

Reply to Michael J. McClymond

In a section entitled “The Philosophical Universalism of Thomas Talbott,” which is but a tiny fraction of his massive two-volume work *The Devil’s Redemption: A New History and Interpretation of Christian Universalism*,¹ Michael J. McClymond illustrates the danger, as I see it, of trying to cover way too much ground way too quickly. His entire work of over 1,300 pages is a monumental piece of historical scholarship, at least in terms of its breadth of coverage; one would be hard pressed, indeed, to identify a single name or topic relevant to the history of Christian universalism that escapes his attention altogether. But in some cases at least, his incredible breadth of coverage also comes at the expense of a careful presentation and evaluation of arguments, of any real depth, and even of simple accuracy. And his discussion of *The Inescapable Love of God* illustrates the point nicely.

An Unfortunate Confusion

McClymond gets off to a rough start in discussing my book when he confuses a set of three propositions, which I claimed to be logically inconsistent, with “a philosophical argument for universalism” (p. 950). As set forth in the first edition, which is the focus of his attention, here are the relevant 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.

The inconsistency implicit in this set of propositions, as I presented it in the first edition, rested on a particular understanding of God’s redemptive purpose for the world. According to that understanding, God’s redemptive purpose for the world includes everything he considers *most* important and thus by definition overrides every other purpose he might have (see note 1 on page 44 for the full explanation). But whether these specific propositions really do comprise an inconsistent triad need not concern us here, since I later revised them in a way that puts the issue beyond dispute, or at least so I believe.² The important point for our purposes is that we have here a rather simple schema for classifying theologians; as I put it in the context, “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” (p. 46). In general, the Augustinians or Calvinists will reject proposition (1), the Arminians, Wesleyans, and most Roman Catholics will reject proposition (2), and we Christian universalists will reject proposition (3).

In any case, given that the above set of propositions has no conclusion and no premises, and given that it is lifted from a chapter entitled “Three Pictures of God in Western Theology”—a chapter in which I do not argue for (or against) any of the positions identified therein—how on earth, I wonder, could McClymond have confused this inconsistent triad with a philosophical

argument for universalism. He points out, correctly, that I reject proposition (3), even as I would point out, correctly, that many Calvinists reject proposition (1). But that no more makes these three propositions an argument for universalism than it makes them an argument for Calvinism. I would consider this a minor slip-up, one not even worth mentioning, had McClymond not repeated this claim several times³ and had he not written the following: “we may be suspicious of Talbott’s argument for universalism [i.e., my inconsistent triad] because the argument *proves too much*—that is, more than Talbott might wish” (p. 951). But again I must ask, what on earth does McClymond think the above set of propositions in fact proves? If it is indeed logically inconsistent, as I still believe it is, then that proves one thing and one thing only; it proves only that at least one of the three propositions is false.

Things get even crazier when McClymond tries to justify his strange claim that my supposed argument for universalism proves more than I might wish. Incredibly, he switches to an entirely different set of propositions, as if that could be relevant to the propositions I actually set forth. He thus wrote, “let us revise the argument slightly, without changing its basic format” (p. 952), and he then set forth the following propositions (whose numbers I have changed):

- (4) “An all-loving God wills for there to be no sin, evil, or suffering in the universe he has created.”
- (5) “An all-powerful God is able to prevent any sin, evil, or suffering from existing in the universe he has created.”
- (6) “Sin, evil, and suffering exist in the universe that God has created.”

Now there are, of course, many similarities between the problem of hell and the more general problem of evil. But that hardly justifies the absurd claim that McClymond’s set of propositions does not change the “basic format” of my own. In the first place, whereas I claimed that my set of propositions was logically inconsistent, so that not all three of them could be true, McClymond treats his set of propositions as logically consistent, so that an Epicurus or a David Hume could claim that all three of them are true and then deduce from them that God cannot be both all-loving and all-powerful.⁴ McClymond then tries to foist this same conclusion on me, which is “more than Talbott might wish” to prove; he maintains, in other words that my *inconsistent* set of propositions likewise commits me to the conclusion that God cannot be both all-loving and all-powerful. That leaves me almost speechless—almost anyway! Suffice it to say that no inconsistent set of propositions could *prove* any substantive conclusion at all, and neither could it prove, therefore, that an all-loving and all-powerful God does not exist.

Note also that an inescapable hell, whether understood as a horrific place of everlasting torture or as an everlasting separation from every possible source of joy and meaning in life, represents an utterly unique kind of suffering unknown on earth. With respect to the temporary sufferings of this life, however severe they might be over the short run, St. Paul could write: “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us” (Rom 8:18). That future glory, he evidently thought, will more than compensate for all of the travails experienced along the way. But consigning someone to an *inescapable* hell would clearly be an instance of God inflicting irreparable harm upon someone, where *irrepara-*

ble harm is the kind of harm that not even omnipotence could *both* permit someone to experience *and* do something to alleviate or repair it at some future time. Accordingly, it is logically impossible that an omnipotent God should love someone even in the minimal sense of willing some good for this person over the long run and, at the same time, subject this person to an inescapable hell.⁵ So either God does not love all human beings, as consistent Calvinists have always acknowledged, or he does not subject any of them to an inescapable hell. It is as simple as that.

An Egregious Distortion

Christian universalists hold that, according to explicit teachings in the New Testament, God will eventually reconcile to himself the entire world, which includes every member of the human race. But isn't that view, some may ask, inconsistent with Jesus' own remarks concerning blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? For did not Jesus himself declare that such blasphemy would never "be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come"? (Matt. 12:32). Did he not also declare that one of the most widespread of all sins—the refusal to forgive others—is so unpardonable that it renders all other sins unpardonable as well? That certainly seems to be the import of these words: "if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt. 6:15). These words also seem to imply, by the way, that God remains a father even to those whose trespasses he might refuse to forgive in some relevant sense of "forgive" (see below).

