

Comments on Robert Reymond's Supralapsarianism

Concerning “the Biblically informed Christian”

Because the dispute between supralapsarians and infralapsarians is essentially a parochial one among those who accept a doctrine of limited election, I am less interested in the details of this particular dispute than I am in an assumption that both parties accept: the assumption that God restricts his mercy to a limited elect. So the question I would pose, right at the outset, is this: Has Robert Reymond provided anything remotely like a strong biblical argument, or even any argument at all, for a doctrine of limited election? And the correct answer, I believe, is that he has not. First, one cannot successfully argue that Paul, for example, held a doctrine of limited election simply by pointing to a few texts in Romans 9 while ignoring Paul's own conclusion in Romans 11 and ignoring, in particular, Paul's explicit statement in verse 32 that God is merciful to all; and second, even if one should restrict oneself to Romans 9, not one word there implies a final and irrevocable rejection of anyone, whether it be Ishmael, Esau, Pharaoh, or Paul's unbelieving kin. You can read the idea of irrevocable rejection *into* Romans 9, but you cannot find anything there that *entails* such an idea.

Now I would have no one interpret these remarks as a criticism of Reymond. None of us can do everything at once, and it is perfectly appropriate for Reymond to construct an argument for supralapsarianism within the context of certain assumptions. By “assumption” here, I do not mean something like an absolute presupposition. I mean (roughly) any proposition that one employs as a premise in the context of a given discussion and does so without a supporting argument in the same context. Because none of us can do everything at once, as I said, we all argue from assumptions in this sense; that is, we often employ as a premise some proposition not at issue in a given discussion. **All parties to the present discussion, for example, can appropriately**

assume that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, and it matters not that this assumption would merely beg the question against anyone who might be skeptical of the resurrection.

But here is where I think Reymond overplays his hand. In the early part of his essay, he repeats the expression “biblically informed Christian” again and again and repeatedly treats some controversial issue, such as a belief in absolute determinism or the doctrine of reprobation, as if no biblically informed Christian could possibly reject it. He thus concludes that “the biblically informed Christian...will, in short, espouse the Reformed faith that is in turn simply the Faith of the Holy Scripture itself.”¹ But this way of speaking, however appropriate it may be for an “in-house” discussion among Calvinists, does nothing to advance a plausible case against either Arminianism or Christian universalism. For in a discussion among Christians with theological differences, such language amounts to little more than the dogmatic assertion, “My interpretation of the Bible is right, and yours is wrong!”

As an illustration of the problem, consider just one premise in Reymond’s argument for limited atonement: the premise that “neither Scripture, history, nor Christian experience will tolerate the conclusion that all men have become, are becoming, or shall become Christians....”² In the context of his case against the Amyraldians, this premise plays a powerful role in Reymond’s argument for limited atonement. But in a larger context, it does nothing to advance the case against universalism, because in that context it merely begs the question or assumes the very point that Reymond needs to demonstrate. How, after all, is Christian experience even relevant to the question of whether God will eventually reconcile all sinners to himself through the blood of Christ? And how is history relevant? If history teaches anything, it is the extent to which orthodoxy, as we now understand it, was the product of imperial politics and was preserved by the

¹ Manuscript, p. 8.

² Manuscript, p. 24

power of the sword. As for the teaching of Scripture, Reymond can hardly deny that a text such as Romans 5:18-19 at least *appears*, when taken in its own context, to teach universalism. Even John Murray, perhaps the best of the Reformed New Testament scholars, admitted this when he asked: “Is this [the second half of 5:18] to be interpreted as embracively as the terms *appear* to imply?” (my emphasis). He then went on to write: “There is no possibility of escaping the conclusion that, if the apostle meant the apodosis to be as embracive in its scope as the protasis [that is, if Paul really meant what his words in fact say], then the whole human race must eventually attain eternal life.”³ And similarly for 1 Corinthians 15:20-28: Anyone without prior theological commitments who just reads this text (in a grammatically correct translation) would likely conclude that, according to it, the very same “all humans” who died in Adam will eventually belong to Christ and will thus be made alive in him as well.

