

# Universalism: A Biblical and Theological Critique

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In the spring of 2011, Pastor Rob Bell's book *Love Wins* hit the book stores, but the furor over the book started even before that. The charge was heresy: Bell appeared to be teaching Universalism, the belief that everyone will be saved in the end. Quite frankly, I was put off by the severity of the attacks, given that people hadn't yet read the book, and I wrote a short article to that effect.<sup>2</sup> Critics rejected Bell's claims that he isn't a Universalist, but as a matter of fact, he *doesn't* make a clear case for Universalism in the book, even though certain comments and questions make it seem that way at first. I think he *would* be a true Universalist but for the problem of free choice.<sup>3</sup>

In this article I will address some of the significant biblical and theological issues raised in the discussion of Universalism. It is important to understand why Universalism should be rejected rather than to simply slap the "heresy" label on it and set it aside. That isn't helpful. There are reasons Universalism has been rejected by most Christians throughout the centuries, but there are reasons it has never gone away, too. It's better to deal with it on that level. Why should we or should we not believe it?<sup>4</sup>

Theologian Albert Mohler says the basic issue for Universalism is theodicy.<sup>5</sup> Theodicy is the justification of God given the presence of sin. How could a good God permit sin with all its destructive force? In the matter of Universalism, the question is how a good God could send people to hell—a place of conscious torment—forever. What amount of sin could be so bad as to justify that? Some traditionalists will respond right off that God doesn't send people to hell; people send themselves. I have to differ with that view. The images in the New Testament of judgment do not show people waving goodbye to God and stepping into the lake of fire. They reject God and God delivers them to punishment. While Universalists acknowledge that Scripture *seems* to teach the eternal punishment of unbelievers, and (obviously) the church has traditionally believed that, they object based primarily upon the belief that God's love is fundamental to His character and is completely out of keeping with the traditional view of hell. Furthermore, God is a God of justice, and a punishment of eternal torment is incommensurate with our finite sins, as bad as they may be.

Universalists find scriptural support primarily in Paul's writings where he declares, for example, that "as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men" (Rom 5:18), and, "For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all" (Rom. 11:32). In 1 Corinthians 15:22, Paul says that in Adam all die and in Christ all are made alive.

Jesus' words about punishment are interpreted differently than in the traditional view. For example, when He spoke of separating people at the final judgment as the shepherd separates the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31-46), He was speaking of what *would* be the case if people didn't receive the saving grace of God in Christ; He was speaking metaphorically to make a point. Jesus' warnings about eternal punishment are also modified by interpreting the word typically translated "eternal" as meaning an age with a beginning and an end (e.g., Matt. 25:46).

The necessity of postmortem salvation is inferred from all this, and support is drawn for that from 1 Peter and Revelation.

For Rob Bell, free will is a big problem for Universalism, but not so for Universalists. Either we will be overwhelmed by God's love and turn to Him, or He will simply override our free choice and save us. However it happens, God will win.<sup>6</sup>

In what follows I will present some of the biblical and theological arguments in support of Universalism and give a response. Before digging in, however, I need to make an important distinction. What I'll be

talking about is *Christian* Universalism, not *pluralistic* Universalism. While the term “Christian Universalism” might sound like an oxymoron, its use is necessary to make an important distinction. Pluralistic Universalism is the belief that everyone in the world will be saved by some almighty being or force that the various religions understand in different ways. *Christian* Universalism, by contrast, is the belief that Christianity holds the truth about God, man, and salvation and that, contrary to the traditional belief, *everyone* will be saved through Christ, even if on the other side of the grave. I am not going to discuss pluralistic Universalism here. That would take me too far afield.

### **Universalism in the Early Church**

The traditional teaching of the church has been that Jesus will one day return to reward those who are His and to punish those who are not. This has been based on such passages as Matthew 25:31-46, Mark 9:47-48, 2 Thessalonians 1:5-9, and Revelation 20:11-15 and 21:7-8. It was taught as part of the Rule of Faith in the early church, a kind of summary statement of Christian doctrine,<sup>7</sup> and it is found in the writings of prominent church fathers.

In his first apology, written around AD 160, Justin Martyr wrote,

And more than all other men are we your helpers and allies in promoting peace, seeing that we hold this view, that it is alike impossible for the wicked, the covetous, the conspirator, and for the virtuous, to escape the notice of God, and that each man goes to everlasting punishment or salvation according to the value of his actions. For if all men knew this, no one would choose wickedness even for a little, knowing that he goes to the everlasting punishment of fire; but would by all means restrain himself, and adorn himself with virtue, that he might obtain the good gifts of God, and escape the punishments.<sup>8</sup>

Writing around AD 180, Irenaeus said that “Eternal fire is prepared for sinners. The Lord has plainly declared this, and the rest of the Scriptures demonstrate it.”<sup>9</sup> In his *Prescription Against Heretics*, Tertullian said that Jesus “will come with glory to take the saints to the enjoyment of everlasting life and of the heavenly promises, and to condemn the wicked to everlasting fire, after the resurrection of both these classes shall have happened, together with the restoration of their flesh. This rule, as it will be proved, was taught by Christ, and raises amongst ourselves no other questions than those which heresies introduce, and which make men heretics.”<sup>10</sup>

Universalists counter this with other evidence from church history. Some go so far as to make the sweeping claim that the church fathers were Universalists until the Fifth Ecumenical Council of Constantinople (AD 553) condemned the teaching. This claim is a terrible exaggeration. There were a few prominent church fathers prior to that Council who were Universalists—Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa most notably. But to generalize the claim to suggest that *most* were Universalists is false.

It is thought by many that the third century theologian/philosopher Origen was the subject of the Fifth Ecumenical Council’s anathemas. It’s interesting to note, however, that the Council didn’t name anyone. What can we make of this?

Origen lived from about 185 to 254. The Fifth Council delivered its verdict three hundred years later. Universalism wasn’t condemned by itself simply as an aberrant doctrine standing alone; rather, the Council took up a whole set of beliefs promulgated by the “Origenists”, people who followed in the train of Origen’s thinking, whose beliefs were strongly indebted to Greek philosophy (as were Origen’s). Professor of patristics Morwenna Ludlow points out that “universal salvation was condemned specifically in connection with . . . the ideas of the pre-existence of souls, their ‘fall’ into human bodies, and a spiritual resurrection.”<sup>11</sup>

In his brief but frequently-cited history of Universalism, New Testament scholar Richard Bauckham elaborates on these Greek elements in his comments about Origen:

Origen's universalism belongs to the logic of his whole theological system, which was decisively influenced by his Platonism and depended on his hermeneutical method of discerning the allegorical sense of Scripture behind the literal sense. According to Origen, all intelligent beings (men, angels, devils) are created good and equal, but with absolute free will. Some, through the misuse of free will, turned from God and fell into varying degrees of sin. Those who fell furthest became the devils, those whose fall was less disastrous became the souls of men. These are to be restored to God through a process of discipline and chastisement, for which purpose this material world has been created and the pre-existing souls incarnated in human bodies. The process of purification is not complete at death but continues after this life. Nor is it an inevitably upward path: the soul remains free to choose good or evil, and so even after this life may fall again as well as rise. Within this scheme punishment is always, in God's intention, remedial: God is wholly good and His justice serves no other purpose than His good purpose of bringing all souls back to Himself. Thus the torments of hell cannot be endless, though they may last for aeons; the soul in hell remains always free to repent and be restored.

Logically it might seem that Origen's conviction of the inalienable freedom of the soul ought to prevent him from teaching both Universalism (for any soul is free to remain obstinate for ever) and the final secure happiness of the saved (who remain free to fall again at any time). In fact Origen seems to have drawn neither conclusion. Given unlimited time, God's purpose will eventually prevail and all souls will be finally, united to Him, never to sin again. The final restoration includes even Satan and the devils.

Origen's scheme conforms to a Platonic pattern of understanding the world as part of a great cycle of the emanation of all things from God and the return of all things to God. Despite the appeal to such texts as 1 Cor. 15: 28 ("God shall be all in all"; this has always been a favourite Universalist text) the final unity of all things with God is more Platonic than biblical in inspiration. The Platonic pattern of emanation and return was widely influential in Greek theology and provided the same kind of general world-view favouring Universalism as Darwinian evolution was to provide for some nineteenth-century Universalists. In both cases Universalism is achieved by seeing both this earthly life and hell as only stages in the soul's long upward progress towards God, whereas mainstream Christian orthodoxy has always regarded this life as decisive for a man's fate and hell as the final destiny of the wicked.<sup>12</sup>

One can see the influence of Greek philosophies here according to which the universe is an emanation from God which returns to its original place in a cyclical manner. This runs counter to what is taught in Scripture. According to the Bible (and Christian theology from the beginning), God is wholly different from His creation, and His creatures were not all created the same; angels and humans are different kinds of beings. Nor is there any evidence from Scripture of the pre-existence of souls.

I quoted Bauckham at length to show a major difference between Origen and Universalists today. The Universalism of today is not couched in the same philosophical schema as Origen's; it is grounded in Christian metaphysics. To simply dismiss Universalism today as heresy based upon Origen's thinking is misguided. It is why one shouldn't simply say that Universalists are heretics because Origen was declared a heretic. One has to wonder, if Universalism per se had been the real enemy, why Gregory of Nyssa wasn't also condemned, for he was clearly a Universalist. This isn't to suggest that Universalism isn't a false doctrine, but to note again that simply tagging it as heresy and setting it aside isn't helpful. A proper critique requires a proper understanding of the belief and its foundations. The important question is, is it true or not that everyone will necessarily be saved by faith in Christ?

A word which came to represent the teachings of Universalists in the early centuries is *apokatastasis* which means "restoration." The idea of restoration has backgrounds in both Hebrew and Greek thought. When Jesus spoke of Elijah coming and restoring all things (Matt. 17:11), He was referring to a prophecy recorded in Malachi 4:5, 6 where God said Elijah would "turn the hearts of fathers to their children and

the hearts of children to their fathers, lest [God] come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.” This prophecy was fulfilled in John the Baptist (Matt. 17:13). It fit within the context of a prophetic vision of eschatological and Messianic hope.

In Acts 1:6, the apostles asked Jesus if it was at that time that he was going to restore the kingdom to Israel. They were still looking for a political Messiah. In Acts 3:21, Peter expanded the vision to the end times when the restoration God had planned would come to fruition. As one scholar put it, “The [restoration of all things] does not mean the conversion of all mankind, but the restoration of all things and circumstances which the OT prophets proclaimed, i.e. the universal renewal of the earth.”<sup>13</sup>

The Greek understanding of apokatastasis was quite different. It had to do originally with the return of the constellations to their proper places. The Stoics believed, writes Morwenna Ludlow, “that when the planets reached the place in the heaven which they occupied when they were first created there would be a world conflagration, followed by the recreation or restoration of the world—the *apokatastasis* (literally, a setting back to the beginning).”<sup>14</sup> It marked the end of the old and the beginning of the new. Stoics believed in an infinite series of these cycles.

It’s important to understand that Origen’s thinking about restoration was inspired more by Greek thought than Hebrew, although he intended to be faithful to the things of God. He appealed to such Scriptures as 1 Corinthians 15: 28, a verse which is important to Universalists still today. It reads, “When all things are subjected to [Christ], then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.” Ludlow writes, “Origen and Gregory [of Nyssa] reasoned that, since the Father created the world through the Son, the submission of the world to the Father in the Son is akin to the return of all things to their original state, in a manner loosely analogous to the Stoic astronomical return.”

Origen didn’t believe in endless cycles as did the Stoics, but his framework for understanding universal restoration was metaphysically problematic. What was really scandalous was his suggestion that *all* created beings—including Satan and the demons—would be restored to unity with God. It isn’t certain that that was a settled conviction, though, since he spoke in later years of the destruction of the demonic powers in eternal fire. In a letter to friends, he denied strongly that he ever believed in the redemption of the demons. “In any case,” writes historian Brian Daley, Origen believed that “nothing will disrupt the final unity and harmony of God’s creation.”<sup>15</sup>

Because of the condemnation of “Origenism” in the sixth century and Augustine’s strong views on the certainty of hell, apokatastasis became a doctrine to avoid for most Christian thinkers until modern times.

### **The Love and Justice of God**

In the introduction to the book *Universal Salvation?*, editors Robin Parry and Christopher Partridge ask, “How could eternal conscious torment ever be the *just* punishment for the finite sins of any individual?”<sup>16</sup> The fact that God punishes cannot be denied. But what is the nature of His punishment? Is it retribution, or is it for the sake of reform and restoration? And is it unending?

Universalists take the traditional view of judgment to be completely out of keeping with the loving character of God. Philosopher Thomas Talbott believes that, because love is fundamental to the nature of God, everything God does has a loving aspect. Thus, even judgment (properly understood) is characterized by love. One cannot separate the two. He rejects the notion that God acts out of love at one moment and out of justice the next. The two always have to go together. He writes, “It is as impossible for God to act contrary to someone’s ultimate good . . . as it is for him to believe a false proposition or to act unjustly.”<sup>17</sup> This being the case, he believes, there can be no eternal judgment against a person, for that would preclude any goodness.