Accordingly, in a section entitled "Are Some Sins Unforgivable?" I raised the question of just what it might mean to claim that God will never forgive or pardon a given sin. "Does it mean," I asked, "that God no longer loves the person who commits the sin in question?—or that he no longer seeks to reconcile this person to himself?—or that his attitude towards this person is no longer one of forgiveness?" To which I answered, "Not at all"; that is, by no means does any such consequence follow from Jesus' remarks concerning unpardonable sins. And in the same paragraph I also declared that God's "attitude of forgiveness" towards such sinners "never ceases" (pp. 103-104). I then distinguished between two radically different kinds of forgiveness:

When *we* speak of forgiveness, we typically have in mind an attitude or state of mind in the one who forgives; that is, a state of mind that exists when a person gives up all resentment towards an offender. But when Jesus speaks of forgiveness in the present context, he has in mind . . . the canceling of some obligation, debt, or prescribed punishment. A little reflection will reveal that the two kinds of forgiveness are utterly different. A governor may pardon a criminal for reasons, such as political expediency, that have nothing to do with a forgiving attitude; alternatively, loving parents, despite their forgiving attitude, may judge it best [i.e., in a beloved child's best interest] to hold their rebellious child to a given punishment. Precisely because the parents do love and do forgive their child, they may refuse to forgive the punishment in the sense of setting it aside. And that, I want to suggest, is exactly how we should understand the idea of a sin that God will not forgive or pardon as well. Because a refusal to forgive others, a refusal to repent, and a willful opposition to the work of the Spirit within undermine the very possibility of reconciliation and are so contrary to the conditions of our own future happiness, God will require that we experience in full the painful consequences of, and hence the punishment for, such sins as these. He could

not express his love for us—his concern for our future happiness—in any other way. For when mercy itself requires severity, or a harsh means of correction, that is just what we can expect, says Jesus, either in this age or in the age to come (pp. 104-105)

Now whether or not one agrees with this understanding of a so-called unpardonable sin, I think it fair to say that McClymond's response is shockingly inaccurate. He writes: "The Chapter on punishment in *The Inescapable Love of God* states that some people are saved even though God never forgives them." And this salvation, he claims, is a kind of "self-willed purification" (p. 953). Where I have even hinted that someone or something other than God and his grace might be the agent of our purification, he does not say. Neither does he explain the seemingly meaningless term "self-willed purification." If the perfecting love of God, like a consuming fire, gradually purges us of everything that separates us from him and from our neighbors, thereby resulting in a transformed heart and a transformed will, in what sense does that qualify as an instance of a "self-willed purification"? But even more shocking, in my opinion, is this. In the very section upon which McClymond comments, I insisted again and again that a sin's being unpardonable implies no limit at all on God's own forgiveness of those who commit such sins. What renders such a sin unpardonable is not God's unwillingness to forgive, but a sinners' stubborn unwillingness to accept God's forgiveness in repentance. As Janet Meyer Everts put it in the Anchor Bible Dictionary, "Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is never equated with any particular sin; even the sin of denying Christ will be forgiven. The only thing that could possibly result in an unforgivable sin is a person's refusal to accept God's forgiveness."⁶ For at some point such a refusal becomes a stubborn opposition to the work of the Spirit within. Behind God's unwillingness to pardon certain sins, in other words, lies a deeper love and forgiveness: a steadfast unwillingness to permit any of us to harm ourselves irreparably. As I put it in my own discussion:

God could hardly be *for* forgiveness and, at the same time, tolerate our refusal to forgive others; he could hardly be *for* reconciliation and, at the same time, tolerate our [persistent] refusal to repent of that which separates us from others; and similarly, he could hardly be *for* our ultimate perfection and spiritual regeneration and, at the same time, tolerate our willful opposition to the work of the Spirit within. Accordingly, God does not withhold punishment—that is, a harsher means of correction—when we sin in this way (p. 104).

So how, I wonder, could anyone who actually reads what I wrote on the topic of unpardonable sins attribute to me the view that "some people are saved even though God never forgives them"? At the very least, one would expect some response—even if highly critical—to my distinction between the two kinds of forgiveness. McClymond does, it is true, offer one quotation in support of his mistaken interpretation. He thus quotes my statement that those whose sin is unpardonable will experience God's "love as a consuming fire . . . So in that sense, *they will literally pay for their sin*; and God will never—not in this age and not in the age to come—forgive (or set aside) the final payment they owe . . ." (p. 953—his italics).⁷ But even here he renders the quotation misleading by cutting it off in midsentence. For what I actually said was that God will never "forgive (or set aside) the final payment they owe, *which is voluntarily to step inside the ordained system of repentance, forgiveness, and personal sacrifice*."⁸ As long as a sinner refuses to do this, the sinner will continue, by the grace of God, to pay the price of such a refusal. Or, as Jesus himself put it, using the analogy of someone being thrown into prison: "Truly I tell you,

you will never get out until you have paid the last penny” (Matt. 5:26). Would McClymond also quote these words of Jesus (out of context) and claim that, according to Jesus, “some people are saved even though God never forgives them”?

It all boils down, I suppose, to how one understands the idea of a sinner paying for a given sin. McClymond reveals his own presumed understanding when he comments: “Through what Talbott calls an ‘alternative strategy,’ some people pay the price on their own—in other words, they atone or compensate for their own sins” (p. 953). But that makes no sense at all. When a man commits cold-blooded murder and then pays for it with his life, it hardly follows that he has atoned for his sin or has successfully compensated for all the harm he did either to his victim or to his victim’s family and loved ones. Even proponents of a traditional hell, moreover, believe that its denizens deserve to be there and are therefore paying for sins committed during their earthly lives. It hardly follows, however, that one could truly atone for one’s sins in an eternal and inescapable hell. That, in fact, is part of the problem with the traditional doctrine: there is no effective atonement, not even grounded in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, for a vast quantity of the sins that people commit. As George MacDonald once put it so forcefully, “Punishment, or deserved suffering, is no equipoise to sin. It is no use laying it on the other scale. It will not move it a hair’s breadth. Suffering weighs nothing at all against sin.”⁹ If that is true, as it surely is, then paying for a sin in the sense of suffering on account of it, however deserved that suffering may be, could never qualify as atoning for it or as compensating for the harm it does to us. Deserved suffering may indeed play a corrective role in our lives or even become a means of redemption, but no atonement for sin is even possible unless divine forgiveness results in some further divine action. For though God can resurrect the victims of murder just as easily as he can the victims of old age, a murderer himself can do little or nothing to undo the harm he has done. Neither can anyone earn God’s forgiveness through personal suffering. Either it is offered freely, or no atonement for sin is possible at all.

