

Critique of
THOMAS TALBOTT, “UNIVERSAL RECONCILIATION AND THE
INCLUSIVE NATURE OF ELECTION”
by Jack Cottrell

Talbott’s present essay is the only writing of his that I have read; thus my comments are based on it alone. I will address three main problems found therein.

The first is a problem of *methodology*. Most would agree that it is wrong to pre-define a key theological term and then interpret the biblical data according to the pre-definition. This is what Calvinism does, for example, with the term “sovereignty.” Talbott seems to do the same with the word “love.” Many of his conclusions related thereto are philosophical speculations based on “the logic of love” (7mb).

In exposing certain errors in Augustinianism, Talbott makes two points about love with which I agree, i.e., “love is part of God’s very nature or essence” (1bb), and--therefore--his love necessarily embraces every human being and not just a “limited elect.” These good points, however, are negated by three major “faulty philosophical ideas” of the same kind that Talbott attributes to Augustinians (11tm).

The first faulty idea has to do with the *content* of love. I.e., the nature of God’s love is presented in such a way that *by definition* it leads to universal salvation. For example, divine love is described as completely unconditional (1m); but this is not true in a crucial sense explained below. Also, according to Talbott, “God’s love no doubt does preclude a literal *hatred* of someone and therefore does preclude a final rejection of his loved ones” (6m). This also is not true; see below. Again, God’s “purifying love . . . is bound to destroy all that is false within us” (6m), i.e., it must necessarily, unconditionally do so. Finally, by nature a loving God cannot allow his creatures to bring “irreparable harm” upon themselves (33m-b). To simply assert that such is the nature of love, however, begs the question of universal salvation.

The second faulty idea related to love is the application of the philosophical concept of divine simplicity to the moral nature of God. Talbott says this concept is incoherent when applied to the full nature of God, but is coherently and properly applied to his moral nature. This means that all of God’s moral attributes (love, mercy, justice, holiness, righteousness, wrath,

etc.) are identical with each other; they are all one and the same. Thus everything God does must be an expression of his love, and equally an expression of his justice and wrath (12).

Three serious problems are involved here. One, it seems arbitrary and inconsistent (incoherent?) to apply simplicity to part of God's nature and not to all of it.¹ Also, in Talbott's system the simple moral nature of God in the end reduces to love and love alone. Every other moral attribute loses its identity and integrity, and becomes just one of the ways love expresses itself. This applies especially to what we call God's wrath, justice, or severity (see Rom. 11:22), and even to the description of God as a "consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29) (6m). Finally, such love-reductionism is very difficult to justify in view of the extensive biblical teaching on God's holy wrath,² which is described in terms of terror (Heb. 10:31), hatred (Ps. 5:5-6; 11:5), curses (Matt. 25:41), retribution (Deut. 32:35), and vengeance (Ps. 94:1-3). Looking at Scripture as a whole, it seems utterly indefensible to say that "God's severity, no less than his kindness, is an expression of mercy" (14m).

The third faulty idea about love is Talbott's failure to distinguish between (on the one hand) love as an attitude (attribute) that resides within the nature of God, and (on the other hand) love in the form of objective gifts and benefits offered to and received by individuals. Only the former aspect of God's love is unconditional and universal; Talbott's error is to say that these characteristics apply also to the latter aspect. E.g., he says that God "extends his love and mercy to every person equally" (1mb; see 6tm). True, his *attitude* or spirit of love extends to all; and even the concrete benefits of his saving love are extended to all in the sense that they are *offered* to all. But sadly God's love in the form of these objective gifts is *not received* by all, as a result their own choice (see Matt. 23:37).

This distinction between the attitude of love and the actualization of love explains how God can indeed have both an *attitude* of love AND an *attitude* of real hatred toward the same person at the same time (contra 6m); see Ps. 5:5-6; 11:5; Prov. 6:16-19; 11:20; 16:5. Both

¹In reality, it should not be applied to God at all in its philosophical sense. See Jack Cottrell, *What the Bible Says About God the Creator* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1983), 37-40.