Gregory MacDonald, in his own Christian pilgrimage, worked through the writings of several theologians and philosophers as he wrestled with the idea that God would punish some people eternally. “Over a

period of months,” he writes, “I had become convinced that God *could* save everyone *if he wanted to*, and yet I also believed that the Bible taught that he would not. But, I reasoned, if he loved them, surely he would save them; and thus my doxological crisis grew.”<sup>18</sup> Later he writes, “The love of God is very important for the Universalist. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that it is a strong belief in God’s love that often drives people towards Universalism.”<sup>19</sup>

The late New Testament scholar John A.T. Robinson believed that God’s winsome love is so overwhelming that everyone will eventually be won over. We see this kind of thing take place between people, he says. Someone who is hateful to another person is gradually won over by the love shown by the offended party.<sup>20</sup> God’s love is much greater than ours and is capable of winning everyone. It is because of His love that God sent His Son to die for us. His grand project since the Fall has been to save people. If He doesn’t save all, He has failed. Says Robinson, “God has no power but the power of love, since he has no purpose but the purpose of love and no nature but the nature of love. If that fails, he fails.”<sup>21</sup>

Because of his understanding about God’s love, Talbott sees God’s justice primarily as remedial or restorative, not as retributive or punitive. An illustration Talbott gives is that of Jews who were at that time under the judgment of God as recorded in Romans. God “did not spare the natural branches,” Paul writes (Rom. 11:21). However, God will eventually have mercy on all, including the Jews. God’s judgment, Talbott says, is an act of love which serves to bring people back.<sup>22</sup> MacDonald, who puts great emphasis on Israel in the plan of God, says this: “One thing that is important to notice about God’s love for Israel is that this love is quite compatible with his anger at their disobedience and his just punishment of them.” Thus, just to see God judging His people is not to think that He has abandoned His covenant with them. “He punishes them *because* he loves them, and he will not allow wrath the final word *because* he loves them.”<sup>23</sup>

If this is the case for the Jews, couldn’t it be the same for the Gentiles? MacDonald notes that what looked like ultimate destruction on Sodom is to be reversed according to Ezekiel 16:53-55. In Isaiah 19:16-25, we read that Egypt, too, is to be restored.<sup>24</sup> In Revelation 3:14-22, God says some harsh things to the church in Laodicea, but His rebuke isn’t final. “The universalist,” MacDonald says, “would see the lake of fire as deserved and terrible but also as educative, being aimed at producing a realization of one’s sins and thus repentance.”<sup>25</sup>

How shall we respond?

Two questions arise from this. First, is it correct that God’s (saving) love must always have the final word, even when administering justice? Second, does Scripture support the notion that God’s final judgment is not retributive?

Those holding to the traditional view about hell argue that God’s justice has its demands. It is not always superseded by love. In His love, God reaches out to humankind, but for those who refuse all the way to the grave, justice must be served. They have rejected the offer of salvation made by Christ who satisfied God’s judgment on the cross for all who believe (to put one’s faith in Christ is to receive the effects of that payment). Having refused that, they must bear that judgment themselves.

Regarding judgment, we begin by noting that God does indeed, at times, administer retributive justice. Retribution is seen in Isaiah 3:11 where God says that what the wicked “have dealt out shall be done to him.” Consider, too, God’s judgment against the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites (Deut. 20:16-17). Where do we see any indication of judgment as restorative and colored by love for those being punished? When the angel of the Lord struck down 185,000 men in the camp of the Assyrians (2 Kings 19:34, 35), how was that a demonstration of love for them? There is no mention of restoration.

Regarding the judgment to come, Paul says that those with “hard and impenitent” hearts are “storing up wrath for [themselves] on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed.” Wrath,

fury, tribulation, and distress await those who do not obey the truth (Rom. 2:5-9). At the judgment of the great white throne, people will be judged according to what they have done and then thrown into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:11-15). Even if one sees some kind of future restoration for all nations (such as that declared by God for Sodom in Eze. 16), that wouldn't indicate that love will be the final word and all inhabitants of the nations will enter His glory. One might see here a final opportunity to say yea or nay to Christ before final judgment is pronounced.<sup>26</sup>

Scripture claims both that God is just and that God is love. Deuteronomy 32:4 reads, "The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he." First John 4: 8 says "Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love." I see no biblical justification for elevating one over the other. If one is to be elevated, why not the other way around? Why shouldn't love serve justice? God is both perfectly loving and perfectly righteous or just. Think of Romans 9:22: "What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?" Here's an instance where a display of God's patience (an exercise of love) will one day become a display of His justice.

N. T. Wright asks why *either* love or justice ought to be seen as the highest expression of God's nature. "To foist attributes on God—particularly such an attribute as the peculiarly modern notion of a love incompatible with sternness or serious judgment—is neither safe nor wise." Perhaps, he says, both are expressions of God's *holiness*.<sup>27</sup>

God's exercise of retributive justice is a righteous act and sometimes reveals His attitude of love toward His own people. We see this in the book of Revelation, chapter 16. After the angels pour out the wrath of God, the "angel in charge of the waters" says, "Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was, for you brought these judgments. For they have shed the blood of the saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve." And the altar responds, "Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are your judgments" (vv. 5-7).

The cross work of Christ is instructive regarding the nature of God's justice. Our hope for salvation rests on the death of Christ, that on the cross He who knew no sin became sin on our behalf (2 Cor. 5:21; see also Rom. 3:25; Gal. 3:13; Heb. 10:10,12,14; Isa. 53:5). What kind of judgment fell on Christ? One does not get the sense from the New Testament that Jesus was on the receiving end of *restorative* justice from God. If justice is only restorative, what was accomplished on the cross? Certainly Jesus wouldn't have been, in that case, paying the penalty for our sin since we, too, might very well have to experience this kind of justice.

Theologian Daniel Strange says the doctrine of propitiation is missing from Talbot's understanding of the atonement. "I would want to argue," he writes, "that not only is propitiation an important concept in terms of the doctrine of the atonement, but is *the* most important concept because of its *Godward* reference." It has to do with addressing the wrath of God. "In Talbot's universalism," Strange continues, "is there any room for the notion of penal substitution? My fear is that in rejecting the concept of retributive punishment, the cross loses much of its meaning and power." He goes on to quote Herman Bavinck:

If the object [of the crucifixion of Christ] had not been salvation from eternal destruction, the price of the blood of God's own Son would have been much too high. The heaven that he won for us by his atoning death presupposes an eternal death by which he saves us. The grace and good pleasure of God in which he makes us participants forever presuppose a wrath into which we would have otherwise plunged forever.<sup>28</sup>

The point of the cross work of Christ was that what He received we do not have to. What Jesus took on himself we do not have to experience. The judgment which fell on Christ was punitive and it was properly ours. If what Christ experienced was punitive judgment, then that is what people apart from Him can expect.

Still, even with all this, how can we possibly regard *everlasting* punishment as a just punishment for the finite number of sins committed by people? It's important to understand that judgment isn't merely a reflection of a sin:punishment ratio. People are punished for their rejection of God which is characterized by a lack of belief and demonstrated by their many sins and unwillingness to repent and humble themselves before God.

Biblical belief isn't the modern day psychologized belief of theological liberalism—"an optimistic confidence in the friendliness of the universe, divorced from any specific creedal tenets" as J.I. Packer describes it—nor is it merely an intellectual exercise of "believing that."<sup>29</sup> In expanding the biblical idea of faith, Packer notes that the idea behind Habakkuk 2:4 ("the righteous shall live by faith") is of a contrast "between the temper of the righteous and the proud self-sufficiency of the Chaldeans" and the attitude "of self-renouncing, trustful reliance upon God, the attitude of heart of which faithfulness in life is the natural expression." This sense is found in the New Testament as well where the word expresses "the complex thought of unqualified acceptance of, and exclusive dependence on, the mediation of the Son as alone securing the mercy of the Father."

Packer points out that the Greek words *pistis* and *pisteuō* "signify commitment as following from conviction, . . . The nature of faith, according to the NT, is to live by the truth it receives; faith, resting on God's promise, gives thanks for God's grace by working for God's glory." The idea of living by the truth is easier to see when the word for faith in Habakkuk is (legitimately) translated "faithfulness". In modern times faith is so often understood as a mere epistemological principle, a means of apprehending truth, a justification for believing something, or, at the other extreme, a merely volitional act, acting as if something were true without having any knowledge of whether it is or not. Faithfulness expresses well the true nature of biblical faith. It isn't only believing something is true; it is living in keeping with that truth. Something is so, and it requires a certain kind of response. To say one believes something but not live as if that were true makes no sense. This richer understanding is laid out in James 2:14-26: a merely intellectual faith is as nothing.

Believing in God is not just a matter of making Him happy by assuring Him that one acknowledges His existence. Believing in God in the biblical sense involves both our acceptance of God in all His glory and our submission to Him whatever He may command or promise. Hence in Hebrews we read this: "but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him" (10:38). To not believe is to shrink back from God and His commands.

Thus, to *not* believe in God in the biblical sense is to reject God, and this is why the harshness of judgment. Moses was thus condemned for his lack of belief when he struck the rock after God said to just speak to it (Num. 20:12). He didn't obey God and thus showed he didn't believe Him. The people of Israel did not believe God would give them the land after seeing the inhabitants (Dt. 1:32), and their lack of belief prevented them from obeying (Dt. 9:23). As a result, none in that generation were allowed to enter the land. In 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12, Paul speaks of the judgment to come "for those who are perishing." He continues: "Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness." Note the contrast. It isn't between believing the truth vs. not believing the truth as an intellectual matter; it is between believing the truth and having pleasure in unrighteousness. Not believing God, people live according to their own unrighteous ways and are judged for it. In the same way that good works reflect real faith behind them, evil works reveal an evil heart, a heart in rebellion.

Thus, those who are punished by God are those who have rejected Him and have broken His righteous law. That is what one should measure eternal punishment by, not by the number or magnitude of individual sins. It isn't a simple payback for offenses committed.

Universalists believe that the sufferings of hell will be sufficient to show people the error of their ways and bring about repentance and faith. In Scripture we see examples where suffering produces repentance and where it doesn't, or where it does temporarily—until the suffering is over, that is. For the Israelites in

the desert, it produced grumbling and resentment. Later, in the days of the judges, suffering brought repentance, but a repentance that was temporary. In Revelation 9:20, we see where people who probably experienced the judgment of the four angels (in v.15) but didn't die continued in their sin. In chapter 16, after the fifth angel poured out his bowl of judgment, "people gnawed their tongues in anguish and cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores. They did not repent of their deeds" (vv. 10-11). When the seventh angel poured out judgment including giant hailstones weighing about one hundred pounds each, the people cursed God; they did not repent (16:21). Universalists might speculate that a few thousand years of that would probably produce true repentance, but that would be mere speculation. There is no reason from the book of Revelation to reasonably hope for it.

## Paul and Universalism

To develop their case, Universalists will often go first to the letters of Paul. Thomas Talbott says straightforwardly that he "[tends] to view the entire Bible through a Pauline lens." "Unlike most conservatives," he writes, "I see no way to escape the conclusion that St. Paul was an obvious Universalist."<sup>30</sup> Where does he find this in Paul's letters?

Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15 are key passages for Universalists. In Romans 5, Paul compares the first Adam with the second Adam, Christ. He begins a thought in verse 12, breaks it off for a long parenthetical section, and picks it up again in verse 18. So in verses 12, 18, and 19 he writes, "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—" (now verse 18) "Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous." Likewise, in 1 Corinthians 15:22 Paul says, "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive." "All" is taken quite literally to mean everyone tainted by sin.

Talbott says Paul couldn't be any clearer. He makes parallel claims about the same group of people. All die in Adam; all are made alive in Christ.<sup>31</sup> The only alternatives are to claim that the "all" who will be made alive only refer to the elect (the Augustinian position), or that, while "all" refers to every single person, not all people will *actually* receive the salvation offered (the Arminian position). But since Paul says "the many *will* be made righteous," Talbott thinks the meaning is clear: everyone will be saved.