All of which leads me to what may be McClymond’s most egregious distortion. He writes: “Talbott thus arrives at an ironic conclusion. In his effort to extend grace to everyone, Talbott ends up denying the necessity of grace. Some are saved by grace, while others are saved apart from grace” (p. 953). But unfortunately, McClymond provides no argument whatsoever for this bald assertion; instead, he proceeds as if no argument for it is even necessary. He evidently takes his assertion to be an intuitively obvious inference from my claim that we all pay for certain sins—a claim that Paul himself clearly endorsed in his letter to the Romans. For what could be clearer than this? “There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality” (Rom. 2:9-10). Is that not an explicit statement that disobedience in the form of doing evil exacts a heavy price in terms of alienation, personal dissatisfaction, and an undermining of enduring happiness? Paul goes on in Chapter 11 to discuss the non-remnant Jews whose hearts were hardened. “Have they stumbled so as to fall?” he asked in 11:11 and then immediately answered, “By no means!” He insisted instead that their “full inclusion” will mean so much more than their stumbling meant (11:12). Indeed, “they have now become disobedient,” Paul declared, “in order that they too may now receive mercy . . .” (11:31—NIV). Then, just in case you don’t get the point, he generalized the whole thing: “For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all” (11:32).

Accordingly, it looks to me as if McClymond is the one who fails to appreciate the all-pervasive nature of God's grace. According to Paul's teaching in Romans 11, God's severity, no less than his kindness, is *always* an expression of his mercy and hence an expression of his saving grace as well. But if you cannot see God's severity towards the disobedient as an expression of his saving grace, then it may look to you as if my interpretation of Jesus' remarks about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit seems to imply that some "are saved apart from grace." Whatever the truth of that speculation, there are a host of ironies here. McClymond claims, for example, that a "basically optimistic view of human nature pervades Talbott's account of salvation" (p. 954). And he then ignores this obvious retort: "No Mr. McClymond, I do not have an optimistic view of human nature; I have instead an optimistic view of the infinitely resourceful God, sometimes called the Hound of Heaven,¹⁰ and his ability to achieve his loving will over the long run." For given McClymond's explicit acceptance of an everlasting hell, it is he who has a very limited and pessimistic view of God and God's saving grace. He has no choice but to concede either that God's grace is limited in its effectiveness, as the Arminians believe, or that it is limited in its scope, as the Calvinists believe. There is, unfortunately, no third possibility open to him.

The Issue of Human Freedom

McClymond's discussion reaches a kind of peak confusion when he turns to the complicated issue of human freedom and gets both my view and that of Jerry Walls, one of my better philosophical critics, utterly wrong.

But first a word about context. More than a few Christian theologians have viewed hell as a place of eschatological punishment with two crucial features: first, the punishment of a sinner in hell will take the form of unbearable suffering, both physical and psychological, and second, this unbearable suffering will continue unabated forever. According to Augustine, for example, the damned will writhe forever in literal fire. But "by a miracle of their most omnipotent Creator, they can burn without being consumed, and suffer without dying."¹¹ We thus get the diabolical picture of an everlasting torture chamber and the familiar expression "eternal conscious torment." Still, however diabolical this picture may be, it at least provides a coherent explanation of why no one in hell ever vacates the place, which is simply not permitted. A forcibly imposed punishment is not, after all, something that one freely chooses either to endure or not to endure.

During the 20th Century, however, a number of Christian thinkers began revising the traditional understanding of hell by replacing the idea of a forcibly imposed punishment with that of a freely embraced condition. C. S. Lewis, one of the earliest proponents of such an understanding, thus wrote: "In creating beings with free will, omnipotence from the outset submits to the possibility of ... defeat.... I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful, rebels to the end; that the doors of hell are locked on the inside."¹² But if the damned *freely* lock the doors of hell on the inside, thus freely separating themselves from God *forever*, then in what sense can hell represent unbearable suffering (or even worse, as Augustine held, unending physical torture)? From the perspective of the damned at least, hell must in the end seem more desirable than fellowship with God. So herein lies the context in which I have argued repeatedly that the whole idea of a freely embraced destiny apart from God is deeply incoherent. It is also the context in which McClymond quotes me as saying that "if separation from God can bring only greater and

greater misery into a life, as Christians have traditionally believed, then the very idea of . . . freely embracing a destiny apart from God *seems to break down altogether.*”¹³

Now please read that quotation carefully one more time, because McClymond misinterprets it entirely. Notice first that this quotation says nothing about any divine action, redemptive or otherwise, nothing about a forcibly imposed punishment, nothing about purgatorial suffering, and nothing about the effect of the described misery on the one who endures it. Although these are all important issues that I discuss in other contexts, my purpose in making the statement quoted above was merely to describe a simple metaphysical reality: the fact that, according to the Christian faith, a life wholly apart from any implicit experience of God would be an objective horror and would include misery beyond what any soul could tolerate. As Lewis himself wrote concerning the divine nature, “union with that Nature is bliss and separation from it [an objective] horror.”¹⁴ If that is true, then the “greater and greater misery” associated with one’s continuing to separate oneself from God’s loving nature has nothing to do with an *externally* imposed punishment at all; it is instead an unavoidable consequence of such separation and hence a means of revelation. In the right circumstances, in other words, it can teach us the true nature of such separation, just as a burn might teach a child the true nature of a hot stove.

