ALL DIE IN ADAM, ALL LIVE IN CHRIST: A DEFENSE OF UNIVERSAL RECONCILIATION

ISABEL JONES

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Contents

The Problem with Hell

Hell is one of Christianity's most challenging doctrines. Though the existence of Hell as a place of everlasting punishment and eternal separation from God has been affirmed throughout the history of the Church, the idea of unrepentant souls being damned to an eternity of suffering is a difficult thought for many Christians. Nonetheless, while the concept of an eternal Hell is unpleasant for some, it is often treated as an unfortunate fact of the faith. This attitude is best epitomized by C. S. Lewis in *The Problem of Pain*: "There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power. But it has the full support of Scripture and, specially, of Our Lord's own words; it has always been held by Christendom; and it has the support of reason."[1] For a number of Christians, the concept of eternal Hell is viscerally objectionable but undeniably true.

One wonders, however, if there is room within orthodox Christianity for a different understanding of Hell. Focusing on the statement above, Lewis outlines three categories of evidence for the traditional doctrine of eternal punishment: tradition, Scripture, and reason. The first of these categories is difficult to dispute. Other views of eternal punishment have existed on the periphery for much of the Church's existence, but it would appear that mainstream tradition is firmly on the side of eternal punishment, and this reality is arguably one of its greatest strengths. Many of the Church's greatest theologians believed in and defended eternal punishment, including St. Augustine, St. Anselm, and St. Thomas Aquinas. At different points in the history of the Church, the concept of eternal Hell and its associated imagery dominated

[1] C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2001), 119-120.

Christian thought and practice—this was especially true for the Roman Catholic Church during the Middle Ages. Lastly, though many of the early creeds of the Church are silent on the matter of eternal punishment, the Athanasian Creed explicitly states that "they that have done good shall go into life everlasting and they that have done evil into everlasting fire."[2] Eternal punishment is also affirmed in some later Protestant creeds, including the Westminster Confession, the Dordrecht Confession, and the Augsburg Confession.[3] It would be reasonable to conclude, then, that eternal punishment is the view most readily supported by Church tradition. That said, the other two categories of evidence—Scripture and reason—require further analysis.

In terms of Scriptural support, there are certainly passages of Scripture that can be read as explicit statements of the existence of eternal punishment without a great deal of difficulty. One especially famous example of a statement affirming eternal punishment can be found in Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats, which occurs in the Gospel of Matthew. When describing the fate of the goats, Jesus first states: "Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed [the goats], depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.'"[4] A few verses later, Jesus concludes the parable by stating the ultimate fate of the sheep and the goats: "And these [the goats] will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous [the sheep] into eternal life."[5] The use of the terms "eternal fire" and "eternal punishment" are seemingly self-explanatory. Further examples of Scripture attesting to eternal punishment can be found

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[2] Taken from the website of the *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*: https://www.ccel.org/creeds/athanasian.creed.html.

[3] Richard Bauckham, "Universalism: A Historical Survey," *Themelios* 4, no. 2 (1978): footnote 2.

[4] Matthew 25:41. All Scriptural quotations come from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless otherwise specified.

[5] Matthew 25:46.

elsewhere in the New Testament, though none are nearly as explicit as the parable of the sheep and the goats. There is talk of a "great chasm" in Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus, which "has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us," which would imply some sort of eternal separation from God.[6] One substantial passage found in the Gospel of Mark consists of Jesus telling his followers that it would be better to cut off their hands and tear out their eyes than it would be to sin and end up in Hell: "it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched."[7] Even if the punishment itself is not explicitly stated to be eternal in duration, the implication of eternality remains.

So far, so good: even if one were to focus solely on the sayings of Jesus, one would find no shortage of evidence supporting the traditional view of eternal punishment. However—and this is where the doctrine of eternal punishment encounters its first difficulties—these are not the only passages of Scripture that deal with the afterlife. Furthermore, other passages dealing with the fate of the unrepentant, when taken *prima facie*, appear to contradict the idea that some will be eternally punished. To give another example from the Gospels, Jesus says in John: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw **all people** [emphasis added] to myself."[8] By itself, this verse does not necessarily signal a contradiction; for example, it could merely function as a statement of the universality of the salvation *offer,* not salvation itself, as suggested by the

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[6] Luke 16:26.

[7] Mark 9:47-48.

[8] John 12:32. Some—particularly, David Bentley Hart—have argued that "drag" is more accurate to the original Greek text than "draw," which is how it is typically rendered in English translations.

Amplified Bible.[9] The latter reading, though, feels equally "natural," particularly if one is not reading the passage solely through the lens of eternal punishment. Moving on from the Gospels, there are numerous statements made by Paul in the Epistles that imply a different understanding of the nature and duration of post-mortem punishment from the traditional view. Paul writes in Romans that "as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all," which, like the previous example from John, *could* imply that salvation is merely offered to everyone.[10] This time, however, salvation is directly paralleled with the Fall, which was an event that affected *everyone,* making such a reading more challenging to justify. The Fall was not merely an "offer" of sin that one could accept or deny; it left the indelible mark of sin on all of humanity. It would be peculiar, then, to directly parallel the consequences of the Fall with the consequences of Jesus' death on the cross if only *some* experience salvation. A similar parallel appears in the first of Paul's letters to the Corinthians: "for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ."[11] Because of the Fall, death affects everyone universally—nobody is exempt from death. Interpreting this passage in light of the traditional view of Hell is not impossible—like the other examples investigated here, many have assumed that the "all" refers not to all of humanity but is limited to those who follow Christ—but it is, again, a less natural reading of the text. If one takes the entirety of the New Testament *prima facie,* tension arises between passages that seem to definitively describe eternal punishment for some and passages that seem to definitively describe a more universal vision of

[9] The Amplified Bible renders John 12:32 as such: "And I, if and when I am lifted up from the earth [on the cross], will draw all people to Myself [Gentiles, as well as Jews]."

[10] Romans 5:18.

[11] 1 Corinthians 15:22.

salvation. The "correct" view is not immediately obvious from the text itself if the text is not read with a particular belief in mind.

Lewis mentions a third category of evidence pointing towards the reality of eternal punishment: reason. It is true that there is no shortage of philosophical arguments justifying eternal punishment. Some of these arguments are made on primarily philosophical grounds; that is, while they do not necessarily contradict Scripture, they are not drawn directly from Scripture either. Other arguments are reason-based attempts to interpret and harmonize seemingly contradictory passages of Scripture regarding salvation and postmortem punishment. For the sake of brevity—there are, undoubtedly, other arguments dealing with eternal punishment than the ones examined here—three especially important and influential arguments justifying eternal punishment and common rebuttals to these arguments will be the focus of this analysis.