²See Jack Cottrell, *What the Bible Says About God the Redeemer* (Joplin, MO: College

attitudes may be present, however, while only one is concretely applied (as to lost sinners in hell).

The second main problem in Talbott's essay relates to his *exegesis* of specific key texts. This applies especially to his treatment of Romans 9-11, which is interpreted in such a way that it functions as a central proof text for his view. In my judgment he misses the whole point of the passage.

The misunderstanding begins with what Talbott identifies as the problem Paul is dealing with in these chapters, i.e., a complaint from the Jews that God is being unjust toward them by allowing the Gentiles to be saved without requiring them to convert to Judaism. The issue is stated thus: "Has God acted unjustly in extending his mercy to Gentiles as well as to Jews?" (27m). This, I believe, is a seriously wrong reading of these chapters.³ What Paul is dealing with here has nothing to do with the Gentiles directly (as if he were addressing the Judaizing controversy again). Here, the Jews' complaint was not that God is unjust for saving the Gentiles, but that he is unjust for *not* saving all the Jews. Having wrongly understood God's promises to the patriarchs as including guaranteed salvation for all Jews, they saw God's present rejection of most of them as a violation of these promises (Rom. 9:6, 14).

Talbott's misunderstanding of the main issue being dealt with leads to a second crucial error, namely, his interpretation of all references to predestination (election) in these chapters as primarily *election to salvation*. He sees "God's purpose in election" in Romans 9:11 as equivalent to Ephesians 1:9-10 and as expressing God's universal salvific plan, "the means by which he extends his mercy to all people including Esau" (21m, 25a). He sees verse 15 (and Exod. 33:19) as God's assertion that he has the sovereign right to save whomever he pleases (27b)--even Gentiles!

But if the issue here is God's faithfulness *in spite of* his rejection of the Jews, this puts these chapters in an entirely different light. Specifically, it shows that the election being explained by Paul in chapter 9 is *not* election to salvation, but election to *service*. Paul's point is

Press, 1987), 275-319; see especially pp. 286-288.

³See Jack Cottrell, *The College Press NIV Commentary: Romans* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1998), 2:23-303, for the explanation and defense of my understanding of these chapters.

that God is *not* being unfaithful to his promises concerning Israel, because his original election of the Jews via Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was an election to service, not salvation. Their important role in God's redemptive plan did not guarantee their personal salvation. Verse 15 (and Exod. 33:19) assert God's sovereign right to *use* whomever he pleases without necessarily saving them--even Pharaoh! This means that "God's purpose in election" in Romans 9:11 (and 11:28) is not about salvation at all, but election to service.

How we understand the nature of the issue and the nature of the election in these chapters affects our analysis of the structure of the passage as a whole. Since Talbott sees it all as relating to election to salvation, he sees a single running argument beginning with 9:1 and reaching a climax in 11:32. I.e., the agony of the Jews' lostness (9:1ff.) is erased by the ecstasy of universal salvation in 11:32 (20-21). I believe the structure of these chapters is quite different, however. Paul is indeed addressing *one problem* in chapters 9-11, i.e., God's faithfulness in spite of his rejection of the Jews; but he is giving *two separate answers* to the problem. In chapter 9 his point is that God is faithful because he never promised the *save* the Jews anyway. Then in chapters 10-11 (actually 9:30-11:36) he explains that the only reason any Jew is denied salvation is his or her failure to believe in the Messiah. Salvation is available to anyone, Jew or Gentile, who accepts Jesus as Savior.

