

## Foreword to the annotated edition of Thomas Allin, *Christ Triumphant*

In a chapter entitled “Universalistic Trends in the Evangelical Tradition: An Historical Perspective,” David Hilborn and Don Horrocks point out that “for most evangelicals, and for many non-evangelicals besides, the very concept [of *evangelical universalism*] . . . is an oxymoron.” Why so? Because however “conservative a person’s background and theological formation may have been, the historic evangelical norm is that once that person embraces universalism, he or she *de facto* forfeits any authentic claim to the description ‘evangelical.’”<sup>1</sup>

But why so much concern over the usage of a given label? According to one widely acknowledged group of evangelical Christians (the Arminians), it is a clear and obvious teaching of Scripture that all human sinners are equal objects of God’s redemptive love; and according to another such group (the Calvinists), it is a clear and obvious teaching of Scripture that God will in the end reconcile to himself every object of his redemptive love. Does it not seem utterly arbitrary, therefore, to stipulate that a *true* evangelical can accept either one of these supposedly clear and obvious teachings but not both of them together? Nor would such a stipulation have any relevance, in any case, to a single substantive theological or exegetical dispute. I emphasize this point because Thomas Allin, the 19<sup>th</sup> Century author of *Universalism Asserted* (sometimes retitled as *Christ Triumphant*), accepted both the doctrine of the Trinity, on the one hand, and the absolute authority of Scripture, on the other. So to insist that his affirmation of universalism (and that alone) would suffice to undermine “any authentic claim to the description ‘evangelical,’” had he wished to adopt such a label, would most likely constitute a lazy person’s way of ignoring the important theological, exegetical, and hermeneutical issues raised in this long neglected classic.

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<sup>1</sup> Parry and Partridge (eds.), *Universal Salvation?* 238.

Accordingly, we all owe Editor Robin Parry and Wipf and Stock Publishers a debt of gratitude for bringing back into print a book that, quite frankly, few evangelical presses today would likely have the courage to publish. Fans of George MacDonald in particular should greatly appreciate this volume. For even as MacDonald vigorously challenged the idea that justice and mercy are distinct (and very different) attributes of God, so Allin argued that “God’s essential unity is destroyed when we assign to him conflicting actions, as though his love demanded one course of action, and his justice another; as though God the Saviour were one person, and God the Judge a wholly different one.” And even as MacDonald often described God’s love as a consuming fire (see Hebrews 12:29), so Allin asked how “but by love can . . . [God’s] fires be kindled? They are, in fact, the very flame of love; and so we have the key to the words: ‘Your God is *a consuming fire*’ and ‘Your God is *a merciful God*’ (Deut 4:24–31).” As for the popular (albeit confused) objection that a doctrine of universal restoration minimizes the seriousness of sin and the depth of God’s opposition to it, Allin and MacDonald both turned that objection on its head, so to speak. According to the traditional understanding, after all, God will eventually confine sinners to a particular region of his creation, a region known as hell, but he will never destroy their sin altogether. So it is the traditional understanding, Allin insisted, that minimizes the seriousness of sin; as he put it himself, “no system so effectually affirms God’s hatred of sin as that which teaches that he cannot tolerate its existence for ever.” Allin thus drew a contrast between two very different ways of thinking about God:

Whenever judgment comes, it comes on love’s errand, if it comes from God. Here is the spiritual watershed between the two theologies. There is the popular theology that says, God loves his enemies, *till they die*. His love then turns into hate and vengeance. His love is, in fact, a question of chronology, or, if one will,

of geography, i.e., bounded to this world. And there is the truer theology that teaches with the Bible that God *is* love [1 John 4:8]—love unchanging and eternal in all his ways.

I have found no evidence, by the way, in either Allin or MacDonald that the two of them ever interacted with each other, despite their overlapping lifespans and the similarity of their theological ideas. But their approaches also differed in a way that makes this annotated version of Allin's work a most welcome companion to MacDonald's sermons. For even though MacDonald saturated his sermons with the results of his careful study of the Bible in its original languages, he preferred not to make a great show of citing chapter and verse; as a result, people sometimes fail to appreciate just how accurate he was in matters of exegetical detail. For his own part, however, Allin sought to provide in one volume a more systematic and thorough discussion of the two biblical themes most relevant to the topic of universal reconciliation, that of Christ's ultimate victory and triumph over sin, on the one hand, and that of divine judgment, on the other. In an effort to demonstrate just how well these superficially different themes in fact fit together, he thus tried to account for the most important biblical texts (along with important Patristic commentary upon them) that might pertain to either of these themes.

With respect to the Greek words "aiōn" and "aiōnios," for example, Allin showed conclusively that nowhere in either the New Testament or the Septuagint do these words carry any implication of unending *temporal* duration; and with respect to the image of fire, he rightly contended that throughout the Bible this image symbolizes a kind of divine judgment that, however severe it may be, nonetheless purifies and restores as well. Concerning 1 Corinthians 3:12-15, he thus wrote: "And so the 'fire is to try *every man's* work.' He whose work fails is saved (mark the word *saved*), *not damned* 'so as by fire,' for God's fire, by consuming what is

evil, saves and refines.” As further support for this interpretation, he also cited such clear Old Testament texts as Zephaniah 3:8-9 and Malachi 3:2-3, in effect inviting us to compare Paul’s own language with that of Malachi, who likewise associated “the Day” of judgment with a fire that purifies and restores. That so many commentators have ignored altogether the similarity of Paul’s own language to that of Malachi, preferring instead to interpret Paul as if he had in mind something akin to “being saved by the skin of one’s teeth,”<sup>2</sup> is remarkable, to say the least. For Paul nowhere treated salvation as if it were a kind of “fire insurance,” like “a brand snatched from the fire” (Amos 4:11); he thought of it instead as a complete destruction of the old person, which seems to render the whole idea of “being saved by the skin of one’s teeth” utterly unintelligible. But in any event, regardless of their perspective on universal reconciliation, thoughtful Christians should find much in Allin’s work that will reward further reflection and careful study.

Finally, Allin’s Victorian writing style, which can at times seem a trifle long winded and repetitive, is on full display in this work. But the editor’s added section headings make this annotated edition easy to navigate, and a wonderful set of annotations make it a rich source of historical information. All of that along with the author’s own penchant for thoroughness have resulted in a most valuable guidebook for anyone seeking to understand how Christian universalists interpret various biblical themes, especially the crucial one of divine judgment.

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<sup>2</sup> See Thistleton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 314-315. [For bibliog.: Eerdmans & Paternoster 2000]