The first of these arguments originated with St. Anselm and is briefly summarized by Biblical scholar Denny Burk in *Four Views on Hell*. In this paper, this argument shall be referred to as the *argument from infinity*. God is infinite, Burk argues; therefore, any sin against God merits infinite punishment. Burk illustrates this concept with a parable: if you saw someone pulling the legs off a grasshopper, you would not intervene; you would intervene, however, if you saw someone pulling the legs off a human baby. Your reaction to such a violent transgression would be dictated by the worth of the one being transgressed against; therefore, a transgression against the infinite God, who is "infinitely more precious than the tiniest baby," would warrant infinite punishment.[12]

Though there is some truth to the idea that the seriousness of a transgression is *partially* determined by the status of the person transgressed against—the parable presented by Burk does

[12] Denny Burk, *Four Views on Hell* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 20.

a fairly decent job of demonstrating this concept—a common critique of this argument is that it does not logically follow that a sin against an infinite being is infinitely heinous and deserves, as Burk puts it, "an infinitely heinous punishment."[13] Robin Parry is correct in his critique of this argument when he argues against the idea that all sins are considered sins against God, meaning all sins are infinitely bad and cannot be differentiated by levels of badness; this, Parry asserts, contradicts Scripture as well as "our deepest moral intuitions."[14] Parry argues that the Bible continuously differentiates sins by their severity, and while it is true in one sense that all sins are committed against God, it is not true that all sins are equally bad and, consequently, deserve an equally severe punishment. Parry concludes his critique by stating that "[f]inite creatures are simply not capable of committing sins that warrant never-ending punishment," making eternal punishment staggeringly disproportionate to what it is punishing.[15] Though God is infinite, it hardly follows that a sin against God warrants an infinite punishment on the basis of God's infiniteness, especially when the sinners in question are themselves finite beings.

In addition to the argument from infinity, two other common arguments dealing with eternal punishment merit further analysis: the *argument from free will* and the *argument from God's sovereignty.* Among Protestant Christians, the former argument is typically associated with Arminianism or free will theism; the latter, Calvinism or Augustinianism. These arguments are distinct from the argument from infinity in that they are not solely based in philosophical reasoning; they also function as attempts to resolve potential contradictions found in Scripture.

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[13] Burk, 20; Robin Parry, *Four Views on Hell*, 53.

[14] Parry, *FVoH*, 53.

[15] Ibid.

Proponents of the argument from free will believe that God has made the offer of salvation available to all, but the onus is on the individual to accept or reject it. God's grace is resistible because God has given humans the ability to freely choose whether to accept it or not. Often, supporters of the free will argument assert that God has given humans a choice out of love; after all, it is better to love freely than to be forced. A love that is freely given and reciprocated is more genuine than a love that is compulsory. Humans that find themselves in Hell, then, have ended up in Hell through their own choices. Some believe that the decision to reject God continues after death—that is, those who are in Hell remain there because they continue to choose to reject God in the afterlife. To quote from Lewis, again: "I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful, rebels to the end; that the doors are locked on the inside."[16] Every person is given an opportunity to choose between God or Hell; some will choose Hell and continue to do so forever.

The argument from free will presents one possible method of reconciling those passages of Scripture that indicate salvation for all with passages that describe eternal punishment for some. Everyone can choose God and accept his offer of salvation, but many do not, and thus spend eternity in Hell. Such an explanation seems plausible enough, and there is a certain appeal to the idea that eternal damnation is a choice on the part of the damned rather than a decision made by God. However, there are two possible critiques to be made of such an argument. One common critique of the argument from free will is that no person could make a rational, fully informed decision to reject God, and that those who choose to reject God are behaving irrationally or acting out of ignorance of God's character. This brings into question whether or not it is just that someone could damn themselves to Hell forever if their decision to reject God

[16] Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 139.

cannot be fully rational or informed, or if such a decision would even be possible for a fully rational being to make. A view of postmortem punishment similar to the one articulated by Lewis alleviates this difficulty somewhat, as the decision to reject God continues after death and into the afterlife. Even then, such a decision would be utterly absurd, and it is difficult to imagine someone, presented with God himself, would continue to reject God forever. A second critique of the argument from free will is that it diminishes God's omnipotence. God clearly articulates a desire for everyone to accept his offer of salvation but is unable to ensure that this offer is accepted; in fact, it is likely that many will reject it. If God genuinely desires the salvation of all, then God has proven to be incapable of accomplishing his will. Such an argument subordinates God to humanity; he wants and offers salvation for all but is unable to ensure his offer is accepted. Given that omnipotence is generally thought to be a necessary aspect of God's character, this too presents a significant problem for the viability of the argument from free will.

The argument from God's sovereignty takes a markedly different approach to reconciling seemingly contradictory views of postmortem punishment and salvation within Scripture. Rather than arguing that salvation is offered to all and rejected by some, proponents of this view believe that God has selected some for salvation and the rest to eternal damnation. Those who are "elected" to receive God's grace cannot resist it; conversely, the unelected cannot do anything to obtain it. Subsequently, the verses that seem to indicate some sort of universal salvation are narrowed in scope; they are instead interpreted as describing salvation for God's elect *only*. The verses describing eternal punishment, on the other hand, are directed at those who have been excluded from the salvation offer. God is justified in choosing to save some and damn the rest because he is totally sovereign and perfectly just by nature; it is completely within God's power to mete out punishment as he sees fit.

The argument from God's sovereignty is controversial. One can appreciate the neatness of the logic employed in such an argument, and the emphasis placed on God's sovereignty. If some or most spend eternity in Hell, that is because God wanted them to be there in the first place; God does not "lose" in the grand, cosmic scheme of things. But there is something viscerally appalling about the idea that God's love is severely limited, and it is difficult to understand why God would only save a select few. Under this view, the scope of God's love is narrowed and weakened; instead of loving all, God arbitrarily loves some and hates everyone else. Even if God *could* act in such a manner, why would he do so, based on what we know about God's character? Steve Gregg summarizes the opposition to this view best in *All You Want to Know About Hell*:

> God undoubtedly has the right to do whatever He pleases. The question is, do we have an adequate scriptural basis for affirming that the most horrendous scenario imaginable is, of all possible alternatives, the one that most pleases God? If tormenting men for eternity is what God really does, we cannot escape the conclusion that this is what He is pleased to do, and, try as we may to dodge it, this must inevitably inform our perception of His character.[17]

From this analysis it becomes increasingly evident that while each argument contains some truth, all fall short of being fully convincing. Some element of God's character must be bent; some aspect of Scripture must be diminished; and, ultimately, the significance of God sending Christ to die and atone for the sins of humankind is undermined, because either God is so mired in spite and arbitrariness that he could hardly be called perfectly good and loving, or God is incapable of eliminating the disease of sin from his creation. Though most Christians have affirmed some iteration of it, and though it has been treated as an essential truth of the faith, the doctrine of eternal punishment struggles under scrutiny. Simply put, eternal punishment leaves much to be desired from a logical standpoint, and what evidence we do have for eternal

[17] Steve Gregg, *All You Want to Know About Hell* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 30.

punishment in Scripture is too scant to justify its status as unquestionable reality. It *could* be true, but the case for its existence is far from airtight.