So just how, exactly, are we to interpret Reymond’s claim that Scripture (or the Bible as a whole?) will not tolerate a doctrine of universal reconciliation? Perhaps as follows: Whatever such texts as Romans 5:18 and 1 Corinthians 15:20-28 may appear to teach in their own context, other texts, such as Matthew 25:46 or 2 Thessalonians 1:9, exclude the very possibility of universal reconciliation. But one could just as easily make essentially the same claim in the reverse direction: Whatever such texts as Matthew 25:46 and 2 Thessalonians 1:9 may appear to teach in their own context, other texts, such as Romans 5:18 or 1 Corinthians 15:20-28 exclude the very possibility of an everlasting separation from God. So which claim, if either, should we accept? One possibility, which Reymond and I both reject, is that the Bible as a whole is simply inconsistent on this matter; another, which Reymond no doubt accepts, is that, contrary to appearances, Romans 5:18 and 1 Corinthians 15:20-28 carry no implication of universal reconcilia-

³ John Murray, *Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, Vol. I (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1960), p. 202.

tion; and still another, which seems to me the sober truth of the matter, is that, contrary to initial appearances, Matthew 25:46 and 2 Thessalonians 1:9 carry no implication of unending punishment. But whatever position one adopts, the fact is that *any* interpretation of the Bible as a whole is a far more complex affair than Reymond appears to acknowledge.

Interpreting the Bible As a Whole

One of the best ways, in my opinion, to appreciate some of the complexities in interpreting the Bible as a whole is to reflect upon the following inconsistent set of propositions:

- (1) God's redemptive love extends to all human sinners equally, and he therefore *sincerely* wills or desires the redemption of all humans in the sense that, for any two of them, *s* and *s**, God wills or desires the redemption of *s* *in every sense* that he wills or desires the redemption of *s**.
- (2) God's redemptive love will triumph in the end and successfully accomplish the redemption of everyone whose redemption he sincerely wills or desires.
- (3) Some human sinners will never be reconciled to God but will instead be separated from God forever.

Two clarifications are perhaps in order at the outset: First, proposition (1), as I here formulate it, is a bit more complicated than I would like because I want to guarantee that no one who accepts a doctrine of limited election can consistently accept it. For even if, as Bruce Ware insists, God suffers from a conflict of will or desire in the matter of saving the non-elect and therefore does will or desire (in some attenuated or conflicted sense) their redemption and reconciliation, he could not possibly will the redemption of the non-elect *in every sense* in which he wills the redemption of the elect. Second, proposition (2) does *not* merely say that God has *the power* to redeem everyone whose redemption he sincerely wills or desires; it says instead that he will *in*

fact accomplish the redemption of everyone whose redemption he sincerely wills or desires. So if someone holds that God has the power to save all but chooses not to exercise it, then this person has already rejected proposition (2). And though Bruce Ware might join the Arminians in rejecting (2), as stated, he would have to accept

(2*) God's redemptive love will triumph in the end and successfully accomplish the redemption of everyone whose redemption he sincerely wills or desires *in every sense* in which he wills or desires the redemption of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Now if the above set of propositions, consisting of (1), (2), and (3), is logically inconsistent, as it surely is, then at least one proposition in the set is false. But which one? Augustinians, such as Reymond and Ware, reject (1); Arminians and open theists, such as Jack Cottrell and Clark Pinnock respectively, reject (2); and we Christian universalists reject (3). The problem, however, is that in each case the rejected proposition is one that other "biblically informed Christians," including some highly competent and highly respected Bible scholars, accept as a clear and obvious teaching of Scripture.⁴ So in that respect, all reflective Christians are in the same theological boat, so to speak; they must *either* reject a proposition that other competent scholars accept as a clear and obvious teaching of Scripture *or* simply concede that the teachings of Scripture are logically inconsistent. My point is not that all three theological positions are equally cogent; far from it. I continue to believe that Christian universalism provides the best and most reasonable interpretation of the Bible as a whole. But I am not so naïve as to expect that every "biblically informed Christian," including Reymond, will automatically agree with me.

⁴ For a quick survey of the texts that might initially seem to support each of the three propositions, see Thomas Talbott, "Towards a Better Understanding of Universalism," in Robin Parry and Christopher Partridge, *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, 2004), pp. 9-10.

In any event, Reymond and I both accept proposition (2), which states that God's redemptive love will triumph in the end. So part of the issue between us is this: Which is stronger, the biblical warrant for believing that God loves all persons equally (proposition (1)), or the biblical warrant for believing that some of those created in the image of God will be lost forever (proposition (3))? But that is only part of the issue between us. For one can also weaken the case for any one proposition in our inconsistent set simply by strengthening the case for the other two. So if (a) the biblical case for (1) is as overwhelmingly strong as I have claimed in my own essay and (b) someone should present an equally strong biblical case for (3), the proper response would then be to reject (2), join the ranks of the Arminians, and deny the sovereignty of God's salvific will. Alternatively, if the biblical case for (1) and the biblical case for (2) are both overwhelmingly strong, as I believe they are, then that might outweigh even a strong *prima facie* case for (3). It is not enough, in other words, merely to cite the standard proof texts on behalf of (3) or to consider (3) in isolation from (1) and (2). One must instead show that the biblical grounds for believing in everlasting separation are either stronger than those for believing in the universality of God's redemptive love or stronger than those for believing in the sovereignty of God's salvific will—a daunting task indeed! And from my point of view anyway, Reymond appears not even to appreciate the enormity of the task.

