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THREE PICTURES OF GOD IN WESTERN THEOLOGY

Thomas Talbott

I begin with an inconsistent set of three propositions, each of which has the following characteristic: We can find *prima facie* support for it in the Bible. I then classify theologians according to which proposition they reject, and I identify three different pictures of God: the Augustinian picture, the Arminian picture, and the universalist picture. Finally, I explore some hermeneutical problems and suggest a way in which those who hold the universalist picture might interpret some of the texts upon which the doctrine of eternal punishment has traditionally rested.

A cardinal doctrine of the Christian faith is that God, being a loving Creator, is at work in the world redeeming sinners—that is, reconciling to himself those who have fallen into moral corruption. But Christians have often disagreed among themselves about the extent and the ultimate success of God's redemptive activity, and these disagreements reflect surprisingly different conceptions of the divine nature. The conceptions are so different, indeed, that some may even wonder whether all Christians worship the same God.

Here is a relatively easy way to understand these issues and to organize our thinking about them. We begin with an inconsistent set of three propositions:

- (1) It is God's redemptive purpose for the world (and therefore his will) to reconcile all sinners to himself;
- (2) It is within God's power to achieve his redemptive purpose for the world;
- (3) Some sinners will never be reconciled to God, and God will therefore either consign them to a place of eternal punishment, from which there will be no hope of escape, or put them out of existence altogether.

In calling this an inconsistent set of propositions, I assume, of course, that the following is necessarily true: If it is God's redemptive purpose to reconcile all sinners to himself and it is within his power to accomplish that purpose, then he will indeed reconcile all sinners to himself. If this is necessarily true, then at least one of the above propositions is false.¹

Next, we observe the following: Although at least one of the propositions above is false, we nonetheless find theological arguments in support of each of them; we also find texts in the Bible which may appear, at least initially, to support each of them. In support of proposition (1), for example, we find



such texts as II Peter 3:9: “The Lord . . . is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (KJV); I Timothy 2:4: God “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”; Romans 11:32: “For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all” (NRSV); and Ezekiel 33:11: “As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn away from his way and live . . .” All of these texts seem to suggest that God sincerely wants to achieve the reconciliation of all sinners, and that his failure to achieve this end would therefore be, in some important sense, a tragic defeat of one of his purposes.

Similarly, in support of proposition (2), we find such texts as Ephesians 1:11: God “accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his own will”; Job 42:2: “I know that thou canst do all things, and that no purpose of thine can be thwarted”; Psalm 115:3: “Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases”; and Isaiah 46:10b & 11b: “My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose . . . I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it.” These texts seem to imply that God is able to accomplish all of his purposes—including, therefore, his redemptive purposes. And, in addition to these texts, a number of others seem to imply that God has *both* the will *and* the power to bring all things into subjection to Christ (I Corinthians 15:27-28), to reconcile all things in Christ (Colossians 1:20), and to bring acquittal and life to all persons through Christ (Romans 5:18).

But finally, in support of proposition (3), we also find such texts as Matthew 25:46: “And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life”; II Thessalonians 1:9: “They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might . . .”; and Ephesians 5:5: “Be sure of this, that no immoral or impure man, or one who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.” These texts may seem to imply that at least some persons will be lost forever and thus never be reconciled to God.

Lest there should be any confusion in the matter, I should perhaps point out at this point that I make no claim, in the present context, about the correct interpretation of any of the texts I have just cited. Neither do I make any claim about the appropriateness of lifting isolated texts from very different contexts and setting them side by side, as if one could somehow adduce evidence thereby for the content of revealed truth. I merely make the point that various texts in the Bible may initially appear to support, and in fact have been cited on behalf of, each of our three propositions. With respect to each of them, some theologians and Bible scholars have concluded that it is a fundamental—not a peripheral, but a fundamental—teaching in the Bible.

But as a matter of logic, not all of them can be true; at least one of them is false. So if we consider the matter purely as an exercise in logic—that is, without considering any textual evidence at all—we confront this alternative: We can say, on the one hand, that the Bible teaches all three propositions and is not, therefore, infallible in all of its teachings; or we can say, on the other hand, that the Bible is indeed infallible in all of its *teachings*, but does not really teach all three propositions. In either case, those who believe that God has revealed himself in the Bible will face essentially the same hermeneutical problem; that is, essentially the same problem of interpreting the Bible as a whole: They must provide an interpretive structure that avoids a fundamental logical inconsistency in what they take to be the revealed truth about God.