Universalists see the same claim in Romans 11:32. After explaining to the Jews how it is that Gentiles can also be saved, Paul turns to the Gentiles and tells them not to be arrogant because the Jews were at that time largely rejecting Christ, for the time would come when God would draw them back. "For God has consigned all to disobedience," Paul writes, "that he may have mercy on all." Talbott considers what a person may have to go through to receive the salvation that will inevitably come. For some it will require that they go through a very painful process "whereby God shatters our illusions, destroys the flesh, and finally separates us from our sin." He continues:

This is a mystery, but nothing could be clearer than Paul's own glorious summation in [Romans] 11:32. For here, once again, we encounter a parallel structure where the first "all" determines the reference of the second. 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.<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, in Philippians 2:10-11 we read that one day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord. The idea of confessing Jesus as Lord is taken from Isaiah 45:23. Talbott, drawing from the late NT scholar J.B. Lightfoot, says that the verb used for "confess" carries implications of praise and thanksgiving. It isn't mere subjugation. He writes, "Now a ruling monarch may indeed force a subject to bow against that subject's will, may even force the subject to utter certain words, but praise and thanksgiving can come only from the heart."<sup>33</sup> In Colossians 1:16-20, Paul writes that God is pleased



to “reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.” Regarding the reconciliation of all things to Christ, Talbott says that reconciliation “is explicitly a redemptive concept” which Paul “applied . . . not only to all human beings, but to all of the spiritual principalities and dominions as well.”<sup>34</sup>

What shall we say in response to this? Do Paul’s writings give clear evidence of Universalism? I believe that Universalists are too selective in their use of Paul’s writings and they don’t take his comments in context.

Paul’s main point in Romans, with respect to the issue at hand, is that salvation is not just for Jews but for all people. Sin came to all men through Adam, and now salvation comes to all men—both Jews and Gentiles—through Christ. In chapter 1, Paul claims that all people know God exists, that everyone is bound by sin, and that God judges, here by giving people over to the consequences of their sin. In chapters 2 and 3, he shows that possession of the law by the Jews is no protection for them against such judgment, for even as they saw themselves as the judges of others, they broke the law they were privileged to receive. However, God responded to human sin by making the way for righteousness through faith in Jesus. This is for all people (Jew and Gentile), for God is the God of all people. Then Paul shows, in chapter 4, how even Abraham—the father of the Jews—was justified by faith, not by works of righteousness. Thus, the Jews had no advantage regarding salvation because they had the law; they were as guilty as the Gentiles. Their salvation comes by faith in Christ just as does the Gentiles’. He sums up in chapter 5: everyone is tainted by sin through Adam; likewise, for everyone—Jew and Gentile alike—salvation is to be found only in Christ.

N.T. Wright argues that “the context of Romans is the Gentile mission of which Paul speaks continually: the gospel is for all, Jew and Gentile alike, who believe (Rom. 1:16,17). Jewish particularism is Paul’s chief enemy, and the one way of salvation (e.g. Rom. 4:9-17, 10:12-13) one of his main emphases.”<sup>35</sup> He writes,

Frequent appeal is made to Paul’s use of the word “all” (e.g. in Rom. 5 and 11, and in 2 Cor. 5) with no apparent realization of the different shades of meaning that must be understood in the particular contexts. In Romans 11:32, for instance, Paul is drawing to a close his carefully argued case that God’s mercy is not for Jews only, nor for Gentiles only, but for *all*—Jews and Gentiles alike. To assume that this verse *must* mean “all men individually” is to take the text right out of the context both of the chapters 9-11 (in which we see God’s judgment on all, Jew and Gentile alike, who disobey, as well as God’s mercy on all, Jew and Gentile alike, who obey) and of the whole epistle (in which salvation is only through faith in Christ, and in which clear warnings are given of impending judgment—e.g. 1:18ff, 3:8, etc.). The word “all” has several clearly distinct biblical uses (e.g. “all of some sorts”, “some of all sorts” etc.), and to ignore this frequently-noted fact is no aid to clear thinking.<sup>36</sup>

Wright notes that in 1 Corinthians 15: 22—“For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive”—the “all” refers to those who are Christ’s as verses 23 and 24 make clear: “But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God.”

MacDonald believes that in 1 Corinthians 15:23-24, Paul is speaking only of Christians alive at that time. “The fate of those who do not yet believe is simply not an issue that interests him here in this context, and thus it goes unmentioned.”<sup>37</sup>

It’s important to note that there is no indication of an intervening time for the evangelization of the lost between the resurrection of those who are Christians (v. 23) and the end (v. 24). Jesus is raised, then His people are raised, and then comes the judgment. Paul always speaks only of the significance of what men do before death for what comes after, and the next event for him after the resurrection is the judgment. In Romans 2:3, Paul asks the reader who lives in sin if he thinks he “will escape the judgment of God.” Such

a one is “storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed” (v. 5). The one who does well will gain eternal life; the one who obeys unrighteousness will face wrath and fury (vv. 7, 8). I’ll return to this later, but for now will just note that there is no clear teaching in Scripture that in the eschaton people will be saved (postmortem salvation) or even that saving grace will be offered (postmortem evangelization) and certainly not after God’s judgment is revealed.<sup>38</sup>

Wright also responds to the claim that Philippians 2:10 prophesies that all people will kneel before Christ in a spirit of adoration and worship, implying that all are in fact saved. There Paul quotes Isaiah 45:23, a passage quoted again in Romans 14:10-12 which is speaking of judgment.<sup>39</sup> The same word is used in both passages for “confess” (exomologeō). In Matthew 25, we also see what happens at the final judgment as those who did well are ushered in the kingdom and the rest are ushered into eternal punishment.

As for Romans 11:32, which says that “God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all”, this isn’t referring to the end times but is offered in defense of Paul’s ministry to the Jews despite their rejection of the Messiah. Addressing the Gentiles (11:13), Paul says they should not be arrogant toward those who have been temporarily rejected. The disobedience of the Jews led to the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles that they might receive mercy. In turn, the Jews who lived in disobedience will be grafted back in “if they do not continue in their unbelief” (11:23).

Second Thessalonians 1: 6-10 is especially problematic for Gregory MacDonald. There Paul writes,

God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

MacDonald says that Paul could merely be talking about the limited punishment of people who oppressed the Christians at that time. This punishment would take place in the age to come, but, since he believes that age to be limited in time, such punishment is not the last word. However, he concedes that this isn’t clearly Paul’s meaning.<sup>40</sup>

We find a similar contrast in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11. Those who are in Christ obtain salvation; those who are not face destruction. MacDonald claims that the word for “destruction” doesn’t mean completely destroyed. The same word is used in 1 Corinthians 5:5 about the man who is to be turned over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh. MacDonald says this refers to the destruction or ruin of the man’s sin nature. This would be a destruction that worked for the good of the person. However, he acknowledges that the 1 Corinthians passage refers to a Christian while the Thessalonians passages do not. The contrast is striking in the 1 Thessalonians 5 passage: destruction for one and salvation for the other. Could Paul really just be talking about a limited punishment that would eventually bring the person to Christ? I will return to these Thessalonians passages later. For now I’ll just make the claim that the image in 2 Thessalonians 1 is one of final judgment, not of remedial punishment.

## **Jesus and Universalism**

It’s been noted often that Jesus makes the strongest statements on hell in Scripture. Universalists believe they have been misunderstood.

Chapter 25 of Matthew is a significant passage regarding Jesus’ view of the judgment to come. There we read where the sheep will be separated from the goats—the saved will be separated from the unsaved—and Jesus says that the latter will go away into eternal punishment but the former into eternal life. How do Universalists read this?

Given that Paul clearly taught Universalism, Talbott believes, he interprets such passages as Matthew 25 in that light. He characterizes Jesus' prophetic teachings as "hyperbole, metaphor, and riddle . . . parable and colorful stories." Jesus' teachings, he says, were "intended to awaken the spiritual imagination of his disciples and to leave room for reinterpretation as they matured in the faith; it was not intended to provide final answers to their theological questions." Talbott says it isn't surprising that people who seek support for rejecting Paul's Universalism should find it "in the colourful language of Jesus."<sup>41</sup> Jesus is simply teaching what would have been our fate were it not for the atonement.<sup>42</sup> He writes,

Had it been Jesus' intention to address the question of universal salvation (or any other theological question) in a clear and systematic way, I'm sure he was capable of doing so. He did not have to express himself in hyperbole, parables, and riddles, after all. He did so, in part, because he was far more interested in challenging us and in transforming our hearts than he was in imparting correct doctrine.<sup>43</sup>

Gregory MacDonald sees Jesus' life and teachings in the context of the fulfillment of God's covenant with Israel. He writes, "Jesus, in his role as messianic king of Israel, represents and embodies the destiny of that nation. . . . [In] his death and resurrection Israel's exile and return are pictured and achieved."<sup>44</sup> MacDonald takes the promise that all nations would be blessed because of Abraham as evidence that "Abram and Israel are elect *for the sake of the nations*."<sup>45</sup> But Israel rejected God. How can God complete His promise to the nations? Israel must be drawn back. In Isaiah we read about the nations "flowing in pilgrimage to Mount Zion to worship at the Temple" (cf. Isa. 2:1-4; 11:10-12). Since God promised in the Old Testament that Israel would be brought back, that He would be faithful to His covenant, this promise must be fulfilled, and it would be fulfilled through the Servant. Who is the Servant? The Servant Song in Isaiah 49 shows a shift in the identity of the Servant from the corporate to the individual, from Israel to Jesus. He is identified with Israel yet distinguished from it. "The individual Servant in Isaiah 49:8-13 does for Israel what Israel was to do for the nations." How he will achieve it is found in Isaiah chapter 53: through his death and resurrection.<sup>46</sup>

As the judgment of Israel is followed by its salvation, so it is for the other nations. Isaiah 45: 23-24, the passage quoted by Paul in Philippians 2, says that one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that in the Lord are righteousness and strength. MacDonald agrees with Talbott:

That this is no forced subjection of defeated enemies is clear for the following reasons. First, we see that God has just called all the nations to turn to him and be saved, and it is in that context that the oath is taken. Second, the swearing of oaths in Yahweh's name is something his own people do, not his defeated enemies. Third, those who confess Yahweh go on to say, "In the Lord alone are righteousness and strength," which sounds like the cry of praise from God's own people.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, all Israel and all nations will be saved through the work of Christ on the cross. Judgment isn't the last word.

If this is so, what was Jesus talking about when He spoke of people experiencing everlasting punishment?

MacDonald argues that the two important texts for Jesus' teachings on the state of the lost can be shown to not teach eternal suffering as traditionally understood.

The first text is the story of the rich man and Lazarus told in Luke 16: 19-31. The Pharisees had ridiculed Jesus for his teachings on wealth, and he responded with the parable of the rich man in torment.

MacDonald believes Jesus was simply using a story to illustrate his teaching on wealth and poverty, not on the afterlife. The rich man was a representative of Pharisaism. Rather than being the one in the presence of Abraham, where a Pharisee would expect to wind up because of his supposed piety, the rich man was in torment and the poor man who had sat at the Pharisees' gate begging was in the better place. This was a shocking thought to Pharisees who assumed they were the righteous ones who would inherit heaven.

To teach this lesson, Jesus drew on an image of the afterlife held by the Pharisees.<sup>48</sup> MacDonald doubts this parable is about the afterlife because “nowhere else does Jesus ever suggest that the coming judgment precedes the end of the age”, and he believes this is what we see in this story. In addition, this passage speaks not of Gehenna but of Hades, “an intermediate period between death and final judgment.”<sup>49</sup> “Jesus adopts the eschatology of the Pharisees,” MacDonald writes, “in order to lampoon their pseudo piety. If this is so, then we learn nothing about the afterlife from the parable.”<sup>50</sup>

The second passage is the Matthew 25 passage (vv. 31-46). Verse 46 presents the length of life and of punishment as eternal; they are parallel. How can this be interpreted to not contradict Universalism?

Here we’re introduced to a word that is important in the arguments of Universalists, the word commonly translated “eternal”. The Greek word is *aiōnion*. Universalists argue that this word refers to an age of punishment because the root word, *aiōn*, means just that—an age with a beginning and an end. So there is the age of punishment and the age of reward. MacDonald thus translates “eternal life” as “the life of the age to come” and “eternal punishment” as “the punishment of the age to come.”<sup>51</sup> He continues: “True, the age to come is everlasting, but that does not necessitate that the punishment of the age to come lasts for the duration of that age, simply that it occurs during that age and is appropriate for that age.” But what would that mean for “eternal life”? Is it also not everlasting? He replies that the text doesn’t affirm or deny the length of life or punishment. However, he writes, 1 Corinthians 15:42-44 “clearly [establishes] the indestructible nature of resurrection life.”<sup>52</sup> So here we have affirmation that the life of the saved is everlasting.

On the surface, Jesus *could* be taken to be teaching everlasting punishment. But why wasn’t He clearer? He knew how the Jews of His day understood these things. MacDonald claims that Jesus’ concern was to warn people to avoid God’s punishment however long it might be experienced; “to add a ‘p.s., it’ll work out OK in the end’ was not only unnecessary,” he says, “but also counter-productive.” In other words, this wasn’t the appropriate time to explain that no one would actually be judged eternally. Prophets in the Old Testament, he notes, frequently warned the Israelites about God’s judgment, knowing that one day God would restore Israel. “In such contexts one rarely hears a message of restoration, but such restoration invariably came and was spoken of *when the context required it*.”<sup>53</sup> There were a number of things Jesus didn’t teach clearly during his earthly ministry that were taught later by his apostles when the time was right. And MacDonald believes that later Paul clearly taught Universalism.