But even though my statement that McClymond has quoted says nothing about any divine action at all, he immediately injects into it all kinds of preconceived nonsense. He thus attributes to me the view that “God increases the misery to ever-higher levels, until at last the human sufferer finally submits to God” (p. 955). And a few paragraphs later, he gets even more absurd: “God employs the postmortem equivalent of waterboarding or electroshock, at ever-increasing levels of intensity, until the poor sufferer finally ‘cries uncle’ and surrenders to God’s demand to be recognized. Though Talbott speaks of love, this seems more like torture” (p. 956). That would indeed be more like torture than love, had I ever said anything remotely like that. Not only can nothing like that be deduced validly from the statement that McClymond quotes; in the very article from which he has quoted, I explicitly rejected such torture as an appropriate (or even a possible) means of redemption. I thus distinguished sharply between the way in which the use of a sword or even torture might produce spiteful and resentful submission to some superior power, on the one hand, and “the way in which clarity of vision and knowing the truth compels obedience” to God and heartfelt repentance, on the other:

A stunning revelation such as Paul reportedly received, one that provides clear vision and *compelling evidence*, thereby altering one’s beliefs in a perfectly rational way, does not compel behavior in the same way that threatening someone with a sword might. A sword, as employed in typical cases of persecution, provides no evidence for the belief its wielder seeks to influence and therefore has no power to alter such a belief in some rational way. It typically alters behavior without altering basic convictions. But some free-will theists seem almost as leery of clear vision and compelling evidence as they are of more sinister forms of compulsion.¹⁵

As the example of Paul illustrates, a stunning revelation can sometimes be far more effective as a means of correction than deserved suffering might ever be. For according to the self-description attributed to Paul in 1 Timothy, he had been at one time “the foremost” of sinners: “a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence” (1:13); and according to the account in Acts,

Paul (or Saul) was “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” as he prepared to leave for Damascus (Acts 9:1). But the revelation he received on the road to Damascus stopped this religious terrorist dead in his tracks and changed entirely the direction of his will. And even if there are good reasons, as I suspect there are, for why such revelations must be relatively rare in this life, I see no reason why that should be true in the postmortem realm where sooner or later everyone will presumably encounter God face to face.

In any case, the whole point of my remark about separation from God bringing “greater and greater misery into a life” was that such misery would sooner or later undermine the very possibility of someone *freely* embracing a life apart from God. Why? Because given any reasonable account of moral freedom, whether it be libertarian or compatibilist, the decision to continue separating oneself from God’s loving nature would eventually become too irrational to qualify as a genuinely free decision. As even Jerry Walls points out in a passage that McClymond cites against me: “The notion of ever increasing misery, misery without a distinct limit, destroys the very notion of a free choice. The reason for this is that finite beings like ourselves are simply not constituted in such a way that we can absorb ever increasing misery” (quoted on page 955).¹⁶ So just where does McClymond think a disagreement lies here? Even as Walls argues that such misery as I have described is incompatible with “the very notion of free choice,” so I have argued that in the face of such misery the very idea of free choice “seems to break down altogether.”¹⁷ The one qualification I would add is that my expression “greater and greater misery” was never intended to imply “misery without a distinct limit” but rather “misery up to and including a kind of maximal degree.” If we think of the outer darkness as the logical limit, short of annihilation, of possible separation from God—a soul suspended alone in sheer nothingness, without even a physical environment to experience or other persons to encounter—then we can also, perhaps, think of the loneliness and terror associated with it as the maximal degree of possible terror and psychological distress.

It is hardly surprising, then, that such biblical images as the outer darkness and the lake of fire are typically associated with the postmortem realm rather than with an earthly life. For given the ambiguities of an earthly life where “we see through a glass, darkly,” as Paul put it (see 1 Corinthians 13:12a—KJV), we are rarely required to confront immediately the full implication of choosing self over God. As George MacDonald once observed, “let a man think and care ever so little about God, he does not therefore exist without God. God is here with him, upholding, warming, delighting, teaching him—making life a good thing to him. God gives him himself, though he knows it not.”¹⁸ But in a postmortem realm where all the ambiguities of our earthly existence are quickly resolved and we are each destined to encounter God “face to face” (see 13:12b), our sinful delusions will be much harder to maintain, I believe, even if maintaining them should be possible at all. So if, perchance, some hardened sinners should continue resisting God’s grace in the context of a direct encounter with him, the only remaining choice for them would seem to be this: either they can submit humbly to his purifying love, or, if they still refuse to do that, they can escape altogether from his holy presence and enter the outer darkness, where they will experience the unavoidable consequence of choosing self over God.¹⁹ Probably no one has described the horror of the outer darkness more poignantly than George MacDonald when he wrote the following:

But when God withdraws from a man [or the person withdraws from God] as far as that can be without the man's ceasing to be; when the man feels himself abandoned, hanging in a ceaseless vertigo of existence upon the verge of the gulf of his being, without support, without refuge, without aim, without end . . . with no inbreathing of joy, with nothing [including the faintest experience of love] to make life good, then will he listen in agony for the faintest sound of life from the closed door; then . . . he will be ready to rush into the very heart of the Consuming Fire to know life once more, to change this terror of sick negation, of unspeakable death, for that region of hopeful pain. Imagination cannot mislead us into too much horror of being without God—that one living death.²⁰

At the risk of repetition, I would again emphasize that such intolerable horror as MacDonald here described has nothing to do with God turning up the heat, so to speak, on the intensity of some externally imposed punishment (or torture) and everything to do with sinners bumping up against the hard rock of reality. Not even Omnipotence, after all, could *both* permit such separation to take place in the outer darkness *and* protect a sinner from the intolerable misery it entails. So yes, as I acknowledged in the previous section, God sometimes does employ corrective punishment, but such punishment is never coercive and never beyond what an individual can bear. More often than not, God even protects us, at least for a while, from the worst of the suffering that our bad choices might otherwise produce. When it becomes necessary for our own long-term good, however, he will indeed allow us to learn a hard lesson—not by doing something further to us or by controlling our individual choices, but by simply permitting us to experience the very condition of separation that we have confusedly chosen for ourselves. For at some point in the process of separating ourselves from God's loving nature, if it should continue long enough, we will inevitably begin to discover its horrific nature. Just as no minimally rational person (with a normal nervous system) could both shove an unprotected arm into a hot fire and retain the illusion that the fire causes sensations of intense pleasure, neither could a sinner both experience the loneliness and terror of the outer darkness and retain *forever* the illusion that a loving relationship with God would be even worse than this.