The Emergence of Three Different Pictures

Now a good way to classify Christian theologians and their theological systems, I want to suggest, is according to which of our three propositions they finally reject. Of course, a theologian could always remain a skeptic on this question, but such skepticism would tend to undermine the entire discipline of systematic theology; it is virtually nonexistent, therefore, among traditional theologians. Instead of skepticism, however, we sometimes do find a kind of subterfuge: A theologian may embrace, clearly and emphatically, two of the propositions and then try to waffle on the third, either by redefining a crucial term or simply by pretending to hold the third proposition in abeyance. Someone who embraces our first two propositions, for example, may try to ignore the third or to dismiss it with the comment: “The ultimate fate of the wicked is a mystery to be left in the hands of God.” Another may reject proposition (1), which states that it is God’s purpose to reconcile all sinners to himself, and then try to identify some artificial sense in which we can still say that God *offers* salvation to all. The fact is, however, that a theologian must reject at least one of the three propositions; and when we look carefully at a given theologian’s writings, it is usually rather easy to say which one the theologian in fact rejects. We can therefore distinguish between three different schools of thought: The Augustinians, because they believe strongly in both the sovereignty of God’s will (proposition (2)) and the doctrine of eternal punishment (proposition (3)), finally reject the idea that God wills the salvation of all (proposition (1)); the Arminians, named after Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) for his opposition to the Calvinistic understanding of predestination and limited election, finally reject proposition (2); and the universalists, because they embrace both (1) and (2), finally reject proposition (3).

A point to bear in mind here is that the universalists are no different from the Augustinians and the Arminians in this regard: *Every* reflective Christian who takes a stand with respect to our three propositions *must* reject a proposition for which there is at least some *prima facie* biblical support. Which-

ever proposition one rejects, moreover, will have important implications for one's concept of the divine nature. If one rejects proposition (1), then one can no longer regard loving kindness as a part of God's very essence; one must concede, in other words, that God's love has definite limits and does not extend to all created persons. So the dispute over proposition (1), which implies that God loves all created persons enough to will their salvation, is perhaps the most important dispute concerning these propositions, because it goes to the very heart of who God is. But the dispute over propositions (2) and (3) also raises some important theological issues. Those who reject proposition (2) can no longer regard God as being sovereign or undefeated with respect to his own redemptive purposes; he simply does the best he can to cut his losses, to minimize the defeat, and to produce the best balance of good over evil that he can. Those who reject proposition (3), however, can continue to believe *both* that God's love is unlimited *and* that his redemptive purposes are unthwarted.

So here, then, are three quite different pictures of God: According to the Augustinian picture, God's redemptive purposes are unthwarted, but he is limited in love; according to the Arminian picture, God's love is unlimited, but his redemptive purposes are thwarted by factors over which he has no control; and according to the universalist picture, God's love is unlimited and his redemptive purposes are unthwarted as well. Accordingly, a question that may now arise is this: Which of our three pictures best preserves the praiseworthy character and the glory of the divine nature?

Though we can find advocates in Western theology for each of the three pictures, it is probably fair to say, as a rough generalization, that the Augustinian picture has tended to dominate the thinking of theologians, the Arminian picture has been, perhaps, more popular among the Christian laity, and both the theologians and the laity have, for the most part, regarded the universalist picture as heretical. The latter point is hardly surprising, given that the state Church condemned universalism in the mid 6th century and suppressed it for nearly a thousand years; it was not until Christendom had become considerably fragmented in the 17th and 18th centuries that powerful voices on its behalf began to re-emerge. But despite the church pronouncements of the past, those who regard universalism as not just mistaken, but heretical, are clearly in an awkward position. Why should it be heretical to believe that God is both almighty and perfectly loving? At the very least, those Christians who regard universalism as heretical must show that the biblical warrant for proposition (3) not only outweighs, but *vastly* (and perhaps even obviously) outweighs, the biblical warrant for one of the other two propositions. And I know of no one who has even tried, much less succeeded, in building an overwhelming exegetical case of that kind.

Saving the Appearances

We thus approach the difficult task of interpreting the Bible as a whole. It stands to reason that, once one of our three pictures captures the imagination of a given Christian thinker, it will have a profound effect on how that thinker puts together biblical ideas and interprets specific texts in the Bible. For as I have said, every Christian thinker must reject a proposition for which there is at least some *prima facie* biblical support; so as almost a practical necessity, virtually every Christian thinker (who looks to the Bible as an authority) will end up interpreting some texts, some documents, and some authors in light of others.