Fortunately, there are alternatives to the traditional understanding of Hell that may present a more consistent view of Hell and salvation. The most compelling of these alternatives is *universal reconciliation*, which is the belief that God will eventually reconcile all of humanity to himself; in other words, all will be saved. As a belief, its popularity has waxed and waned throughout the history of the Church, though it is unlikely that it ever constituted a "majority" view of Hell, as many scholars emphasize that it was a minority view among even the earliest Christians.[18] Nonetheless, universal reconciliation appears to have enjoyed some support in the early Christian Church; for example, as Augustine writes in *Enchiridion*, "some—indeed very many—yield to merely human feelings and deplore the notion of the eternal punishment of the damned and their interminable and perpetual misery. . . they soften what seems harsh and give a milder emphasis to statements they believe are meant more to terrify than to express the literal truth."[19] Earlier still, some manuscripts of the *Apocalypse of Peter*, a second-century apocryphal writing accepted by some early churches, end on a distinctly universalist note. In those manuscripts, Peter is told by an angel: "Then will I give unto my called and my chosen whomsoever they shall ask me for, out of torment, and give them a fair baptism in. . . salvation," a view of universal salvation which differs from more mainstream conceptions of universalism in that the salvation of the damned is contingent on the prayers of the saved, but nonetheless

[18] Bauckham, 48. A possible exception to this view might be found in John Wesley Hanson's 1899 book *Universalism, the Prevailing Doctrine of the Christian Church During Its First Five Hundred Years*, but opinions regarding the credibility of Hanson's research are mixed among universalist scholars.

[19] Augustine, *Confessions and Enchiridion*, ed. Albert Cook Outler (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1955), 406.

demonstrates an early precedent for universalistic thought.[20] In addition to these examples, one can find a healthy smattering of early Christian thinkers who advocated for a form of universalism, including Clement of Alexandria, Origen of Alexandria, and Gregory of Nyssa. Of these individuals, Origen is the most closely associated with universalism; he is best known for championing *apokatastasis*, or the "restoration of all things." It is worth noting that some of Origen's teachings were anathematized in the sixth century by the fifth ecumenical council in 553 CE; earlier, they were also anathemized directly by the emperor Justinian.[21] Most of these anathemas do not make direct mention of *apokatastasis*, and even the anathemas that do mention *apokatastasis* do not necessarily condemn universalism as a whole, seeing as there were other Christian thinkers, like Gregory of Nyssa, who were never condemned for openly espousing universalism. Furthermore, the anathemas that directly condemn *apokatastasis* come from Justinian, not an ecumenical council.[22] Nonetheless, the fact that some of Origen's views were condemned three hundred years after his death seems to make an appearance in most every attempt to denounce universalism as contrary to the established doctrines of the Church, when in reality Origen's universalism was hardly the issue at hand.

There is a lengthy period following the first few hundred years of the Church during which universalism largely vanishes. Very few, if any, writings advocating for universal reconciliation can be found during the Middle Ages, apart from the writings of Christian mystics

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[20] Parry, *Four Views on Hell*, 101; M. R. James, "The Rainer Fragment of the Apocalypse of Peter," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 32, no. 127 (April 1931): 271.

[21] Gregory MacDonald, ed., "*All Shall Be Well:" Explorations in Universal Salvation and Christian Theology, from Origen to Moltman* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), 5-6.

[22] Ibid., 8.

like Julian of Norwich, as well as the 9th-century Neoplatonist thinker John Scotus Eriugena.[23] Following the Reformation, however, universalism began to reemerge among certain sects of Protestantism, with its biggest resurgence beginning in the eighteenth century. Initially, two "strands" of universalism appeared among Protestants. The first of these strands viewed postmortem punishment as purgatorial and was supported by the likes of Elhanan Winchester; this view is the view held by most modern Christian universalists.[24] The second of these strands was "hyper-Calvinist" in nature, denying the existence of postmortem punishment entirely as Christ's atonement was believed to render any sort of punishment completely unnecessary; this iteration of universalism was supported most famously by ministers James Relly and John Murray.[25] Since its post-Reformation resurgence, universalism has continued to persist as a minority view held—sometimes ardently, sometimes hopefully—by a number of respected nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers, including George MacDonald, F.D.E. Schleiermacher, Karl Barth, Jacques Ellul, and John Hick. Recently, in the twenty-first century, universalism has become a hot topic yet again, with much of the recent scholarship in favor of universalism advanced by Evangelical theologians such as Robin Parry and Thomas Talbott. Additionally, significant support for universal reconciliation can be found in the Eastern

[23] Bauckham, 50.

[24] Morwenna Ludlow, "Universalism in the History of Christianity," in *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate*, ed. Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Partridge (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 204-205.

[25] Ibid., 205.

Orthodox Church, including the Eastern Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart as well as the bishop Kallistos Ware, who was a "hopeful universalist."[26]

There is, then, historical precedent for universalism. It has never been the majority view of the Church, but it is not a modern, "liberal" invention, either; there is strong evidence that it developed alongside the traditional view of eternal punishment and was considered a viable alternative to the traditional view for the first few hundred years of the Church's existence. More importantly, with the exception of Origen for reasons largely unrelated to his belief in universal reconciliation, none of its proponents were formally condemned by the Church as heretics. This point is especially significant; there are, of course, numerous ancient heresies that were also developed alongside orthodox Christianity, but universal reconciliation could scarcely be said to be one of them. It is a perspective with its own long-running tradition within Christendom.

As demonstrated previously in this section, traditional Christian conceptions of Hell suffer from numerous deficiencies regarding Scriptural precedent as well as logical consistency. The Scriptural support for eternal punishment is less conclusive than previously thought, and it is difficult to construct a rational argument for eternal punishment without diminishing or disregarding some crucial component of God's character, be it God's love, power, or justice. It is my firm belief that universal reconciliation avoids most, if not all of these issues. The argument advanced in this paper, then, can be summarized as such: considering what we know about God through what has been revealed to us through both reason and Scripture, universal reconciliation presents the most coherent picture of Hell, punishment, and salvation, and it functions as a viable (if not preferable) alternative to the traditional view of eternal punishment for these reasons.