It is in this light that we must understand Romans 11:32. I reject the universalist view that God will ultimately have saving mercy upon every person who ever lives (14mb). In chapter 11 Paul is treating Jews and Gentiles basically as groups. The non-remnant Jews are hardened, and as a result Gentiles are saved (11:11-12), but not *all* Gentiles. As a result of Gentiles being saved, the Jews come back to salvation (11:13-14), but not *all* of them--only those who do not persist in unbelief (11:23). "All Israel" in 11:26 means all ethnic Jews who belong to the true spiritual Israel (9:6). The bottom line is that God's mercy is *available* to all Jews and all Gentiles, and will be given to them *if* they will turn to Jesus; but there is no reason whatsoever to take 11:32 to mean that God actually *will* have saving mercy on the entire human race.

Another text misinterpreted as teaching universal salvation is Romans 5:12-21. Talbott is absolutely correct to insist, contra Augustinianism, that the salvation language in these verses must be as universally applied as the references to sin and condemnation (17-18). I agree:

“According to Romans 5:12-21, Jesus Christ rescued the entire human race from the doom and condemnation that Adam originally brought upon it” (28m). But Talbott misses the main point of his own statement, i.e., that this text is referring *only* to the condemnation that *Adam* brought upon the race. Any potential “original sin” was *completely* nullified for all of Adam’s progeny by Christ’s one saving act; all babies are born instead in the “original grace” of Jesus Christ.⁴ Christ’s death does “much more” than this (Rom. 5:15, 17), i.e., it also saves us from our *personal* sins. This, however, is conditioned upon one’s free-will acceptance of Jesus. Only the cancellation of *Adam’s* sin is universal and unconditional.

I must comment also on Talbott’s misuse of 1 Corinthians 15:20-28 as supporting universal salvation (31-32). First, he contends that being under the feet of Christ and being brought into subjection to him imply a willing, voluntary surrender resulting in reconciliation and redemption. This is not consistent, however, with Ephesians 1:19-22, which uses this very same language to refer to what Jesus has already accomplished (aorist tense) in reference to demonic powers. This was certainly not a willing surrender on their part.

Second, Talbott goes to great lengths to insist that “all” in 1 Corinthians 15:22 really means *all* human beings. But we cannot suspend the most basic rules of hermeneutics here, i.e., consideration of context and comparison with other biblical teaching. We know that context sometimes limits the “all” to which a text refers, e.g., Matthew 10:22 (Mark 13:13; Luke 21:17); Mark 1:37; John 17:21; 1 Corinthians 6:12 (1 Cor. 10:23; Titus 1:15); 1 Corinthians 14:24; 2 Timothy 1:15; 4:16; Revelation 22:21. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul is obviously speaking to and about Christians (see vv. 1-2, 18-20). The “all” in v. 22b means all “who are Christ’s” (v. 23). Likewise passages such as Romans 8:38-39 (36b) and Revelation 21:4 (31t) must be understood in context as referring only to believers.

My final comments regarding exegesis apply not just to Talbott’s treatment of 1 Corinthians 15:20-28, but to his entire enterprise. Another basic rule of hermeneutics is that “Scripture interprets Scripture.” Divine inspiration gives unity and consistency to the Bible as a whole, thus one’s interpretation of any text must take into account and be in harmony with all

⁴See Jack Cottrell, *The Faith Once for All* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2002), chapter 9.

other Scripture on the same subject. I believe Talbott's doctrine of universal, unconditional election to salvation most seriously violates this rule. He has focused on a few texts that (taken in isolation) seem to teach universalism. But his interpretation of these texts and the conclusions drawn therefrom are possible only if one ignores the virtual multitude of texts that emphasize God's retributive wrath (as discussed earlier), and sinners' ultimate and unrelieved lostness, in eternal opposition to those who become believers during their lifetime on earth.⁵