As an illustration, consider how St. Augustine tries to handle the statement in I Timothy 2:4 that God “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” According to Augustine, this text

does not mean that there is no one whose salvation he [God] doth not will . . . but by “all men” we are to understand the whole of mankind, in every single group into which it can be divided . . . For from which of these groups doth not God will that *some* men from every nation should be saved through his only-begotten Son our Lord?²

It is not God’s will, in other words, to save every individual from every group and every nation; it is merely God’s will, says Augustine, to save all kinds of people, that is, *some* individuals from every group and every nation. For does not the context of I Timothy 2:4 single out at least one group of people—namely, “kings and all who are in high positions” (2:2)—on behalf of whom prayers and supplications are requested? Seizing upon this reference, Augustine argues that God wills salvation only for the elect, only for some persons from all groups: “kings and subjects; nobility and plebeians; the high and the low; the learned and the unlearned; the healthy and the sick; the bright, the dull, and the stupid,” etc.³ To those of us who are not antecedently committed to the Augustinian picture, such an interpretation will no doubt seem fantastic; I think it fair to say, indeed, that it *is* fantastic. The text begins with an exhortation to offer prayers and supplications on behalf of “all men” (2:1); it then singles out one group for a special reason: We should pray for kings and those in positions of authority, it says, so that “we may lead a quiet and peaceful life” (2:2); and finally, it gives this explanation of why it is fitting to pray for “all men”: This is fitting, because God himself “desires all men to be saved” (2:4). That the author had a special, and quite understandable, reason for singling out one group of people for special mention—namely, those in positions of authority, whose job it is to keep the peace—hardly seems to justify the Augustinian claim that “all men” really means “some men from all groups of people.”

But suppose that, on the basis of other texts from other contexts, one were antecedently committed to the Augustinian picture and therefore antecedently

committed to two propositions: first, that God's will cannot be defeated (proposition (2)), and second, that eternal damnation will be the terrible fate of some persons (proposition (3)). One might then find the following reasoning altogether tempting: Even though I Timothy 2:4 *appears* to say that God "desires all men to be saved," its *real* meaning, when taken in the context of the Bible as a whole, is merely that God wills the salvation of all kinds of people. For is that not at least a *possible* interpretation? If so, then even if the author did not have it explicitly in mind, it nonetheless remains what the Bible as a whole *requires*. Or, if that approach seems too artificial, one might simply say with Augustine: "We could interpret it [I Timothy 2:4] in any other fashion, as long as we are not compelled to believe that the Omnipotent hath willed something to be done which was not done"⁴—and as long as we are not compelled to believe, Augustine would no doubt add, that no one will be eternally damned. For if propositions (2) and (3) are true, then proposition (1) is false. It is as simple as that.

We find the same pattern of interpretation in Calvin. Concerning I Timothy 2:4, Calvin writes:

How did it happen that God deprived many peoples of the light of his gospel while others enjoyed it? How did it happen that the pure recognition of the doctrine of godliness never came to some, while others barely tasted some obscure rudiments of it? From this it will be easy to determine the drift of Paul's reasoning [in I Timothy 2:4]. . . . Paul surely means only that God has not closed the door to any order [or class] of men . . .⁵

And concerning Ezekiel 33:11, Calvin writes:

If God wills that all be saved, how does it come to pass that he does not open the door of repentance to the miserable men who would be better prepared to receive grace [than some who do receive it]? . . . God is without doubt ready to forgive, as soon as a sinner is converted. Therefore, in so far as God wills the sinners repentance, he does not will his death. But *experience teaches* [my emphasis] that God wills the repentance of those whom he invites to himself, in such a way that he does not touch the hearts of all.⁶

So for Calvin, even as for Augustine, God does not *really* will that all be saved, and Calvin's argument may seem no less contrived and *ad hoc* than Augustine's. For here Calvin gives, it seems, a rather confused argument from experience merely for the purposes of overpowering a text. There could be a thousand reasons, after all, why God, even though he wills the salvation of all and will accomplish it in the end, does not save everyone *at the same time*—a thousand reasons why he leaves some in darkness longer than others. How is our limited and impoverished experience of such matters even relevant to what God will do *in the end*? How is it even relevant to the meaning of the text in question?

But however strained Calvin's argument may initially seem, we must again place it in the context of his commitment to the Augustinian picture. Because

he accepts propositions (2) and (3), he draws the inference that God does not save some of those whom God could have saved. He then merely asks the obvious question: If God does not save some of those whom God could have saved—if, for example, God has “deprived many peoples of the light of his gospel while others enjoyed it”—how can anyone contend that God really wills the salvation of all? In this way, Calvin simply deduces his interpretation of the text from the Augustinian picture which he brings to the text and thus imposes upon it.