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[26] "Hopeful universalism" is distinct from the "strong universalism" advocated for in this paper, in that hopeful universalists hold that one can only *hope* that all will be saved, versus strong universalists, who argue that we can *know* that all will be saved.

Eternal Punishment and Universal Salvation in the New Testament

As established in the preceding chapter, there are several New Testament passages that are often used as proof-texts for the doctrine of eternal punishment. I have chosen to focus on analyzing three of these texts: Matthew 25:41 and 46; Luke 16:26; and Mark 9:43-48. Though by no means an exhaustive list of every reference to eternal punishment in the New Testament, these passages are among the most central texts to this theological debate. Additionally, because all three of the passages discussed here are presented as direct quotes from Christ, they carry an especially authoritative weight. As the argument goes, eternal punishment not only enjoys more general Scriptural support, but is directly attested to by Christ himself.

Of these texts, Matthew 25:41 and 46 are arguably the most direct allusions to eternal punishment in the Gospels and, accordingly, require the most immediate and thorough attention. Verse 41 describes an "eternal fire," and verse 46 states that the goats, or the unrighteous, will face "eternal punishment," alongside the "eternal life" granted to the righteous. At the surface level such statements are practically self-explanatory; one could hardly imagine a more explicit affirmation of the reality of eternal punishment, especially when the duration of the punishment experienced by the wicked is compared to the duration of the life experienced by the righteous. The parallel seems clear enough: just as those who follow Christ and repent will experience everlasting life, those who fail to do so will experience everlasting punishment. The parallel is further strengthened by the reference to "eternal fire" in verse 41, which is not only intended for the unrepentant, but also for "the devil and his angels." So far, all signs point towards eternal punishment for the unsaved, potentially by fire.

A look into the original Greek text of the New Testament, however, complicates this seemingly straightforward picture of the afterlife. There are two Greek words that require further

examination: *aiōnios*, which is translated as "eternal" here; and *kolasis,* which is commonly rendered as "punishment" in English translations of the New Testament. Both have numerous shades of meaning when taken literally. Furthermore, though English translations are fairly uniform in how they handle these terms, there is evidence that both Christian and non-Christian thinkers in antiquity disagreed on their exact meaning.

Of the two words in question, *aiōnios* has a more complicated history. First, it is important to keep in mind that *aiōnios* is not the only word translated as "eternal" or "everlasting" in the New Testament. Another word, *aïdios* is also used, albeit less frequently. *Aïdios* more explicitly conveys "eternal" or "everlasting" than *aiōnios*, and it only appears twice in the New Testament: Romans 1:20 and Jude 1:6. The former uses *aïdios* to describe God's power: "Ever since the creation of the world his eternal [*aïdios*] power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made." The latter uses *aïdios* in reference to the duration of the punishment for fallen angels, not humans: "And the angels who did not keep their own position, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal [*aïdios*] chains in deepest darkness for the judgement of the great day." Ilaria Ramelli and David Konstan posit that the use of *aïdios* instead of *aiōnios* in Romans 1:20 appears to "denote absolute eternity in reference to God;" similarly, in Jude 1:6, *aïdios* "seems to indicate the continuity of their [the fallen angels'] chastisement throughout the entire duration of this world—and perhaps too from before the creation of the world and time itself."[27] It is potentially significant, then, that *aïdios* is never used to describe the duration of postmortem punishment for

[27] Ilaria Ramelli and David Konstan, *Terms for Eternity: Aiônios and Aïdios in Classical and Christian Texts* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2007), 69.

humans. The considerably vaguer term *aiōnios* is used instead when describing the fate of humans after death.

Unlike *aïdios*, *aiōnios* occurs numerous times in the New Testament. As noted by Ramelli and Konstan, the precise meaning of *aiōnios* can change depending on the context in which it is used:

> It perhaps signifies 'eternity' in the strict sense—without beginning or end—in reference to God and his three Persons or to what pertains to God, such as his glory and his kingdom; or it may mean 'perpetual'—in the sense of 'without end,' 'permanent,' 'uninterrupted'—in reference, for example, to the new covenant mentioned by Christ.[28]

Such distinctions are subtle, but nonetheless important to keep in mind when trying to understand how *aiōnios* is used throughout the New Testament. That being said, *aiōnios* is frequently connected to both life *and* punishment after death, and it would be easy enough to argue that, in those verses, *aiōnios* is meant to denote that both are "without end"—*aiōnios* life, *aiōnios* punishment. There are repeated references to "everlasting" or "eternal" life throughout the New Testament that use *aiōnios*, including this famous verse from the Gospel of John: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal [*aiōnios*] life."[29] The same connection to life can be seen in the aforementioned passage from Matthew: "everlasting life." In short, both passages appear to describe the duration of life after death for the saved as well as the duration of punishment after death for the not-saved. If *aiōnios* can be taken to mean "without end," "permanent," or "uninterrupted," it would not be a stretch to conclude that it is intended in that sense when used in verses describing both life and punishment after death.

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[28] Ramelli and Konstan, 69.

[29] John 3:16.

Such a conclusion, however, might be qualified. As Bradley Jersak points out, Christian universalists have long argued that *aiōnios*, in addition to meaning "eternal" in the strictest sense or "without end," can also mean an "age," which would be a finite period of time, or a duration of time that cannot be quantified.[30] Furthermore, as noted by David Bentley Hart, the root of *aiōnios*, *aiōn*, was typically understood by the Greeks as an age or period of time from the ancient period through late antiquity, ranging from a year to a single person's lifetime in duration; later, the word "came to mean something like a discrete epoch, or a time far in the past, or an age far off in the future."[31] This is confirmed by Edward Beecher, who writes "as our word *age*, denoting the time of the life of a man, also comes to denote the lifetime of a generation, and then a period marked with some characteristic, as the antediluvian age, or the Mosaic age, and then those living in that period, so was it with the word *aion* [sic]."[32] At any rate, terms that more explicitly denote "eternity" can be found in Greek, including *aïdios* as well as *ateleutētos*.[33] Only *aïdios* is used in the New Testament; *ateleutētos* is not used at all. The decision to use a word with a diverse spectrum of meanings, particularly when other, more precise words for the same concept exist, may hint at post-mortem punishment having some sort of terminus, rather than continuing forever. At the very least, "eternal" or "everlasting" is not the only understanding of

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[30] Bradley Jersak and Nik Ansell, *Her Gates Will Never Be Shut* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009), 28.

