condition of God’s own happiness, which “will not be complete,” says Packer, “till all His beloved ones are finally out of trouble....”<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, Packer leaves us with exactly three possibilities: Either (a) all persons will eventually be reconciled to God, or (b) God’s own happiness will never be complete, or (c) God does not love all created persons. Now Packer clearly rejects both (a) and (b), and that leaves only (c), namely, that God does not love all created persons.

So far as I can tell, moreover, Packer sees all of this clearly, though he fails to make it explicit. His confusing caption—“‘God is love’ is not the complete truth about God so far as the Bible is concerned”—is merely his way of opting for (c) without calling too much attention to it. But in the end, his readers are bound to ask the obvious question: Does the Johannine declaration imply that God loves all persons, or does it not? To this question, Packer can give one of three possible answers: “Yes,” “No,” and “I don’t know.” As we have just seen, the answer he in fact gives is, “No,” but it almost seems as if he recoils from the very answer that he gives. He probably felt a burden to express himself with sensitivity and caution on a difficult matter, lest he put off his readers with a clear statement of his own position. So he ends up trying to conceal his position, even as he articulates it, behind a curtain of ambiguous and confusing language.

### **The Loving Nature of God**

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Augustinians, who restrict God’s love and mercy to a limited elect, really have no clear idea how to handle I John 4:8 and 16. As a further illustration, consider how Calvin flatly contradicted himself when he was forced to say something about these texts, however briefly, in his commentary on I John. He began by observing, correctly,

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 115.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 113.



that the author of I John “takes as granted a general principle or truth, that God is love, that is, that his *nature* [or essence] is to love men” (my emphasis). He then went on to write:

But the meaning of the Apostle is simply this—that as God is the fountain of love, this effect flows from him, and is diffused wherever the knowledge of him comes, as he had at the beginning called him light, because there is nothing dark in him, but on the contrary he illuminates all things by his brightness. Here then he does not speak of the essence [or the nature] of God, but only shows what he is found to be by us [i.e., by the elect].<sup>12</sup>

Having just told us that the Johannine declaration *is* a statement about the nature of God, Calvin went on to provide some additional reasons for taking it so: Just as God is light in the two-fold sense that “there is nothing dark in him” and “he illuminates all things by his brightness,” so God is love in the sense that he is the very source or “fountain of love.” But then, by way of a conclusion that seems to come from nowhere, Calvin flatly contradicted himself and took it all back: In declaring that “God is love,” he concluded, “the Apostle ... does not speak of the essence [or the nature] of God, but only shows what he is found to be by us” [i.e., by the elect]. Nor did Calvin explain himself any further; he simply moved on to other matters.

Though such an explicit contradiction is no doubt bewildering, Calvin's conclusion that “the Apostle...does not speak of the essence [or the nature] of God” remains just what his overall theological perspective requires. It also indicates that he saw more clearly than Packer does exactly where the issue must be joined. The issue is not, as Packer has caricatured it, whether the proposition, *God is love*, expresses the complete truth about God. The issue is whether it expresses a truth about the very nature or essence of God—whether, in other words, it ascribes an

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<sup>12</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), p. 239.

essential property to God. If it does, then God could not possibly fail to love someone or fail to seek anything other than the best for those whom he does love.

Consider now how Packer defends his Calvinistic interpretation of the Johannine declaration. Even as Calvin compared the divine attribute of love with that of light, so Packer points to two other Johannine statements “of exactly similar grammatical form”: “God is light” and “God is spirit”; he then informs us that the “assertion that God is love has to be interpreted in the light of what these other two statements teach....”<sup>13</sup> But these other two Johannine statements unquestionably *are* statements about the essence (or the nature) of God. In I John 1:5, we read that “God is light and in him is no darkness at all.” This is not a declaration to the effect that, by a happy accident, God *happens* to be free from all darkness, all impurity, all unrighteousness; nor is it a declaration that God has *chosen* to remain free from all darkness in his relationship to some fortunate people only. It is instead a declaration about the very essence (or nature) of God. And similarly for the assertion in John 4:24 that God is spirit. As Calvin acknowledged in a comment upon this very passage, “Christ himself calls God in his entirety ‘Spirit’”; and this implies “that the whole essence of God is spiritual, in which are comprehended Father, Son, and Spirit.”<sup>14</sup> But then, if *God is spirit* implies “that the whole essence of God is spiritual,” why should not *God is love* likewise imply that it is God’s very essence (or nature) to love? Packer insists that the latter proposition is a mere “summing up, *from the believer’s standpoint* [my emphasis], of what the whole revelation set forth in Scripture tells us about its author.”<sup>15</sup> But just what is that supposed to mean? Would Packer (or Calvin, for that matter) interpret the statement that God is spirit in the same way? Would he describe this as a mere “summing up, from the believer’s standpoint,” of the revelation about God? Certainly Calvin never described God’s spiri-

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<sup>13</sup> Packer, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

tual nature in this way, and I doubt that Packer would either. He would surely recognize that, given the spiritual nature of God, the expression “from the believer’s standpoint” adds little but confusion. Given Packer’s own principle of interpretation, therefore, we are entitled to conclude that, in Johannine theology at least, God is love in exactly the same sense that he is spirit and is light; that is, it is as impossible for God not to love someone as it is for him to exhibit darkness rather than light.

In at least one place, moreover, Packer seems to acknowledge all of this. For he writes: “To say ‘God *is* light’ is to imply that God’s holiness finds expression in everything that He says and does. Similarly, the statement ‘God *is* love’ means that His love finds expression in everything that He says and does.”<sup>16</sup> But if God’s holiness “finds expression in everything that He says and does,” and his love likewise “finds expression in everything that He says and does,” then in God there is no such thing as a holy act devoid of love or a loving act devoid of holiness. Accordingly, God’s holiness and his love must be, at the very least, logically compatible; and if that is true, then the presence of divine judgment and divine wrath—which are but particular expressions of God’s holiness—would no more imply the absence of God’s purifying love than the presence of his love would imply the absence of his holiness.

One final point. Packer points out, correctly, that “sentimental ideas of His [God’s] love as an indulgent, benevolent softness, divorced from moral standards and concerns, must therefore be ruled out from the start.”<sup>17</sup> But the view that God’s purifying love extends to every person equally in no way entails “an indulgent, benevolent softness.” A father who does nothing when his teen-age son is caught swindling old ladies might be indifferent, but not truly loving; he

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<sup>14</sup> *Institutes*, Bk. I, Ch. XIII, 20.

<sup>15</sup> Packer, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

<sup>16</sup> Packer, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 110.

would have no real regard for the future happiness of his son. And similarly for God: If he should condone our selfishness, our vicious attitudes, our tendency to promote our own interest (as we perceive it) at the expense of others, he would be indifferent, not loving; he would have no real regard for *our* future happiness either. Accordingly, though God's love no doubt does preclude a literal *hatred* of someone and therefore does preclude a final rejection of his loved ones, it does not preclude our *experiencing* that love as punishment, harsh judgment, or even wrath. For if God is love and his purifying love, like a consuming fire (see Hebrews 12:29), is bound to destroy all that is false within us or the very thing we *call* ourselves, then for as long as we cling to the false self we will continue to experience God's love, not as kindness, but as harsh judgment and even wrath. In no other way could God truly be merciful to us.

### **The Paradox of Exclusivism**

Our discussion so far has underscored two points: first, that the Johannine declaration that God is love is without question an assertion about the very essence (or nature) of God, and second, that, so interpreted, this single declaration is utterly inconsistent with any doctrine of limited election. But let us now set these two points aside for a moment, and let us grant, at least for the sake of argument, the possibility that God might not truly love all people. If we grant that assumption, then it may appear as if God is utterly free, as Calvin insisted, to will the good for some, namely the elect, and not to will it for all others.

But the appearance is misleading. If loving-kindness were merely an accidental property of God and not part of his very essence, then it would indeed be possible that, for some sinner *s*, God does not truly love *s*. It would not follow, however, that God could *both* love some person *s\** who also loves *s and*, at the same time, fail to love *s*. It would not follow, for example, that God could *both* love Isaac, who loved his son Esau so dearly, *and*, at the same time, hate Esau in

the sense of willing that Esau should come to a bad end. Nor would it follow that God could *both* love Jacob, who eventually came to love Esau as a brother (see Gen. 33:10), *and* literally hate Esau. To the contrary, even if loving-kindness were not part of God's very essence, God still could not love some persons (the elect) without loving all other persons as well.

Consider first a mere awkwardness in the doctrine of limited election. If God has commanded us to love our families, our neighbors, and even our enemies, as the New Testament consistently affirms, then a doctrine of limited election carries the awkward implication that God hates (or simply fails to love) some of the very ones whom he has commanded us to love. Jesus declared that we are to love our enemies as well as our friends, so that (a) we might be children of our Father in heaven and (b) we might be perfect even as our Father in heaven is perfect (see Matt. 5:43-48); that is, we are to love our enemies because God loves them, and we should be like God in just this respect. So why should God command us to love some of the very ones whom he himself fails to love? The reply that we can never know in this life who are not the objects of God's love may seem to provide a practical reason for loving all, lest we fail to love a true object of God's love. But such an answer hardly accords very well with the words of I John 4:8, "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love."

Though the above paragraph registers a mere awkwardness in the doctrine of limited election, a more substantial puzzle emerges as soon as we ask ourselves how God could possibly love Isaac without loving Esau as well. According to Packer's excellent statement, quoted above: "This is what God does for those he loves—*the best He can*; and the measure of the best that God can do is omnipotence!" So just what is the best that Omnipotence could do for Isaac? Or, to put it another way, what is the nature of the good that God wills for those whom he does love? He no doubt wills that they should achieve happiness of some kind. But just what is the

relevant *kind* of happiness? Let us call it true *blessedness* or, to borrow Richard Swinburne's expression,<sup>18</sup> *supremely worthwhile happiness*. Among the various conditions of such happiness, two are especially relevant for our present purposes. If I should be so unloving as to take pleasure from the misery of others, then whatever pleasure I take from it would be far removed from true blessedness; and if I should remain blissfully ignorant of some tragedy that, if known, would undermine my happiness altogether, then my blissful ignorance would not be worth very much in the end. Accordingly, my happiness will qualify as supremely worthwhile, a form of true blessedness, only when (a) I am (finally) filled with love for all others and (b) no false beliefs or ignorance of any kind are essential to it. If God truly loves (or wills the best for) Isaac, therefore, then he wills that Isaac should achieve true blessedness in the end; he wills, in other words, that Isaac should become the kind of person who loves (or wills the best for) all others including Esau.

Consider next the way in which love, or willing the good for another, binds people's interests together even as it renders them more vulnerable to misery and sorrow. Whenever two people are bound together in love, their purposes and interests, even the conditions of their happiness, are so logically intertwined as to be inseparable. Paul acknowledged this point when he commented concerning his fellow worker Epaphroditus: "He was indeed so ill that he nearly died. But God had mercy upon him, and not only on him but on me also, so that I would not have one sorrow after another" (Phil. 2:27). Given Paul's love for his friend, then, any good that befell his friend would also be a good that befell Paul and any evil that befell his friend would likewise be an evil that befell Paul. It is a point about the logic of love that the New Testament endorses again and again. I John 4:20 thus declares: "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate

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<sup>18</sup> See Richard Swinburne, "A Theodicy of Heaven and Hell," in Alfred J. Freddoso, *The Existence of God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

their brothers and sisters are liars”; they are liars because it is simply not possible to hate those whom God loves and, at the same time, to love God. Or, as Jesus put it in his much misunderstood account of the judgment of nations: “as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren [or loved ones], you did it to me” (Mt. 25:40—RSV). But the reverse is true as well. Just as we cannot love God and hate those whom he loves, neither can God love us and, at the same time, hate (or even fail to love) those whom we love. If I truly love my own daughter, for example, and love her *even as I love myself*, then God cannot love (or will the best for) me unless he also loves (or wills the best for) her. For I am not an isolated monad whose interests are distinct from those of my loved ones, and neither is anyone else. If God should do less than his best for my daughter, therefore, he would also do less than his best for me; and if he should act contrary to her best interest, he would also act contrary to my own.

Calvin seemed to believe, however, that I might at least *experience* God as loving and kind, provided that I am one of the elect, even if God should choose not to love some of my own loved ones. But except in a case of blissful ignorance, which is not true blessedness, how could that be true? Could Isaac, consistent with his love for Esau, both *know* that God refused to love (indeed hated) his beloved son and, at the same time, experience God as loving and kind? Not unless he were somehow mentally deranged. Suppose that in the aftermath of a boating accident my daughter and I should both start floundering in the water, too far apart to be of help to each other; suppose further that a man in another boat could easily rescue both of us, if he should choose to do so; and suppose, finally, that he should choose to rescue me (by throwing me one of several life rings in his possession) even as he permits my daughter to drown. We might imagine him to reason as follows: “If I permit the girl to drown, the man will be even more thankful for his own rescue and will therefore be even more inclined to reward me handsomely.” As twisted as such

“reasoning” surely is, it seems comparable to the following: “If God passes over some sinners and refuses to extend his mercy to them, then the fortunate elect, despite their love for some of the lost, will be even more thankful for the (gratuitous) mercy extended to them and will therefore have even more grounds to praise God for their own undeserved salvation.” Is the latter “reasoning” any better than the former? Clearly not. Unless he were in some way ignorant of God’s attitude, Isaac could no more experience as loving and kind a God who literally hated Esau than I could experience as loving and kind a man who refused to throw a needed life ring to my daughter.