Perhaps we are now in a position to see why exegetical disputes between those who operate from different theological frameworks are apt to seem so futile. To Arminians and universalists, it will no doubt seem as if the Augustinians have simply rejected the plain teaching of Scripture that God at least wills the salvation of all. To Augustinians and Arminians, however, it will likewise seem as if the universalists have rejected the plain teaching of Scripture concerning the reality of eternal punishment. And to Augustinians and universalists, it will seem as if the Arminians have rejected the plain teaching of Scripture that God is *almighty* in this sense: None of his redemptive purposes can be thwarted.

When fully developed, moreover, each of our three positions will include standard and well-rehearsed ways of handling its own set of difficult texts. Just as St. Augustine and Calvin interpret the statement that God “desires all men to be saved” to mean something like: “God desires all *the elect*—that is, some persons from all classes—to be saved,” so the Arminians will interpret the statement that God “accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his own will” to mean something like: “God accomplishes *everything he is able to accomplish* according to the counsel of his own will.” And similarly for the universalists: They will interpret the statement that some sinners “will go away into eternal punishment” to mean something like: “In the coming age God himself will punish some sinners”; and they will deny in particular that the Greek expression “εἰς κἀλαστίαν αἰώνιον,” which the King James Bible translates as “into everlasting punishment,” carries any implication of *unending punishment* (see below for a fuller explanation). Each position, in other words, will have a standard way of “saving the appearances,” of explaining (or explaining away) its own set of difficult texts in the Bible.

A Closer Look at Proposition (3)

There is, perhaps, a twofold reason why so many well-meaning Christians, all of whom look to the Bible as an authority, find it so difficult to come to an agreement on important theological matters: First, the Bible is not a single text with a single (human) author; it is instead a rich and diverse set of documents that appeal to the religious imagination in a variety of complex ways. Given the diversity of interests and writing styles of its various authors,

the history of some of its documents, and the variety of perspectives that it includes, a fertile imagination can almost always find a congenial way of putting things together. Even wildly implausible interpretations of specific texts are apt to seem utterly compelling to some, as the adherents of various religious cults sometimes illustrate. Second, the Bible is not a textbook in systematic theology either; it rarely, if ever, addresses our theological questions in a systematic way. Not even St. Paul does this with any degree of persistence. In any (traditional) systematic theology, we find systematic discussions of such Christian doctrines as the Incarnation, the Trinity, the Atonement, and the Final Judgment, but we find nothing like that in the Bible, not even in the New Testament; and Christians now sometimes fail to appreciate, it seems to me, how easy it is simply to read the traditional formulation of these doctrines *back into* the New Testament. Why, I would ask at this point, were the controversies over these doctrines in the early church so heated?—and why were they finally resolved (for a season) not by New Testament exegesis, but by the power of the sword? Is not the obvious answer that honest and reasonable Christians, all of whom accepted the absolute authority of the Bible, began to read the New Testament in quite different ways?

I do not mean to suggest here that every reading of the New Testament—or, more specifically, every reading of Paul—is as good as any other; far from it. Some things in the New Testament—for example, the Pauline claim that God raised Christ from the dead—seem to me clear and undeniable; and beyond that, the New Testament provides decisive grounds, I still believe, for choosing between our three pictures of God. But I do mean to suggest this: A theological interpretation of the Bible as a whole is as much an art, as much a work of the imagination, and as much a product of philosophical reasoning as it is of historical and linguistic study. Just as proponents of the geocentric theory of the solar system found many ways to account for the anomalous behavior of planets, so those who interpret the Bible from the perspective of a given system of theology inevitably find many ways to account for anomalous texts in the Bible. There is, no doubt, a point at which interpretation passes over into systematic distortion. But even in cases of systematic distortion, one cannot document such distortion simply by pointing to this or that text in the Bible. Neither can one undermine the apparent biblical warrant for any of our three pictures simply by pointing to its own set of difficult texts. Instead, one must tackle an entire system of interpretation, a way of putting things together, including the theological and philosophical assumptions that lie behind it; and one must somehow demonstrate a better way of putting things together.