[31] David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 121.

[32] Edward Beecher, *History of Opinions on the Scriptural Doctrine of Retribution* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1878), 135-36.

[33] On page 124 of *Saved*, Hart references the sixth-century Neoplatonist philosopher Olympiodorus the Younger, who "thought it obvious that the suffering of wicked souls in Tartarus is certainly not endless, *atelevtētos* [sic], but merely very long in duration, *aiōnios*." This further indicates that, while some thought *aiōnios* to mean something equivalent to "eternal," there was not a full consensus on the matter, at least in the broader Greek-speaking world.

aiōnios, and terminal punishment cannot be completely ruled out on the grounds of *aiōnios* alone.

However, because *aiōnios* is used in relation to life as well as punishment, this poses a significant theological issue. If *aiōnios* can be taken to mean "a long time" rather than eternity, does that mean life in the world to come has a finite duration? Is it possible to hold that the punishment for the goats in Matthew 25:41 and 46 has an end, but the life for the sheep does not? One potential solution to this issue is that, in the context of its usage in the New Testament, *aiōnios* does not describe the *duration* of life or punishment after death, but rather *when* each will occur. Both life and punishment are described as *aiōnios* not because they are equal in length, but because they will take place in the "age to come."[34] This opens the possibility that, while life for the righteous is eternal, punishment for the wicked will eventually end; one being finite does not require the other being finite. The two are related in the sense that that they will begin at the same time, but they will not necessarily take place for the same amount of time.

In summary, there is considerable room for interpretation regarding the meaning of *aiōnios*. It could mean eternal; it could mean some other undefined duration of time; or it could have nothing to do with duration at all. Of course, the precise meaning of *aiōnios* is not terribly significant *by itself*; there are numerous possible interpretations of how the Biblical authors intended to use it. Where it *does* become significant is when it is considered alongside another key term in Matthew 25:46: *kolasis*. *Kolasis* is often rendered as "punishment" in English translations of the Bible. However, like *aiōnios*, *kolasis* carried connotations other than "punishment," bringing the viability of the traditional interpretation of Matthew 25:46 into question.

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[34]Jersak, 29.

Kolasis is one of two words translated as "punishment" in the New Testament; the other is *timōria*. Of the two, only *timōria* carries the explicit connotation of penal, retributive punishment, and it is only used once in reference to postmortem punishment, in Hebrews: "How much worse punishment [*timōria*] do you think will be deserved by those who have spurned the Son of God, profaned the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace?"[35] Its other two uses are in Acts 22:5 and 26:11, when Paul is describing his persecution of the Jews prior to his conversion. *Kolasis*, on the other hand, is found in Matthew as well as in one of the epistles of John: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment [*kolasis*], and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love."[36] In both Matthew and 1 John, there is certainly a possibility that *kolasis* could be describing retributive punishment; the context in which it is used would certainly not rule out retributive punishment. However, there is strong evidence that *kolasis* was often understood as being corrective rather than retributive; in other words, a "pruning" rather than a punishment.[37] Evidence for this distinction can be found in writings of both Plato and Aristotle, the latter of whom described *kolasis* as being beneficial for the sufferer.[38] Some scholars, particularly William Barclay, have asserted that "in all Greek secular literature *kolasis* is never used of anything but remedial punishment."[39] Furthermore, as noted by Hart, "the word's special

[35] Jersak, 30; Hart, 116; Hebrews 10:29.

[36] 1 John 4:18.

[37] Jersak, 30.

[38] Thomas Talbott, *The Inescapable Love of God* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 81.

[39] William Barclay, *A Spiritual Autobiography* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 60.

connotation of corrective rather than retributive punishment was still appreciated and observed by educated writers for centuries after the time of Christ."[40] Hart does qualify this statement by acknowledging that "[b]y the late antique period, admittedly, *kolasis* might have become a word for any sort of legal penalty," but "the evidence is mixed."[41] Nonetheless, there is compelling evidence that, broadly speaking, *kolasis* was used to describe punishment for the sake of correction rather than retribution.

What is the significance of the usage of *kolasis* instead of a more explicit word for retributive punishment, like *timōria*? Because *kolasis* is used in conjunction with *aiōnios*, which has several established meanings other than eternal, new possibilities for interpreting Matthew 25:41 and 46 emerge. Most importantly, one could propose an alternative reading of these verses in which Christ describes not eternal punishment for the unrepentant, but rather a period of post-mortem correction. In this reading, Hell becomes purgatorial, a place where those who have failed to follow Christ in this life are purified of their sins by cleansing fire. This understanding of Hell is quite common among Christian universalists, and a closer examination of the varied meanings of both *aiōnios* as well as *kolasis* makes such an interpretation viable. At the very least, Matthew 25:41 and 46 are hardly explicit affirmations of the traditional view of eternal punishment, and the Greek text is ambiguous enough to allow for either a traditional or universalist reading of these verses.

Sheep and goats aside, Christ's parable of the rich man and Lazarus appears to convey a similar notion of eternal, post-mortem separation for the wicked:

> "In Hades, where he [the rich man] was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger and cool my tongue; for

[40] Hart, 116-117.

[41] Ibid.

> I am in agony in these flames.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. **Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.** [emphasis added]'"[42]

Like the passage from Matthew, those in favor of the traditional view of eternal punishment have argued that this text implies that the separation of sinners from God is eternal, a chasm that cannot be crossed by either party after death. In other words, the only opportunity to choose God is *in this life*; nobody can change their mind after they die, and there is no redemption for those who failed to follow Christ while they were alive on Earth. However, this is not the only possible interpretation of this passage. In his treatment of the parable in question, the Christian philosopher Thomas Talbott notes that "not one word in the story implies that this great chasm will remain in place or remain unabridged forever," despite many Christians interpreting it as such.[43] Talbott argues for a different interpretation of the parable in light of its place in the historical timeline of the New Testament: because the parable is being told by Christ during his earthly ministry, its description of the "great chasm" is a description of the barrier between the saved and un-saved *prior* to Christ's death and resurrection.[44] Through his death on the cross, Christ successfully bridged this gap. If this parable is intended to be taken literally, then it appears to be a description of the afterlife prior to Christ's death rather than its current state. This interpretation is further strengthened by the "harrowing of Hell," when Christ descended into

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[42] Luke 16:23-26.

[43] Talbott, *Inescapable*, 86.

[44] Ibid., 88.

Hell (or the underworld) to preach the Gospel directly to its inhabitants.[45] In summary, though the chasm may have been fixed at one point, it is not fixed now.