So herein lies a paradox, it seems, at the very heart of Augustinian theology. The idea that God loves some people but not all, that he loves Isaac but not Esau, or that he divides the human race into the elect and the non-elect, is necessarily false. For even if, as Calvin insisted, the proposition, *God is love*, does not express a truth about the essence of God—even if God could have chosen not to love us—he could not choose to love some of us without also choosing to love all of us. That is why Paul, at least, so often spoke in terms of corporate wholes, the most important of which was the human race as a whole; even if it were possible that God should withhold his mercy from the human race as a whole, he must either extend it to the human race as a whole or extend it to no sinful humans at all. The reason, as we have seen, has to do with the inclusive nature of love. For any two people,  $s$  and  $s^*$ , you choose, either a bond of love will exist between them where  $s$  wills the best for  $s^*$ , or it will not. If such a bond does exist, then God cannot will the best for  $s$  without willing the best for  $s^*$  as well. But even if such a bond does *not* exist, God still cannot will the best for  $s$  unless he wills that  $s$  should become the kind of person who is filled with love for, and therefore wills the best for, all others. And God cannot will that  $s$  should become the kind of person who wills the best for all others, I contend, unless



God himself wills the best for them as well. Hence, God cannot love one person unless he loves all others as well.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Sin of Exclusivism**

The argument of the previous section establishes, I believe, that Augustinian exclusivism or the doctrine of limited election entails a logical absurdity. But there is another side to the argument, which I have not yet emphasized, and in expressing this other side I run the risk of offending some who are far more virtuous and far more loving than I. For it does seem to me that a belief in limited election is, in one important sense, an expression of sin or human rebellion. Does this mean that, as I see it, those who accept such a doctrine or think they find it in the Bible are worse sinners than those of us who do not accept it? Of course not. Many deeply engrained and culturally conditioned patterns of thought, like the “us verses them” mentality, may reflect sinful tendencies common to the human race as a whole, and perhaps all of us, at various times in our lives, unknowingly express such sinful tendencies in a variety of different ways.

But in what sense, one may ask, does Augustinian exclusivism express a sinful pattern of thought? It expresses, first of all, a temptation as old as religion itself: the temptation to distinguish between the favored few—to which, of course, we belong—and everyone else. We see the crudest manifestation of this temptation, perhaps, in some of the primitive religions, where people seek the favor of God (or the gods) in an effort to achieve an advantage over their enemies. Here the aim seems to be to possess the tribal god, or at least to pacify him with sacrifices, so that one can control him and even use him as a weapon against one’s enemies. The last thing one may want, at this stage in one’s religious development, is a God whose love and mercy ex-

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<sup>19</sup> For a more rigorous statement of the argument, see my article, “The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment,” *Faith and Philosophy* (January, 1990), pp. 30-34 and endnote 30.

tends to all persons including the members of enemy tribes, and the last commandment one may want to hear is that we must love our enemies as well as our friends.

In no way, however, are such attitudes of exclusivism limited to primitive religion; to the contrary, they are widespread and persistent, and they lie behind some of the most important religious struggles in many different ages. In the Old Testament, no less than in the New, we encounter a prophetic tradition that not only condemns such attitudes, but testifies to their persistence and destructive power. A good early example is the story of Jonah and his refusal to preach to the Ninevites. For according to the story, Jonah's disobedience arose from his hatred of the Ninevites: the fact that he simply did not want them to repent and be saved. When they did repent and the Lord therefore spared their city, Jonah became so angry and distraught that he literally wanted to die:

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord! Is this not what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live" (Jonah 4:1-3).

So great, and so self-destructive, was Jonah's hatred for the Ninevites that he would have preferred to die himself than to see them spared. Consider his whining complaint: "for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." The very thing that should have been his greatest source of hope was transformed by his hatred into a source of despair. But in one respect, at least, he exhibited more insight than some. For as much as he detested—so he thought—God's loving and

merciful nature, he did not try to explain it away; instead, he lashed out at God angrily and asked to die. So perhaps he recognized, on some level of consciousness at least, that what he *thought* he wanted—namely, for God to extend mercy to him, but not to the Ninevites—was a logical impossibility.

Now a doctrine of limited election ultimately reflects attitudes very similar to those of Jonah. For those who accept such a doctrine either sincerely desire that God's mercy should extend to all people, or they do not. If they do, then they are, given their own theology, more merciful than God; and if they do not desire this, then their attitudes are little different from Jonah's in this regard. We thus approach another logical impossibility built right into the very heart of Augustinian theology. So long as I love my daughter as myself, I can neither love God nor worship him unless I at least *believe* that he loves her as well. For my love for God, if genuine, entails, first, that I respect God and approve of his actions, second, that I am grateful to him for what he has done for me, and third, that my will is, on the important issues at least, in conformity with his will. But if I truly love, or desire the best for, my daughter and God does not, then (a) my will is *not* in conformity with God's will in this matter, (b) I could not consistently approve of God's attitude towards my daughter, and (c) neither could I be grateful to him for the harm he is doing to me. Nor is this merely to register a point about my own psychological makeup; the whole thing, I want to suggest, is *logically* impossible. As a matter of logic, either I do not love my daughter *as myself*, or I do not love God with all my heart, or I do not believe that God himself fails to love my own daughter.

Now Jesus issued two great commandments:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto

it. Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets (Matthew 22:37-40—KJV).

If I believe, however sincerely, that God despises (or even just fails to love) some of those neighbors whom Jesus here commanded me to love, then, for as long as I hold that belief, I will be unable to obey *both* commandments. If I approve of a God who fails to love some of my neighbors (even though I know not which ones) and I am grateful for this fact, then I do not truly love or will the best for all of my neighbors; and if I *do* love them, then in the very act of willing the best for them I demonstrate my disapproval of any God who does not likewise will the best for them.

Of course people are not always consistent and do not always see all the implications of their own beliefs; neither do they always believe what they *think* they believe. I have known several people who, after some tragedy or the death of a loved one, discovered that they did not really believe everything they had previously thought they believed. Still, certain beliefs—a racist ideology would be an example—unquestionably do interfere with a person's capacity to love. If a racist is also a Southern gentleman, then he may be very gracious, very loving towards his family and friends, and a person of many good qualities; his demeanor may be utterly different from that of skinheads or members of the American Nazi Party. But for as long as he *truly* believes that he belongs to a superior race or that his black neighbors are less than fully human, his racist ideology will interfere with his capacity for love and will inevitably separate him from some of his neighbors; he cannot, in other words, *both* hold his racist beliefs *and* love his black neighbor as himself. Neither could the first century Jews *both* believe that God restricts his love and mercy to the physical descendants of Abraham *and* love their Gentile neighbors as themselves. And, for similar reasons, neither can those Christians who believe that God has divided the world into the elect, whom he loves, and the non-elect, whom he despises, *both* love their

neighbors even as they love themselves *and*, at the same time, love with all their heart a God who refuses to love some of their own loved ones.

Lest I be misunderstood here, I should perhaps repeat a point made at the beginning of this section. My point is not that exclusivists in theology or even racists are, on balance, worse than anyone else. I presume that, when God finally perfects our love for others, we shall all find that we have had to shed some deeply ingrained beliefs. But the fact is that some beliefs, particularly faulty beliefs about God, do undermine our capacity for love and do separate one person from another. When we finally learn to love our neighbor even as we love ourselves, therefore, we shall find that such beliefs have fallen away from us like the shackles they are.

## **PART II: GOD'S UNRESTRICTED AND UNCONDITIONAL MERCY**

“For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all” (Rom. 11:32).

We have seen so far that the Augustinian understanding of limited election is utterly inconsistent with the loving nature of the Christian God and, in particular, utterly inconsistent with the Johannine declaration that God *is* love. We have also seen that this doctrine is riddled with logical impossibilities in any case. But we have not yet addressed St. Paul's view of the matter or the view of the New Testament in general. So in this part of my essay, I shall argue that the Augustinian understanding of limited election is not only inconsistent, but obviously inconsistent, with the whole thrust of Pauline theology.

Not only did Paul nowhere *embrace* a doctrine of limited election; he was, so I shall argue, a vigorous opponent of this doctrine, which he clearly regarded as heretical. The clarity and power of his explicit and sustained argument against it, moreover, explains why it virtually disappeared from the early church for several centuries until St. Augustine finally revived it in the

early fifth century. Of course Paul combated the specific form that the doctrine had taken in his own day: the idea that God restricts his mercy to a single nation, namely the nation of Israel. He did not address—or try to anticipate—every conceivable form that the heresy might take in the future; he did not specifically discuss, for example, the Augustinian view that restricts God’s mercy to a limited elect drawn from all nations and all classes of people. He did not discuss this view, because he had never heard of it. For his purposes, it was enough to point out that God will save everyone “who calls upon the name of the Lord” (Rom. 10:13) and “everyone who has faith” (Rom. 1:16), whether the person be a Jew or a Greek. But though Paul never discussed Augustine’s particular version of limited election, he did address and explicitly reject the understanding of justice and mercy that underlies it; so in that respect, his doctrine, set forth in Romans 11, that God is merciful to all and merciful even in his severity clearly did rule out the Augustinian view, as we shall see.

### **Are Justice and Mercy Separate and Distinct Attributes of God?**

As the first Christian thinker to endorse a doctrine of limited election, Augustine’s influence over subsequent generations of Christian thinkers was enormous, in part because he set forth a very simple and captivating theological picture. But his simple picture also rests upon a faulty philosophical idea: one that perverts, I believe, the biblical understanding of both God’s loving nature and his sovereignty in the matter of salvation. What the Augustinian picture finally illustrates, therefore, is the power of a faulty philosophical idea, particularly when articulated with skill and conviction, to influence how subsequent generations read the Bible and even what they are able, and not able, to see in it.

So just what was Augustine’s faulty philosophical idea? It was the idea, to which he clung tenaciously in his later life, that justice and mercy are distinct and very different attributes of

God. In the *Enchiridion*, he thus argued that all human beings, by reason of their relationship to Adam, are part of “a corrupt mass”; all of them, the children no less than the adults, therefore *deserve* everlasting punishment. He argued further that God selects from this corrupt mass a limited elect, drawn from all classes and all nations, to which he extends his mercy; having made *them* a special object of his love, he saves them from their sin. The rest God simply leaves in their sin and guilt, and they have, Augustine insisted, no grounds for complaint thereupon. For God merely gives them the punishment they deserve.<sup>20</sup> So the rest are objects of God’s justice, but not his mercy, and that is possible only if justice and mercy are distinct and very different attributes of God.

Such a faulty understanding of justice and mercy is by no means restricted to the Augustinians, however. For in his great epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, John Milton, who clearly rejected any doctrine of limited election, nonetheless described Christ’s willingness to die for our sins this way:

No sooner did thy dear and only Son  
 Perceive thee purpos’d not to doom frail Man  
 So strictly, but much more to pity inclin’d,  
 Hee to appease thy wrath, and end the strife  
 Of Mercy and Justice in thy face discern’d  
 Regardless of the Bliss wherein hee sat  
 Second to thee, offer’d himself to die

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<sup>20</sup> See Augustine, *Enchiridion*, Ch. XXV.

For man's offense.<sup>21</sup>

According to Milton, then, the fall of the human race produced a conflict within the very heart of God, a “strife” between his justice and his mercy, and Christ’s atonement somehow managed to resolve the conflict. Presumably the source of the conflict was this: As a righteous judge, God willed something for the fallen human race that he could not possibly will in his role as a loving father; and as a loving father, he willed something that he could not possibly will in his role as a righteous judge. As a righteous judge, he willed that justice should prevail; and since justice requires retribution for sin, he was quite prepared to punish sin—in hell, for example—without any regard for the sinner’s own good. But as a loving father, he also wanted to forgive sin and to permit his loved ones to escape the terrible punishment they deserved on account of their sin. Hence the strife within the heart of God, and hence the need for an atonement that would appease the wrath of God—that is, satisfy his justice—and put an end to the strife. It is almost as if, according to Milton, Christ died not to effect a cure in us, but to put an end to a bad case of schizophrenia in the Father. That may be a bit of a caricature, but it illustrates the point that, according to Milton and a host of Augustinian theologians, Christ died in order that God might be merciful to sinners without doing violence to his own sense of justice.

It is noteworthy, however, that Augustine’s understanding of justice and mercy flatly contradicts his own commitment to the philosophical doctrine of divine simplicity: the difficult (and, I suspect, finally incoherent) idea that each attribute of God is identical with God himself and with every other attribute of God.<sup>22</sup> But however incoherent the *full* doctrine of divine simplicity

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<sup>21</sup> Bk. III, 403-410.

<sup>22</sup> In *De Trinitate* Augustine thus wrote: “God is truly called in manifold ways, great, good, wise, blessed, true, and whatsoever other thing seems to be said of Him not unworthily: but his greatness is the same as His wisdom; for He is not great by bulk, but by power; and His goodness is the same as His wisdom and greatness, and His truth the same as all those things; and in Him it is not one thing to be blessed, and another to be great, or wise, or true, or good, or in a word to be Himself” (VI, 7). Note, however, that Augustine here identified God’s greatness, not with his love, but with



may be—and we can simply let the proverbial chips fall where they may on that issue—the idea that God’s *moral nature* is simple seems to me both coherent and very profound. According to this idea, God’s love is identical with his mercy, which is identical with his justice, which is identical with his holiness, which is identical with his righteousness, etc. So how, one wonders, could Augustine accept *both* this kind of identity, which his own doctrine of divine simplicity also implies, *and* a doctrine of limited election? If God’s justice and mercy are identical attributes and the non-elect are an object of his justice, then they are an object of his mercy as well; and beyond that, God’s justice must be every bit as forgiving as his mercy and his mercy every bit as severe as his justice.

In the case of Augustine, it is possible that, after embracing a doctrine of limited election, he simply changed his mind on the matter divine simplicity. But a more recent Augustinian, Daniel Strange, embraces both limited election and divine simplicity in the context of the very same essay!<sup>23</sup>—an incoherent combination, if ever there was one. Consider again Strange’s curious assertion, quoted above, that “God does not have to love all of humanity...for Him to *be* love.” Would Strange make a similar claim about God’s justice? Would he say that God does not have to treat all people justly in order to be just? I doubt it. But given the doctrine of divine simplicity, God is perfectly just in his treatment of all people only if he is perfectly loving, perfectly compassionate, and perfectly merciful in his treatment of them all as well. So if God is not perfectly loving, perfectly compassionate, and perfectly merciful in his treatment of the non-elect, then he is not perfectly just in his treatment of them either.