MacDonald believes that the fact that Jesus’ contemporaries wouldn’t have expected Universalist teaching doesn’t mean Jesus didn’t believe in it. Although he acknowledges that Jesus didn’t clearly teach Universalism, he believes that “what [Jesus] did teach does not formally contradict universalist claims.”<sup>54</sup> A few pages earlier he wrote, “I shall argue that Jesus never explicitly endorsed the claim made by some Jews that the wicked would be tormented *forever* nor the claim of others that they would be *annihilated*. My claim is that although Jesus only once mitigated his claims about hell so as to suggest that it was a temporary fate (Mark 9:47-49), there are good rhetorical reasons why he would not have done so normally.”<sup>55</sup>

Here is what MacDonald means when he says Jesus mitigated His claims about hell in the Mark 9 passage. In verses 47 and 48, we read where Jesus said that “it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell [Gehenna] ‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’” This surely sounds like eternal punishment, but, again, that is what the people would expect. “Thus, when Jesus spoke about the fires of Gehenna, almost everyone who was listening to him would interpret his words as a reference to the *final* state of the lost.”<sup>56</sup> However, Jesus follows up his teaching about Gehenna by saying that everyone will be salted with fire (v. 49). If the fire in verse 48 is eternal damnation, verse 49 would indicate that everyone will go to hell. Since that obviously isn’t so, then verse 48 can’t be talking about eternal judgment. This salting is taken to refer to purification. Here we see a major theme in modern Universalist writings, namely, that judgment in Scripture is for purification, not for retribution. “This [verse] has long perplexed commentators,”

MacDonald writes, “but it seems to indicate that the fires of Gehenna function as a place of purification. Presumably, if *everyone* must pass through eschatological fire to enter the Kingdom (compare Matt. 3:11), then Gehenna is only one mode of such purification and, clearly, the mode to avoid at all costs.”<sup>57</sup> Thus, Jesus “mitigated” his teachings on hell in this passage to suggest that it might be temporary.

What shall we say to all this?

To respond to MacDonald’s commentary on the Mark 9 passage, if Jesus didn’t uniformly make strong, non-mitigated statements about eternal judgment, one might justifiably argue as MacDonald has. But against the background of all of Jesus’ teachings, one might give a different but plausible interpretation. It could have been that after Jesus spoke of fire in the context of eternal judgment, He shifted over to talking about the testing by fire that believers will experience of which Paul speaks in 1 Cor. 3:13 and which Malachi prophesied about (Mal. 3:2).

In the story of the rich man and Lazarus, does it make sense to think Jesus was simply accommodating a faulty view of the eschaton? There was no need for Jesus to do that to make his point. He speaks of this judgment on several occasions. Surely at *some* time he would have seen fit to correct the Pharisees’ belief were it wrong. Jesus showed little reluctance to correct wrong ideas; the Sermon on the Mount with its “You have heard . . . but I say unto you” provides clear examples of that. Why accommodate such a major error in the telling of the story?

The cumulative weight of what Jesus taught about the judgment to come is not overcome by the possible different interpretations offered by Universalists. Let’s look at a few passages in the Gospels where Jesus speaks of judgment.

In Matthew chapter 7, we read this severe warning from Jesus: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness’” (7:21-23). There is no mention of a second chance later.

In the parable of the ten virgins, when those who weren’t prepared knocked on the door and asked to be let in, the bridegroom refused, saying he didn’t know them (Matt. 25:1-13). This is clearly counter to the Universalist notion that when people finally turn to the Lord, even in the afterlife, they will be saved. Jesus says there will come a point after which the door won’t be opened.

Matthew 25 includes an extended passage on judgment. Jesus concludes by naming two possibilities: eternal punishment or eternal life. There is no indication that they are speaking of different kinds of eternity, or that the eternity in mind is merely qualitative. The interpretation given to “eternal” as applied to “life” must also be applied to “punishment”. The Universalist might cry “Foul!” to this claim since the traditionalist interprets the two uses of “all” in the Romans 5 passage differently. The difference lies in the contexts. In Romans we have good reason to interpret “all” differently. Here in Matthew there is no contextual reason for interpreting “eternal” differently.

In Mark 3:29, Jesus said that “whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.” It’s hard to imagine how Jesus could have been any clearer: guilty of eternal sin with no hope of forgiveness.

Mark 8:38 says that whoever is ashamed of Jesus and his words *in this generation*, the Son of Man will be ashamed of in return when he comes in his glory. Such people will forfeit their souls (8:36). Those who deny Jesus before man will be denied by Jesus before the Father (Matt. 10:33).

In Mark 9:43, Jesus said it would be better to remove one’s hand, foot, or eye than to enter hell with them where the fire is inextinguishable (see also v. 48).

In this dire warning in Luke 13, there is no hint of an opportunity for salvation to be found after death:

He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem. And someone said to him, “Lord, will those who are saved be few?” And he said to them, “Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, open to us,’ then he will answer you, ‘I do not know where you come from.’ Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.’ But he will say, ‘I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!’ In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out. And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God. And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last” (Luke 13:22-30).

What sense would it make for Jesus to talk about a wide gate that leads to destruction and a narrow one that leads to life if everyone is going to enter into eternal life?

There is more, but this is sufficient to show the essence of Jesus’ teachings about the finality of hell and judgment. New Testament scholar I. Howard Marshall says that “there is no hint in the Gospels that [Jesus] continues to seek out sinners in the next world until he is completely successful.”<sup>58</sup> If this *were* Jesus’ own beliefs, we are left with a very curious situation. “We are left, therefore, to hypothesize,” Marshall says, “that universalism was a belief held by Jesus that he did not communicate directly to his friends. . . . [T]here is nothing whatever to suggest that Jesus believed that God would bring about the ultimate salvation of all, and we have no justification for interpreting his statements about ultimate separation in some other way. If we attribute to Jesus an underlying universalism, we make nonsense of the beliefs and attitudes that he openly expressed.”<sup>59</sup> MacDonald’s explanation that Jesus didn’t teach everything we need to know, that “to add a ‘p.s., it’ll work out OK in the end’ was not only unnecessary but also counter-productive,” is hardly satisfactory. Jesus’ fearful warnings are gross exaggerations of only intended as cautions to the faithful (and all the rest who would definitely become so). They far exceed in magnitude the stern warnings given by Jewish prophets to get the people of Israel back on the straight and narrow.

## **Aiōnion**

Let’s return to the word aiōnion. We noted earlier the way Universalists understand this word, typically translated “eternal” or “everlasting”. They hold that it means an age with a beginning and an end because of its root word aiōn, so references to eternal judgment have in mind a time of judgment that comes to an end.

The problem here is that aiōnion isn’t directly a form of aiōn; it is a form of the word *aiōnios* which means “eternal.” That still doesn’t settle the issue for Thomas Talbott, however. He claims that “on no occasion of its use in the New testament does ‘*aionios*’ refer to a *temporal* process of unending duration.” The term is qualitative. Jude wrote that Sodom and Gomorrah were subjected to “eternal fire,” but surely that doesn’t mean the fire is still burning today, he says. “He was instead giving a theological interpretation in which the fire represented God’s judgement upon the two cities. . . . it expressed God’s eternal character and eternal purpose in a special way.” He continues,

So just as eternal life is a special quality of life, associated with the age to come, whose causal source lies in the eternal God himself, so eternal punishment is a special form of punishment, associated with the age to come, whose causal source lies in the eternal God himself. In that respect, the two are exactly parallel. But neither *concept* carries any implication of unending temporal duration.<sup>60</sup>

According to Walter Bauer's Greek lexicon, there are a few possible meanings of *aīōnios*.<sup>61</sup> It can mean "without beginning" as in 2 Timothy 1:9: "before time eternal" or "from eternity". It can mean "without beginning or end" as in Romans 16:26 where it refers to God. Contrary to Talbott's claim, it can also mean "without end" as in 2 Corinthians 4:18 and 5:1 where Paul contrasts our earthly tent, which will be destroyed, with the "house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (cf. Jn. 14:2,3).<sup>62</sup> That this refers to an open-ended period of *time* that has a beginning and not just a particular *quality* is clear from the contrast set up in 4:18: "For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." The word translated "transient" (*proskairos*) refers to that which is limited in time: lasting only for a time, temporary, transitory.<sup>63</sup> In Philemon 15, Paul says he is sending Onesimus, the slave, back to Philemon, and he makes this contrast: "For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for *a while*, that you might have him back *forever*." The oft-quoted verse John 3:16 contrasts having eternal life with perishing. Does this not mean life unending?

One may also note Jude 25 where the atemporal is mixed with the temporal: "to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen." This isn't speaking merely of a mode of existence or of timeless eternity. Jesus existed before the world began, he came to earth and fully participated in our time, and he will continue to exist forever.<sup>64</sup>

Joachim Guhrt elaborates on this connection between God and *aīōnios* with respect to time:

As in the OT, these statements reveal the background conviction that God's life never ends, i.e. that everything belonging to him can also never come to an end. So it comes about that even where the conception of the age (in the doxologies of the Pauline letters and those closely related to Paul, and also those of Rev.) is intensified (*eis tous aionas ton aionon*, lit. "to the eternity of eternities"), the connexion with the basic meaning of *aion* as life-span is still not lost. What appertains to the living God is "eternal."<sup>65</sup>

Guhrt notes that "the expression 'eternal life' (*zoe aionios*), corresponding to the basic meaning of *aion*, lifetime, as defined by the OT, is to be understood primarily as life which belongs to God." John brings out this connection with respect to Jesus specifically. John 3:36 says that "whoever believes in the Son has eternal life." This a quality of life one has now. However, the temporal is not absent, because this life is the life of the Son (Jn. 14:6; 1 Jn. 5:11), and he has no end; it extends beyond the grave (11:25, 26). In John 4:14, Jesus promises that whoever drinks of the water he gives will never thirst "into the age" (*eis ton aīōna*). He uses the same phrase in 6:58 to contrast the bread of earth with that of heaven: "This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever." In John 10:28, Jesus promises, "I give them life eternal and never into the age [literal translation] will they perish"<sup>66</sup> Guhrt lists a number of times in the Synoptic Gospels, Paul's epistles, and Jude where "there is a temporal understanding of eternal life . . . . This is a life that is awaited in the future along with the resurrection of the dead."<sup>67</sup>

New Testament scholar Leon Morris says that both quantity and quality are included:

The adjective "eternal" means literally "age-long," and everything depends on the length of the age. In the New Testament there is never a hint that the coming age has an end—it is the continuing life of the world to come. When the life of believers beyond the grave is spoken of it is with the use of this same adjective. "Eternal life" is that life which belongs to the age to come. Therefore it has no end. At the same time "eternal" is a quality of life. It is not only that life in the age to come will be longer than life here: it will also be of a different quality.<sup>68</sup>

Thus, even if one sees a qualitative character to *aīōnios*, there is still a time element. We will have life everlasting because Jesus, to whom we are now connected, has life everlasting.

In the same way that eternal *life* has a time element as connected with the life of God, Guhrt notes that "one must not forget that this God is also the final Judge, so that even perdition must be called *aionios*,

eternal.”<sup>69</sup> Jude says that the blasphemers plaguing the church were like “wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars, for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever” (v. 13). About those who worship the beast and its image John writes, “And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name” (Rev. 14:11). Earlier we noted that, in Mark 3:29, Jesus said that “whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never [lit. “not into the age”] has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin [aiōnion hamartēmatos]”. Note well: this person *never* has forgiveness. And in the much discussed passage in Matthew 25, Jesus juxtaposes the destinies of the saved and the lost. One has eternal life; the other has eternal punishment.

Even if we think of aiōn in terms of definite periods of time that have a beginning and an end, this isn’t helpful to Universalists. The work of Christ marks the end of the present age which will culminate in the separating of His people from those sent to judgment, and the age to come is the time of the rule of Christ. The writer of Hebrews says that Jesus “has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (9:26). “End” here means culmination or completion. Paul says that on us has come the end of the ages (1 Cor. 10:11). This “end of the ages” is the time of the work of Christ on this earth that will end with the casting of the “weeds” or evildoers “into the fiery furnace” by the angels (Matt. 13:39-43). By contrast, Jesus promised His disciples that He would be with them until the end of this age (Matt. 28:20) after which will come the age of blessing for believers (Eph. 1:21; 2:7; see also Matt. 12:32; Heb. 6:5).

### **The Destruction of the Lost**

What is the nature of the experience of the lost after the judgment? I return to the writings of Paul on this important issue for Universalism.

Second Thessalonians 1:9 speaks of those who “will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction [olethron aiōnion], away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.” In keeping with his understanding of aiōnion as referring just to an age with beginning and end, MacDonald translates the phrase “the destruction of the age to come” or “the ruin of the age to come.”<sup>70</sup> Such ruin need not be eternal; it is just that which is appropriate to that particular age. This introduces another concept important to this discussion. What does it mean to be destroyed or to perish (cf. Jn. 3:16)?