We now come to the last of the three proof-texts for eternal punishment: Mark 9:43-48. In this passage, Christ instructs his followers to avoid temptation and appears to describe the fate of those who fail to do so:

> If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where **their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched**. [emphasis added][46]

Though not as direct as the previous passages from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, verse 48 in particular is often interpreted by those in favor of the traditional view as evidence for eternal punishment. The unquenchable fire never ends; the worm consumes forever. This reading is reinforced by the drastic measures Christ calls for his followers to take in order to avoid being "thrown into hell." It would be better to be maimed, lame, and blind than it would be to be thrown into Hell, as there is no escape from Hell, and the torment experienced in Hell never ends.

Again, some clarifications must be made to the traditional reading of the text. The first is that the "hell" Christ refers to here is Gehenna.[47] As Parry has pointed out, Gehenna "was the

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[45] Talbott, 88. Relevant Scriptural texts might include 1 Peter 3:18-19: ". . . He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he made a proclamation to the spirits in prison. . .."; as well as 1 Peter 4:6: "For this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead. . . ."

[46] Interestingly, verses 44 and 46 are omitted from this version, as scholars believe they were a later addition to the text. The *King James Version* retains these verses, which are essentially repetitions of verse 48: "Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched."

[47] There is a tendency among English translators of the Bible to lump together several different places—including Gehenna, Sheol, Tartarus, and sometimes Hades—under the blanket term of "Hell."

name of a valley next to Jerusalem—a valley strongly associated in Israel's past with idolatry. . . and divine judgment."[48] Parry notes that the prophet Jeremiah "had prophesied a great slaughter of apostate Israel in that valley," and that the valley would be "filled with corpses and then set alight, becoming a 'valley of ashes;'" this association, according to Parry, is what Christ is alluding to here.[49] Furthermore, though it has been argued that by the time of Christ Gehenna was generally understood as being a place of eternal punishment, Parry emphasizes that there is very little evidence supporting this claim, and that it is unlikely that there was any consensus on what Gehenna meant prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.[50] The second clarification pertains directly to verse 48: "That the fire will not be quenched and the worms will not die need mean no more than that the fire and the worms will be unceasingly and unstoppingly active until they have finished their work."[51] In other words, Christ is not necessarily describing eternal punishment here; he is only stating that the fire and worms will continue to consume until there is nothing left for them to consume. The third and final clarification comes from Mark 9:49: "For **everyone** will be salted with fire [emphasis added]." In the words of Thomas Allin, this verse demonstrates that "the true reference in this passage is to some sacrificial or purifying process,

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This can be problematic, as each place carries with it unique connotations that do not necessarily correspond to the traditional Christian understanding of Hell.

[48] Parry, *Four Views on Hell*, 117.

[49] Ibid., 117.

[50] Ibid., 118. In footnote 43 of this page, Parry writes: "There is no mention of Gehenna as a place of postmortem judgment in the post-Jeremiah books of the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal books, the LXX, or the Dead Sea Scrolls. This is an argument from silence, but it is a loud silence."

[51] Ibid., 119.

which every one must undergo."[52] In light of verse 49, Christ may not be describing eternal punishment at all, but rather a period of post-mortem correction. This would be in line with the universalist interpretation of Matthew 25:46, and it further strengthens the case for Hell being purgatorial rather than eternal.

Looking beyond proof-texts for eternal punishment, one can also consider the numerous proof-texts for universal reconciliation scattered throughout the New Testament. John 12:32, Romans 5:18-19, and 1 Corinthians 15:22, which are discussed in the previous chapter, are among the least ambiguous of these texts. There is also the parable of the lost sheep in Matthew 18, which concludes with the statement that "it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost;" or John 3:17, which asserts that "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him;" or even Philippians 2:10-11, which proclaims that "at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."[53] One could argue that these statements do not *really* mean that *everyone* will be saved. Perhaps these statements only describe salvation for the elect; or, alternatively, that salvation is made available to all, but there is no guarantee that all will accept God's offer. But, as emphasized in the preceding chapter, both readings are incredibly unnatural. I see no compelling reason to assume, for example, that when Paul said "just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all," he did not *really* mean "all." Nor do I see any compelling reason to assume that

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[52] Thomas Allin, *Christ Triumphant: Universalism Asserted as the Hope of the Gospel on the Authority of Reason, the Fathers, and Holy Scripture. Annotated Edition*, ed. Robin A. Parry (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2015), 288.

[53] Matthew 18:14.

when Paul wrote “for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ,” that Paul meant to write that only *some* would be made alive in Christ. Much like Matthew 25:46, there are clear parallels being drawn here between the Fall (which affected all of humankind) and the Atonement of Christ (which, accordingly, *also* affected all of humankind). A universalist can preserve the parallel in Matthew 25:46 by maintaining that *aiōnios* life and *aiōnios* punishment mean life *in the age to come* and punishment *in the age to come*. The same cannot be said of traditionalist interpretations of Romans 5:18 and 1 Corinthians 15:22.

The point of all this is to say that a universalist interpretation of the relevant Scriptural texts is at least *possible*; it might even be preferable to traditionalist interpretations, at least regarding texts that most clearly denote universal salvation. The viability of a universalist interpretation of Scripture is especially significant for the viability of universal reconciliation as a whole, as a supposed lack of Scriptural compatibility is often thought to be the Achilles’ heel of Christian universalism. But, as this analysis has hopefully demonstrated, this is not so. If nothing else, universal reconciliation and eternal punishment are on equal Scriptural footing.

Who Is God?

With the Scriptural and historical precedent of universal reconciliation now firmly established, we can turn to the final category of evidence for eternal punishment: reason. In the first chapter, a few philosophical arguments in favor of eternal punishment were briefly assessed; and, as previously touched upon, each of those arguments seemed to diminish some crucial aspect of God's being, be it God's justice, God's power, or God's love. The question at hand, then, is this: which view of salvation and punishment aligns best with what we know about God's character in its totality? Such a question might be broken down into more precise "sub-questions:" would a just God punish finite beings for an infinite duration of time; would an all-powerful God be able to secure salvation for all; or, perhaps most importantly, would a loving God eternally damn some of his creatures to Hell? Each of these issues will be examined in turn.