My last problem with Talbott's universalism has to do with the *means* by which the ultimate goal will be accomplished. This problem has several facets, not the least of which is the role of Jesus in the salvation process. Talbott clearly asserts that the "complete victory over sin and death" is accomplished by "the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ" (28a). But how? Consistent with his view of a love-only God, Talbott clearly rejects any view of Christ's death that resolves a tension within God's nature between his love and his wrath (11b). This all but eliminates any concept of substitutionary atonement involving true propitiation, and sets the stage for a moral-influence view of the cross. Talbott criticizes John Milton for espousing the former view, a view that says "Christ died not to effect a cure in us" (11b)--implying that, as Talbott sees it, this is exactly what the death of Jesus accomplishes. This is explicitly affirmed when Talbott refers to "the Power of the Cross, which is the transforming power of love" that will ultimately bring "every rebellious will into conformity with Christ's own loving will" (32a). Salvation thus is a process of *purification* accomplished by the "consuming fire" of God's "purifying love" (6m), "when God finally perfects our love for others" (10m). This view falls far short of the biblical teaching of the cross as a work of redemption and propitiation (Rom. 3:24-26).

Another serious issue regarding the means by which all will be saved is the *logistics* of its accomplishment. It is clear that most human beings die unsaved. This means that their process of purification must take place *after* death, in some other unexplained space-time framework. Talbott says it will happen "at some future time" involving "a much longer time frame" (33b); it

See also Cottrell, *The College Press NIV Commentary: Romans*, 1:330-368.

⁵Re the latter, see, e.g., Dan. 12:2; Matt. 7:13-14; 10:28; 25:41, 46; Mark 9:43-48; Luke 16:26; John 5:28-29; 2 Thess. 1:7-10; Rev. 11:18; 14:9-11; 20:10, 15; 21:8.

will happen “in the next life, if not in this one” (35mb); it will happen “in the end,” “over time,” often “after many trials and tribulations” (36a). Only very general, vague assertions are offered to describe what will be happening during this purgatorial regime. No details are given, and no biblical basis is offered for even the general speculations. Why not? The answer is simple: there is absolutely nothing in the Bible that gives any credence whatsoever to a post-mortem purification process leading to ultimate universal salvation. The most relevant text is Hebrews 9:27: “Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment” (NIV).

A final issue regarding the means by which an alleged universal salvation will be accomplished is the role of free will in the process. As an Arminian, I believe that salvation (including election to salvation) is *conditional*, that true conditionality requires true (libertarian) free will, and that true free will involves the contingency that some sinners will never repent. The final application of God’s mercy in Romans 11:32 is limited by the “if” clauses in 11:22-23.

In the final analysis, though, Talbott’s version of universal, unconditional election leaves no room for a truly free will. He realizes that his view will cause some to “wonder about the role of free choice and moral effort” (34b), and he himself declares that it is “essential to the whole process . . . that we exercise our moral freedom” (35tm). The bottom line, though, is that whatever Talbott means by “moral freedom,” in the end it is superfluous for the salvation process. He speaks as if it is a real part of the process, e.g., the will “must be won over” so that it *voluntarily* subjects itself to Christ (31t,m); “our free choices . . . determine which path we are now traveling” on our way to heaven (35a). But he also declares that God’s purpose in election will be accomplished “regardless of what choices we make, good or bad.” Our *destiny* depends not on our choices but only “upon God who shows mercy,” as in Romans 9:16 (27b-28a). “If our own free choices determine our ultimate destiny,” there is no such thing as grace (36mb) and God is not sovereign (32m).

Talbott declares that the salvation of every human being is absolutely guaranteed (34, t,m). Free-will choices affect the *way* we get to heaven, but “all paths finally lead to the same destination . . . , though some are longer, windier, and a lot more painful than others” (35mb). But if this is the case, we may legitimately question the nature of the “love” that Talbott says determines everything God does. If we are all destined for the same end, why does God give us

just enough “freedom” to make the journey miserable? Talbott admits that his view is the same as Augustinianism in that he believes in unconditional election and irresistible grace (1b), though he believes these apply to all human beings and not just to a limited elect. But at least in the Augustinian scheme, God does not subject some of his elect to an undefined, indeterminate post-mortem gauntlet before the end is finally achieved.