Earlier I noted that the word “destruction” (olethron) in 2 Thessalonians 1:9 is used in 1 Corinthians 5:5 where Paul says that the person in the church living in sin should be handed over to Satan “for the destruction of the flesh.” The word olethron is used only of persons in the New Testament, and can be defined broadly as ruin; the person is brought to a place of uselessness. In the Corinthian passage, Paul doesn’t mean the *eternal* destruction of the body; this judgment was indeed intended for the restoration of the person. MacDonald believes that in the 2 Thessalonians passage Paul is likely speaking of a judgment that is limited in time (albeit in this case a judgment that is retributive), and it is referring to the judgment of people who were persecuting the early Christians. He writes that “in the context Paul is simply pointing out that those who have persecuted the Christians will not get away with it but will be punished at the appearing of the Lord. [Paul] has no interest in this context in discussing whether a future salvation is available for them or not.”<sup>71</sup>

Contra MacDonald, it is entirely in keeping with other teachings of Paul (and of Jesus) to understand him to be speaking of the everlasting ruin of individual persons. As noted above, Leon Morris says that the term “eternal destruction” is the opposite of “eternal life.” It is the end of all that is worthwhile in life.

Thomas Talbott agrees that the destruction here is forever, but he believes that it refers not to the *person* but to the *sin nature* the destruction of which serves to bring about redemption. Talbott’s interpretation is hard to see in the 2 Thessalonians passage. The judgment is against persons, not against their sin natures; it’s on those “who do not obey the gospel”. We see this in 1 Thessalonians 5:3 which speaks of the sudden destruction that will come upon those outside the church.



Another note on the 2 Thessalonians 1:9 passage. To try to undermine the idea of a final judgment, some Universalists point out that the words “away from” can also legitimately be translated “that comes from.” Thus the phrase would be, “will suffer . . . eternal destruction *that comes from* the presence of the Lord.” No separation from God is intended. This is to negate the idea that these people are being sent away to hell.

Contrary to this interpretation, Morris writes,

As eternal life can be defined in terms of the knowledge of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ (John 17:3), so the eternal destruction which is here in mind is “from the face of the Lord.” “From” appears to have the meaning “away from” (contrast 1 Thess. 4:17). It indicates that separation from the Lord which is the final disaster. The solemnity of this thought should not be minimized. Those who oppose the things of God here and now are not engaged in some minor error which can easily be put right in the hereafter. They are engaging in that defiance of the will of God which has eternal consequences.<sup>72</sup>

Thus, Morris sees a major contrast between the end of unbelievers and that of believers with respect to the presence of the Lord. He points out that in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, Paul says believers “will be with the Lord forever” whereas in 2 Thessalonians 1:9 he says unbelievers will experience “eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord.”

Although the Universalist translation of the phrase is grammatically possible, the traditional interpretation has the support of the rest of Scripture. It is noteworthy, too, that the Universalist interpretation adds nothing to their argument *for* Universalism; at best it only undercuts a *clear* statement of everlasting destruction in this passage. But even if the destruction comes “from the presence of the Lord,” that in no way implies that it isn’t everlasting.

Another word is used in the New Testament for the destruction of the unsaved is *apōleia*. In Philippians 3:19 Paul uses it to refer to the end (*telos*) of the enemies of the cross. In Romans 9:22 he speaks of the vessels of wrath that are prepared for destruction. Peter writes about the false teachers who will bring swift destruction on themselves (2 Pet. 2:1-2). In the following chapter he says that by the same word that created the world and destroyed it in the time of Noah, “the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly” (3:7).

The Universalist might want to note that a related word is used in 2 Peter 3:6 to refer to the world that was “destroyed” but then rebuilt. Could that not also be what is meant by the destruction of the ungodly, that they’ll be destroyed but then be restored?

*Apōleia* has been used to mean everything from being lost to perishing to being destroyed. It is used by the disciples to speak of the “waste” of the costly ointment poured out on Jesus’ feet (Matt. 26:8). In Matthew 27:20, the chief priests and elders demanded that Jesus be destroyed or put to death. In Hebrews 10: 39 it is used to refer to those who shrink back to destruction in contrast to those who move forward to the preservation of their souls.

J. I. Packer argues that Scriptures that contain statements that could be construed as Universalistic are juxtaposed with statements that speak of perishing and should be qualified by them. Talbott believes Packer is arguing fallaciously. Why, he asks, should the perishing statements qualify the universal statements rather than vice versa? He defends his position by claiming that “the state of *having perished* (or of ‘being lost’) is simply that of *not yet having been found*”, so there isn’t any real tension. As examples he points to Luke 15:4 which speaks of the lost sheep that has yet to be found, the prodigal son who, being lost, was later to be found (Lk. 15:24), and the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt. 10:6). Talbott translates the term “having perished” in these verses.<sup>73</sup> (The Greek word used here is the related word *apollumi* [ἀπόλλυμι]).

Talbott doubts that Packer could show that Paul used the word to mean other than simply lost (with the possibility of being found), but I think Packer could do that easily. The word carries different meanings as noted previously. Surely the tenants in Matthew 21:41, for example, are to be understood to be put to death or destroyed (see also Mark 3:6; 4:38; 8:35; 9:22). In Romans 2:12, Paul writes that “For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.” In 1 Corinthians 10:9, he speaks of the Israelites who were “destroyed by the serpents.” In 2 Thessalonians 2:1-11, Paul speaks of the time when the “man of lawlessness” will be revealed who is himself destined for destruction (apōleia; v. 2). This one will deceive “those who are perishing [apollumi], because they refused to love the truth and so be saved” (v. 10). Are these merely lost like the sheep in Jesus’ parable? Clearly not.

The question for Talbott is this: which meaning of apollumi or apōleia best suits the contexts of Paul’s writings? Are Paul’s statements about being destroyed (or lost, for Talbott) to be modified by his statements that could possibly be interpreted to support Universalism, or vice versa?

According to the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, there is typically a specific theological meaning given to this family of words in the New Testament. It is set in opposition to eternal life:

The specific theological sense of these words in the NT is brought out by Jn. and Paul. Just as soteria (salvation) and zoe aionios (eternal life) connote sure and lasting salvation, so apollymi and apoleia mean “definitive destruction, not merely in the sense of the extinction of physical existence, but rather of an eternal plunge into Hades and a hopeless destiny of death” (A. Oepke, TDNT I 396). Besides those who receive eternal life (Jn. 10:28) there will also be those who “perish” (1 Cor. 1:18; cf. 2 Cor. 2:15; 4:3). . . . Over against life with God there stands the terrible possibility of eternal perdition. The NT use of *olethros* and related words is characterized by the way in which destruction is set in the light of eternity. Perdition is the fate that awaits the man who does not come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9; cf. Matt. 13:3, 5), who rejects love of the truth (2 Thess. 2:10), who goes on the broad way “that leads to destruction” (Matt. 7:13), or who is one of the enemies of the cross of Christ (Phil. 3:18f.). Judas (Jn. 17:12) and the Antichrist (2 Thess. 2:3) are specifically described as “sons of perdition”.<sup>74</sup>

The phrase “eternal destruction” in 2 Thessalonians 1:9 summarizes well the New Testament teaching about the destiny of the lost. One day judgment will be passed, and they will suffer everlasting ruin.

### **Postmortem Salvation**

Because obviously not everyone dies in Christ, postmortem salvation is an essential component of Universalism. Some Christians have held a kind of half-way position called *postmortem evangelization*. This is the idea that people will have an opportunity beyond the grave to be saved, although not all will receive it. Some Roman Catholic theologians, for example, have held to what is known as the “final option” theory according to which the unsaved have an encounter with Christ at the moment of death when the soul is separating from the body. The person is completely free to accept or reject. The choice made is irreversible.<sup>75</sup> Others have held that people will have an opportunity after the moment of death.<sup>76</sup> Theologians Clark Pinnock and Gabriel Fackre believe that postmortem evangelization makes sense. Fackre argues that, since salvation is obtained by personal belief and one must hear the gospel in order to exercise faith (since one cannot learn the way to salvation from general revelation), then everyone must hear the gospel sometime. Since not everyone hears it while here on earth, they must hear it after death.<sup>77</sup> Likewise, Pinnock says that, “Although the scriptural evidence for postmortem encounter is not abundant, its scantiness is relativized by the strength of the theological argument for it. A postmortem encounter with Jesus actually makes very good sense.”<sup>78</sup>

Universalists go further than this. They hold both that postmortem evangelization is a reality and that the offer remains good until received, however long that takes. Everyone will ultimately be saved. Postmortem salvation is assured. Is there biblical warrant for this belief?

There is no direct scriptural teaching about postmortem salvation. Nor, as Pinnock noted, is there much to go on for just postmortem *evangelization* (even if salvation for all itself is not secured). The closest scriptural text is the much disputed passage in 1 Peter where Peter speaks of Jesus making proclamation to the spirits in prison (3:19,20). G. W. Beasley-Murray believes this refers to an offer of salvation:

The primary lesson in the writer's mind is to exemplify the universal reach of Christ's redeeming work and the divine willingness that all should know it. The preaching of Christ between his cross and his Easter is intended to prove that the wickedest generation of history is not beyond the bounds of his pity and the scope of his redemption, hence there is hope for *this* generation, that has sinned even more greatly than the Flood generation in refusing the proclamation of a greater Messenger of God and that faces the *last* judgment.<sup>79</sup>

Universalists believe they see evidence for postmortem salvation elsewhere in Scripture, too. For example, MacDonald believes that Revelation 21:25, which says that the gates to the New Jerusalem will never be closed, indicates that unbelievers can change their ways and come in after death. Those who are outside he identifies as the murderers, idolaters, and the sexually immoral mentioned in Revelation 21:8 and 22:15. "To be outside the city walls," he says, "is to be in the lake of fire (21:8)." In 21:23-27, we read that the kings of the earth—who MacDonald identifies with the kings defeated earlier with the beast (19:19)—enter into the city along with the glory and honor of the nations. MacDonald reasons this way:

Given that those in the city would have no reason to leave it to enter the lake of fire, why are the doors always open? . . . In the oracle of Isaiah 60 on which this vision is based we read that the gates were left open for the purpose of allowing the nations to enter (60:11), and that is the case here too: the open doors are not just a symbol of security but primarily a symbol of the God who excludes no one from his presence forever.<sup>80</sup>

So those outside, including the kings of the earth defeated with the Beast in chapter 19, may come in at a later time.

MacDonald sees more in the book of the Revelation that he believes supports his view. For example, in chapter 14 we read of judgment meted out by three angels. In chapter 15 there is a scene of worship which includes the pronouncement that "all nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed" (v. 4). These are the same, he believes, as the apostate nations in 14:11, the smoke of whose torment rises forever. Says MacDonald, "Notice that John does not say that people *from* all nations . . . will come and worship, but that all nations will come and worship."<sup>81</sup> "All" here means "all without exception," not "all" as in "representatives from all nations."

To his credit, MacDonald is not adamant about his interpretation.<sup>82</sup> Here we see how his theological vision of the love of God determines how he interprets texts. He bases his understanding on the basic interpretive principles laid down at the beginning of his book according to which "biblical teachings on God's love, his desire for universal salvation, and his providence point towards universalism."<sup>83</sup> He contrasts his method of interpreting the Revelation texts with that of NT scholar G. K. Beale who "rightly draws attention here to a tension between the damnation texts [in Revelation] and this vision [21:25]. [Beale] takes his fixed point as the damnation texts and re-reads Revelation 21 to fit them. Universalists will take their interpretation of Revelation 21 as the starting point and attempt a re-interpretation of the damnation texts."<sup>84</sup>

How can we respond to this?

Regarding the passage in 1 Peter, it is not at all clear that the event in question refers to the evangelization of all the lost after death. New Testament scholar Wayne Grudem names five possible interpretations of

this passage, but says that even more are possible.<sup>85</sup> Theologian John Feinberg says that “it should be clear that one could hold to any number of positions and not be thought to be on the fringe.”<sup>86</sup> While the Universalist interpretation is possible, it isn’t enough upon which to base a doctrine of postmortem salvation.

Regarding the “kings of the earth” spoken of in Revelation 19:19 and 21:24, we need to recognize that that designation is given five other times in Revelation.<sup>87</sup> “Kings of the earth” is a common designation in Scripture for earthly rulers. Jesus speaks of the kings of the earth in Matthew 17:25. The term is also used in Acts 4:26 which is drawn from Psalm 2:1, 2. It is entirely reasonable to see John, in Revelation, as talking about one group of kings who side with the beast (19:19) and another group who, later (21:24), are part of the kingdom and who enter to bring homage to *the* King.

Regarding the gates to the New Jerusalem never being shut, Universalists point out that Revelation 22:15 indicates that those outside who are lost can come in. It’s just as plausible to interpret this section as meaning that not all the redeemed live inside the city, or that, if they do, they are free to come and go. “Outside” doesn’t necessarily mean simply outside spatially but can also mean those not included in the circle or group (cf. Mk. 4:11; 1 Cor. 5:12f; Col. 4:5; 1 Thess. 4:12). The wall around the city marks a boundary between those who may enter and those “outside.”<sup>88</sup> Those who are able to enter the city are those whose robes are washed (Rev. 22:14) and whose names have been written in the Lamb’s book of life (21:27). No promise is given that a person’s name can be entered after death.