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his *power*, and Augustine also identified God’s goodness with his greatness; Augustine thus seems to have reduced everything to mere power. It seems to me, however, that one can defend a doctrine of absolute simplicity *and* be faithful to the biblical witness only if one identifies God’s power as the creative and transforming power of love.

<sup>23</sup> See Strange, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

Clearly, then, no proponent of limited election can consistently accept a doctrine of divine simplicity or consistently agree with George MacDonald, who once wrote: “I believe that justice and mercy are simply one and the same thing: without justice to the full there can be no mercy, and without mercy to the full there can be no justice....”<sup>24</sup> Neither, therefore, can a proponent of limited election accept Paul’s clear and explicit argument in Romans 11 that all of God’s actions—even his severity towards the disobedient—are, in the end, an expression of his boundless mercy.

### **Romans 11: An Explicit Argument Against Limited Election**

The argument of Romans 11 is exquisitely simple. God is merciful to all; therefore, the doctrine of limited election is false. What we encounter here is a glorious vision of mercy without limit of any kind—a severe mercy, perhaps, but mercy nonetheless. For even in the case of the disobedient, those who have refused to call upon the name of the Lord, Paul insisted that God permits their disobedience and permits them to stumble only for the purpose of being merciful to them. In verse 7 Paul thus wrote: “What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened” (or blinded). He then explicitly asked whether God’s severity towards these unbelievers—the hardening of their hearts, for example—implied an ultimate rejection of them: “have they [the non-remnant who were cut off and hardened] stumbled so as to fall?” (vs. 11). “Is this a doctrine of limited election?” he in effect asked. And his reply was most emphatic: “By no means!” Are there limits of any kind to God’s mercy? By no means!

It seems as if the proponents of limited election inevitably stumble and fall themselves whenever they confront Paul’s devastatingly simple answer to his own simple question. Accord-

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<sup>24</sup> George MacDonald, “Justice” in Rolland Hein (ed.), *Creation in Christ* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1976), p, 77.

ing to John Piper, for example, the hardening of which Paul spoke in verse 7 “is a condition that leaves part of Israel unresponsive to the gospel and so excludes them from salvation....”<sup>25</sup> Excludes them from salvation? Would that be forever or just temporarily? If Piper means only that the non-remnant Jews were excluded from salvation temporarily, then they were no different, in that respect, from Paul himself. For Paul was also unresponsive to the gospel, and was even a religious terrorist, before he finally repented and became reconciled to God on the road to Damascus. If Piper means, however, that the non-remnant Jews were excluded from salvation forever—and the whole thrust of his argument suggests that this is indeed his meaning—then he has flatly contradicted Paul’s own words in verse 11. For as John Murray has pointed out, the construction at the beginning of verse 11 (translated “So I ask”) “is Paul’s way of introducing a question intended to obviate a conclusion which might seem to follow from what precedes.”<sup>26</sup> It is almost as if Paul had said, in other words, “Don’t make the mistake of interpreting my previous remark in the way that John Piper does, that is, in a way that implies ultimate rejection.” So how does Piper square his interpretation of verse 7 with Paul’s own clarification in verse 11? Well, he never mentions verse 11, at least not in the work where he gives the above interpretation of verse 7. And when challenged in another context with Paul’s explicit claim that those who had stumbled, according to verse 7, did not stumble so as to fall (with ultimate consequences), Piper replied as follows: “Notice that this [i.e., the “they” in verse 11] is not a reference to all Jews, but to Israel as a corporate whole conceived of as an entity that endures from generation to generation made up of different individuals from time to time.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), p. 158.

<sup>26</sup> John Murray, *Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, vol. II (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1960), p. 75, n.18.

<sup>27</sup> John Piper, “Universalism in Romans 9-11? Testing the Exegesis of Thomas Talbott,” *The Reformed Journal*, Vol. 33, Issue 7, p. 12.

But that could not possibly be right, because in verse 7 Paul had already distinguished between three groups of people: Israel or the nation as a corporate whole, “the elect” or the faithful remnant, and “the rest,” that is, the non-remnant Jews who were hardened. Now the antecedent of “they” in verse 11 could not possibly be the faithful remnant; they are not the ones who stumbled and were hardened. Nor could it be the nation as a corporate whole, for Paul had just distinguished between two groups within that corporate whole: the faithful remnant who did not stumble and were not hardened, and “the rest” who did stumble and were hardened. Accordingly, the antecedent of “they” in verse 11 must be “the rest,” the non-remnant Jews or the very ones whom God had hardened. Even the Reformed New Testament scholar, John Murray, admitted this when he asked: “Is not the denotation of those in view [in verse 11] the same as those mentioned in verse 7: ‘the rest were hardened’? And is not Paul thinking here of those in verse 22: ‘toward them that fell, severity’?”<sup>28</sup> The answers are, “Yes” and “Yes.” But somehow Murray failed to draw the obvious conclusion that “they” (i.e., the non-remnant Jews) did not fall with ultimate consequences and therefore were not excluded from salvation. Perhaps, like many others, Murray was simply unable to fathom the idea that in Paul’s scheme of things God’s severity, even the hardening of a heart, is itself an expression of mercy; Murray therefore insisted, even as Piper does, that “those who stumbled did fall with ultimate consequences.” But that could not possibly be right either. For the “denotation of those” mentioned in verse 11 is not only “the same as those mentioned in verse 7”; it is also the same as those mentioned in verse 12, that is, those whose “full inclusion” will mean so much more than the stumble that made their full inclusion possible. In Paul’s own words: “Now if their stumbling means riches for the world, and if their defeat means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!” And again: “For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their ac-

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<sup>28</sup> Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

ceptance be but life from the dead!” (v.15). Throughout the entire chapter Paul was talking about the unbelieving Jews (“the rest”), and throughout the entire chapter his third person plural pronouns consistently refer back to the unbelieving Jews and not to Israel as a corporate whole.

Now Paul fully appreciated, it seems, the radical nature of his thesis that God’s severity, no less than his kindness, is an expression of mercy; he fully appreciated that his readers would find such a teaching, which is so foreign to our ordinary ways of thinking about justice and mercy, hard to understand and therefore hard to accept. To forestall the anticipated objections, therefore, he in effect warned his readers to be wary of their normal ways of thinking and told them not to regard themselves as wiser than they are (v.25) in the face of a fundamental mystery, which is this: “a hardening has come upon part of Israel,” he said, “until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved” (vs. 25-26). God may have hardened part of Israel, but he did so, Paul insisted, as a means of saving all of Israel and all of Israel *including those who were hardened*. And lest a reader still miss the point, Paul repeated it one more time with an absolutely explicit statement: Though the unbelieving Jews were in some sense “enemies of God” (verse 28), they nonetheless became “disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy” (11:31-NIV). You simply cannot get any more explicit than that. But though Paul’s *specific* point about his disobedient kin was glorious enough, the general principle (of which the specific point is but an instance) was even more glorious yet: “For God has imprisoned *all* in disobedience so that he may be merciful to *all*” (11:32—my emphasis).

The message of Romans 11, then, is that God is always and everywhere merciful, even as he is always and everywhere righteous. His rejection of a sinner, if we can call it that, is always temporary and always serves an overriding redemptive purpose; even when he shuts people up to their disobedience—blinding their eyes, hardening their hearts, or cutting them off for a sea-

son—he does so as an expression of his mercy or compassion for them. Nor can one counter this glorious message by insisting, as so many have, that Paul’s “all Israel” in 11:26 does not include, for example, Israelites who have already died. For though I think that this is quite mistaken,<sup>29</sup> I am not here presenting Romans 11 as a complete argument for universalism. I am instead presenting it as Paul’s argument against limited election, against the idea that God sometimes acts righteously but without mercy or compassion, as if that were even a logical possibility. For whether or not sinners are free to reject God forever, God himself never rejects anyone. In that respect, the central claim of Romans 11 is in perfect agreement with Lamentations 3:22 & 3:31-32: “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.” The God described here is not one who restricts his mercy and compassion to a chosen few.

Consider, finally, two important features of Romans 11:32. First, Paul’s use of “For” (“gar”) shows that verse 32 is not, as some have supposed, a mere summary of verses 30 and 31; nor is it a mere summary of anything else in the chapter. As the grand finale of Paul’s theological essay, verse 32 makes a general claim that grounds or explains several specific points made in the chapter. As an illustration, suppose that I should say something like the following: “You know, Hollywood stars, however highly they may think of themselves, are mere mortals in the end, and the same is true of sports heroes and famous politicians. For, however highly they may think of themselves, all humans are mere mortals.” Here it is obvious that my claim about all

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<sup>29</sup> As Jan Bonda has put it: “The only argument adduced against this view [that Paul literally had in mind all Israel] is that the dead are excluded from this number. But this exclusion wreaks havoc with the interpretation of Romans 11:26a. . . . It denies that God’s redemption in Christ includes all generations since Adam, while this is precisely the point Paul wants to make. If we grasp that, then we know that if all Israel will be saved, this will include all Israelites who have died’ [Jan Bonda, *The One Purpose of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Company, 1998), p. 184. See also footnote 28 on p. 184].

humans is not a mere summary of my several claims about Hollywood stars, sports heroes, and famous politicians; nor do these specific instances of my generalization provide an excuse for denying that it also applies, for example, to schizophrenics with delusions of immortality. And similarly for Paul's general claim in 11:32: Why is it, according to Paul, that the non-remnant Jews who stumbled did not stumble so as to fall with ultimate consequences? Because God is merciful to all. Why was the hardening that came upon part of Israel destined to be but one contributing factor in the salvation of all Israel? Because God is merciful to all. Why did Paul's unbelieving kin become "disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy"? Because God is merciful to all. "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!" (11:33).

Second, the parallel structure of 11:32, so typical of Paul, should eliminate any possibility of ambiguity. For the whole point of such a parallel structure is for the first "all" to determine the reference of the second. And it is simply inconceivable, to my mind at least, that Paul had here forgotten, or simply did not have clearly in view, the whole thrust of his teaching throughout his letter that each and every human being, with the one exception of Jesus Christ, has been shut up to disobedience.<sup>30</sup> It is likewise inconceivable, therefore, that Paul did not mean to say what his sentence in fact does say, which is that God is merciful to each and every human being. As I have expressed the point elsewhere:

According to Paul, the *very ones* whom God 'shuts up' to disobedience—whom he 'blinds', or 'hardens', or 'cuts off' for a season—are those to whom he is merciful; his former act is but the first expression of the latter, and the latter is the goal and the *purpose* of the former. God hardens a heart in order to produce, in the end, a contrite spirit, blinds those who are unready for the truth in order to bring them ul-

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<sup>30</sup> But see Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 103, for an example of someone who claims that, even if Paul did not literally forget the whole thrust of his previous teaching on this matter, neither did he here have it in view.

timately to the truth, ‘imprisons all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.’<sup>31</sup>

### When “All” Really Means *All*

A remarkable feature of the standard Augustinian exegesis of the Bible is how often “all” arbitrarily becomes *some*, and Augustine’s own explanation of I Timothy 2:4, where we read that God wills or “desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth,” illustrates the point nicely. Though the meaning of this text seems clear and straightforward, here is how Augustine tried to explain it away:

The word concerning God, “who will have all men to be saved,” does not mean that there is no one whose salvation he doth not will . . . but by “all men” we are to understand the whole of mankind, in every single group into which it can be divided.... For from which of these groups doth not God will that *some* men from every nation should be saved through his only-begotten Son our Lord?<sup>32</sup>

So it is not God’s will, said Augustine, to save every individual from every group and every nation; it is merely God’s will to save all kinds of people, that is, *some* individuals from every group and every nation.

But why should anyone accept such an interpretation as that? In support of it, Augustine pointed to the context, which singles out a specific group of people—not several groups, mind you, but a single group—for special mention. Though we should pray for all people (2:1), the text specifically mentions “kings and all who are in high positions” (2:2). Seizing upon this reference, Augustine argued that God wills salvation only for the elect, only for some persons from all groups: “kings and subjects; nobility and plebeians; the high and the low; the learned and the

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<sup>31</sup> Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Partridge (eds.), *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), p. 34.



unlearned; the healthy and the sick; the bright, the dull, and the stupid,” etc.<sup>33</sup> But that will never do. For the text explains exactly why “kings and all who are in high places” are singled out for special mention. We should pray for those in positions of authority, it says, so that “we may lead a quiet and peaceable life” (2:2). The mere fact that the text provides a special (and quite understandable) reason why we should pray specifically for those whose job it is to keep the peace—the kind of prayer, incidentally, that one can hear almost any Sunday in some churches—hardly justifies Augustine’s contention that “all humans” really means “some humans from all classes and all nations.”

The text goes on to specify a second reason why we should pray for all; we should do so because “Christ Jesus, himself human...gave himself a ransom for all” (2:5). The full passage (2:1-2:7) thus includes three references in sequence to all humans. We are to pray for all humans (2:1), first, because God wills or desires the salvation of them all (2:4), and second, because Jesus Christ gave himself as a ransom for them all (2:5). Now the “all humans” in 2:1 could not possibly be limited to some from all classes and all nations. For even if one should accept a doctrine of limited election and should hold that the reason we are to pray for all people is that we have no way of knowing who is elect and who is not, it would still be true that, according to our text, we are to pray for all people, not just some of them. So unless one supposes, in the absence of any grammatical or textual evidence at all, a shift of reference in the text, the “all” whose salvation God sincerely desires includes everyone for whom we are to pray, and the “all” for whom Jesus gave himself as a ransom includes everyone whose salvation God sincerely desires. In the words of the New Testament scholar, Luke Johnson: “As the one God wills the salvation of all,

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<sup>32</sup> *Enchiridion*, Ch. XXVII.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

the one mediator gives himself for all.”<sup>34</sup> No other interpretation is even remotely plausible. The Arminians can rightly deny that, taken by itself, I Timothy 2:1-7 entails universalism, because the text leaves open the question of whether God’s desire for the salvation of all will ever be satisfied. But the Augustinian interpretation requires that we simply ignore what is right there before our eyes.