First is the matter of God's justice. Traditionally, many Christians have held that eternal punishment is not only *compatible* with God's justice but *required* by it. As the philosopher Marilyn McCord Adams writes, this view is based on the claim that God's justice not only requires that God is fair and does not treat anyone worse than they deserve to be treated, but that God must also not treat anyone better than they deserve to be treated.[54] Finding a principle of justice that would rationalize this claim, however, is challenging. In Adams' treatment of the traditional doctrine of eternal punishment, she assesses several possible principles of justice that might make such a claim plausible, including the principle of proportionality to the harm to those offended against (e.g. "eye for an eye") as well as the principle of proportionality to the honor of those offended against (e.g. the aforementioned argument from infinity) and the principle of

[54] Marilyn McCord Adams, "Hell and the God of Justice," *Religious Studies* 11, no. 4 (Dec. 1975): 434.

intent (i.e. Thomas Aquinas's principle, "to will it is as bad as to do it").[55] However, Adams concludes that none of these principles offers a satisfactory explanation as to how God would be justified in damning someone to eternal punishment in Hell. In the case of the first principle, a finite person with a finite ability to cause harm could not commit an act that would cause great enough harm to make eternal punishment proportionate to the negative consequences of that act; in the case of the second, such an approach to justice would be "contrary to the moral principles we apply in assigning liability to punishment;" and in the case of the third, it "is not in general true either that to will an evil deed causes as much harm as the deed itself, or that it reflects as badly on one's moral character."[56] In short, eternal punishment appears to be incompatible with God's perfect justice; or, at the very least, there is no clear principle by which eternal punishment would be justified. A finite being is simply not capable of committing a sin so grievous that infinite punishment would be a fair and just response. Similarly, it does not follow that sinning against an infinite being would merit infinite punishment. Furthermore, while intent matters to an extent—for example, our own legal system often differentiates between manslaughter and murder based on concepts like *malice aforethought,* or the intent to harm or kill—it would be a stretch to say that willing an evil act is always as bad as actually committing an evil act. Humans are limited in both power and lifespan, and while it would stand to reason that a person could commit an act so heinous and so deeply harmful that they would deserve a *lengthy* punishment—perhaps spanning years, centuries, or even millennia—there is nothing a person could do that would deserve everlasting punishment, for such an act would be outside the scope of a finite being's power. Eternal punishment, then, is entirely disproportionate in severity; some form of

[55] Adams, "Hell," 446-47.

[56] Ibid.

temporary correction, even if it were to last for an extremely long time, would be more appropriate to the capabilities of humans to cause harm.

Justice aside, there is also the question of whether granting salvation to all would be within God's power. Traditionally, Christians have held that God's omnipotence enables him to perform actions he wills or bring about states of affairs he wills, with a possible caveat: God cannot make a logical contradiction true. For example, God cannot create a square circle or a four-sided triangle, as these things could not logically exist. More relevantly, God cannot sin, as sin is ultimately going against the will of God, and it would be logically incoherent to argue that God wills what God does not will. The question, then, might be restated: would it be logically contradictory for God to ensure that all are saved? How one answers this question depends on how one views the role of God in salvation.

Interestingly, universal reconciliation might be most readily compatible with Augustinian (or Calvinist) soteriology. If God determines who is or isn't a recipient of his grace, and if his grace is completely irresistible, then there is nothing preventing God from granting salvation to all except his own will. The theologian Oliver Crisp has posed one possible formulation of Augustinian universalism:

> (1) God decrees to create and elect all human agents.
> (2) God decrees that the mechanism by which the sin of all human agents is atoned for is the death of Christ.
> (3) The sin and guilt accruing to all sinful human agents is transferred to Christ, who is punished on their account on the cross.
> Thus,
> (4) all human agents are saved; none are lost, and none are in hell.[57]

[57] Oliver Crisp, "Augustinian Universalism," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 53, no. 3 (June 2003): 135.

The greatest strength of Augustinian universalism is that it resolves the problem of arbitrariness that plagues traditional Augustinianism—that is, the problem of why God chose to create this world with a certain restricted number of elect (*n*) when it would have been possible for him to create a different world containing a greater number of elected individuals (*n+1*).[58] Even in a scenario where God has to have at least one moral agent in Hell so that his "divine justice" is displayed and his "divine holiness vindicated," there is no non-arbitrary reason why God could not accomplish this by damning, say, a single demon, and granting salvation to all human beings.[59] (This is assuming, of course, that God needs to damn anyone to Hell in order to demonstrate the fullness of his character, or even that God needs to demonstrate the fullness of his character to begin with.) When taken to its logical conclusion, traditional Augustinianism reasonably leads to universalism. The only possible barrier between traditional Augustinianism and universalism is the belief that eternal punishment is the view most clearly articulated in Scripture; and, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, this is hardly the case.

Though universalism is well-suited to the traditional Augustinian or Calvinistic view of salvation, where God is the primary agent of salvation and God's grace cannot be resisted by humans, it would initially appear that universalism is more challenging to reconcile with an Arminian or "free will" view of salvation. If God has granted humans free will in the libertarian sense—meaning that a person is only free to choose something if rejecting it or choosing something else is *also* a possibility—and subsequently, if each person is free to accept or deny God's offer of salvation, then it seems that ensuring salvation for all would require God to make a logical contradiction true—the contradiction being that the fate of a person with free will is

[58] Crisp, 131-132.

[59] Ibid., 132.

determined by God—which would be outside of God's power as traditionally understood by Christians. And so, for free-will theists like C. S. Lewis, the "doors of Hell are locked on the inside;" if someone is in Hell, it is because they have freely chosen to remain there, and some will continue to make that choice forever.[60] Assuming this view of salvation is correct, God cannot override a person's free choice regarding salvation, as this would contradict the very notion of a person having free will to begin with.

If that *is* the case, is universal reconciliation incompatible with human free will? Not necessarily. As Thomas Talbott argues, the notion that a rational being could choose Hell forever is itself logically problematic: "how could anyone, rational enough to qualify as a free moral agent, choose an eternity of horror over an eternity of bliss, or actually prefer hell to heaven?"[61] Some, like Lewis as well as the philosopher Jerry L. Walls, contend that those who are in Hell do not necessarily view it as an objective horror, but instead experience a kind of illusory gratification that motivates them to continue choosing to remain in Hell. But Talbott asserts that such a view is incoherent. Either those who are in Hell are so deeply mired in self-deception that they are no longer free, rational agents; or, alternatively, if they never learn from their experiences and continue to experience some sort of gratification or happiness while in Hell, then the illusion that they are able to "act with impunity" is not an illusion at all but "the simple truth of the matter."[62] Talbott concludes that if "the objective truth of the matter is that union with God is bliss and separation from Him a horror, then, for God to win, He need only refuse to

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[60] Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 139.

[61] Thomas Talbott, "Freedom, Damnation, and the Power to Sin with Impunity," *Religious Studies* 37, no. 4 (December 2001): 429.