Now that, of course, is a huge undertaking and obviously beyond the scope of a single short paper. Accordingly, I shall now be content merely to illus-

trate how a universalist might interpret some of the texts commonly cited on behalf of proposition (3). Most Christians today have some idea of how to put things together either from an Augustinian or from an Arminian perspective, but many have no clear idea of how to do so from a universalist perspective. And that more than anything else, I believe, explains the widespread assumption that universalism is heretical. It also explains why Christian philosophers have sometimes made such pronouncements as these: According to William Craig, "If we take Scripture [or the New Testament] seriously, we must admit that the vast majority of persons in the world are condemned and will be forever lost";⁷ and similarly, according to Peter Geach, "if the Gospel account [of the teaching of Jesus] is even approximately correct, then it is [my emphasis] that according to that teaching many men are irretrievably lost."⁸ Remarkably, neither Craig nor Geach feel compelled even to tell us which texts in the New Testament, or which words of Jesus, they have in mind. They proceed instead as if this were unnecessary; as if their pronouncements were utterly uncontroversial; as if no reasonable person could interpret the New Testament, or certain texts in it, any differently than they do.

But it is not as if the texts commonly cited on behalf of proposition (3) are especially clear or decisive. Quite apart from anything else, the mere fact that Geach appeals to the words of Jesus should perhaps raise a doubt in our minds. For as I have written elsewhere:

Even a superficial reading of the Gospels reveals one point very clearly: Jesus steadfastly refused to address in a systematic way abstract theological questions, especially those concerning the age to come. His whole manner of expressing himself, the incessant use of hyperbole and riddle, of parable and colorful stories, was 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.⁹

Are we to take literally, for example, such words as these: "If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children . . ., he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26)? Clearly not. Most of us would recognize these words for what they are, hyperbole, and use our imagination to find a point which is compatible with our *loving* our "father and mother and wife and children." At the very least, therefore, Geach owes us some explanation of which words of Jesus he has in mind and why he takes them to imply that some persons will be "irretrievably lost"; he owes us something more than a dogmatic assertion at this point.

Another philosopher who appeals to the words of Jesus is Richard Swinburne, who writes:

It seems to me that the central point of New Testament teaching is that an eternal fate is sealed, at any rate for many, at death, a good fate for the good and a bad fate for the bad. This appears to be the main point of such parables as the sheep and the goats.¹⁰

Now according to the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46), the Son of man will one day return and separate the nations even as a shepherd might separate the sheep from the goats, placing the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left. Those at his right hand will “inherit the kingdom” prepared for them, but those at his left will depart into the “eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” The parable ends with this parallel construction: “And they [the unrighteous] will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (25:46). Evidently, then, it is this parallel construction which Swinburne takes to imply that “an eternal fate is sealed, at any rate for many, at death.”

Is Swinburne right about that? As he points out himself, Jesus never intended for anyone to take the details of a parable literally;¹¹ the details merely provided a colorful background for the main point, which itself is not always easy to discern. So the first question we must ask is this: Just what is the main point of the parable of the sheep and the goats? Is it really a parable about the eternal destiny of the good and the bad, as Swinburne supposes? I doubt it. As I read the parable anyway, its main point (and truly startling message) is this: When we feed the hungry and provide drink for the thirsty, it is as if we are offering food and drink to Jesus himself; and when we refuse to do this, it is again as if we are refusing to offer it to Jesus himself. In order to make this point in a forceful way, Jesus tells a colorful story in which those who are judged are utterly surprised to discover the true nature of their own actions. The righteous ask: “Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink?” (25:37); and similarly, the unrighteous ask: “Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?” (25:44). To which Jesus replies: “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me . . . [And] as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me” (25:40,45). It is a powerful point about the inclusive character of love: how the interests of Jesus are so tightly interwoven with those of his loved ones that any good which befalls them is a good which befalls him, and any evil which befalls them is an evil which befalls him. As is true of all parables, furthermore, we could easily draw all kinds of faulty inferences if we should take the details of this one too literally. We might conclude, for example, that eternal life is simply a reward for our own good works—something that Paul, at least, explicitly denies; or we might conclude that, whether we repent or not, any of us who have ever failed to meet our responsibilities to others—which is to say all of us—are destined for eternal punishment. Such inferences, however, would take us far beyond the main point of the story, as would the inference that everyone’s “eternal fate” is sealed at death. The purpose of the story is to inform us that our actions, for good or ill, are more far reaching than we might have imagined,

and that we shall be judged accordingly; it is not to warn us concerning the ultimate fate of the wicked.

Still, Jesus does say that the unrighteous go “into eternal punishment” (“εις κἀλασιν αἰώνιον”) even as the righteous go “into eternal life” (“εις ζωὴν αἰώνιον”); and many, like Swinburne, do take that to be the main point of the parable. Their assumption here, in addition to an assumption about the main point of the parable, is that “eternal punishment” is *unending* punishment even as “eternal life” is unending life. In the following section, however, I shall argue that our text in fact carries no such implication. Not only does it not imply that the punishment and the life are of equal duration; it may even imply that the two are *not* of equal duration. To see why this is so, we must examine the relevant concepts more carefully.