When we turn, furthermore, to a theological context such as Romans 5:12-21, where Paul identified his reference class with great clarity, we discover just how carefully he sometimes used the expression “all humans” (or more literally “all men”). For here Paul made it abundantly clear that, when he spoke of all humans, he had in mind the whole mass of humanity with only two possible exceptions: the first and the second Adam. And he excluded the second Adam, or Jesus Christ, from his “all humans” for several obvious reasons: First, he did not think of Jesus as merely human—*fully* human, perhaps, but not *merely* human; second, he did not think of Jesus as a sinner, and in 5:12 he identified his reference class as all humans *who have sinned*; and third, for the very reason that he did think of Jesus as the savior of all, he did not include Jesus among the “all” who are being saved. But in Romans 5, at least, Paul also seems to have excluded the first Adam from his “all humans.” For in 5:14 he distinguished Adam, who first sinned and brought doom upon the entire human race, from those whose sins had a less profound effect upon the human race as a whole; he also called Adam a “type” of Jesus Christ or of “the one who was to come,” and he did so to indicate that Adam and Jesus Christ stand in an analogous relationship to the whole of humanity. So in that sense he distinguished both Adams from his “all humans” or the whole of humanity.<sup>35</sup> And in 5:15 he continued to contrast “the one” and

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<sup>34</sup> L.T. Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (New York: Anchor Bible, Doubleday, 2001), p. 197.

<sup>35</sup> This in no way implies, of course, that Adam was excluded from salvation. He was excluded from Paul’s “all humans” only by reason of the analogy between the first and the second Adam. But Jesus and Jesus alone was excluded from both the class of sinners and the class of redeemed sinners.

“the many” in two instances: In the first, Adam is “the one” who stands in a special relationship to “the many” or the whole of humanity; in the second, Jesus Christ is “the one” who stands in a special relationship to “the many” or the whole of humanity. As Paul himself put it in 5:15: “if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!” (NIV). So insofar as Adam brought doom upon the human race as a whole and Jesus Christ undid the doom and restored the human race to life, neither of them was strictly in view when Paul spoke of “all humans,” which included all the merely human and sinful descendants of Adam.

It is absolutely clear, then, that in Romans 5 Paul employed the two expressions “all humans” and “the many” to pick out exactly the same group of individuals. As John Murray has pointed out:

When Paul uses the expression “the many”, he is not intending to delimit the denotation. The scope of “the many” must be the same as the “all men” of verses 12 and 18. He uses “the many” here, as in verse 19, for the purpose of contrasting more effectively “the one” and “the many”, singularity and plurality—it was the trespass of “the one”, . . . but “the many” died as a result.<sup>36</sup>

Similarly, it was the righteous act of “the one,” but “the many” are granted justification and life as a result. In order to eliminate any possibility of ambiguity, moreover, Paul then employed one of his favorite devices in verses 18 and 19: a parallel structure and a “just as . . . so also” construction:

Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all [humans], so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for [them] all. For just as

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<sup>36</sup> John Murray, *Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, Vol. I (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1960), pp. 192-193.

by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Given such a parallel structure, it is simply inconceivable, to my mind at least, that Paul intended to shift reference within the context of a single sentence. He could easily have written: "Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all humans, so also one man's act of righteousness brings justification and life to some of them, or to all of the specially favored, or to some people from all nations and classes." But Paul used every grammatical device he could think of to avoid this kind of misinterpretation. The whole point of his parallel structure and the "just as...so also" construction was to make two parallel statements about exactly the same group of individuals; the whole point was that *all of those* who are subject to condemnation, as a result of Adam's sin, are also the beneficiaries of Christ's act of righteousness. Mind you, I am not, at this point, presenting Romans 5:18 as an explicit statement of universalism; I am claiming only that you cannot escape a universalistic interpretation by insisting that the second "all" is restricted in a way that the first is not. For Paul intentionally constructed his sentence in a way that would make it obvious that both instances of "all" pick out exactly the same group of individuals.

But the specter of universalism no doubt explains why so many strive so mightily to explain away the clear sense of the text. According to Douglas J. Moo, for example, "Paul's point [in verses 18 and 19] is not so much that the groups affected by Christ and Adams, respectively, are coextensive, but that Christ affects those who are his just as certainly as Adam does those who are his."<sup>37</sup> In support of this widespread contention, Moo appeals to Paul's use of "all" in

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<sup>37</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), p. 343.

other contexts.<sup>38</sup> “That ‘all’ does not always mean ‘every single human being,’” he writes, “is clear from many passages, it often being clearly limited in context (cf., e.g., Rom. 8:32; 12:17, 18; 14:2; 16:19)”; hence, there is “no linguistic barrier,” he concludes, to supposing that the second “all humans” is more restrictive than the first.<sup>39</sup> But in fact there are very serious “linguistic barriers” to Moo’s interpretation, most notably the parallel structure of Paul’s sentence and the care with which he distinguished between “the one” and “the many” with respect to his “all humans.” Nor do any of Moo’s references have the slightest relevance to these “linguistic barriers.” We can certainly agree with him that in neither Paul nor any other author does “all” always mean “every single human being”; in the statement, “All rocks have weight,” for example, “all” obviously does not mean “every single human being.” And if this seems like a rather cutesy remark, I would point out that in two of Moo’s cited examples, Romans 14:2 and 8:32, the relevant reference class is not even that of human beings! Consider Romans 14:2, where the unstated reference class is that of *edible foods*:<sup>40</sup> Whereas some, Paul in effect said, believe in eating all edible foods, both meat and vegetables, others believe in eating vegetables only. More often than not, the reason that an implicit reference class, such as edible foods, is left unstated is as familiar as it is simple: When the context already makes a reference class clear, it is simply not necessary to state it explicitly. Not even Romans 3:23, where Paul declared that all have sinned, explicitly identifies the relevant reference class of human beings. Following Moo’s strategy, therefore, one could always contend that even in Romans 3:23 “all” is “limited in context,” because neither dogs nor birds nor unfallen angels have in fact sinned. It is a neat trick:

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<sup>38</sup> In support of his claim that the second “all humans” in 5:18 is more restrictive than the first, Moo also appeals to Paul’s consistent emphasis on the necessity of faith and belief and to his reference in 5:17 to “those receiving the abundance of grace.” But this is more relevant to the question of whether 5:18 teaches universalism than it is to the question of whether Jesus did something on behalf of all humans or the human race as a whole. In any event, see Part IV for a further discussion of this matter.

<sup>39</sup> Moo, *op. cit.*, pp. 343-344

First misidentify a reference class; then, argue that “all” is “limited in context” because it does not refer to each and every member of your misidentified reference class.

Moo’s strategy of citing uses of “all” outside the context of Romans 5:18, though misguided in my opinion, is in fact widely employed. But at least Moo restricts himself to Pauline references. Others, such as Loraine Boettner, seem to have ranged far and wide in search of ambiguous contexts, such as often arise in the gospel narratives, where “all” is used rather loosely and not quite accurately. In almost any body of literature, one would expect to find contexts of many different kinds: poetic contexts (“My darling, you mean everything (or all things) to me”), narrative contexts (“Last year, the Portland Trailblazers disappointed all of Oregon”), and contexts of both hyperbole and exaggeration. When Jesus told his disciples, “You will be hated by all because of my name” (Luke 21:17), we understand that this “all” did not include John’s hating Peter or, sillier still, Peter’s hating Peter. According to Boettner, “In some fifty places throughout the New Testament the words ‘all’ and ‘every’ are used in a limited sense” (by which he means, I suppose, that they are used rather loosely);<sup>41</sup> and though some of Boettner’s examples strike me as confused, we can let that pass. For none of his examples are lifted from contexts in which Paul was discussing theological doctrine, and many are lifted from the gospel narratives and the words of Jesus, which is just where one would expect to find lots of hyperbole and many rather loose uses of “all.” So how, one is entitled to ask, are examples drawn from such contexts as these even relevant to Romans 5:18 or to any of Paul’s other statements about all humans?

As an illustration of just how faulty the Moo/Boettner strategy is, suppose that a future racist society should come to regard our country’s Declaration of Independence as a sacred docu-

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<sup>40</sup> Because Paul was no doubt opposed to cannibalism, a more accurate statement of his reference class would be that it includes all edible non-human flesh and vegetables.

ment, and suppose further that some scholars in this society, being determined to explain away the statement, “All men are created equal,” should scour other letters and documents of the time in order to find instances where “all” is used rather loosely. We might suppose that they find “some fifty places,” perhaps in some narratives of the Revolutionary War, where “the words ‘all’ and ‘every’ are used in a limited sense” (whatever, exactly, that unclear expression might mean). Would this have any bearing on the meaning of “all men” in the statement, “All men are created equal,” as it appears in the Declaration of Independence? It is hard to see why it should. And it is no less hard to see how the Moo/Boettner strategy is even relevant to the correct interpretation of Romans 5:18 or any other universalistic text in Paul.

When examining the use of “all” in any text, it is always critical to distinguish between two very different sorts of contexts: those where “all” is combined with a relevant noun, which either explicitly fixes or helps to fix the reference class, and those where it is not combined with a relevant noun. In the latter contexts, it is up to the reader to identify the reference class accurately—which, in the case of Paul’s letters, is rarely a difficult task. For whenever Paul used “all” in the context of some theological discourse, he seems always to have had in mind a clear reference class, stated or unstated, and he referred distributively to every member of that class. When he said that God “accomplishes *all* things according to his counsel and will” (Ephesians 1:11), he did not, it is true, literally have in mind everything, including numbers and propositions and sets of properties; he had in mind every *event*. Everything that happens in the world, he was claiming, falls under God’s providential control. And similarly for his remark that “*all* things work together for good to them that love God” (Romans 8:28—KJV); here he meant not just *some* events, but *all* events. Or again, when Paul asserted that “God has put *all* things in subjection” to Christ (I Corinthians 15:27), he clearly had in mind all *created* things; and so, as he pointed out

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<sup>41</sup> Loraine Boettner, *Studies in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1947), p. 321.

himself, this does not include the Father (15:28). But it does include every member of the class he had in mind. Indeed, I have been unable to find a single example, drawn from Paul's theological writings, in which he made a universal statement and the scope of its reference was unduly fuzzy or less than clear. Paul's writing may be cumbersome at times, but he was not nearly as sloppy a writer (or a thinker) as some of his commentators, in their zeal to interpret him for us, would make him out to be.

Beyond that, Paul never spoke of the human race as a whole, at least not in a context of doctrinal exposition, in a way that omitted anyone—except, perhaps, the first and the second Adam. And even if he had spoken rather loosely in some contexts, that would have had no relevance to those contexts, such as Romans 5:18, Romans 11:32, and I Corinthians 15:22, where he employed special grammatical devices for the very purpose of eliminating all ambiguity. Nor is there a single shred of evidence that by “all” Paul ever meant “some” or that by “all humans” he ever meant “some humans from all classes.” And because he explicitly stated that God is merciful to all and merciful even in his severity, he also explicitly rejected any view that would restrict God's mercy to a limited elect.

### **PART III: UNDERSTANDING ROMANS 9**

“I will have mercy on whom I have mercy,  
and I will have compassion on whom I have  
compassion” (Rom. 9:15).

Romans 9-11 is a sustained theological discourse in which Paul took up the problem of Jewish unbelief and systematically defended his thesis that God has every right to extend his mercy to all the descendants of Adam including Gentiles. The body of discussion is sandwiched between Paul's expression of “great sorrow and unceasing anguish” in 9:2 and his expression of



great joy and wonder at the end of chapter 11. So just what transformed Paul's "unceasing anguish" over the condition of his unbelieving kin into ecstatic praise at the end of chapter 11?

Was it not precisely the message of chapter 11?

As something of an aside, I would point out that in Romans 9-11 we encounter a literary structure very much like that of a fairytale. Essential to any good fairytale, according to J.R.R. Tolkien, is the "sudden joyous 'turn'" and the consolation it brings. A good fairytale thus "denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat...[thereby] giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief."<sup>42</sup> In a similar vein, Paul's discourse in Romans 9-11 begins with "unceasing anguish" and the *apparent* "dark side of any doctrine of election," as the New Testament scholar, James Dunn, has called it.<sup>43</sup> The apparent darkness many seem to include God's supposed hatred and rejection of Esau, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, and a lot of "orc-talk" about how Paul's beloved kin are little more than "vessels of wrath fit for destruction." No wonder the discourse begins with "unceasing anguish!" But then comes the sudden joyous turn at the end of chapter 11. We learn that we have misconstrued the whole story, and we finally begin to penetrate the glorious eschatological mystery behind it all: how rejection is always temporary and always serves a merciful purpose, how even the hardening of a heart is an expression of mercy, and how the election of one, such as Jacob, is always on behalf of all others, including Esau. As James Dunn has correctly summarized the point: "God hardens some in order to save all; he confines all to disobedience in order to show

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<sup>42</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories" in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), p. 68.

<sup>43</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), p. 511.

mercy to all.”<sup>44</sup> So all is grace and mercy in the end, and no lesser vision could have transformed Paul’s “unceasing anguish” into his ecstatic praise of God at the end of chapter 11.