It is not clear in the passages put forth by MacDonald that they are speaking of the lost being saved after death. They have to be interpreted in light of a prior commitment to Universalism in order to be understood that way. These verses are flimsy evidence when placed next to the much clearer passages in Revelation about everlasting judgment (not to mention those in the rest of Scripture).

To disprove the possibility of salvation after death is to completely undercut Universalism for, obviously, not everyone comes to faith in this life. If death marks the end of the possibility for salvation, Universalism is destroyed. But even if death *isn’t* the end of any possibility of salvation, if any *other* event clearly marks an end to opportunities, that would put Universalism on shaky foundations as well since Universalists speak in terms of an open ended period of time in which people can be saved.<sup>89</sup>

Do we have support in Scripture for a cutoff time, whether at death or at some time after death? I think we do.

First, although some Universalists see the lake of fire as the experience of those who are apart from Christ where they learn first-hand what total separation means and consequently change their minds and turn to Him, John 5:28 and 29 seems to show judgment delivered *before* the lake of fire based upon what people did before death: “Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.” Those who hear Jesus’ voice at His second coming are in their tombs. They have not had the chance to be purged in the lake of fire. Some come out of their tombs to the resurrection of life, others to the resurrection of judgment. Because Jesus is referring to tombs on this earth, this couldn’t refer to a time after the destruction (or renewing) of the earth where all things are made new. A Universalist might say that this judgment to which some are raised is restorative judgment, but the burden is theirs to prove it; that isn’t the face value interpretation.

Second, in Matthew 7, Jesus talks to His disciples about false prophets who are wolves in sheep’s clothing. These same people, Jesus says, will approach Him in the day of judgment and tell Him all about the good things they did. About that Jesus said,

Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your

name?” And then will I declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.”

There is no indication that these workers of lawlessness ever have a chance to return.

Third, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31 is often used to show that there is no crossing of the divide after death. Recall that MacDonald believes this isn't a vision of an event after the day of judgment but rather sometime before it since the rich man is in Hades, not Gehenna, and because it speaks of a judgment prior to the end of the age, and nowhere else does Jesus speak of this.<sup>90</sup>

It's true that one should hesitate to build an eschatology on this passage. For example, whereas here the man is in torment in the flames while still in Hades, in Revelation, Hades itself is thrown into the lake of fire (20:14). However, one still gets a sense of finality about the rich man's situation. Abraham tells him no one can cross the chasm between them, and implies that he, like his brothers, didn't believe Moses and the Prophets to his (and their) detriment. If all Jesus wanted to do was to chastise the Pharisees for their love of money, there would be no need to construct such an image. As noted previously, Jesus had no problem with correcting the Pharisees' misunderstandings.

Fourth, in Matthew 25, Jesus presents a fearsome image of the day when He comes in judgment and separates the sheep from the goats. About those who never demonstrated the love of Christ to other people He says, “And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (v.46). There's no hint that there could be a day after this when people will move from punishment into life.

Fifth, the New Testament speaks of the “day of the Lord”, the eschatological event when Christ will be revealed in all His glory (1 Thess. 5:2; cf. Lk. 17:24; 1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Thess. 2:2) and which will mark the beginning of the end when judgment will be passed on the unsaved, and the saved will receive their reward.<sup>91</sup>

Sixth, the marriage supper of the Lamb, described in Revelation 19:6-10, implies a point in time when the Bride of Christ is a fixed body who “has made herself ready.” There is no hint that later some others will be brought in to the banquet.

All the above are offered as evidence that there will be a cutoff time, a point beyond which no one will be saved. One would have to find clear teaching elsewhere in Scripture about postmortem salvation to counter the *prima facie* meanings of these passages. But there *are* no such Scriptures. Even if all the Scriptures to which I've referred *could* be interpreted to mean something different than they do on the surface, with no *clear* supporting evidence on the other side of this issue the face value interpretations make better sense. The New Testament knows of no open-ended eternity in which the lost can find salvation.

### **Human Freedom—One Final Problem**

Universalists believe everyone will be saved. But what if a person really doesn't *want* to be saved? If a person really doesn't want to be saved, will God—*can* God—override that person's choice? If it is a certainty that everyone will be saved, what does this mean for free choice?

All the Universalists I surveyed are clear proponents of human freedom albeit with limits. John A. T. Robinson maintained a consistent view of libertarian free will:

This unswerving insistence on the inviolability of freedom must be maintained from beginning to end if all that follows is not to fall away into self-contradiction and futility. And this insistence is not merely in the interests of human liberty: it is equally necessary in order to safeguard any Christian doctrine of God. For it is evident that God, if we may say so, has as much interest in the preservation of our freedom as ever we have ourselves, even in our most self-assertive moods. For if his omnipotence is to be *acknowledged* (and that is the only way in which an omnipotence of

love could become effective and victorious), then the freedom required for the acknowledgment must be preserved right to the very end. The very act of submission is an act of freedom and embodies the assertion of its eternal integrity.<sup>92</sup>

How, then, can it be a sure thing that everyone will freely choose God's offer of salvation? Robinson's theory offers, to my thinking, is the most moving and plausible framework *if* Universalism were true. He draws an analogy between the power of love between human persons and that between God and humankind:

We all know times, when a man or woman really shows his or her love for us, whether it be in some costly manifestation of forgiveness or self-sacrifice or in some small act of kindness or consideration, that we feel constrained to respond—we cannot help ourselves, everything within us tells us that we must. Our defences are down, the power of love captures the very citadel of our will, and we answer with the spontaneous surrender of our whole being. Yet, at the same time, we know perfectly well that at such moments we can, if we choose, remain unmoved; there is no physical compulsion to commit ourselves. Everyone may point to instances in which he has been constrained to thankful response by the overmastering power of love. And yet, under this strange compulsion, has anyone ever felt his freedom infringed or his personality violated? Is it not precisely at these moments that he becomes conscious, perhaps only for a fleeting space, of being himself in a way he never knew before, of attaining a fullness and integration of life which is inextricably bound up with the decision drawn from him by the other's love? Moreover, this is true however strong be the constraint laid upon him; or, rather, it is truer the stronger it is. Under the constraint of the love of God in Christ this sense of self-fulfillment is at its maximum. The testimony of generations is that here, as nowhere else, service is perfect freedom.<sup>93</sup>

Despite the power of this outpouring of love, however, one can still imagine someone resisting the love of another human being. Perhaps there is a fear of what succumbing could mean. For Robinson, the love of God is greater than this fear. A voice calls us to the home we long for. We become aware that it is the voice of the God of infinite love. "For we all know that the power of *this* love could experience no bounds at all," Robinson wrote. "Sooner or later, as we let it, it would bring us back to the haven where we would be."<sup>94</sup>

Robinson found this thought expressed well in the words of a hymn by Charles Wesley:

I yield, I yield,  
I can hold out no more;  
I sink by dying love compelled  
To own thee conqueror.

This is surely a moving image, one to which many of us can relate. But, still, is it a *certain* thing? We know of people who *do* resist demonstrations of love from other people. Yes, God's love is greater, but the sin in us is a powerful force to overcome. Despite the love that Christ showed, people still rejected Him. Do we see the promise made in Scripture that God will indeed finally overcome all resistance by His love? We do know that people die apart from God. If people can resist His will until death, why not into eternity?

There is more lying behind this than simply a particular view of the efficaciousness of God's love. It is the belief that God *will* have His way whatever it takes. Other Universalists affirm this but have different understandings of human free will.

Thomas Talbott, for example, accepts libertarian freedom to a certain extent. He doesn't believe we are *forced* to be saved. Yet, he believes that our freedom cannot be allowed to hinder the desires of God. Referring to 1 John 4:8 and 16, Talbott says we need to take seriously God's nature to love and his ability to accomplish all his loving ends.<sup>95</sup> Although he believes that we are free to choose, in the sense that we

can choose differently than we do, he doesn't think that can render us impervious to God's desires to save us. He writes,

But because God has infinite love, infinite wisdom, and the very nature of reality on his side, he can so providentially control our lives that in the end we will inevitably learn for ourselves every lesson that, on account of our free choices, we need to learn. In that respect, God is a teacher than whom none greater can be conceived. For even as the proverbial grandmaster in chess can permit a novice to move freely, perhaps even allow the novice to "get away with" some ill-advised moves, and still manage to checkmate the novice in the end, so the hound of heaven can permit his loved ones to choose freely, perhaps even shield them from painful truths for a while, and still undermine over time every possible motive for disobedience.<sup>96</sup>

Talbott thus rejects the notion that hell is locked from the inside and can be unlocked after death, even though many will not do it. For Talbott, no one who has experienced the inside of hell would choose to remain there forever. He writes, "For no one rational enough to qualify as a free moral agent could possibly prefer an objective horror—the outer darkness, for example—to eternal bliss, nor could any such person both experience the horror of separation from God and continue to regard it as a desirable state."<sup>97</sup> To resist the good from God in favor of the horror of hell would be irrational, and to be irrational is to not be free. Thus, to finally resist salvation is not a freely made decision. Since we clearly *do* have free will, however, we will choose salvation.

Gregory MacDonald gives as an example of God overpowering a person's will the experience of the apostle Paul on the road to Damascus. "It seems that St. Paul was probably in such a position of revelation that his ability to reject Christ was severely diminished. So what? Did God do him an injustice?" He continues:

In the Bible God seems far less concerned with preserving human libertarian freedom through everlasting 'epistemic distance' than many modern philosophers do. Epistemic distance may play an important role in God's economy, but only as a temporary measure. By so revealing himself, God is not forcing an agent to act against free will but simply clarifying the situation in such a way that the will changes. Why should this worry us? Such compulsion is totally unlike forcing someone against his or her will.<sup>98</sup>

One sees an affinity here with Robinson's claim about the power of God's love.

Thus, God so works in a person's life that to reject Him any further is not psychologically possible.<sup>99</sup> This isn't compulsion in the strong sense of the word; strictly speaking a person *could* choose otherwise. But that theoretical freedom will not deter God. After all, our salvation isn't up to us anyway. Talbott is no Pelagian; we do nothing to obtain salvation. He writes, "To block such boasting, Paul consistently insisted that all credit for our salvation and for our eventual sanctification must go to God, not to us."<sup>100</sup>

The matter of free will shows that Universalism isn't a one-size-fits-all belief. Robinson sees no threat to our free will; for Talbott, God having His way is what is most important, however He might accomplish it. A (traditional) Calvinist might find a surface affinity with Talbott because of the emphasis on God's choice, but would reject the notion that everyone will be saved. An Arminian would appreciate Robinson's emphasis on free choice, but would reject the notion that everyone will freely believe.

Scottish theologian Sinclair Ferguson notes that typically Universalists are semi-Pelagian in their doctrine of salvation (semi-Pelagianism being the belief that man makes the first move toward God in receiving salvation as over against the Calvinistic belief that it is all the work of God). Ferguson writes that, even though Universalists hold to this belief, "suddenly, after death, everything becomes Calvinistic. The love of God is overwhelming. The love of God is irresistible. The love of God cannot be stopped."<sup>101</sup> It is rather odd that those who reject the Calvinistic notion of election for *some* promote the belief in salvation for *all* grounded in the will of God.

Behind Talbott's view is the presupposition that we all really desire God and, given time to come to our senses, will freely believe. Is that true? I think it doesn't take seriously enough the effects of sin and how deeply rooted it is in our fallen nature. Paul describes people in the unregenerate state as being in opposition to God even though they know He is there, as suppressing in their unrighteousness the truth they know (Rom. 1). In Revelation 16:8 and 9, there is a vision of an angel pouring out his bowl of God's wrath on people such that "they were scorched by the fierce heat" and yet "they cursed the name of God who had power over these plagues. They did not repent and give him glory." Talbott would say they are acting irrationally and thus are not free. If they are acting irrationally, it is their own fault that they are.<sup>102</sup> God is under no obligation to save them when they haven't so desired.

Universalists might object that no one living on this earth has yet to experience horrors of hell, so the experiences of people in Scripture aren't conclusive. The traditional understanding, according to Talbott, is that people in hell are subjected to "unbearable suffering" that continues forever—"eternal conscious torment."<sup>103</sup> The image of people "gnashing" their teeth gives that idea a vividness in our imagination.

That hell is pictured as torment, there can be no doubt. But is it unbearable? Christian philosopher Jerry Walls argues that, while the torments of hell bring great misery, they aren't obviously *unbearable*.<sup>104</sup> The phrase Jesus used a few times to describe those in hell, "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 8:12; 13:42,50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30) sounds as if it *could* indicate unbearable suffering. But it could also refer to weeping over being damned and expressing despair or anguish.<sup>105</sup> There is no attempt here to make hell sound like it's not such a bad place after all, but just to point out that "unbearable suffering" might exaggerate the horror of it. It is not inconceivable that a person could freely choose to be there even if allowed the option to leave.