Right here, by the way, is where Jerry Walls and I have a relatively minor philosophical disagreement, what we have both described as “a hair's breadth of difference.” Whereas Walls and I share exactly the same understanding of divine goodness and divine love and both reject the idea that a person's eternal destiny is always unalterably fixed at the moment of physical death, we nonetheless differ concerning the possibility of a sinner clinging forever to the delusions that make sin possible in the first place. I reject, for reasons of a kind sketched above, even the possibility of such delusions enduring forever. But Walls defends this idea as a logical possibility at least, and McClymond quotes a lengthy passage in which Walls says, among other things, that it is “the ability to deceive ourselves that finally makes intelligible the choice of eternal hell.”²¹ In defending the intelligibility of such a choice or choices, Walls is, of course, defending the idea that such a deluded choice is perfectly coherent. So how does McClymond interpret this matter? Unfortunately, he gets it utterly confused and thus writes: “Self-chosen damnation may indeed be incoherent *and yet happen anyway*, as Jerry Walls explains” in the lengthy passage just mentioned (see p. 998, n. 69—his italics). Evidently, then, McClymond has confused Walls' forceful argument that a self-chosen damnation requires some kind of self-deception to endure forever

with the absurd claim that an incoherent idea might nonetheless describe accurately something that actually happens. This time I really am left speechless!

A Few Issues Concerning Biblical Exegesis

According to McClymond, “Talbot uses some far-fetched exegesis to support his views” (p. 953). But remarkably, he never provides a single example of an exegetical or textual *argument*—note the word “argument”—that he takes to be farfetched. For even though he cites as his example my interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 1:9, which treats *eternal destruction* as a redemptive concept, he ignores entirely every argument I offered in support of that interpretation.

He says nothing, for example, about why I believe this text to be badly mistranslated in many of our English Bibles and nothing about how Paul himself used the same term for destruction (the Greek “olethros”) in the following harsh-sounding redemptive context. When Paul “pronounced judgment in the name of the Lord Jesus” on a man who was living with his father’s wife and ordered the Corinthians to “hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh” (see 1 Cor. 5:1-5), we might never have guessed, had he not explicitly said so, that Paul intended this for the man’s own good. For his tone here was exceedingly harsh, and his words had a definite retributivist ring to them. It therefore comes almost as a surprise when we read the entire sentence: “hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.” We thus discover that these two expressions, “destruction of the flesh” and “salvation of the spirit,” are functioning something like two sides of the same coin. Now McClymond may find all of this unpersuasive, farfetched, or perhaps even irrelevant to a correct interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 1:9; that would be fine. But when he declares that some interpretation is farfetched without providing even a hint of my argument in support of it, this seems to me more like political spin than competent criticism.

Now consider, by way of comparison, some of McClymond’s own exegetical comments. With respect to my proposition 3 (the proposition that some sinners will never be reconciled to God), he writes: “Literal interpreters of the Bible will not doubt that proposition 3 finds support in Scripture” (p. 951). But just what does it mean, beyond rejecting certain extreme forms of allegory, to be a *literal interpreter of the Bible*? Does it mean, for example, that one takes literally every detail of every parable? Or consider the following assertion of Jesus: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters . . . cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). Are we supposed to take that literally as well? These questions are important because at times McClymond appears to identify being “biblically literalistic” with interpreting the Bible properly, even though he never provides a clear explanation of just what this is supposed to mean. Concerning Robin Parry’s understanding of the lake of fire, according to which the image of fire is a symbol of purification,²² McClymond thus writes: “Even though Parry is one of the most biblically literalistic of recent Christian universalists [good], in this case his interpretation becomes quite nonliteralistic” [bad] (p. 1048). But why couldn’t a Christian universalist just as plausibly argue that the standard ways of explaining away such texts as Romans 5 and 11, 1 Corinthians 15, and the old creedal hymn reproduced in Colossians 1:15-20 result in “quite nonliteralistic” as well as utterly farfetched interpretations?

As a sort of test case, then, let us consider Romans 5:18 more closely and consider McClymond's nonliteral and farfetched interpretation of it. Consider first its parallel structure:

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

The whole point of such a parallel structure, so typical of Paul, is to identify a single group of individuals and to make two parallel statements about that single group of individuals, and the practical effect is therefore to eliminate any possibility of ambiguity. The very ones who came under condemnation, as a result of the first Adam's act of disobedience, will eventually be brought to justification and life, as a result of the second Adam's act of obedience. So how could a so-called literal interpretation of this text possibly require the assumption that Paul shifted reference on his readers in the context of a single sentence or require the assumption that his second "all" (literally "all men") refers to a more restricted group of people than does his first? If Paul were that sloppy a writer, why should anyone trust him as a reliable source of revelation?

McClymond's own farfetched exegesis of this text appears not in his critique of me, but in his critique of Robin Parry who, he claims, "interprets Romans 5:12-21 out of context." He then ticks off four objections in the space of a couple of sentences; and even though each of his objections deserves careful attention and at least two of them have also been rejected by first rate scholars in his own evangelical tradition, he seems content simply to mention these objections without so much as discussing them. Here is what he says:

Sound hermeneutical practice would suggest that "for all men" [in 5:18] should be read alongside "justified by faith" in 5:1. Parry does not adequately take into account the alternating terms in the passage ("many" versus "all"), the possible qualifying phrase in 5:17 ("those who receive the abundance of grace"), nor the reasonable surmise of N. T. Wright that the "all" of Romans 5:18 refers to "all nations" and not Jews only (p. 962).