My point is that we must allow the glorious eschatological vision at the end of our “fairy-tale” to reshape our understanding of the whole story, and that is only a sound exegetical procedure anyway: It would be exegetically irresponsible not to interpret the early stages of Paul’s argument, as developed in chapter 9, in light of Paul’s own conclusion in chapter 11. But it sometimes seems as if the Augustinians stop reading, either literally or metaphorically, around 9:24 or so. In the *Enchiridion*, for example, Augustine set forth a summary of Christian doctrine, as he understood it; and though his summary is saturated with quotations from Romans 9, it contains not a single reference to Romans 11, which he evidently regarded as less essential than Romans 9 to Paul’s understanding of divine mercy. I find this truly astonishing, sort of like Calvin’s failure in the *Institutes* even to mention the Johannine declaration that God is love. No less astonishing to me is that John Piper could write an entire book on Romans 9:1-23 without ever citing either Romans 11:11 or 11:32. The implication of such omissions is that these texts have no relevance to a correct interpretation of Romans 9. But the issue of their *relevance* should be utterly non-controversial, because it is simply not possible that God should *both* refuse to extend his mercy to Esau *and*, at the same time, extend it to all, as 11:32 at least *appears* to say he does. So how can Piper give a responsible interpretation of Romans 9 without even mentioning a text that functions as the conclusion of Paul’s argument and at least *appears* to contradict Piper’s own interpretation?

Be all of that as it may, I shall now argue that the real message of Romans 9 is just the opposite of what the Augustinians have claimed it to be.

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<sup>44</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 38b: *Romans 9-16* (Dallas: Word Books, Publisher, 1988), p. 696.

### St. Paul's Inclusive Understanding of Election

In Romans 9:6 Paul insisted that the widespread unbelief among his Jewish kin carried no implication that “the word of God had failed”; and when he spoke of God’s “purpose in election” (v.11—NIV) and how it continued through the choice of Jacob “not by works but by his call” (v.12), his implication was again that this “purpose in election” had not failed. But just what did he mean by “God’s purpose in election?”

Based upon Ephesians 1:9-10, we can say that God’s purpose in election expresses his eternal “good pleasure”; it is simply his decretive will, as the Augustinians often call it, “a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth.” Given the close association and similarity of structure between Ephesians 1:10 and Colossians 1:20, we can also infer that “this plan to gather up all things” in Christ is a plan to reconcile all people to God through Christ. For as Colossians 1:19-20 explicitly states, “God was pleased [i.e., it was God’s good pleasure<sup>45</sup>] to reconcile to himself [through Christ] all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (NIV). In view of the stress that the Augustinians typically place on God’s “good pleasure” or decretive will, they would do well, I believe, to place an equal stress on texts, such as Ephesians 1:20 and Colossians 1:20, that tell us exactly what God’s good pleasure or decretive will or purpose in election is. In the latter text Paul applied the concept of reconciliation, which is explicitly a redemptive concept, to the entire creation; he also specifically associated this reconciliation with the peace that the blood of the cross brings and specifically cited his own readers (v.21) as examples of the kind of reconciliation he had in mind. Without question, therefore,

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<sup>45</sup> The difference between saying “God was pleased to reconcile...” and saying “it was God’s good pleasure to reconcile...” is like the difference between saying “I desire to do such and such” and saying “I have a desire to do such and such.”

he had in mind the reconciliation of all people in the full redemptive and restorative sense.<sup>46</sup>

God’s “good pleasure” or decretive will, in other words, is precisely his loving will to be merciful to all (Rom. 11:32), to reconcile the entire world (or all of humanity) to himself (2 Cor. 5:19), and to achieve this end through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But if that is true, if it is God’s “good pleasure” or “purpose in election” to reconcile all of humanity to himself, why the initial *appearance* of exclusion in Romans 9? Why the division between Isaac and Ishmael, between Jacob and Esau, and between “the children of the flesh” and “the children of the promise”? There is, I believe, a relatively simple explanation. Paul normally spoke of an all-encompassing election *in Christ*; in Ephesians 1, for example, he asserted merely that God chose “us”—not one person rather than another (e.g., Isaac rather than Ishmael), but simply *us*—“in Christ before the foundation of the world” (1:4). And this predestined “us” in no way *requires* a rejected “them.” But at the beginning of Romans 9, Paul’s interest was more historical, as he wrestled with the meaning of Jewish unbelief. Among the many advantages that belong to the Israelites, he listed these two: “Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all” (9:5—NIV). He then went on to review<sup>47</sup> some early (and utterly familiar) Jewish history: how Israel had come into being as a nation in the two generations following Abraham, and how the line of descent from Abraham to Jesus had begun with the election of Isaac and Jacob. One could hardly overemphasize, moreover, the importance that Paul placed on this idea that Jesus Christ was the promised offspring (or seed) of Abraham. In his letter to the Galatians, he had earlier written: “Now the promises were

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<sup>46</sup> For why the reconciliation of which Paul speaks in Colossians 1:20 is not a mere subjugation of hostile powers, see my remarks in Parry and Partridge, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-25.

<sup>47</sup> Romans 9:5 is, of course, the conclusion of the opening section in this theological discourse. But a point that James Dunn makes concerning the transition from 9:13 to 9:14 is also relevant here: “As so often with Paul the conclusion to a section...serves also as introduction to the next section [Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 38b: *Romans 9-16* (Dallas: Word Books, Publisher, 1988), p. 538].

made to Abraham and to his offspring; it does not say ‘And to offsprings,’ as of many; but it says, ‘And to your offspring,’ that is, to one person, who is Christ” (Gal. 3:16). In Romans 9, however, the emergence of Israel as a nation and the line of descent between Abraham and his seed, namely Jesus Christ, was the focal point of his attention. That line of descent could not possibly have passed through both Isaac and Ishmael, and neither could it have passed through both Jacob and Esau.

In the relevant historical context being reviewed in Romans 9, therefore, election has both a particular and a universal aspect and both are reflected in the original promise to Abraham. The particular aspect emerges clearly in the promise, to which Paul alluded in (9:9), that Sarah would give birth to a child and would thus provide Abraham with a line of physical descent, so that he could become the father of a great nation and a blessing to all nations. Neither Ishmael nor any child not born of Sarah, however righteous that child might turn out to be as an adult, could have fulfilled this part of God’s promise to Abraham. But the promise also had an obvious universal aspect, which already included, so Paul stated in Galatians 3:8, the central message of the Christian gospel. For the very essence of that promise was that through Abraham’s offspring, identified in Paul’s mind as Jesus Christ, God would bless all nations, not just the nation of Israel. Observe also that neither Ishmael nor Esau were Israelites or descendants of Jacob; they were passed over, therefore, in exactly the same sense in which all other Gentiles living at the time were likewise passed over. Not everyone, after all, could play the same role in redemptive history that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were destined to play. My point is not that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were chosen merely to positions of national privilege; far from it. I have no doubt that their election carried clear and undeniable implications of personal salvation. But as the patriarchs of the great nation from which the Messiah (and the Savior of all) would eventually

emerge, their election was also on behalf of all others including Ishmael and Esau. For that is just what the promise said: *All nations would be blessed in Abraham.*

It seems to me a pointless exercise, then, to deny, as some commentators do, that in Romans 9 Paul had in mind the election of the specific individuals named “Abraham,” “Isaac,” and “Jacob.” When Paul spoke of Jacob’s election (9:11) and cited the Old Testament prophesy that the “elder shall serve the younger” (9:12), it is true that he lifted his quotation from a context in which nations, not individuals, were definitely in view. In Genesis 25:23, we thus read that the Lord declared to Rebecca: “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.” Similarly, when Paul quoted the words “I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau” (9:13), which he lifted from an oracle that the prophet Malachi had delivered to Israel, he again quoted from a context in which nations, not individuals, were in view. But the issue here is Paul’s context, not these Old Testament contexts; and given the use to which the New Testament writers typically put the Old Testament, we cannot suppose uncritically that the Old Testament context from which Paul lifted his quotations determined his own use of them. According to F. F. Bruce, among others, Paul did indeed have in view the peoples of Israel and Edom, rather than the Old Testament characters who bore the names “Jacob” and “Esau”;<sup>48</sup> and according to Johannes Munck, “Romans 9:6-13 is speaking neither of individuals and their selection for salvation, nor of the spiritual Israel, the Christian church. It speaks rather of the patriarchs, who without exception became the founders of peoples.”<sup>49</sup> It is doubtful, however, that even Malachi would have disassociated the individuals, Jacob and Esau, from their progeny, the latter being seen as but an extension of the former. And furthermore, when Paul indicated that the election of Jacob took place before the twins

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<sup>48</sup> See F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963), p. 193.

<sup>49</sup> Johannes Munck, *Christ & Israel: an interpretation of Romans 9-11* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), p. 42.

were “born or had done anything good or bad” (9:11), he surely did have the individuals, Jacob and Esau, principally in view. Was not the whole point to illustrate “God’s purpose in election”: how it continues “not by works but by his call” (9:11-12)? And was not the familiar struggle between Jacob and Esau for the birthright—the fact that it went to the younger brother rather than to the older one—just what illustrated his point in a forceful way? Ernst Kasemann thus seems at least half right when he comments: “The quotations [from Genesis and Malachi] are taken out of their context.... For Paul is no longer concerned with two peoples and their destiny..., but timelessly...with the election and rejection of two persons who are elevated as types....”<sup>50</sup>

But on what textual grounds does Kasemann suppose, along with so many others, that the election of one person implies the rejection of another? For many, the idea that rejection is the inevitable “dark side” of election functions almost like an *a priori* assumption. James Dunn thus writes: “The election of one implies as an unavoidable corollary the nonelection, that is, rejection, of another.”<sup>51</sup> But why should that follow? Why should the election of Isaac and Jacob in particular imply the rejection of Ishmael and Esau? For that matter, why should the election of Abraham imply the rejection of all others, living at the time, whom God could have called out but did not? In fact, since election is an expression of love, as even the Augustinians agree, the *logic* of election is just the opposite of what Dunn has said. For as we have already seen, God could not love Jacob without also loving Esau (assuming that both exist), and neither could he make Jacob the object of his electing love without making Esau its object as well. In fairness to Dunn, I should perhaps point out that by “rejection” he does not mean God’s final and irrevocable rejection of someone; in the context of his full discussion of Paul, “rejection” turns out to be a temporary cutting off, which is the only kind of rejection that Paul ever contemplated, especial-

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<sup>50</sup> Ernst Kasemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), p. 264.

ly in Romans 9-11. But not even a temporary rejection of one person is either a *logical* or an *unavoidable* corollary of someone else's election.

The critical exegetical issue, however, concerns not the logic of election, but Paul's own view of the matter, and not one word in Romans 9-11 implies a final and irrevocable rejection of Ishmael, Esau, Pharaoh, the non-remnant Jews, or anyone else. To the contrary, Abraham was chosen as a blessing to all nations, including Esau and his progeny; and for exactly the same reason, Jacob was chosen on behalf of Esau as well. So yes, God does, according to Paul, elect or choose individuals for himself. But God never treats anyone as an isolated monad, and the election of one person is always on behalf of others; it reaches beyond the chosen person to incorporate, in a variety of complex ways, the community in which the person lives and, in the end, the entire human race. That is why the idea of a "remnant, chosen by grace" (Rom. 11:5) played such an important role in Paul's argument that God has not rejected his people as a whole (11:1). For contrary to what the Augustinians would have us believe, it was not a mere tautology that Paul here defended, something like: "A remnant, chosen by grace, proves that God has not rejected the remnant, chosen by grace." Instead, the "remnant, chosen by grace," proves that God has not rejected the whole of which the remnant is a part. The faithful remnant is always a pledge, in other words, on behalf of the whole and also the proof that "the word of God" or his "purpose in election" has not failed (9:6). Or, as Paul himself put it in 11:16, "If the part of the dough offered as first fruits [or the faithful remnant] is holy, then the whole batch [that the faithful remnant represents] is holy" in God's eyes as well.

### **God's Severe Mercy: Three Examples**

If you fail to interpret Romans 9 in light of Paul's own conclusion in Romans 11, or fail to appreciate Paul's inclusive understanding of election (how the salvation of a single individual is

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<sup>51</sup> Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, p. 511.



a pledge on behalf of the human race as a whole), then Romans 9 is apt to appear dark and unforgiving. For Paul's understanding of God's love and mercy was anything but sentimental. But once we begin to glimpse the merciful purpose behind God's severity, as Paul explains it in Romans 11, Romans 9 turns out to be no problem at all.

Consider first the quotation in 9:13 from the Prophet Malachi: "I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau." It is important to set aside, right at the outset, a distracting irrelevancy. In an effort to ameliorate things a bit, Charles Hodge suggested, as have many others, that in Romans 9:13 "hatred" does not imply *positive disfavour*, but instead means only "*to love less, to regard and treat with less favour*"?<sup>52</sup> And even Dunn, despite his accurate understanding of chapter 11, likewise writes: "To 'love' Jacob (that is, to lavish love on Jacob) means to 'hate' Esau (that is, to withhold such affection from Esau...)." <sup>53</sup> But why should that be true? Why should my love for my son (even lavishing love on my son) imply a withholding of love from my daughter? If I were so much as to love my daughter *less* than I do my son, then that would surely imply a defect in my moral character; and similarly, if God were even to have loved Esau *less* than he did Jacob, then that too would have diminished his holy character and have contradicted Paul's repeated declaration that God shows no partiality to anyone. What we have in 9:13, therefore, is an obvious case of hyperbole, where hyperbole is *by intention* literally false. We encounter an almost identical hyperbole in the words of Jesus: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters...cannot be my disciple" (Lk.14:26). Though no Christian would likely misinterpret these words to mean that we should *literally* hate the members of our family, some do misinterpret them to mean that we should love the members of our family *less* than we do Jesus. But Jesus' hyperbole, no less than Paul's use of the quota-

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<sup>52</sup> Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1896), p. 490.

<sup>53</sup> Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, p. 511.

tion from Malachi, is *by intention* literally false. Was it not Jesus, after all, who commanded us to love others, including the members of our family, even as we love ourselves? And was it not Jesus who pointed out (in the parable of the sheep and the goats) that anything less than a perfect love for those whom Jesus loves is also less than a perfect love for Jesus himself? If that is true, then it is simply not possible to love our family *less* and, at the same time, to love Jesus *more*. Accordingly, we hate the members of our family in the relevant metaphorical sense only when we love them more, not less; and similarly, God hated Esau in the relevant metaphorical sense only because he loved him to the fullest extent possible, not less.