Punishment in the Coming Age

The Greek adjective that our English Bibles translate as “eternal” or “everlasting” is “αἰώνιος,” which literally means “age-enduring” or perhaps “that which pertains to an age.” As many commentators have pointed out, this adjective need not carry any implication of unending duration; in fact, the context may even preclude such an idea. When Paul speaks of a “mystery which was kept secret for long ages (κρυφούς αἰώνιους) *but is now disclosed*” (Romans 16:25-26), he clearly supposes that an age-enduring mystery or a mystery that endures for “eternal times” can come to an end; and if an age-enduring mystery can come to an end, so also, one might argue, can an age-enduring punishment.

One could perhaps make too much of this point,¹² however. For Paul’s use of “αἰώνιος” in Romans 16:25—where it refers neither to God nor to the actions of God—seems clearly exceptional. Given its more normal usage in the New Testament, the term has a good deal of religious meaning that it does not have in Romans 16:25. For Plato, at any rate, “αἰώνιος” clearly did mean “eternal” as opposed to “temporal”; it designated the timeless realm, that which exists without any temporal duration or change at all. And this Platonic use probably did influence the New Testament use to some extent: As Paul himself put it, “the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal” (II Corinthians 4:18). For the New Testament writers, no less than for Plato, “αἰώνιος” applies, paradigmatically, to God himself (see the reference to “the eternal God” in Romans 16:26), to that which distinguishes the incorruptible God and his incorruptible realm from the things that undergo change and corruption in time. I do not mean to imply that the New Testament writers took over the Platonic idea of an utterly timeless eternity, but I do mean to imply that their use of “αἰώνιος” was *roughly* Platonic in this sense: Whether God is eternal (that is, timeless, outside of time) in the Platonic sense or everlasting in the sense that he

endures throughout all of the ages, nothing other than God is eternal in the primary sense. Other things—for example, the gifts, possessions, and actions of God—are eternal in the secondary sense that they have their causal source in the eternal God himself. Accordingly, when the letter of Jude describes the fire which consumed Sodom and Gomorrah as “eternal fire,” the point is not that the fire literally burns forever without consuming the cities; it is not that the fire continues to burn even today. The point is that the fire is a form of divine judgment upon those cities, a foreshadowing of eschatological judgment, which has its causal source in the eternal God himself. And similarly for Jesus’ reference to “eternal fire” in Matthew 25:41 and to “eternal punishment” in Matthew 25:46. The fire to which he alludes is not eternal in the sense that it burns forever without consuming anything—without consuming, for example, that which is false within a person (see I Corinthians 3:15)—and neither is the punishment eternal in the sense that it continues forever without accomplishing its corrective purpose. Both the fire and the punishment are eternal in the sense that they have their causal source in the eternal God himself. For anything that the eternal God does is eternal in the sense that it is the eternal God who does it.¹³

Even as “eternal punishment” is that form of punishment that has its causal source in the eternal God, so “eternal life” is that mode of living that has its causal source in the eternal God. In the Gospel of John, we thus read: “And this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent” (17:3). Here too, then, the emphasis is upon the special *quality*, not the duration, of a life in proper relationship with God. But there is more. The Gospel writers thought in terms of two ages, the present age and the age to come, and they associated the age to come with God himself; it was an age in which God’s presence would be fully manifested, his purposes fully realized, and his redemptive work eventually completed. They therefore came to employ the term, “ἄϊωvιoς,” as an eschatological term, one that functioned as a handy reference to the realities of the age to come. In this way, they managed to combine the more literal sense of “that which pertains to an age” with the more religious sense of “that which manifests the presence of God in a special way.” Eternal life, then, is not merely life that comes from God; it is also the mode of living associated with the age to come. And similarly for eternal punishment: It is not merely punishment that comes from God; it is also the form of punishment associated with the age to come.