That's it. That is sufficient, as McClymond apparently sees it, to discredit Parry's universalist understanding of Romans 5 and verse 5:18 in particular. To be fair, McClymond does return to this passage in an appendix entitled "Barth and Bultmann on Romans 5," where he defends Bultmann's critique of Barth's interpretation of this text. But so far as I can tell, Bultmann's standard Arminian misreading of it adds nothing substantive to the points made in the above quotation. Even as McClymond suggests that the expression "for all men" in 5:18 "should be read alongside 'justified by faith' in 5:1," so Bultmann insists that verses 12-21 must be interpreted in light of verses 1-11. The point, which neither of them makes sufficiently clear, is evidently that, according to Paul in 5:1, the right kind of faith is a necessary condition of someone receiving the relevant justification and life. But so what? Paul's explicit affirmation in 5:18 that one act of righteousness will eventually bring "justification and life" to all humans already entails that all the necessary conditions of such justification and life will eventually be met. Nor does that entailment depend on which text, either 5:1 or 5:18, someone happens to regard as more basic or in some sense more important. You can hardly challenge the universal scope of the

second “all” in 5:18, therefore, merely by pointed out that, according to 5:1, the right kind of faith, which in Pauline theology is itself a gift from God, is one of these necessary conditions.

A variation on Bultmann’s appeal to 5:1 is his (and McClymond’s) appeal to 5:17 and the expression “those who receive the abundance of grace.” According to Bultmann, “For Adamic mankind there was no choice between death and life, but all were doomed to death. According to logical consequence all men after Christ should receive life.” Strictly speaking, Bultmann should have said, if he wanted to be accurate, that according to “logical consequence” the same *all* that were doomed to death, whether they lived before or after Christ, should likewise receive life. But anyway, Bultmann then fell off the proverbial cliff and continued as follows: “Of course Paul does not mean that [and therefore ignored the logical consequence of his own words!]; instead all men now face the decision whether they wish to belong to ‘those who have received,’ provided that the word of proclamation has already reached them.”

Although this is the standard Arminian way of explaining away our text, it also ignores one all-important fact: in any context where the thing received is divine judgment, divine grace, or a divine gift of some kind, Paul consistently used the verb “to receive” (*lambanō*) in a passive sense. And lest there should be any confusion about this, the passive sense of this verb has nothing to do with the grammatical idea of the passive voice. When Paul declared, “Five times I have received [active voice] . . . the forty lashes minus one” (2 Cor. 11:24), we understand that he received these 39 lashes in the same passive way that a boxer might receive severe blows to the head; and when he spoke of those who “have received [active voice] grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith” (Rom 1:5), we again understand that such persons are the recipients of some divine action in the same passive way that a newborn baby receives life. Similarly, in Romans 5:18 and 19 Paul was comparing the effect of Christ’s one act of righteousness on the whole mass of humanity with the effect of Adam’s disobedience, pointing out in verses 15 and 17 that the latter is far greater, and far more extensive, than the former. So as the Reformed New Testament scholar John Murray, himself a vigorous opponent of universalism, once pointed out, the “word ‘receiving’ [in 5:17] . . . does not refer to our believing acceptance of the free gift but to our being made the recipients, and we are regarded as the passive beneficiaries of both the grace and the free gift in their overflowing fullness.”²³ According to Paul, in other words, we no more choose to experience the beneficial effects of Christ’s one act of righteousness than we chose to experience the destructive effects of Adam’s disobedience.²⁴

As for McClymond’s remark concerning “the alternating terms in the passage (‘many’ versus ‘all’),” this merely reveals, I believe, that he (and not Parry) is interpreting Romans 5:18 out of context. For he ignores altogether Paul’s own clarification in verse 15, where he distinguished within the group or class of all human sinners between “the one” and “the many”—“the one” being Adam himself, who first sinned, and “the many” being all of those who died as a result of Adam’s sin. So once again it is John Murray who, despite his vigorous opposition to universalism, has nonetheless pointed out the fatal flaw in McClymond’s objection:

When Paul uses the expression “the many”, he is not intending to delimit the denotation. The scope of “the many” must be the same as the “all men” of verses 12 and 18. He uses “the many” here, as in verse 19, for the purpose of contrasting more effectively

“the one” and “the many”, singularity and plurality—it was the trespass of “the one” . . . but “the many” died as a result.”²⁵

Paul also insisted in the same context that “the one,” namely Adam, was “a type” of Jesus Christ (vs. 14), presumably because Jesus Christ, the second Adam, stands in the same relationship to “the many” as the first Adam did. The most reasonable interpretation, therefore, seems to be that Paul had in mind one group of individuals—“the many,” which included all human beings except for the first and the second Adam—and he envisioned that each of the two Adams stands in exactly the same relationship to that one group of individuals.

Finally, McClymond thinks it sufficient merely to mention, without even discussing it, “the reasonable surmise of N. T. Wright that the ‘all’ of Romans 5:18 refers to ‘all nations’ and not Jews only.” But the expression Paul actually used was “all men,” by which he clearly meant in context *all the merely human descendants of Adam*. When Paul declared in Romans 3 that “all have sinned” (vs. 23), he was not claiming merely that all nations include some sinners; he was declaring instead that “all, both Jews and Greeks [Gentiles], are under the power of sin. As it is written: ‘There is no one who is righteous, not even one . . .’” That is clearly the reference of the first “all men” in Romans 5:18. And the “just as . . . so also” construction makes it clear that the second “all men” has exactly the same reference. So who, I ask, is interpreting this text nonliterally? Is it the Christian universalist or McClymond himself?