So just what is the relevant metaphorical sense in which, according to Paul's hyperbole, God supposedly hated Esau? The answer is implicit in what we have already said. The election of Jacob unto salvation carried no implication of Esau being rejected. But in addition to being chosen as children of God, such patriarchs as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were *also* chosen to play a unique role in redemptive history—one that also involved their earthly concerns and perceived interests in important ways. We are all familiar, as Paul's Jewish readers certainly were as well, with the bitter struggle between Jacob and Esau for the birthright and for their father's blessing: how (through Jacob's trickery) Esau lost the very thing that, given all the conventions governing ancient Semitic society, was rightfully his. Because Jacob and Esau both wanted, or thought they wanted, the same thing, their perceived interests had come into conflict; and so not even God could have settled this particular conflict without appearing to favor one of the twins over the other. It is often that way. The events that transpire in our earthly lives often do favor the perceived interests of some over those of others; and with respect to many earthly struggles, a winner does indeed imply a loser. In the case of Jacob and Esau, God had already decided, even before they were "born or had done anything good or bad," who would win and therefore who

would lose in their struggle for the birthright (9:11). Esau was destined to lose, not because he deserved to lose, but in order that God's "purpose in election"—that is, the means by which he extends his mercy to all people including Esau—might continue. The prophesy to Rebecca, "The elder [Esau] shall serve the younger" [Jacob], thus captures the full and complete meaning of God's so-called hatred of Esau.<sup>54</sup>

Consider next the hardening of Pharaoh's heart to which Paul alluded in 9:17-18. Those who view such hardening as an instance of God causing someone to sin have simply failed to acquaint themselves, I believe, with the intricacies of causal-sounding language. But though God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart was in no way a *sufficient* cause of any sin, it was nonetheless an instance of what, according to Romans 11:32a, he does to every descendant of Adam (except Christ): He simply shut Pharaoh up to, or imprisoning him in, his own disobedience. Here two points in the Exodus account are perhaps relevant: First, God consistently hardened Pharaoh's heart in connection with the single command, "Let my people go," and second, Pharaoh was essentially a coward who had exalted himself above the Hebrews for many years (see Ex. 9:17). So perhaps the first question to ask is this: How would Pharaoh likely have responded if God had *not* hardened his heart and therefore had *not* given him the strength to stand in the presence of the "signs and wonders" performed in Egypt? The obvious answer is that Pharaoh would most certainly have caved in much sooner than he did. Does this mean that he would also have repented? Clearly not. Being easily cowed in the presence of superior power, which is just what the plagues in Egypt represented, is no real virtue. So God simply gave Pharaoh the strength to stand, or at least renewed his strength between various plagues, so that he would not be cowed too easily. Call it the *courage* to disobey God's command, if you will, or call it *stubbornness* in

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<sup>54</sup> For additional reasons why God's love for Jacob and his hatred of Esau express exactly the same attitude, see my remarks in Parry and Partridge, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-39.

the presence of a command; that difference is largely a matter of moral perspective anyway. In either case, the essence of God's action remains the same: He simply gave Pharaoh the strength to act upon the sinful desires in the deepest recesses of his own heart; and in that way, he shut Pharaoh up to, or imprisoned him in, his own disobedience.

But that is only half the story. According to 11:32b, the other half is that God's actions towards Pharaoh, like his actions towards anyone else, were also an expression of mercy. Here we might speculate that, had God permitted Pharaoh to be cowed too easily—after the first plague, let us suppose—then Pharaoh's haughty arrogance would have remained largely hidden, at least from his own view. It is a familiar fact of experience: Cowardice sometimes "protects" us from the very sin that we secretly wish to commit. When sheer cowardice prevents a man from committing adultery, for example, it may also "protect" him from a terrible web of lies and deceit, a true prison of sorts. So if the transformation of a heart is far more important than outward conformity to moral rules and even more important than cowardly obedience to the command of God, then having the strength to act upon one's innermost desires might easily serve a redemptive purpose. In the case of Pharaoh, his God-given strength to disobey God's command no doubt revealed to him, in a way that perhaps nothing else could have revealed, the self-destructive and self-defeating character of his own self-exaltation. And however one interprets the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, we can be confident that God gave him exactly what he needed at the time and exactly what would do him the most good over the long run. When the walls of water were crashing over his head and all of his evil plans and ambitions were clearly coming to ruin, Pharaoh may then have been, for all we know, in a far more hopeful condition than he ever had been at any previous time during his earthly life.

Consider, finally, Paul's distinction in 9:22 between the vessels of mercy and the vessels of wrath and why, in the context of Paul's overall argument, every vessel of mercy must represent the destruction of a vessel of wrath. Just who were, first of all, the vessels of wrath that occupied Paul's attention here? Were they not precisely Paul's unbelieving kin about whom he expressed such "unceasing anguish" at the beginning of chapter 9? And were they not also the non-remnant Jews whose hearts, according to 11:7, were hardened? If so, then the vessels of wrath to which Paul referred in 9:22 were the very ones concerning whom he later made two claims: first, that "as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors" (11:28), and second, that "they have now become disobedient in order that they too might receive mercy." So clearly, Paul's distinction between vessels of mercy and vessels of wrath, like his distinction between the new creation in Christ and the old person that the new creation replaces, could not possibly be a distinction between those *individuals* who are, and those who are not, objects of God's mercy. To the contrary, a vessel of wrath just *is* the old person, even as a vessel of mercy just *is* the new creation in Christ. For as Paul himself explicitly stated in his letter to the Ephesians,<sup>55</sup> using a slightly different metaphor, even Christians (or the new creations in Christ) first came into this earthly life as "children of wrath" (Eph. 2.3); they were at one time, in other words, "vessels of wrath fit for destruction." And just as a new creation in Christ requires the absolute destruction of the old person, so every vessel of mercy represents the absolute destruction of some vessel of wrath. In no way, therefore, do such expressions as "children of wrath" or "vessels of wrath" represent a determinate and eternally fixed category of individuals; and if Paul himself, like everyone else, first came into this earthly life as a vessel of wrath (call him Saul), then a paraphrase that captures part of the meaning of 9:22-23 is this:

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<sup>55</sup> Here I adopt the traditional assumption that Paul was indeed the author of Ephesians, as I believe he was.

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

Because the paraphrase is intended to startle, I should perhaps clarify one point: I make no claim here that at the time of writing 9:22 Paul was consciously contrasting his former life as an unbeliever (or as a vessel of wrath) with his then present life as an apostle of Christ; nor do I have any doubt that in 9:22 Paul had Pharaoh and the unbelieving Jews principally in view. But if Paul himself, like all other Christians, first came into this earthly life as a vessel of wrath, as he surely did, then God endured with much patience this particular vessel of wrath, along with all the others, in order to make known the riches of his mercy to the believing Paul. What the above paraphrase illustrates, therefore, is only what Paul himself explicitly stated in 11:32. In Romans 1 Paul also spoke of God giving people over “to impurity” (1:24), “to degrading passions” (1:26), “to a debased mind and to things that should not be done” (1:28); God forces people to experience, in other words, the consequences of their sinful actions and to confront the very life they have chosen to live. He does this to all people, including Pharaoh, because in no other way could he be merciful to each and every one of them, as 11:32 explicitly states that he is.

### **Is there Injustice on God’s Part?**

After reviewing briefly the election of Isaac and Jacob, Paul went on to raise a question about injustice:

What then are we to say? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means! For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compas-

sion on whom I have compassion.” So it depends not upon human will or exertion, but upon God who shows mercy (9:14-16).

But why should a question concerning injustice even arise at this point? Was it because Paul really did accept a seemingly unjust doctrine of limited election? Clearly not. It was Paul’s opponents, not Paul, who believed in limited election; his opponents would have seen no injustice, for example, in the election of Isaac and Jacob, or even in a literal interpretation of “I have hated Esau.” It was not this reminder of history, in other words, that motivated the question about injustice; it was rather the implication in Paul’s teaching that election depends not upon physical descent from Abraham (9:6-8) and not upon works (9:12), but upon God’s sovereign mercy alone (9:16). What seemed unjust to Paul’s contemporaries was his teaching that the Gentiles could attain “righteousness through faith” (Romans 9:30) without converting to Judaism, without keeping the Jewish ceremonial law, and without having their males circumcised. For as they saw it, such teaching implied that God, having broken his promise to Abraham, was unjustly extending his mercy to the Gentiles. That God’s original promise to Abraham, as recorded in Genesis, had already included a reference to all nations (see Genesis 12:3 and 18:18) seemed not to matter at all; whatever the original promise had stated, many in Paul’s own day believed that the election of Israel implied the rejection of other nations. So if God were to extend his mercy to the Gentiles, that would imply, by the same twisted logic, a rejection of Israel.

Paul’s question, then, is essentially this: “Has God acted unjustly in extending his mercy to Gentiles as well as to Jews?” Paul’s remarks about Jacob and Esau, which occur just prior to the question, are not what generate the question, but part of his *answer* to the question. Like a good debater, he meets his opponents on their own ground and prepares them for his answer even before raising the question. For none of Paul’s opponents would have denied God’s right to violate

human tradition and convention in the matter of Jacob and Esau. According to tradition—that is, according to the conventions governing ancient Semitic society—the birthright, the blessing, and the headship of the tribal family should have passed from Isaac to Esau rather than from Isaac to Jacob. But if none of Paul’s opponents would have denied God’s right to violate that tradition, then neither, Paul in effect argued, should they deny God’s right to violate the tradition that would restrict God’s mercy to the physical descendants of Abraham, or at least to the circumcised and to those who keep the Jewish law.

Having disarmed his opponents even before raising his question, Paul then sets forth his unassailable answer, a quotation from Exodus 33:19 in which the Lord declares: “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” This is an idiomatic expression that stresses not the *indeterminacy* of God’s mercy, as some Augustinians have supposed, but rather its *intensity* and *assuredness*. As one Old Testament scholar, Frederick Bush, has pointed out,<sup>56</sup> “the meaning that the expression is normally given in English, i.e. an arbitrary expression of God’s free, sovereign will, makes almost no sense in the context” of Exodus 33:19, where it is a revelation of the very name, or essence, or goodness of God. It is, says Bush, “equivalent to ‘I am indeed the one who is gracious and merciful.’” And similarly for Paul’s own context. To all of those, such as many of Paul’s own kin, who would insist that God has no right to extend his mercy to a given class of persons—whether it be the Ninevites in Jonah’s day, the Gentiles in Paul’s day, or the non-Christians in our own day—Paul in effect quoted the Lord as saying: “I will have mercy upon whomever I damn well please.” There is absolutely nothing in view here except God’s unlimited and inexhaustible mercy—a mercy that, although no doubt severe at times (as Esau and Pharaoh might well have attested), is nonetheless

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<sup>56</sup> Frederick Wm. Bush, “‘I Am Who I Am’: Moses and the Name of God,” *Theology, News and Notes* (Pasadena: Fuller Theological Seminary, Dec. 1976), p. 11.



utterly reliable and therefore secures our hope for the future. For as Paul had already pointed out in the first part of Romans 3, no human disobedience or unfaithfulness can nullify the faithfulness of God. God will continue to meet our true spiritual needs and to consume all that is false within us, regardless of what choices we make, good or bad. So however important these choices may be for the here and now, or even for the immediate future, our *destiny* “depends not upon human will or exertion, but upon God who shows mercy.”

#### **PART IV: THE TRIUMPH OF GOD’S SALVIFIC WILL**

“For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom. 8:38-39—KJV).

According to Christian universalists, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ achieved a complete victory over sin and death—an eschatological victory, if you will, but one that already guarantees the eventual destruction of both. God will not, therefore, merely quarantine evil in a specific region of his creation, a dark region known as hell; he will instead destroy it altogether, as the annihilationists also insist. But whereas the annihilationists believe that God will in the end annihilate some of his own loved ones, some of the very ones created in his own image, the universalists believe that God will eventually destroy evil in the only way possible short of annihilating the objects of his love: by saving them from their sins.

#### **Christ Victorious**

So how should a Christian understand Christ’s victory over sin and death? According to Romans 5:12-21, Jesus Christ rescued the entire human race from the doom and condemnation that Adam originally brought upon it, and, in the process, unleashed the power that will eventual-

ly bring justification and life to all human beings. As we have already seen, both instances of “all humans” in verse 18 pick out exactly the same group of individuals; there is simply no question about that. Nor is there any doubt that, according to this text, Jesus Christ did something *on behalf of* all human beings or the human race as a whole. But if, as some Arminians might contend, he brought to all people something less than full justification and life—an *offer* of salvation, perhaps, or a possibility of some kind that each individual remains free to reject—then the possibility of an ultimate defeat remains. For the possibility yet remains that Christ might be less successful in saving the human race as a whole than Adam was in corrupting it. So did Paul contemplate such a possibility in Romans 5? In support of an affirmative answer, some commentators, such as Douglas Moo and John Blanchard, appeal to 5:17, where the expression “those who receive the abundance of grace” appears. According to Moo, “the deliberately worded v. 17, along with the persistent stress on faith as the means of achieving righteousness in 1:16-4:25, makes it clear that only certain people derive the benefits from Christ’s act of righteousness.”<sup>57</sup> And similarly for Blanchard: “The only ones [according to 5:17] who ‘reign in life’ are ‘those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness’; those who do not receive these things remain under the devastating reign of death.”<sup>58</sup>

Note Blanchard’s words “those who do not receive these things.” Where in the context of 5:17 did Paul say anything about a group of people *not* receiving “God’s abundant provision of grace”? Where did he even leave this open as a possibility? Suppose that I should comment upon those who receive the precious gift of life from their biological parents. Would my comment carry any implication that some people do not receive this precious gift? Of course not. So why struggle so hard, even to the point of drawing an obviously fallacious inference, just to

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<sup>57</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 344.