One might offer the example of the Egyptian Pharaoh in the days of Moses as an example of a person giving in under the pressure of suffering, but Pharaoh hardly had a receptive heart toward God; he merely wanted to end his suffering. After the Israelites were gone, he changed his mind yet again and sent troops after them (Ex. 14:5). J. I. Packer writes,

Leaving sin behind, [Universalists] second-guess God's plan by contending that he uses hell to get sinners on track at last, and in so doing they fail to take the measure of the tragic twisting and shattering and consequent perversity of our souls through the Fall, and of the tragic irrationality and insaneness of sin as the now radical ruling force in humanity's spiritual system.<sup>106</sup>

One also wonders why, if God is so loving, He wouldn't act to save everyone *before* anyone experiences the horrors of hell.

### **The Charge of Heresy**

At the start of this article I said that it isn't helpful to simply slap the heresy label on Universalism and set it aside. Heresy is too easy an alarm to sound, and knee-jerk responses to such serious matters as this deserve more. The case of Rob Bell is a case in point. Because it sounded like he was espousing Universalism, he was quickly labeled and vilified. Granted, Bell's view of hell is certainly unorthodox and I wouldn't hesitate to call it heretical (and this is where he should be taken to task). But he didn't teach Universalism in his book. I raise that subject once again simply to illustrate the effects that the charge of heresy can have on us.

What is heresy, anyway? Simply a wrong belief? If that's so, could premillennialists accuse amillennialists of heresy? We would all be heretics to somebody if it were that simple. What is the difference between a wrong belief and a heretical one?

Early heresies had to do with the nature of Christ. Later ones had to do with the nature of the church and the doctrines of human nature and of salvation.<sup>107</sup> They were seen by the early church as "dead ends, impoverished and distorted versions of the Christian faith that could not be endorsed by the community of



faith as a whole,” writes Alister McGrath.<sup>108</sup> *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* describes heresy this way:

In the fixed ecclesiastical sense that it ultimately attained, it indicated not merely any doctrinal error, but “the open espousal of fundamental error” . . . or, more fully, the persistent, obstinate maintenance of an error with respect to the central doctrines of Christianity in the face of all better instruction, combined with aggressive attack upon the common faith of the church, and its defenders.<sup>109</sup>

McGrath believes that heresies do not typically arise from the desire to harm the church. Rather, they “were originally intended to enable Christianity to relate better to contemporary culture. Heresy arose through a desire to preserve, not to destroy, the gospel.” Motives were often cultural and intellectual.<sup>110</sup> Nonetheless, heresies proved to be destabilizing and destructive:

By the fourth century, the term “heresy” was generally being used regularly to designate a teaching that emerges from within the community of faith on the one hand yet is ultimately destructive of that faith on the other. The central defining paradox of heresy is that it is *not unbelief*; it is rather a vulnerable and fragile form of Christianity that proves incapable of sustaining itself in the long term. . . .

Heresy is thus to be understood to refer to an intellectually defective vision of the Christian faith, having its origins within the church.<sup>111</sup>

Is there good reason to include Universalism in a list of heresies?

Of course, the Universalists I’ve quoted do not think so. Talbott offers an interesting way to look at the matter of heresy. He presents a set of three inconsistent propositions:

1. God’s redemptive love extends to all human sinners equally in the sense that he sincerely wills or desires the redemption of each one of them.
2. Because no one can finally defeat God’s redemptive love or resist it forever, God will triumph in the end and successfully accomplish the redemption of everyone whose redemption he sincerely wills or desires.
3. Some human sinners will never be redeemed but will instead be separated from God forever.<sup>112</sup>

He points out that these three ideas cannot all be true, yet each is believed in orthodox Christian traditions. Calvinists hold to propositions 2 and 3 but deny proposition 1. Arminians deny 2 but accept 1 and 3. Universalists accept 1 and 2 but deny 3. Why, Talbott asks, is Universalism considered heresy while the other two systems aren’t? Interesting question!

I would respond this way. In short, the teachings of Scripture are not all equally clear. Talbott’s argument is clever, but orthodoxy isn’t just a matter of holding an equal number of beliefs as other Christians (two out of three, in this case). If holding a set of beliefs leads one to reject a clear teaching of Scripture that has been recognized as such by the vast majority of the church across denominational boundaries throughout church history, that teaching should be rejected. Universalism is a heresy because of its faulty manipulation of Scripture and its meaning for core doctrines.<sup>113</sup>

First, it isn’t the *prima facie* meaning of Scripture; Scripture must be manipulated to make a case for it. What sense can be made, for example, of Luke 13:22-30 if Universalism is true?

Second, Universalism affects how we think about God. He is expected to abide by our humanitarian standards of love.

Third, it overly restricts the meaning of justice (which must be ultimately rehabilitative rather than retributive).

Fourth, the fear of hell is no longer a motivation for repentance and faith. We might shake our heads about the manipulative techniques of some evangelists who try to scare people into heaven, but Jesus had no problem with painting some pretty grisly pictures to motivate people to repent. It removes an important incentive for people to take seriously that “now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2).

Fifth, Universalism wreaks havoc on the teachings of Jesus about the eschaton. If it is true, as Jesus said, that “at the close of the age” angels “will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace” (Matt. 13:40-42), shall we propagate the teaching in the church that there *is* hope eternally?

Sixth, faith, a crucial element in salvation, loses significance. We are required to believe, and it is clear throughout Scripture that people can believe or not. Of course, having faith isn't a meritorious work, but it is a reflection of the heart of the individual and it is significant. Why else would Jesus chastise His disciples for their lack thereof (e.g., Lk. 8:12; Jn. 3:18; 2 Thess. 2:12; Jude 5). Faith is receiving what is true and acting on it; it is what makes it possible to obey and honor God (Heb. 11:6). As discussed earlier, to not believe is to reject God. If we're all going to be saved regardless, what is the significance of faith? What is it for?

Packer summarizes this way:

Universalism does not stand up to biblical examination. Its sunny optimism may be reassuring and comfortable, but it wholly misses the tragic quality of human sin, human unbelief, and human death as set forth in the Scripture, while its inevitable weakening of the motives for evangelistic prayer and action is subversive of the church's mission as Christ and the apostle defined it. Universalism reinvents, and thereby distorts and disfigures, biblical teaching about God and salvation, and it needs to be actively opposed, so that the world may know the truth about the holiness, the judgment, the plan, the love, the Christ, and the salvation of our God.<sup>114</sup>

## Conclusion

Although I would not base my case against Universalism on a Pascalian wager, we would do well to take heed to Jay Wesley Richards' application of the wager when tempted to offer Universalism as a viable doctrine.

Richards observes that there are Scriptures that can be taken to support Universalism. For those who find Scripture highly ambiguous on the extent of salvation, Wesley suggests they consider these things. First, if we teach Universalism and it is *true*, then we have the benefit simply of proclaiming the truth (for everyone will be saved anyway). In our apologetics, we would have a means to step around the idea of hell as a reason to reject Christianity. The cost of teaching Universalism (and living by it) would most likely be that there would be fewer Christians *now* than there are (since the threat of hell is a serious motivator to evangelize and to believe now). But we would be assured that they would ultimately be saved.

But what if we believe (and teach) Universalism and it is *false*? Will our evangelistic zeal be lessened, and, as a result, will people go to hell because we didn't proclaim the gospel and they didn't put their faith in Christ? Richards writes,

What if our arrogance in denying the obvious tenor of the Gospels results in a lessening of evangelistic zeal and a decrease of repentance and saving knowledge of God? Universalists uniformly deny this connection, but common sense and study of denominational missionary activities clearly confirm a very high correlation between the teaching of universalism and a diluting or redefining of the Great Commission. Universalism does not logically entail a repudiation of a call to repentance and acceptance of Christ's lordship, but these certainly do seem

to follow as a historical fact. And besides all this, the cost of teaching universalism if it is not true is that *we will be teaching a falsehood*.<sup>115</sup>

If we preach that not all will be saved when in fact they will, then the damage inflicted will be small and its effect will be limited to this world. But what if we preach Universalism and we're wrong? The damage will be eternal. Given the paucity of scriptural support for it when placed against the many clear teachings about everlasting punishment, is it worth the chance?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article is a longer version of a program aired on our daily radio program. That shorter version is also available on our web site under the title "[Will Everyone Be Saved? A Look at Universalism](#)."

<sup>2</sup> See Rick Wade, "[\(Ir\)Responsible Critique: The Rob Bell Affair](#)" at [probe.org](#).

<sup>3</sup> It's interesting that the book which brought Universalism into the conversation of Christians across the country, Rob Bell's *Love Wins* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), rejects this overriding of free will. Although the book had "Universalism" written all over it, Bell could not get past free will. He brought this up in his interview with MSNBC's Martin Bashir (March 14, 2011), but Bashir didn't pursue it. He should have; it would have made for a more interesting conversation. (See the interview here: <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2011/03/15/msnbc-martin-bashirs-interview-with-rob-bell/> A transcript is posted here: <http://www.dennyburk.com/martin-bashir-takes-on-rob-bell/#comment-64666>.)

Bell doesn't clearly embrace Universalism (at least, in *Love Wins*; see also Lillian Kwon, "Rob Bell Denies Being a Universalist," <http://www.christianpost.com/news/rob-bell-denies-being-a-universalist-49417/>). The closest he comes is when he says that the story of "God [inflicting] unrelenting punishment on people because they didn't do or say or believe the correct things in a brief window of time called life isn't a very good story." A better story is one where everyone enjoys God's good world together and all wrongs are made right (*Love Wins*, 109-110).

Where Bell clearly does stand against orthodox Christian belief is in his redefinition of hell. He is opposed to the belief that God punishes people for eternity in hell as traditionally understood, although he says we all really love God's judgment against such things as rape, greed, injustice, etc. Heaven and hell are primarily about a quality of life, not about places that we go to at some point in time (58). Bell says that, because we are free, we can choose to live in sin with its consequences if we want to, although we should rather believe God's story about us, that we can have heaven now rather than the hell we make for ourselves. If we would rather have isolation and despair and do not want light, hope, peace, and love, God will grant us our wish. He writes, "If we want hell, if we want heaven, they are ours. That's how love works. It can't be forced, manipulated, or coerced. It always leaves room for the other to decide." (117-119) The phrase "love wins" thus means something different for him than for Universalists. They believe God's love wins by effecting salvation for everyone; Bell believes God wins by releasing us to choose what we want.

<sup>4</sup> I should note here that, while this article is a more detailed look at Universalism than what I presented in the radio version, it still is nowhere near a comprehensive look. There are more than a few ways scholars have approached this subject. My intent is to present and respond to some basic biblical and theological justifications for Universalism. The reader may want to engage other biblical and theological arguments such as those presented by Karl Rahner (John R. Sachs provides an introduction in his "Current Eschatology: Universal Salvation and the Problem of Hell," *Theological Studies* 52 [1991]). Eugene Boring offers a model for relating what he considers to be Paul's earlier and later views on salvation and judgment in his article "The Language of Universal Salvation in Paul," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 105, no. 2 (June, 1986), 269-292. The argument of Gregory MacDonald, to whom I will make frequent reference, invites a detailed examination of Jesus' cross work as the fulfillment of God's plans for Israel laid out in the Old Testament in his *The Evangelical Universalist* (London: SPCK, 2008). ("Gregory MacDonald" is a pen name used by Robin A. Parry. To reduce the possibility for confusion over book titles and author names, I will refer to him as MacDonald when referencing *The Evangelical Universalist* and Parry when referencing a book published under that name.) The more adventurous reader might want to plunge into the philosophical arguments of Thomas Talbott, found, for example, in his article "Universalism" in Jerry Walls, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2007) and in his book-length treatment, *The Inescapable Love of God* (Universal Publishers, 1999). Talbott's argument and responses by scholars on both sides of the debate are presented in Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Partridge, eds., *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). Finally, papers presented in a conference on Universalism in Edinburgh in 1991, published in Nigel M. de S. Cameron, ed., *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), are well worth the reader's time.

<sup>5</sup> R. Albert Mohler, "Modern Theology: The Disappearance of Hell", in Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, *Hell Under Fire* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 37.

<sup>6</sup> The use of this phrase in *Love Wins* (118-19) suggests Universalism, but Bell seems to mean something different by it than other Universalists. They mean that God will save all. Bell means that God's love offers everyone the freedom to choose.

<sup>7</sup> See R.P.C. Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), chap. 3; Everett Ferguson, ed, *Encyclopedia of Christianity* (New York: Garland Publishing Co., 1999), s.v. "Rule of Faith," by Ferguson, 1003. For a brief summary, see Rick Wade, "Scripture and Tradition in the Early Church," Probe Ministries, 2001, [www.probe.org](http://www.probe.org)

<sup>8</sup> Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, chap. 23, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:299, The Masters Christian Library CD-ROM, ver. 5, The AGES Digital Library Collections.