As further support for his own understanding of this text, McClymond also quotes Douglas J. Moo (see p. 1066, n.103), who writes: “That ‘all’ does not always mean ‘every single human being’ is clear from many passages, it often being clearly limited in context (cf. Rom. 8:32; 12:17, 18; 14:2; 16:19)”²⁶ And not surprisingly, McClymond ignores altogether my own critique of Moo’s examples, first published back in 2006.²⁷ Moo is certainly right that “all” does not mean “every single human being” in Romans 14:2, which he cites as an example and where the reference class is not even that of human beings; it is instead that of *edible foods*.²⁸ Like most people, Paul occasionally used the word “all” in contexts where it was never intended to be taken literally, and this should be obvious to any reader.²⁹ But in any case, I am still waiting for someone to propose a counterexample to the following conclusion in my discussion of Moo:

Beyond that, Paul never spoke of the human race as a whole, at least not in a context of doctrinal exposition, in a way that omitted anyone—except, perhaps, the first and the second Adam. And even if he had spoken rather loosely in some contexts, that would have had no relevance to those contexts, such as Romans 5:18, Romans 11:32, and I Corinthians 15:22, where he employed special grammatical devices for the very purpose of eliminating all ambiguity.

Conclusion

The greatest value of *The Devil’s Redemption* is, as mentioned at the outset, its astonishing breadth of coverage. Its bibliography and indexes alone are valuable as pointers to virtually every name, topic, and available written work that might be relevant to the history of Christian universalism. But McClymond does not write merely as a historian who seeks to describe factually and objectively both sides of the various issues and arguments that have arisen in this history. He

also writes as an advocate for a traditional understanding of hell, and that seems to skew everything he does. Although 1300 pages may seem like a huge volume of work—as indeed it is—it does not provide nearly enough space for an advocate to deal accurately and thoroughly with more than a few of those persons whose ideas he seeks to discredit in one way or another. So he seems to have adopted a strategy of picking out a quotation here and there that fits a preconceived narrative and of objecting to some conclusion without any regard for the arguments offered in support of it. The result is an unfortunate superficiality in what could have been a serious and important piece of scholarship.

Even McClymond's section title "The Philosophical Universalism of Thomas Talbott" illustrates this superficiality nicely. For the section bearing that title includes nary a hint of any philosophical argument I have ever set forth on any subject. The inconsistent set of propositions he confuses with a philosophical argument is quite relevant to the issue of biblical exegesis and that of interpreting the Bible as a whole, but it was never intended as a philosophical argument for any conclusion. To the contrary, my philosophical argument for universalism, which he never even mentions, begins with an analysis of the inclusive nature of love: how loving another in the sense of willing the best for the other ties the interests of people together, so that any harm that befalls the beloved is harm that befalls oneself as well. Another manifestation of this superficiality is how often McClymond quotes some author he agrees with and then simply ignores all of the relevant replies to what this author says. He cites, to give just one example, I. Howard Marshall's critique of my interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:24-28 on the ground that my interpretation "ignores the mention of destruction" in this passage (p. 1066, n.108). But he then ignores everything I said about how the concept of *destruction* functions in that chapter.³⁰

Such a lack of thoroughness was no doubt inevitable, given the astonishingly large number of people whose thought McClymond seeks to summarize so briefly and then to criticize in many cases. But it also explains, perhaps, why so many elements of a preconceived narrative never get corrected. How else can one explain his attribution to me of the view that "some people are saved even though God never forgives them" in a context where I explicitly stated that God's attitude of forgiveness never changes, not even in the case of a so-called unpardonable sin? And how else can one explain McClymond's having drawn the implication from my own words that "Some are saved by grace, while others are saved apart from grace" when I have stated hundreds of times that all of God's actions, even his harshest punishments, are an expression of his mercy and his saving grace. His preconceived narrative also includes many of the standard ways of explaining away such universalistic-sounding texts as Romans 5:18, 1 Corinthians 15:20-28, and others. But he never even mentions such objections to these standard arguments as we have reviewed above, at least in our test case of Romans 5:18.

My point is not, however, that a historian who offers "A New History and Interpretation of Christian Universalism" needs to include a lot of detailed biblical exegesis in a thorough historical account. A historian is under no obligation, after all, to step outside of his or her own area of expertise. But when McClymond takes a stand on various exegetical issues, he then owes his readers a lot more than a few bald assertions such as, "Literal interpreters of the Bible will not doubt that" a doctrine of everlasting separation from God "finds support in Scripture"; when he quotes someone, he should at least be aware of the context from which that quote is lifted; and

when he criticizes someone's conclusion, he should at least take note of the person's argument for that conclusion.

¹ Michael J. McClymond, *The Devil's Redemption: A New History and Interpretation of Christian Universalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018).

² For my most recent expression of this inconsistent triad, first published in 2013, see section 1 of my entry entitled "Heaven and Hell in Christian Thought" in the online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, which is available at the following URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heaven-hell/>. The revised version of proposition (2) now reads: "Almighty God will triumph in the end and successfully reconcile to himself each person whose reconciliation he sincerely wills or desires." Note that this makes no reference to God's power or ability. That's because it suddenly occurred to me a few decades ago that virtually every biblical text one might cite on behalf of the weaker claim that God has the power to accomplish his redemptive will for someone could also be cited on behalf of the stronger claim, as the Calvinists have always insisted, that he will in fact satisfy that redemptive will in the end.

³ That McClymond confuses my inconsistent set of propositions with an argument is also made clear from the following quotation: "On the basis of the three-proposition argument, Talbott could just as well go the way of Epicurus into a denial of any loving and omnipotent God" (p. 952).

⁴ Here is another reason—slightly more technical, perhaps, but nonetheless important—why McClymond's set of propositions are in a very different format from my own. Compare my own proposition (1) with his proposition (4), as I have numbered it. Whereas (1) is effectively a singular proposition that attributes to a given individual named God a certain redemptive purpose, (4) is really a universal proposition stating in effect that, for any x , if x is an all-loving God, then x wills for there to be no sin, evil, or suffering in the universe. We can illustrate the different form of these two propositions in the following way. Suppose that God does not exist or that, if he does exist, he is not all-loving and does not have the redemptive purpose I have attributed to him. It follows from that supposition that (1) is false or at least not true, depending upon how one wants to handle singular propositions about non-existent objects. It does not follow, however, that (4) is false, even if it should indeed be false for other reasons. So that is why an Epicurus or a Hume can treat McClymond's set of propositions as perfectly consistent and even claim that all three of them are true.