<sup>58</sup> John Blanchard, *Whatever Happened to Hell?* (Durham: Evangelical Press, 1993), p. 198.

overpower a text, such as 5:18-19, that is as glorious as it is clear? Let us concede, at least for the sake of argument, that 5:17 endorses

(1) Only those sinners receiving the abundance of grace will be saved.

From (1) it simply does not follow that

(2) Some sinners will never receive the abundance of grace,

and neither does it follow that

(3) Not all sinners will be saved.

Even worse for Blanchard's interpretation is the following: If you simply conjoin (1) above with the assertion in 5:18 that Christ brings justification and life to all human sinners, it follows, as a deductive consequence, that all human sinners will indeed receive the abundance of grace. So unless Blanchard is prepared to foist upon Paul his own fallacious inference,<sup>59</sup> verse 17 provides no grounds whatsoever for supposing that some people will never receive the abundance of grace. To the contrary, the expression "much more surely," which appears in both verses 15 and 17, provides an additional reason for supposing that the effects of Christ's one act of righteousness, as Paul understood them, are far greater, and therefore far more extensive, than the effects of Adam's disobedience. As M.C. de Boer has argued: "Unless the universalism of vv. 18-19 is taken seriously... 'how much more' is turned into 'how much less,' for death is then given the last word over the vast majority of human beings and God's regaining of the world for his sovereignty becomes a limited affair."<sup>60</sup> And that surely *is* the issue. Which is greater and therefore

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<sup>59</sup> It is truly astonishing how many commentators draw virtually the same fallacious inference at this point. Moo clearly draws such a fallacious inference in the passage quoted above, and so did H. C. G. Moule when he contended that "the whole Epistle, and the whole message of St Paul about our acceptance" of Christ counts against a universalistic interpretation of Romans 5:18" [*Romans*, (Washington: Christian Literature Crusade, 1975), p., 151].

<sup>60</sup> M.C. de Boer, *The Defeat of Death: Apocalyptic Eschatology in I Corinthians 15 and Romans 5* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), p. 175. Arland J. Hultgren has also expressed the point powerfully: "As Adam was the head of humanity in the old eon, leading all to destruction, so Christ is the head of humanity in the new age which has dawned, leading all to justification and life. The grace of God in Christ amounts to 'much more' than the

more extensive: the effects of Adam's sin, or the effects of Christ's act of righteousness? Which will triumph in the end: sin and death (at least in the lives of millions), or Jesus Christ?

Unlike Blanchard and Moo, Howard Marshall at least recognizes that we cannot read into 5:17 any implication that some will *not* receive the abundance of grace. But Marshall nonetheless contends, incorrectly, that Paul left such an eventuality open as a possibility. For according to Marshall, "Paul's statement [in 5:17] means that all individuals will be saved provided that they believe, and it is left open whether they will do so..."<sup>61</sup> Marshall thus assumes, as do Blanchard and Moo, that in 5:17 Paul used the verb "lambano" ("to receive") in a sense that would mean something like "to take hold" or "to accept believingly." But it is nearly certain that Paul was *not* using "lambano" in this way; indeed, he almost never used it this way in any context, such as Romans 5, where the thing received is divine judgment, divine grace, or a divine gift of some kind. In any such context as that, Paul always thought of God as the active agent and human beings as the *recipients* of some divine action. In Romans 13:2, for example, those who receive (or incur) judgment do so in the same passive way that a citizen might receive a summons to court, a criminal might receive a prescribed punishment, or a boxer might receive severe blows to the head; and in Romans 1:5, those who "have received grace and apostleship" do so in the same passive way that a newborn baby might receive life. Similarly, as John Murray has argued, the "word 'receiving [in 5:17]...does not refer to our believing acceptance of the free gift but to our being made the recipients, and we are regarded as the passive beneficiaries of both the grace and the free gift in their overflowing fullness."<sup>62</sup> Does this mean that, according to

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trespass of Adam and its effects (5:17). All of humanity is in view here without exception" [*Christ and His Benefits: Christology and Redemption in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), pp.54-55].

<sup>61</sup> I. Howard Marshall, "The New Testament Does *Not* Teach Universal Salvation" in Parry and Partridge, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

<sup>62</sup> Murray, *Romans* Vol 1. Richard Bell, following M.E. Boring, makes a similar point in "Rom. 5:18-19 and Universal Salvation," *New Testament Studies* 48 (2002), p. 429.

Paul, salvation is possible apart from faith or belief? Not at all. It could mean, consistent with the rest of what Paul wrote, that even our faith and belief are a work of God within. But even that seems a stretch in the present context, where the focus of Paul's attention was the objective work of Christ, not our personal faith or belief in response to it. If the latter had been his concern here, as it was in chapter 4, he would have used the same verb here, namely "pisteuo" ("to believe" or "to trust"), that he used in chapter 4; he would not have chosen a verb that is just as applicable to the recipients of judgment as it is to the recipients of grace. That he chose the verb "lambano" shows that his intention in Romans 5 was to compare the *effects* Christ's act of righteousness with those of Adam's sin. He insisted that Christ more than undid the harm that Adam had inflicted on the human race as a whole; Christ defeated death on behalf of all people and unleashed into the cosmos the power that will bring eternal life to them all (see verse 21).<sup>63</sup>

If any doubt should remain concerning how Paul understood Christ's ultimate triumph over sin and death, I Corinthians 15:20-28 should, I believe, finally put it to rest. For here we read that Christ will turn his kingdom over to the Father only after he has destroyed *every* competing rule and *every* competing "authority and power" (v.24). The victory pictured here is thus abso-

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<sup>63</sup> Having argued, correctly, that in 5:17 "lambano" is being used in a passive sense and that in 5:18 the expression "justification and life" implies eternal salvation, John Murray's own arguments seem to render universalism an inescapable consequence of 5:18. Murray therefore appealed to the wider context of Pauline thought in order to argue that Paul could not have meant to say what his words in fact do say. He thus wrote: "When we ask the question: Is it Pauline to posit universal salvation? the answer must be decisively negative (*cf.* II Thess. 1:8, 9). Hence we cannot interpret the apodosis in verse 18 in the sense of inclusive universalism..." Murray therefore concluded that the second "all humans" in 5:18 must be more restrictive than the first. But that is, very simply, a fallacious inference, similar to the following, which we might imagine to appear in a commentary on II Thessalonians: "When we ask the question: Is it Pauline to posit eternal damnation? the answer must be decisively negative (*cf.* Rom. 5:12-21). Hence we cannot interpret II Thessalonians 1:8-9 in any sense that implies an eternal separation from God." Murray gives no reason whatsoever, either good or bad, for why we should adjust our understanding of Romans 5:18 in light of our understanding of I Thessalonians 1:8-9 rather than adjust our understanding of I Thessalonians 1:8-9 in light of our understanding of Romans 5, Romans 11, I Corinthians 15 and other universalistic texts in Paul. In fact, there are good exegetical reasons for supposing that *destruction* is a redemptive concept in I Thessalonians 1:8-9, as it clearly is in I Corinthians 5:5 where the pronounced judgment is equally as harsh; there are also decisive grammatical reasons for denying that I Thessalonians 1:8-9 carries any implication of separation from God. On these points see Thomas Talbott, "A Pauline Interpretation of Divine Judgment," in Parry and Partridge, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-43 and p. 49 n. 10.

lute and total, with death being the last enemy to be destroyed (v.26). A literal translation, however, would be, “The last enemy, death, is being destroyed” (present passive), which could imply, as Anthony Thiselton suggests, that “the *process* of annihilation” has been “*already set in motion* by Christ’s (past) death and resurrection.” In any event, Christ must continue to reign “until he has put all his enemies under his feet” (v.25); and when all things are finally brought into subjection to Christ, “then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all” (v.28). All separation from God will then be a thing of the past. “Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things [will then] have passed away” (Rev. 21:4).

Now just what did Paul mean when he suggested that Christ would “put all his enemies under his feet”? Verse 27 implies an equivalency between someone’s being put under the feet of Christ and someone’s being brought into subjection to him, and Paul’s clear implication here is that some people, who are not in subjection to Christ at one time, are then brought into subjection to Christ at some later time. So how should we understand this idea of someone *not yet* being in subjection to Christ? If the powers and authorities that Christ is bound to destroy involve *competing wills*, then the answer is clear: A competing will (or a will not yet in conformity with Christ’s own will) is, for that very reason, not yet in subjection to Christ; that is, it has not yet been reconciled to God through Christ. For there is but one way in which a competing will can be brought into subjection to Christ: It must be won over so that it voluntarily places itself in subjection to Christ. No willing agent, after all, could ever be *entirely* in subjection to Christ involuntarily; the very idea is self-contradictory. If one should be subdued against one’s will, or defeated in battle like John Milton’s Satan, then one’s *will* would precisely not be in subjection

to Christ. Indeed, even after being defeated in battle, Milton's Satan found that "the mind and spirit remains / Invincible":

What though the field be lost?  
 All is not lost; the unconquerable Will,  
 And study of revenge, immortal hate,  
 And courage never to submit or yield:  
 And what else is not to be overcome?  
 That Glory never shall his wrath or might  
 Extort from me.<sup>64</sup>

The author of such a speech could hardly be in subjection to Christ, and so, as Milton's Satan illustrates (perhaps contrary to Milton's own intention), there is but one way for God to defeat a rebellious will and to bring it into subjection to Christ: He must so transform the will that it voluntarily places itself in subjection to Christ. God could easily annihilate, no doubt, anyone with a rebellious will, but that would neither bring the rebellious will into subjection to Christ nor satisfy God's loving nature. As a paradigm of subjection, therefore, we need look no farther than Christ's own subjection to the father, as depicted in 15:28. No one would deny, I presume, that Christ's subjection to the Father is voluntary and implies voluntary obedience; it finds perfect expression in the prayer that Jesus uttered shortly before his arrest and crucifixion: "yet, not my will but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). That is the only coherent form that absolute subjection could take. If, as is not even possible, Christ's will should be in conflict with the Father's on some important point, if he should not want to comply with his Father's will but should nonetheless be forced to do so *against* his will, then he would be no different from Milton's Satan in this regard. But according to our text, *all* things and therefore *all* wills will eventually be brought

into subjection to Christ in the same sense in which Christ places himself in subjection to the Father, a sense that clearly implies voluntary obedience and reconciliation in the full redemptive sense.

The destruction of the last enemy, which is death, carries the same implication of universal reconciliation. For death is a spiritual condition that involves far more than the corruption and disintegration of the body, and it is closely associated in Pauline thought with the power of sin itself (see Rom. 8:2). If “the flesh” in Pauline theology involves “the whole personality of man as organized in the wrong direction,”<sup>65</sup> and if to “set the mind on the flesh is death” (Rom. 8:6), as Paul explicitly declared, then death, like sin, includes anything that separates us from God. And not even God, therefore, can destroy death altogether while keeping sin alive throughout an eternity of hell. For as I have elsewhere stated:

Death is destroyed (and all of its bad effects nullified) only to the extent that those subject to death are made alive. Indeed, if death should achieve a final victory in the life of a single person, then that would provide a clear answer to Paul’s rhetorical question: ‘Where, O death, is your victory?’ (1 Cor. 15:55). But the question is not supposed to have an answer.

So even if Paul had never written the words: “as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (I Cor. 15:22—KJV), we could still be confident that, according to Paul, all of those who die in Adam will in fact be made alive in Jesus Christ. For the bringing of all things into subjection to Christ already entails that all persons will eventually be-

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<sup>64</sup> *Paradise Lost*, Bk. I, 105-111.

<sup>65</sup> See Leon Morris’ entry on flesh in *The New Bible Dictionary* (London: The Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1962), p. 426.



long to Christ,<sup>66</sup> and the final destruction of death already entails that all who are subject to death will be made alive. The parallel structure of I Corinthians 15:22, so similar to Romans 5:18 and 11:32, merely makes explicit, then, what is already implicit in the context. When the Power of the Cross, which is the transforming power of love, successfully brings every rebellious will into conformity with Christ's own loving will and Christ then turns his kingdom over to the Father, then and only then will God truly be all in all.

### **Victory or Defeat?**

Paul's grand vision of a total victory over sin and death thus stands in luminous contrast to the Arminian picture of a defeated God. For though the Arminians insist, even as the universalists do, that God at least wills or desires the salvation of all sinners, they also hold that some sinners will defeat God's will in this matter and defeat it forever. As C.S. Lewis once 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>67</sup> So even though God himself never rejects anyone, at least not forever, he will nonetheless permit some of his loved ones to reject him forever, if that is what they should irrationally choose to do. In the case of the damned, at least, God grants ultimate sovereignty not to his own loving will, but to an utterly irrational human decision.

Now Jerry Walls, for one, objects to my putting the matter this way. For all such talk of God suffering a defeat, he argues, "is cleverly misleading at best":

God's love can be declined but it cannot be defeated. The only meaningful sense in which God's love could be defeated would be if he ceased to love those who re-

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<sup>66</sup> Even as many argue that the second "all" in Romans 5:18 is more restrictive than the first, so many argue that the second "all" in I Corinthians 15:22 is more restrictive than the first. According to Gordon D. Fee, for example, Paul's intention in I Corinthians 15:22 was to assert that "in Christ all *who are in Christ* will be made alive" [*The Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Company, 1973), p. 750]. But even if we should accept that dubious claim, it does nothing to restrict the second "all" in I Corinthians 15:22. For Paul's whole point in the subsequent verses was that everything that might have had the power, were it not destroyed, to prevent some from belonging to Christ and thereby to restrict the second "all" in I Corinthians 15:22 will be destroyed.

jected him and his love turned into hate. But in my view he never stops loving those who reject him. Rather, his love shines all the brighter by remaining steadfast in the face of such rejection.<sup>68</sup>

And I certainly agree with Walls concerning this: A loving God, who values human freedom, will no doubt *permit* his loved ones to do many things that he would prefer them not to do. So as Walls goes on to write: “Even Talbott must agree that things happen in this world that God does not prefer unless he wants to say that all atrocities down the ages have been willed and determined by God.”<sup>69</sup> That is correct. In no way do I believe, for example, that God directly caused the atrocities at Auschwitz; nor do I believe that he wills or desires such moral evils as the rape and murder of innocent children. At the very most, he willingly permits such atrocities as Auschwitz, not for their own sake, but for the sake of some greater good or some larger redemptive purpose—a greater good not only for people in general, but especially for the very victims of such atrocities themselves.