Destruction and Redemption

In my own chapter, I try to build a strong biblical case for proposition (1) and a strong biblical case for proposition (2). But though I also say a lot about Paul's understanding of divine judgment, I say nothing there about the most important proof texts typically cited on behalf of proposition (3); in that respect, my argument is seriously incomplete. So in opposition to Reymond's sweeping claim that Scripture will not tolerate a doctrine of universal reconciliation and

in support of my own conviction that St. Paul was a universalist, I shall now explain why, in my opinion, 2 Thessalonians 1:9 carries no implication of an everlasting separation from God.⁵ In fact, the Greek carries no implication of separation at all. The sole reason that some translators inject the idea of separation into the text is that the Greek “apo,” like the English “from,” can sometimes mean “away from”—as when, for instance, the kings of the earth and others cry out to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us *from (apo)* the face of the one seated on the throne and *from (apo)* the wrath of the Lamb” (Rev. 6:15-16). When we try to hide or to conceal ourselves *from* the presence of the Lord—an impossible task—we are indeed trying to get *away from* that presence. But in 2 Thessalonians 1:9 we find no verb, such as “to hide” or “to conceal,” and no other grammatical device that would give grammatical sense to such a rendering. In the absence of such a device, it is no less grammatically incorrect to translate “olethron aionion apo prosopou tou kuriou” as “eternal destruction *away from* the presence of the Lord” than it would be to translate “kairoi anapsuxeos apo prosopou tou kuriou” (Acts 3:19) as “refreshing times *away from* the presence of the Lord.” Not only is the grammar identical in the two texts; taken together, they tell us that the presence of the Lord brings both refreshing times to the obedient and destruction upon the disobedient. Not one word here implies an exclusion from the presence of the Lord.

Neither does anything here imply the absence of mercy. According to Paul, so I argued in my own essay, even God’s severity and harshest judgment express his boundless mercy; and if that is true, then the concept of *destruction*, as Paul understood it, should likewise turn out to be a redemptive concept. And so it does. We see this clearly in 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, where “in the name of the Lord Jesus” Paul himself pronounced judgment on a man living with his father’s

⁵ For my interpretation of Matthew 25:46, see my remarks in Robin A Parry and Christopher H. Partridge, *op. cit.*, pp. 43-47 & pp. 269-270 n.33.

wife. So incensed was Paul by this immorality—an immorality “not found even among pagans” (5:1)—that he ordered the Corinthians to “hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh” (5:5). Now just how should we understand “the destruction of the flesh” here? Clearly Paul did not have in mind the destruction of the body; he was not here contemplating the possibility of disembodied existence. And as Leon Morris has pointed out, “the flesh” often “denotes the whole personality of man as organized in the wrong direction, as directed to earthly pursuits rather than the service of God.”⁶ So in a very real sense, the destruction of the flesh is the destruction of a person—that is, the old person, the vessel of wrath, the sinful nature, the very thing we *call* ourselves. And what, I ask, could be more frightening than being handed over to Satan for the destruction of an entire personality “as organized in the wrong direction”? This hardly sounds like a mere chastening of a believer, something akin to parental chastisement; to the contrary, it is every bit as harsh as anything we encounter in the context of 2 Thessalonians 1:9, and the prescribed punishment definitely has a retributivist flavor to it. We might never have suspected, therefore, that Paul intended the punishment for the man’s own good, had he not explicitly written: “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.” But that is just what he did write. In 1 Corinthians 5:5, he was clearly thinking of destruction (*olethros*) in a redemptive context, albeit a harsh one, and nothing in the context of 2 Thessalonians 1:9 prevents us from thinking of it that way there as well.

Even as mistranslated in some of our English Bibles, moreover, 2 Thessalonians 1:9 is the only text in the entire Pauline corpus that might initially seem to imply a doctrine of everlasting separation from God. On the other side, we have the clear universalistic thrust of Romans 5:12-21 and 1 Corinthians 15:20-28, the universalistic implications of Ephesians 1:10, Colossians

⁶ See Morris’ entry on flesh in J.D Douglas, *The New Bible Dictionary* (London: IVP, 1962), p. 426.

1:20, and Philippians 2:9-11, and the explicit teaching of Romans 11 that God is merciful to all and merciful even in his severity. The evidence seems to me overwhelming, therefore, that Paul himself proclaimed a doctrine of universal reconciliation; and if that is true, then we are entitled to reject Raymond's sweeping (and unsubstantiated) generalization that Scripture will not tolerate the very doctrine that Paul himself seems clearly to have held.