⁵ Because some recent proponents of a free will theodicy of hell hold that a loving God would never place a time-limit on the opportunity to repent, not even in hell, this particular point does not pertain to those whose view includes the possibility that an occupant of hell may escape from it at some future time.

⁶ *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 746.

⁷ Because this is the only quotation McClymond offers in support of his contention that I have stated that "some people are saved even though God never forgives them," I find his failure even to acknowledge that I am giving an interpretation of Jesus' remarks about the so-called unpardonable sin doubly strange.

⁸ Whether cutting off a quote in midsentence results in a distortion will, of course, depend upon the context. But in his attempt to discredit John Kronen and Eric Reitan and their important book *God's Final Victory*, McClymond provides another example of an egregious distortion. No one who *both* reads this book carefully *and* understands what is being read will come away with the idea that, according to its authors, salvation is possible apart from the right kind of faith. And yet, in support of just this interpretation, which the authors emphatically reject, McClymond attributes to them "the claim that 'it is hard to imagine why God would be incapable of attributing Christ's merit to the unfaithful'" (p. 1066, n.83). But incredibly, his partial quotation here is the consequent of a conditional, where a conditional is a proposition of the form: *if p then q*, with *q* being its consequent. As any college freshman should know, my asserting the conditional: "If McClymond is a bachelor, then he surely is unmarried," is not the same thing as claiming that he is in fact unmarried. Beyond that, Kronen and Reitan are seeking to expose the logical flaws in a particular way of arguing for an eternal hell: one that appeals to a specific understanding of justice and a specific understanding of vicarious atonement. Not one word in this complex discussion implies that, according to these authors, salvation is possible apart from the right kind of faith.

⁹ George MacDonald, "Justice" in *Unspoken Sermons* (Whitethorn, CA: Johannesen, 2004), p. 509.

¹⁰ Here I borrow the name of Francis Thompson's famous poem "The Hound of Heaven."

¹¹ Augustine, *City of God*, bk. xxi, ch. 9.

¹² C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), p. 127.

¹³ Quoted on page 955 from “Freedom, Damnation, and the Power to Sin with Impunity,” *Religious Studies* 37 (2001), p. 420. Italics added.

¹⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955), p. 232.

¹⁵ “Freedom, Damnation, and the Power to Sin with Impunity,” pp. 427-428

¹⁶ The quotation is from Jerry Walls, “A Philosophical Critique of Talbott’s Universalism,” in Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Partridge (eds.), *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 111.

¹⁷ Unlike McClymond, Walls sees correctly that, on my view, “there is an obvious and important asymmetry between choosing fellowship with God as an eternal destiny, on the one hand, and choosing hell as an eternal destiny, on the other. Whereas the first of these obviously is possible, the second is not” (see Walls, *op. cit.*, p. 110).

¹⁸ “The Consuming fire” in *Unspoken Sermons* (Whitethorn, CA: Yohannesen, 2004), p. 31.

¹⁹ When Paul quoted the poet Epimenides of Crete in order to make the point that “in him [God] we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28), one might interpret this to imply that God is not only our moral and spiritual environment, but our physical environment as well. Given that interpretation, even our experience of the physical order would be an implicit experience of God.

²⁰ “The Consuming Fire,” p. 31

²¹ Walls, *op. cit.* pp. 111-112.

²² Of course, the prophet Malachi interpreted the image of fire in essentially the same way when he wrote the following: “But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness” (Mal. 3:2-3).

²³ John Murray, *Epistle to the Romans*, Vol. I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), p. 198. Richard Bell makes a similar point in “Rom. 5:18-19 and Universal Salvation”, *New Testament Studies* 48.3 (2002), p. 429. If Paul were referring to “our believing acceptance of the free gift,” he surely would have used the word “pisteuō” (“to believe” or “to trust”), as he did throughout the epistle; he would not have chosen a verb like “lambanō” that is just as applicable to the recipients of divine judgment as it is to the recipients of divine grace.

²⁴ This does not mean, however, that Pauline theology and in particular Paul’s understanding of irresistible grace minimizes the importance of free choice. For why nothing like this follows, see the sections entitled “The Essential Role of Human Freedom in Universal Reconciliation” and “God’s Respect for Human Freedom” in the second edition of *The Inescapable Love of God*, pp. 192-198.

²⁵ John Murray, *Epistle to the Romans*, Vol. I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), pp. 192-193.

²⁶ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 343-344.

²⁷ For the full reply see Thomas Talbott, “Universal Reconciliation and the Inclusive Nature of Reconciliation,” in Chad Brand, *Perspectives on Election: Five Views* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2006) pp. 233-234. See also the second edition of *The Inescapable Love of God*, pp. 52-55.

²⁸ Because Paul was no doubt opposed to cannibalism, a more accurate statement of his reference class would be that it includes all edible non-human flesh and vegetables.

²⁹ As an illustration, I wrote the following sentence several decades ago: “When the Portland Trailblazers passed over the chance to draft Michael Jordan, they disappointed all of Oregon.” Hope McClymond never sees that sentence. He might conclude that I don’t really believe that all will be saved in the end!

³⁰ Here is one paragraph that he ignores: “Now Marshall is right: Paul clearly taught that Christ will destroy death and a host of other cosmic forces inimical to the interest of humankind. So how should we understand this? Universalists believe that the same God who commands *us* to love *our* enemies loves his own enemies as well. But God does not love sin or death or anything that separates us from him, and Paul also referred to these as enemies. So here we must distinguish carefully between the sense in which such personified evils as Sin and Death and various cosmic forces are enemies and the sense in which real people under the power of such evils are enemies. Christ destroys enemies of the first kind (non-persons) by obliterating them, that is, by eliminating them from his creation entirely.³⁰ When he does destroy sin and death and various cosmic forces, he likewise destroys enemies of the second kind (sinful persons) in the only way possible short of annihilating them: by redeeming them while they are yet enemies. For only enemies of the second kind (persons) are possible objects of God’s redemptive love” (see Chapter 2 “Christ Victorious” in *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate*, p. 27.