I nonetheless find Walls’ complaint perplexing, to say the least. How can he deny that the damnation, or even the loss, of millions whose salvation God sincerely desires would represent a tragic defeat of God’s loving purposes for them? Contrary to what Walls implies, you do not in general defeat a loving purpose by bringing it about that the loving purpose no longer exists, or by turning someone’s love into hatred; you defeat a loving purpose by preventing it from being realized, as the murder of a young child illustrates nicely. If we suppose that the parents of a murdered child had the loving purpose of protecting the child from such harm, however temporary it may be, then the child’s murder clearly defeats that loving purpose and does so without turning the parents’ love for their child into hatred. Nor is a teenager’s suicide any different in

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<sup>67</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1944), p. 115.

<sup>68</sup> Jerry Walls, “A Philosophical Critique of Talbott’s Universalism,” in Parry and Partridge, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

this regard. If we suppose that the teenager's parents had the loving purpose of promoting their child's welfare and future happiness, then the suicide defeats this loving purpose as well. So if Walls truly believes, as I know he does, that God sincerely wills or desires the salvation of all, he surely must concede that the eternal loss of a loved one would represent a horrendous defeat of God's loving purpose for the human race as a whole. Indeed, if someone's rejecting God forever does not count as a defeat, why should someone's repentance and faith count as a victory? Or suppose, as is logically possible on Walls' view, that all human sinners should freely and irrevocably reject Christ, despite God's best efforts to save them. Would that not count as a defeat? If not, then the very concept of *defeat* seems empty of meaning; if so, then the loss of a single loved one should count as a defeat as well.

A distinction that I have drawn repeatedly (and Walls ignores in the passage quoted above) is between *irreparable* harm, on the one hand, and harm that can be repaired or canceled out at some future time, on the other. When we humans confront the possibility of serious and irreparable harm—that is, harm that no mere human can repair or cancel out at some future time—we feel quite justified in interfering with someone's freedom to inflict such harm. We feel justified, first of all, in preventing one person from harming another irreparably; a loving father may thus report his own son to the police in an effort to prevent the son from committing murder. And we may feel justified, secondly, in preventing our loved ones from harming themselves irreparably as well; a loving father may thus physically overpower his teenage daughter in an effort to prevent her from committing suicide. This does not mean, of course, that a loving God, whose goal is the reconciliation of the world, would prevent every suicide, every murder, or every atrocity in human history, however horrendous such evils may seem to us; it follows only that he would prevent every harm that not even omnipotence could repair at some future time, and neither sui-

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

cide nor murder is necessarily an instance of that *kind* of harm. For God can resurrect the victims of murder and suicide just as easily as he can the victims of old age. So even if a loving God could sometimes permit murder, he could never permit one person to annihilate the soul of another or to destroy the very possibility of future happiness in another; and even if he could sometimes permit suicide, he could never permit his loved ones to destroy the very possibility of future happiness in themselves either. Just as loving parents are prepared to restrict the freedom of the children they love, so a loving God would restrict the freedom of the children he loves, at least in cases of truly irreparable harm. The only difference is that God deals with a much larger picture and a much longer time frame than that with which human parents are immediately concerned.

So the idea of *irreparable* harm—that is, of harm that not even omnipotence can repair—is critical, and Paul’s doctrine of unconditional election (along with the closely associated doctrine of predestination) is his doctrine that, despite the many atrocities in human history, God never permits truly irreparable harm to befall any of his loved ones.<sup>70</sup> From the very beginning—that is, even “before the foundation of the world”—God built into his creation, so Paul insisted, a guarantee that his salvific will would triumph in the end. Accordingly, all of those whom God “foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son...And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Rom.8:29-30). Arminians typically argue that the predestination (or foreordination) of which Paul here spoke rests upon foreknowledge, where foreknowledge, as they

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<sup>70</sup> If God draws the line at *irreparable* harm and therefore never permits such harm to befall his loved ones, then neither the unpardonable sin of which Jesus spoke, nor the sin of apostasy, as described in Hebrews 10, nor punishment in the age to come is an instance irreparable harm. I set forth my reasons for believing that the unpardonable sin and the sin of apostasy are both correctable, however unforgivable they may be, in *The Inescapable Love of God* (Parkland, Florida: Universal Publishers, 1999), pp. 103-106. And I set forth my reasons for denying that the punishment associated with the age to come is unending in Parry and Partridge, *op. cit.*, pp. 43-47, 51n.20-n.30, 269-270n.33.

interpret it, is a mere precognition or prevision of someone's faith, or of someone's decision to accept Christ, or of someone's free choice of one kind or another. But a two-fold objection to any such interpretation seems to me utterly decisive: First, the object of God's foreknowledge in 8:29 is simply people, not their faith or their free choices, and second, Paul used the same word "foreknow" ("proegno") when he wrote: "God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew" (Rom. 11:2). And here Paul had in view not the faithful remnant whose proper choices, one might claim, God had already foreknown; instead, he had in view those unbelieving Israelites of his own day who had rejected Christ and whose hearts were still hard and impenitent. They were foreknown, in other words, despite their disobedience, and they remained objects of God's electing love ("as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors"), not because they had made the right choices, but because "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:28-29). To be foreknown in the relevant Pauline sense, then, is simply to be loved beforehand. All of those whom God has loved from the beginning—that is, all the descendants of Adam—are predestined to be conformed to the image of Christ. So not only did Paul hold that Jesus Christ achieved a complete victory over sin and death; he also held that there was never the slightest possibility that God would lose any of those loved ones whose salvation he had already foreordained even before the foundation of the world.

### **Predestination Without Determinism**

That Paul believed in predestination now seems to me undeniable. The Augustinian mistake lies in the doctrine of limited election, which so clearly contradicts the central teaching of the New Testament; it does not lie in the doctrine of unconditional election, which confronts us on almost every page of the New Testament. When the latter doctrine is divorced from the idea of limited election, it no longer inspires fear and anxiety, but inspires instead the greatest con-

ceivable hope and sense of consolation. Still, some may wonder about the role of free choice and moral effort in Paul's predestinarian scheme. Just what role do free choice and moral effort play in our lives if our eventual salvation is secure from the beginning? Fortunately, Paul not only addressed this question directly, but also provided a clear answer to it.

Because our eternal destiny, as Paul understood it, lies in God's hands and not in our own, it is indeed secure. But Paul also provided a clear picture of how our choices, even if causally undetermined, could nonetheless play an essential role in a redemptive process whose end is foreordained and therefore secure. "Note then," he wrote in Romans 11:22, "the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness toward you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise, you also will be cut off." As this text illustrates, Paul clearly believed that our own actions—even our free choices, if you will—determine how God will respond to us in the immediate future; they determine, in particular, the form that God's perfecting love will take. If we continue in disobedience, then God will continue to shut us up to our disobedience, thereby forcing us to experience the consequences of our choices and the very life we have chosen to live; in that way, we will experience God's perfecting love as severity. But if we repent and enter into communion with God, then we will experience his perfecting love as kindness. C.S. Lewis once wrote that union with the divine "nature is bliss and separation from it horror"; and if that is true, then our free choices made in the present determine which path we are now traveling: whether it be one that leads to reconciliation and therefore to ever-increasing bliss, or whether it be one that leads to greater separation and therefore to ever-increasing discontent, misery, and even horror. Our free choices, then, have real consequences in our lives and they determine how we will encounter God's grace in the future; but whichever way we choose, God's perfecting love will meet our true spiritual needs perfectly. For Paul's

whole point in Romans 11 was that God's severity, no less than his kindness, is a means of his saving grace; his severity towards part of Israel, for example, is but one of the means whereby he saves all of Israel in the end, as we have seen.

Essential to the whole process, then, is that we exercise our moral freedom—not that we choose rightly rather than wrongly, but that we choose freely one way or the other. We can choose today to live selfishly or unselfishly, faithfully or unfaithfully, obediently or disobediently. But our choices, especially the bad ones, will also have unintended and unforeseen consequences in our lives; as the proverb says, “The human mind plans the way, but the Lord directs the steps” (Prov. 16:9). A man who commits robbery may set off a chain of events that, contrary to his own intentions, lands him in jail; and a woman who enters into an adulterous affair may discover that, even though her husband remains oblivious to it, the affair has a host of unforeseen and destructive consequences in her life. In fact, our bad choices almost never get us what we really want; that is part of what makes them bad and also one reason why God is able to bring redemptive goods out of them. When we make a mess of our lives and our misery becomes more and more unbearable, the hell we thereby create for ourselves will in the end resolve the very ambiguity and shatter the very illusions that made the bad choices possible in the first place. That is how God works with us as created rational agents. He permits us to choose in the ambiguous contexts in which we first emerge as self-aware beings, and he then requires us to learn from experience the hard lessons we sometimes need to learn. So in that way, the consequences of our free choices, both the good choices and the bad ones, are a source of revelation; they sooner or later reveal—in the next life, if not in this one—both the horror of separation from God and the bliss of union with him. And that is why the end is foreordained: All paths finally lead to the same destination, the end of reconciliation, though some are longer, windier, and a lot

more painful than others.

But if our salvation is guaranteed from the beginning and guaranteed no matter what choices we make in the present, then where is the incentive, many would ask, to repent and to enter into communion with God? Why not just keep on sinning if we are going to be saved anyway? That very question, however, betrays a terrible confusion. Paul himself, I would point out, raised a similar question: “Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?” (Rom. 6:1). And he never rejected, furthermore, the assumption behind the question: namely, that the more we sin, the more grace will indeed abound. To the contrary, he endorsed this very assumption when he wrote: “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Rom. 5:20). Not in a million, or a billion, or even a trillion years could our sins ever out-duel the grace of God. So why did Paul answer his own question, correctly, with his characteristic “By no means”? He did so because of his firm conviction that sin is utterly irrational. For how, he in effect asked, could those who have “died to sin” and therefore understand its true nature continue to sin (6:2)? Is not sin (or anything that separates us from God) precisely the problem, the very thing making our lives miserable? That the pain I experience when I thrust my hand into a flame may serve a beneficial purpose—because it enables me to avoid an even greater injury in the future—hardly entails that I have a good reason to thrust my hand into the flame again and again. And similarly, that the misery and discontent that sin brings into a life can serve a redemptive purpose—because it can provide in the end a compelling motive to repent—hardly implies that one has a good reason to keep on sinning and to continue making oneself more and more miserable in the process.

Accordingly, the well-worn analogy of the grandmaster in chess remains as apt as ever. When a grandmaster plays a novice, it is foreordained, so to speak, that the grandmaster will win,



not because he or she causally determines the novice's every move or even predicts each one; the end is foreordained because the grandmaster is resourceful enough to counter *any* combination of moves that the novice might freely decide to make. And similarly for the infinitely wise and resourceful God: He has no need to exercise direct causal control over our individual choices in order to "checkmate" us in the end; he can allow us to choose freely, perhaps even protect us from some ill-advised choices for a while, and still undermine over time every conceivable motive we might have for rejecting his grace. For once we learn for ourselves—after many trials and tribulations, in some cases—why separation from God can bring only greater and greater misery into our lives and why union with him is the only thing that can satisfy our deepest yearnings and desires, all resistance to his grace will melt away like wax before a flame.

### **Conclusion**

Christian universalists believe that, apart from a corporate salvation of the human race as a whole, there can be no real grace and no worthwhile salvation for any individual. 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>71</sup> and does so, as some believe he did in the case of Esau, even before the child has done anything good or bad? In the end, it seems, a doctrine of limited election replaces grace with a *horrible decree*, one that separates the redeemed forever from some of their own loved ones; and perhaps no other doctrine, not even the doctrine of everlasting punishment itself, has *as a matter of historical fact* produced so much anxiety in the lives of those who actually believe it. It also flatly contradicts Paul's explicit and repeated teaching that God, being merciful to all (Rom. 11:32), shows no partiality to anyone, and it is riddled, in any case, with logical impossibilities, as we have seen. So if a Chris-

tian were forced to choose between the doctrine of limited election and that of conditional election, the latter would be by far the preferable choice. But the doctrine of conditional election, which requires that grace be supplemented by our human free choices, also carries some unfortunate implications. For it too carries the threat, at least, that some of our loved ones will eventually be lost forever; it also undermines the Christian's solidarity with the human race as a whole and seems to provide the redeemed with grounds for boasting. If our own free choices determine our ultimate destiny in heaven or hell and the redeemed are those whose free choices are of a superior moral quality (because, unlike the damned, they did not reject Christ), then that difference, at any rate, is not a matter of grace at all. But beyond all of that, the consistent testimony of the New Testament is that, like a good shepherd who pursues the one lost sheep "until he finds it" (Luke 15:4), the Hound of Heaven pursues all of his loved ones until he finally reconciles them all to himself.

The gospel is truly good news, therefore, and truly glorious in its utter simplicity. Its message is that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has already achieved a complete victory over sin and death in this sense: Though these defeated enemies of true blessedness remain a terrible part of our present reality, their eventual destruction is already guaranteed and so also, therefore, is the reconciliation of the world and every person in it. For no power in the universe, not the power death itself and not even the power of our own recalcitrant wills, can finally "separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:39).

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<sup>71</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* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1960), p. 224.

**NOTES**