[62] Ibid., 430.

protect us forever from the consequences of our own free choices;" and, furthermore, that God can "undermine over time every possible motive for disobedience."[63] By removing any incentive for someone to remain in Hell, God creates the possibility that all will choose to repent and be reconciled with him without having to directly override their free will. In the absence of ignorance and misunderstanding regarding who God really is, and in the absence of any short-term benefit gained from choosing to act against God's will, it seems impossible that a fully rational person could *freely* choose to remain separated from God *forever.* To quote Talbott again: "The more one freely rebels against God, the more miserable and tormented one becomes; and the more miserable and tormented one becomes, the more incentive one has to repent of one's sin and to give up one's rebellious attitudes."[64] There is no reason that someone would not eventually choose salvation once sin no longer holds any short-term appeal. The possibility to continue choosing sin might remain, but at a certain point it would become practically unthinkable by any rational agent, not unlike sticking one's hand in a fire with the full knowledge that it will cause unwanted pain.

From this assessment, universal reconciliation appears compatible with both God's justice and God's power. Even more importantly, universal reconciliation is compatible with what is arguably the most crucial of God's attributes: love. Love is central to God's very being; God's love for the world, after all, is the reason why God sent Christ to die on the cross in the first place, delivering humanity from the jaws of sin and death. Similarly, love is central to the message of the Gospels; the commandment love God with all one's heart, mind, and soul, and

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[63] Talbott, "Freedom," 432-33.

[64] Thomas Talbott, "The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment," *Faith and Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (January 1990): 39.

the commandment to love one's neighbor at themselves, are what Christ calls the greatest commandments, upon which "hang all the law and the prophets."[65] But what, exactly, is meant by "love?" The most plausible definition of love is wanting the best for someone—that is, wanting to promote their well-being. Much like a parent wants the best for their child, God wants the best for his creatures, "the best" in this case being reconciliation with him. God's love could also be defined by other aspects of God's being, including his mercy, compassion, and forgiveness. All stem from God's love for his creation, and we are given little indication in Scripture that any of these things are lacking in abundance. From what is revealed to us in Scripture, God *wants* the salvation of all because he loves all, and through his endless mercy and compassion, we are saved.

The crux of the matter is this: eternal punishment is antithetical to the idea of a perfectly loving, just, and powerful God. It is incompatible with God's nature and contrary to God's intentions for his creation. For as Christ declares in Matthew, it is not God's will that "one of these little ones should be lost."[66] Through God's perfect justice, power, and love, all will be saved.

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[65] Matthew 26:36-40.

[66] Matthew 18:14.

Concluding Remarks

A discussion regarding the significance and consequences of universal reconciliation as a Christian theological position might be beneficial here. First, I am inclined to agree with Parry (or "Gregory MacDonald") when he writes "[n]ot all Christian beliefs are equally important . . . Such core beliefs as are found in the Rule of Faith and the creeds are essential to the spiritual life of all authentic Christian faith, but universalism is not."[67] Whether one believes in eternal punishment or universal reconciliation is not a reflection of the authenticity of one's faith; there is room for both views at the table of orthodox Christian belief. I believe that universalism makes more sense than eternal punishment, given what we know of God and what we are told in the Scriptures; and, similarly, it seems to me that eternal punishment is logically and Scripturally inconsistent. But neither view is essential, in the sense that one must believe one or the other, lest they be deemed no longer a Christian. One could affirm the Apostles' or Nicene Creeds in their entirety without having to "pick a side," so to speak. There is space to disagree on this matter. I can be reasonably sure that universal reconciliation is a viable alternative to the traditional view of eternal punishment based on the existing evidence, but I cannot pretend that I know with perfect certainty which view is correct; only God knows that.

That said, I am also inclined to push against the idea that universal reconciliation is dangerous, a threat to evangelism, or undermines the necessity of faith in Christ *in this life*. If all are saved in the end no matter what we do with our time on Earth, the argument goes, why should anyone follow Christ now—why not continue to sin? Interestingly, the universalist response to this challenge is mixed. Some have held that it is better to refrain from sharing the

[67] Gregory MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 4.

message of universal reconciliation with the "spiritually immature," as eternal Hell is an effective deterrent to sin; this was the view of Origen, who thought that apokatastasis "ought to be kept secret" so that those individuals did not become "careless and indifferent."[68] In one sense, this concern is understandable; in another sense, I fear that it reduces faith and righteous conduct to mere fire insurance. I do not follow Christ because I am afraid of going to Hell; I follow Christ because that is my purpose as a human being. Christ is my *telos.* Furthermore, there is the question of whether eternal Hell is the only effective deterrent to sin. After all, many universalists hold that post-mortem punishment is still an incredibly painful and excruciating experience, whether that is because God directly inflicts suffering as punishment for sin or because, for those who are still unregenerate at the time of death, the presence of God himself is torturous. The only difference is that the experience, whatever it is, does not go on forever. But it could last for a very, very long time. Either possibility is frightening.

Lastly, for those who *do* treat the message of universal reconciliation as an excuse to sin with impunity, the French sociologist Jacques Ellul may have offered the best response:

> A final objection to universal salvation is that of the frivolous or worldly person who says: "It is all very easy then. I do not need to bother about it. I can live as I like. I am not under any religious restraints. There is no need for works, as the Protestants have shown. There is not even any need for faith, since even atheists and pagans are saved." This kind of talk is the only kind that might bring people into danger of damnation . . . The unacceptable thing is not to be moved by this love when it is known and recognized, not to respond to it, or rather to respond with raillery: "It is all very convenient, we can simply profit from it." This is the kind of hypocritical talk that makes a game of the truth. It involves a corruption of the very being against which there rings out the terrible warning: "God is not mocked."[69]

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[68] Kallistos Ware, "Dare We Hope for the Salvation of All? Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Isaac of Nineveh," *Theology Digest* 45, no. 4 (1998): 315.

[69] Jacques Ellul, *What I Believe*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 208-209.

Universal reconciliation is not a license to live however one sees fit; it is the ultimate expression of God's love and mercy towards humanity, that God's love for the world was so great that he extended his mercy and forgiveness to all its inhabitants. To make a mockery of that would be nothing short of appalling.

In the end, it is my steadfast belief that all will be saved, and I have attempted to demonstrate the rationality of this belief throughout this paper. Universal reconciliation is, to paraphrase Lewis yet again, supported by Scripture and reason, and while perhaps not widely supported throughout Christendom, it constitutes a tradition within Christendom that can be traced back to the early years of the Church. That, I think, is sufficient to position universal reconciliation as a viable and even preferable alternative to the doctrine of eternal punishment. As Adam brought death for all, so Christ brings life for all.

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