Now in none of this is there any implication that the life which comes from God and the punishment which comes from God are of an equal duration. I stress this because people sometimes mistakenly argue in the following way: If eternal punishment does not literally last forever, then neither does eternal life. D. P. Walker puts the objection this way:

it could be argued that the ‘everlasting fire’ and ‘everlasting punishment’ (τὸ πῦρ τὸ αἰώνιον, κἄλασις αἰώνιος) . . . did not necessarily mean that their torments would be eternal, since the word αἰώνιος or its Hebrew equivalent is often used elsewhere in the Bible in contexts where it cannot mean an infinite period of time, as for example in Jude 6, where it is applied to the fire which destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. But this interpretation is highly improbable, since Christ is clearly drawing a parallel between the eternity of bliss awaiting the sheep and the eternity of misery awaiting the goats. It can only stand if one also denies eternal life to the saved . . .¹⁴

There are, I believe, three mistakes here: First, Jesus is *not* comparing the *duration* of the punishment with the *duration* of the life; he is comparing a form of punishment that has its causal source in the eternal God with a mode of life that has its causal source in the eternal God. The issue of temporal duration is not at issue here and not relevant to the main point of the parable. Second, the Christian hope of immortality does not rest upon the translation of the Greek “αἰώνιος”; it rests instead upon the doctrine of the resurrection (see John 6:40) and that of God’s unchanging love for us. And finally, when we look more closely at the relevant nouns, we encounter a strong reason to believe that the life lasts longer than the punishment.

Whereas eternal *life*, being rightly related to God, is an *end in itself*, eternal *punishment* (κἄλασις αἰώνιος) is a *means to an end*. A *just* punishment, even when it has a retributivist flavor to it, is always, I would argue, a means of correction. But quite apart from that, the Gospel writer employs a word that is, according to the Greek scholar William Barclay, specifically a word for remedial punishment; “in all Greek secular literature,” says Barclay, “*kolasis* is never used of anything but remedial punishment.”¹⁵ The etymology of the word is especially intriguing, because it “was not originally an ethical word at all. It originally meant the pruning of trees to make them grow better.”¹⁶ According to this (relatively conservative) Greek scholar, therefore, “Eternal punishment is . . . literally that kind of remedial punishment which it befits God to give and which only God can give.”¹⁷ Being remedial, the punishment is intended as a means of correction, a means to the end of eternal life; so it is, if you will, *an eternal means of correction*. It is eternal both in the sense that its causal source lies in the eternal God himself and in the sense that its corrective effects last forever. But as a means to an end, it need not last any longer than is necessary to produce the end for whose sake it exists in the first place.

Accordingly, there are several senses, compatible with New Testament usage, in which a punishment of limited duration could still be eternal. There is even a perfectly natural sense in which such terms as “eternal,” “everlasting,” and “forever,” particularly when used in the context of punishment or judgment, sometimes indicate the intensity (and quality) of an experience rather than its duration. (“The dull after dinner speech simply dragged on

forever!") In the Old Testament story of Jonah, we thus find Jonah praying as follows from the belly of the great fish which had swallowed him: "I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me *for ever* [my emphasis]; yet thou didst bring up my life from the Pit, O Lord my God" (Jonah 2:6). Do we not have here a perfect analogue for a Christian understanding of hell? Jonah too was "cast out" from the presence of the Lord (2:6); and like Jonah, whose punishment, according to the story, included being cast into the depths of the sea, perhaps a myriad others will one day exclaim: "I went down into hell, whose gates closed upon me forever; yet thou didst bring up my life from the Pit, O Lord my God."

Conclusion

One of my purposes in this paper has been to *illustrate* how Christian universalists might handle their own set of difficult texts in the Bible. I make no claim of finality for any of the suggestions I have made. Nor have I tried here, as I have elsewhere, to set forth the positive case for a universalist reading of the New Testament.¹⁸ For though that positive case seems to me overwhelming, it is not likely to convince any Christian who supposes, for example, that Jesus himself believed in eternal punishment. In this paper, therefore, I have argued that we can plausibly understand the New Testament idea of eternal punishment in a way that carries no implication of *unending* duration.¹⁹ I have also argued that, from the perspective of New Testament interpretation, the Augustinians and the Arminians, no less than the universalists, face their own sets of difficult texts in the Bible. Indeed, anyone who takes a stand with respect to our three propositions must, in the end, reject a proposition for which there is at least some *prima facie* biblical support. Accordingly, one cannot undermine the biblical warrant for universalism simply by pointing to a few texts which may, on their face, seem inconsistent with it. One must also show that the texts cited on behalf of proposition (3) are clearer, more systematic, and more decisive than those which the universalist cites on behalf of propositions (1) and (2). One must tackle, in other words, an entire system of interpretation.²⁰

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NOTES

1. According to an anonymous referee for *Faith and Philosophy*, some might object to my claim that the conjunction of (1), (2), and (3) is logically inconsistent and they might do so on the ground that