- <sup>9</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book 2, chap. 28, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:800.
- <sup>10</sup> Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics*, chap. 13, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:448-449.
- <sup>11</sup> Morwenna Ludlow, "Universalism in the History of Christianity," in Parry and Partridge, *Universal Salvation?*, 195.
- <sup>12</sup> Richard Bauckham, "Universalism: A Historical Survey," *Themelios* 4.2 (Sept. 1978): 47-54, accessed online at [http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/article\\_universalism\\_bauckham.html](http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/article_universalism_bauckham.html).
- <sup>13</sup> Hans-Georg Link, "Reconciliation," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed., Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Regency, 1978), 3:148.
- <sup>14</sup> Ludlow, "Universalism in the History of Christianity," 192. See also Link, "Reconciliation," 3:146.
- <sup>15</sup> Brian E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 58-59.
- <sup>16</sup> Parry and Partridge, *Universal Salvation?* xxiii.
- <sup>17</sup> Thomas Talbott, "A Pauline Interpretation of Divine Judgment," in Parry and Partridge, *Universal Salvation?*, 32.
- <sup>18</sup> MacDonald, *Evangelical Universalist*, 3.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.
- <sup>20</sup> See John A.T. Robinson, *In the End God* (New York: Harper & Row: 1968), 116-118; 121-125.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.
- <sup>22</sup> Talbott, "A Pauline Interpretation," 34-39.
- <sup>23</sup> MacDonald, *Evangelical Universalist*, 101-102.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.
- <sup>26</sup> Regarding the promise about Sodom, writing from a dispensational perspective, Charles Feinberg sees its restoration as occurring in the millennium. See his *The Prophecy of Ezekiel: The Glory of the Lord* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), 91. Keil and Delitzsch suggest a time in the future when all nations will have a chance at mercy before the final judgment (referencing Matt. 24:14). This, however, comes short of the *apokatastasis* or full restoration to salvation envisaged by Universalists. See their *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. IX (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 234-36.
- <sup>27</sup> N. T. Wright, "Universalism and the World-Wide Community," *Churchman* 89 (1975): 197-212.
- <sup>28</sup> Daniel Strange, "A Calvinist Response to Talbott's Universalism," in Parry and Partridge, *Universal Salvation?*, 153. The Bavinck quote comes from Herman Bavinck, *The Last Things: Hope for This World and the Next*, J. Bolt, ed., J. Vriend, tr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 153.
- <sup>29</sup> Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), s.v., "Faith" by J.I. Packer, 399-402.
- <sup>30</sup> Talbott, "A Pauline Interpretation," 48.
- <sup>31</sup> Thomas Talbott, "Christ Victorious," in Parry and Partridge, eds., *Universal Salvation?*, 18-19.
- <sup>32</sup> Talbott, "A Pauline Interpretation," 35.
- <sup>33</sup> Talbott, "Christ Victorious," 23.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.
- <sup>35</sup> N. T. Wright, "Towards a biblical view of universalism," *Themelios* 4 (1979): 54-58.
- <sup>36</sup> Wright, "Universalism and the World-Wide Community."
- <sup>37</sup> MacDonald, *Evangelical Universalist*, 87-88.
- <sup>38</sup> Talbott claims that the phrase translated "then comes the end" in 1 Corinthians 15:24 should properly be translated "then the remainder". So the passage teaches that the order of the resurrection is first Christ, then those who are Christians at Christ's appearing, and then the rest of the Christians, those who would become Christians after Christ's appearing. It is possible to translate "end" (telos; Gr. τέλος) as "remainder", and others have done this.<sup>38</sup> I have come across no Bible translations that render it that way, and Talbott does not press the point. He claims, however, that Paul has made his (Universalistic) point in verses 25, 26, and 28. See Talbott, "Christ Victorious," 26, 27.
- <sup>39</sup> Wright, "Towards a biblical view of universalism."
- <sup>40</sup> MacDonald, *Evangelical Universalist*, 151-54.
- <sup>41</sup> Talbott, "A Pauline Interpretation," 43.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-51, n. 18.
- <sup>44</sup> MacDonald, *Evangelical Universalist*, 75.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-66.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 68-69.
- <sup>48</sup> See also I. Howard Marshall, "The New Testament Does *Not* Teach Universalism," in Parry and Partridge, 56.
- <sup>49</sup> MacDonald, *Evangelical Universalist*, 145-46.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

- <sup>55</sup> Ibid., 140. To his credit, MacDonald acknowledges that his interpretations do not have very strong foundations. He writes, “Clearly my interpretation is underdetermined by the texts, . . . I may be offering ways of reading the texts that go beyond what their authors had in mind.”
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid., 144.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid., 150.
- <sup>58</sup> Marshall, “The New Testament Does *Not* Teach Universalism”, 57.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid., 59.
- <sup>60</sup> Talbott, “A Pauline Interpretation,” 46.
- <sup>61</sup> Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, eds., 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979), s.v. “αἰώνιος”.
- <sup>62</sup> Other Scriptures that refer to our future as eternal include Luke 1:33, John 4:14, John 6:51, 58; 8:51; 10:28; 11:26; and Rev. 22:5.
- <sup>63</sup> Bauer, et al, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. “πρόσκαιρος”.
- <sup>64</sup> In Hebrews 1:8 and elsewhere we see a stronger version of this in the phrase “forever and ever” or “into the age of the age” (εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα τοῦ αἰῶνος).
- <sup>65</sup> Colin Brown, ed. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed., (hereafter, NIDNTT), (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Regency, 1978), s.v. “Time” by Joachim Guhrt, 3:830, 832..
- <sup>66</sup> Other Scriptures that refer to our future as eternal include Luke 1:33, John 6:51; 8:51; and Rev. 22:5.
- <sup>67</sup> Guhrt, “Time,” 3:832.
- <sup>68</sup> Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1970), 205.
- <sup>69</sup> Guhrt, “Time,” 3:830.
- <sup>70</sup> MacDonald, *Evangelical Universalist*, 152.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid., 152-53. MacDonald admits the verse isn’t unambiguous; it is a problem for Universalists. But he notes that all theological systems have their problem passages, so his case rests on what he sees to be clear statements about universal restoration elsewhere.
- <sup>72</sup> Morris, *Thessalonians*, 206.
- <sup>73</sup> Thomas Talbott, “Reply to My Critics,” in Parry and Partridge, *Universal Salvation?*, 251.
- <sup>74</sup> Brown, ed., NIDNTT, s.v. “Destroy” by Han-Cristof Hahn, 1:464.
- <sup>75</sup> See John Sanders, *No Other Name* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 164-67.
- <sup>76</sup> John Sanders surveys this position in *No Other Name*, chapter six, 177-214.
- <sup>77</sup> See his chapter, “Divine Perseverance,” in John Sanders, ed., *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995).
- <sup>78</sup> Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 169.
- <sup>79</sup> G. W. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 258-59; quoted in Sanders, *No Other Name*, 186-187.
- <sup>80</sup> MacDonald, *Evangelical Universalist*, 115.
- <sup>81</sup> Ibid., 112.
- <sup>82</sup> Ibid., 131.
- <sup>83</sup> Ibid., 36.
- <sup>84</sup> Ibid., 117.
- <sup>85</sup> Wayne A. Grudem, “Christ Preaching Through Noah : 1 Peter 3:19-20 in the Light of Dominant Themes in Jewish Literature,” *Trinity Journal* 7.2 (Fall, 1986): 3-31.
- <sup>86</sup> John Feinberg, “1 Peter 3:18-20, Ancient Mythology, and the Intermediate State,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 48, no. 2 (Fall 1986): 312; quoted in Sanders, *No Other Name*, 186.
- <sup>87</sup> Rev. 6:15; 17:2, 18; 18:3, 9.
- <sup>88</sup> Brown, ed., NIDNTT, s.v. “Wall, Hedge, Palisade,” by N. Hillyer, 3:948. Hillyer takes the wall to be symbolic, but the same meaning would apply to a literal interpretation.
- <sup>89</sup> Donald Bloesch makes a rather puzzling statement about postmortem evangelization that touches on the question of an end point. He says, “We do not wish to put fences around God’s grace . . . and we do not preclude the possibility that some in hell might finally be translated to heaven. The gates of the holy city are depicted as being open day and night (Isa. 60:11; Rev. 21:25), and this means that open access to the throne of grace is possible continuously.” He goes on to quote Edward Pusey approvingly: “We know absolutely nothing of the proportion of the saved to the lost or who will be lost; but this we *do* know, that none will be lost, who do not obstinately to the end and in the end refuse God.” (quoted in David Hilborn and Don Horrocks, “Universalistic Trends in the Evangelical Tradition: An Historical Perspective,” in Parry and Partridge, *Universal Salvation?*, 233). If the gates are open “continuously,” what is the “end” in view? If there is an end, then either everyone will be either be forced or won over before that end, or Universalism is dead.
- <sup>90</sup> MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist*, 145-147.
- <sup>91</sup> The day of the Lord is also prophesied in the Old Testament. See Ezek. 13:5; Amos 5:18; Obad. 15; Zeph. 1:14-18; Mal. 4:5,6.
- <sup>92</sup> Robinson, *In the End God*, 120-21.
- <sup>93</sup> Ibid., 121-22.

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>95</sup> Thomas Talbott, "Towards a Better Understanding of Universalism," in Parry and Partridge, *Universal Salvation?*, 5.

<sup>96</sup> Thomas Talbott, "Universalism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry L. Walls (Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), 458. Eric Reitan calls Talbott's position "rational freedom." It isn't fully libertarian, because it assumes a person can be brought to the place where he can't act otherwise. It also isn't compatibilist because it is in no way determined. Talbott believes "we learn from our mistakes in a rational way that shapes our moral character and makes certain decisions psychologically impossible." See MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist*, 30, n. 48.

<sup>97</sup> Talbott, "Towards a Better Understanding," 4.

<sup>98</sup> MacDonald, *Evangelical Universalist*, 30.

<sup>99</sup> Thomas Talbott, "Freedom, Damnation, and the Power to Sin with Impunity," *Religious Studies* 37 (2001): 426.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 427.

<sup>101</sup> Sinclair Ferguson, "Universalism and the Reality of Eternal Punishment: The Biblical Basis of the Doctrine of Eternal Punishment," the 1990 Desiring God Conference for Pastors, available at <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/conference-messages/universalism-and-the-reality-of-eternal-punishment-the-biblical-basis-of-the-doctrine-of-eternal-punishment>.

<sup>102</sup> I see a real tension here in Talbott. He both wants to preserve freedom by making a point about how he thinks people will respond to the lake of fire, but he still wants God's choice to be ultimate. Right now it's hard (maybe impossible) for us to clearly understand God's sovereignty and our free will, but typically scholars will come down on one side or the other. Talbott seems to want both.

<sup>103</sup> Talbott, "Freedom, damnation, and the power to sin with impunity," 417.

<sup>104</sup> Jerry L. Walls, "A Philosophical Critique of Talbott's Universalism," in Parry and Partridge, *Universal Salvation?*, 119.

<sup>105</sup> See Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 269.

<sup>106</sup> J.I. Packer, "Universalism: Will Everyone Ultimately Be Saved?" in Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds., *Hell Under Fire* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 193.

<sup>107</sup> See Alister McGrath, *Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), chaps. six and seven.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>109</sup> James Orr, gen. ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. III (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), s.v., "Heresy."

<sup>110</sup> McGrath, *Heresy*, 176.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 11-12, 83.

<sup>112</sup> See Talbott, "Towards a Better Understanding of Universalism," 7.

<sup>113</sup> Some of what follows is borrowed from Mohler, "Modern Theology: The Disappearance of Hell," 37-40.

<sup>114</sup> Packer, "Universalism", 194.

<sup>115</sup> Jay Wesley Richards, "A Pascalian Argument Against Universalism," in William A. Dembski and Jay Wesley Richards, *Unapologetic Apologetics: Meeting the Challenges of Theological Studies* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 217-218.

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### About the Author

**Rick Wade** holds a B.A. in communications (radio broadcasting) from Moody Bible Institute, an M.A. in Christian Thought (theology/philosophy of religion) from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and a Master of Humanities (emphasis in philosophy) from the University of Dallas. Rick's interests focus on apologetics, Christianity and culture, and the changing currents in Western thought. Before joining Probe Ministries in February 1997, Rick worked in the ship repair industry in Norfolk, VA. He can be reached at [rwade@probe.org](mailto:rwade@probe.org).

### What Is Probe?

Probe Ministries is a non-profit ministry whose mission is to assist the church in renewing the minds of believers with a Christian worldview and to equip the church to engage the world for Christ. Probe fulfills this mission through our speakers (capable of addressing a variety of issues), our three minute daily radio program, and an extensive collection of articles and other materials available on our Web site ([www.probe.org](http://www.probe.org)).

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