- (4) "God leaves it up to sinners freely to decide whether they will be reconciled to God"

is possibly true. So far as I can tell, however, the claim that (4) is possibly true is quite compatible with the claim that the conjunction of (1), (2), and (3) is logically inconsistent. For suppose that (4) is not only possibly true but *in fact* true. Where S is a set that includes all (and only) the created persons in the actual world, either God has the power to bring it about (in Plantinga's weak sense) that all the members of S are freely reconciled to God, or he does not have this power. If, on the one hand, he does not have this power, then either (a) he does not will that they should all be reconciled to him, in which case proposition (1) is false, or (b) he wills this but is unable to achieve it, in which case proposition (2) is false. If, on the other hand, God does have the power to bring it about (weakly) that all the members of S are freely reconciled to him, then either (a) he exercises this power, in which case proposition (3) is false, or (b) he does not exercise this power, in which case I would argue, proposition (1) is false. So even if (4) is true, it appears that at least one proposition in the conjunction of (1), (2), and (3) is false; it appears, in other words, that the conjunction is logically inconsistent.

2. Augustine, *Enchiridion*, Ch. XXVII.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bk. III, Ch. XXIV, Sec. 16.

6. *Institutes*, Bk. III, Ch. XXIV, Sec. 15.

7. William Craig, "'No Other Name': A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation Through Christ," *Faith and Philosophy*, VI, 2 (April, 1989), p. 176.

8. Peter Geach, *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 123.

9. Thomas Talbott, "The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment," *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (1990), p. 20.

10. Richard Swinburne, "A Theodicy of Heaven and Hell," in Alfred J Freddoso, *The Existence of God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 52.

11. *Ibid.*, p.52.

12. In the past, I have tried to make too much of this point myself. See Thomas Talbott, "God's Unconditional Mercy: A Reply to John Piper," *The Reformed Journal*, June, 1983, p. 13.

13. Here I should perhaps clarify one point. When I say, "For anything that the eternal God does is eternal in the sense that it is the eternal God who does it," I am not, of course, making an ontological claim about the nature of a divine attribute, namely God's eternity; I am instead making an exegetical claim about how the adjective "ἄϊώνιος," whose correct translation has always been controversial, functions in certain contexts. I am describing, in other words, a way of speaking found in the New Testament. I stress this because an anonymous referee for *Faith and Philosophy* has suggested that my notion of "eternal" is "rather thin." The referee asks: "Why does Talbott's point apply to eternity but not other divine attributes?" and the referee then comments: "'For anything that the triune God does is triune in the sense that it is the triune God who does it' is nonsense."

If my exegetical claim is correct, however, then it is not my notion of eternity, but the biblical warrant for a doctrine of everlasting punishment, which is “rather thin.” For if my exegetical claim is correct, then in those contexts where “ἄϊώνιος” qualifies the actions of God, for example God’s actions in time, it signifies neither timelessness nor unending temporal duration but divine causality of a special kind. And even if “ἄϊώνιος” literally means “eternal,” this might be a perfectly natural way of speaking. When we say that God’s plan for the ages is wise, we do not mean that *the plan* itself has a high IQ; we mean that it manifests the wisdom of God. And similarly, when the letter of Jude describes the fire which consumed Sodom and Gomorrah as “eternal,” the point is not that *the fire* itself literally burns forever; the point is that it manifests the eternal God in a special way. It is perfectly natural to think of God’s actions in time as manifesting his love, his justice, his wisdom, his power, and even his eternal Godhead (see Romans 1:20).

If the idea of God’s triune nature, moreover, poses special problems in this regard, that is hardly surprising. For here we need to clarify what it might mean to say that the triune God does something. Christians have traditionally spoken as if it is the Son and not the Father who died on the cross; and it is the Father, not the Son, who declared, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17). Actions attributed to one person in the Trinity, in other words, are not always attributed to all three; indeed, that seems to be the whole point of distinguishing between different persons in the Trinity. But perhaps Christians would also want to attribute some actions to the Trinity as a whole. In that case, it would seem perfectly appropriate to say that whatever the Trinity as a whole does is itself triune in this sense: It expresses the united will and the causal activity of not just one person, but all three persons, in the Trinity. How much sense we are able to make of this will depend, of course, on how much sense we are able to make of the Trinity itself.

14. D. P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell: Seventeenth Century Discussions of Eternal Torment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 20.

15. William Barclay, *A Spiritual Autobiography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 66.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

18. See Thomas Talbot, “The New Testament and Universal Reconciliation,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* XXI:4 (June, 1992), pp. 376-394.

19. In this paper, I have concentrated on the words of Jesus in the parable of the sheep and the goats. For a discussion of the expression “eternal destruction,” as it appears in II Thessalonians 1:9, see “Universal Reconciliation,” pp. 389-393.

20. My thanks to an anonymous referee for several comments on the paper.