

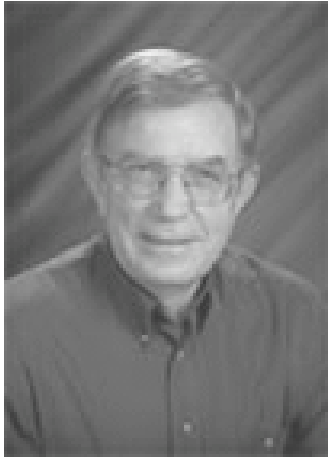
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In Memoriam



Dr. Mike White
1938–2007

Dr. Mike White, son of John and Frances White, was born November 26, 1938, in Danville, Illinois. He died August 31, 2007, while visiting his son Paul in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Mike received his undergraduate degree from Harding College where he met Gwen Combest, whom he married in 1960. After graduating from Harding, Mike entered the University of Illinois where he received his Ph.D. in Chemistry. Mike came to the University of Texas in 1966, where he held the Robert A. Welch Chair in the Department of Chemistry.

Mike published over 650 scholarly articles and graduated more than 50 doctoral students, many of whom are now teaching in universities around the world. In 2004 Mike

began a joint research appointment with Pacific Northwest National Laboratory in Washington State, where at the time of his death he was director of the Department of Energy's Institute for Interfacial Catalysis.

Mike was a longtime member and elder of the Brentwood Oaks Church of Christ in Austin and served on the Board of Austin Graduate School of Theology. Mike is survived by his wife Gwen; son Mark and daughter-in-law Melissa; daughter RaeAnne and son-in-law Todd Landrum and their children; and his son Paul. He is also survived by his mother, Frances, and four siblings.

A friend and administrative associate described Mike as "a mentor, a teacher, a friend, a model for righteous living, and a loving husband, father, and granddad. He treated those he met with respect and generosity, and his passing leaves a mighty gap in not just the academic and scientific community but also in the circles of faith in which he served and lived."

Mike's common exhortation to friends was "Press on." And we will press on; and because of having walked a part of the journey with Mike, we will do so with more resolve, and courage, and expectancy than had we not known him.

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Universal Salvation and the Christian Story

Allan J. McNicol

Everyone who teaches a Bible class is aware that there is always the possibility of questions coming from the class which will be difficult to handle with the brief response dictated by a limited amount of time. Among the most thorny questions are those that focus on election and predestination. When they are raised we almost inevitably drift into an “on the one hand,” but “on the other” type of equivocal response that usually leaves the questioner bewildered and the teacher unsatisfied. Certainly our salvation from beginning to end involves the work of a sovereign God who is finally determinative in the process of creation and redemption. Yet, inherent in the Christian story is a strong affirmation of human responsibility. So when all is said and done, what have we learned? We still wonder how these two great concepts intersect so that the total Christian story has some degree of intellectual consistency.

Over the years issues such as the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart and a fair interpretation of Romans 8:28-30 have provided much grist for the mill in countless Bible classes in Churches of Christ. Since the formative years of the Restoration movement were grounded both in the wake of the European Enlightenment and a reaction to the excesses of Calvinism, we usually rested confident in the notion that our class discussions would never undercut the preservation of personal freedom. My experience in these situations is that

we nearly always end up on the side of personal freedom. If someone insists on pushing predestination, we tend to end the conversation.

But the cultural landscape in which these discussions take place has begun to shift. Surprisingly, as reflected in the religious and metaphysics section of bookstores, contemporary popular thought and ideas are permeated with various forms of fatalism and determinism.¹ This is not only true of the general cultural ethos but is evident in the evangelical community which, in recent years, has had an increasing impact on Churches of Christ.² Expressions of determinism are found in the immensely popular neo-Calvinism of Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life*.³ More classical expressions of Calvinism are also making a comeback. This theology is embedded in the influential talks of R. C. Sproul which are carried on vast numbers of Christian radio stations. So the issue of whether our choices are our own or dictated by some "invisible hand" is a matter of vital concern for many believers. Questions revolving around divine foreknowledge and predestination are surfacing again as a popular topic of religious conversation.

¹ In the ancient church in its earliest centuries these perspectives often traveled under the label of Gnosticism. Although he has made modifications freely, it is fascinating that the influential literary critic Harold Bloom uses the same term (Gnosticism) to describe what is central to the American religious experience. See *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991).

² This odyssey is traced in my essay, "Churches of Christ Meet the Evangelicals," *Christian Studies* 19 (2003): 71-78. Note especially the dominance of Calvinism in the intellectual wing of contemporary evangelicalism.

³ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002). In this work and in subsequent writings, Warren claims that our lives are totally scripted. "Because God made you for a reason, he also decided *when* you would be born, and *how long* you would live. He planned the days of your life in advance, choosing the exact time of your birth and death . . . Nothing in your life is arbitrary. It's all for a purpose." (23) It is difficult to see how this perspective coheres with the general flow of the biblical narrative where God's relationship with the world is far more dynamic. Our freedom entails our capacity to make all kinds of choices—even ones that are clearly against the will and approval of the Creator.

Of course, in the biblical tradition these matters touch on issues far beyond the interpretation of Romans 8:28-30 and the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. They surface in many different texts. To get the flavor of how this issue is often framed we will open with a short discussion of several texts in the book of Revelation. As indicated by the title of this essay, we will only take up one aspect of this complex subject. Conveniently, these texts in Revelation will also introduce us to our central focus – the belief of a growing number of people that God, in his Sovereign Purpose, has determined that all will, in the end, be saved.

Divine Determinism in Revelation

Toward the end of the New Testament the reader of Revelation 17 encounters a series of bizarre images that function as descriptions of the Roman Empire. Rome is pictured as a world power that seeks to exercise an illegitimate, idolatrous claim of ultimacy over the vast network of peoples within her borders. Some of the imagery such as Babylon (i.e., Rome) pictured as a scarlet beast borders on being excessive. If this description were not challenging enough, suddenly one is catapulted into another intellectual briar patch. We learn that those who collaborate in Rome's claim of ultimacy over all areas of life are described as "the earth dwellers" (Rev 2:8; cf. 3:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 14); then suddenly we are startled to see a line in Revelation 17:8 that tells us that the "names [of these earth dwellers] have not been written in the book of life *since the foundation of the world.*" Does this mean from the beginning of time some names are in the book of life and some are not? Has this entire struggle been predetermined down to the last detail? It certainly sounds like what we normally call predestination!

Thus we have before us a text that appears to confirm a persistent view: namely, the thrust of the biblical witness is that God's sovereignty over the world is so scrupulous that the spiritual destiny of each person is scripted

from the beginning of time. Indeed there is more in Revelation that appears to support this view. In Revelation 13:8 we read that the book of life is the property of the Lamb (Christ) “slain from the foundation of the world.” This claim is no idle matter. The book of life is a key concept in Revelation. At the last judgment those not found in this book are thrown into the lake of fire (Rev 20:12, 15).⁴

An obvious question emerges. Do these texts presuppose that the ultimate spiritual destiny of individuals has already been mysteriously pre-scripted? Other texts suggest that this may be true with respect to the salvific power of the death of Christ (Acts 2:23; 1 Peter 1:18-20).⁵ But does the content of this foreknowledge of God’s salvific plan for humankind also encompass the spiritual destiny of each person as well? And, if so, is there a way to know what has been decided? Questions like these have often been viewed as coming within the field of philosophical theology. But the terminology and scope of this discipline may not be of help to the average Bible teacher on Sunday morning. To be plausible to our constituency we need to get a clearer picture of how the concept of divine determinism functions in the biblical narrative.

Perhaps it is now clear to the reader why we have invoked the book of Revelation as illustrative of divine determinism. But the title of this essay also alludes to the question of universalism, or universal salvation. How does this connect with the book of Revelation? It is well known that there is no place in the Bible which speaks with greater clarity about the fate of the lost than Revelation. Not only are they consigned to the lake of fire but, in what surely is one of the most terror-striking texts in scripture, those devoted to

⁴ Presumably the opposite is true. Since the foundation of the world the names of the righteous are written in the book of life (Rev 3:5; cf. 14:1).

⁵ See also G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (HNTC; New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 168.

the form of idolatry implicit in the emperor cult are threatened with fire and sulphur *in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb* (Rev 14:9-11; cf. 20:10, 14-15; 21:8). This is the ‘second death.’ This is so foreboding that early in the book the Lord promises deliverance for the faithful believer (Rev 2:11; cf. 20:6, 14; 21:8).

Despite these unequivocal statements concerning the fate of the wicked, there is a stream of interpreters who argue that deep down Revelation mandates the view that all will be saved.⁶ This claim is based on the presupposition that what God has created as good will be redeemed and not lost.⁷

Although the basic grounds for this line of reasoning is the logical outcome of the rigorous pursuit of a particular theological trajectory, it has widespread and growing force. Many more people believe it than we may think. Its starting point is that the core of the biblical tradition is God’s love—ultimately displayed in Jesus Christ—is so broad and deep that it will irresistibly draw everyone, in a final outcome, into the orbit of universal salvation. Texts such as Isaiah 66:18-23, John 3:17, Romans 11:32-36, and 1

⁶ This position seems to have gained impetus fairly recently with the writings of Matthias Rissi, *Time and History: A Study on the Revelation* (trans. G.L. Winsor; Richmond: John Knox Press, 1965) and *The Future of the World: An Exegetical Study of Revelation 19:11-22:15*; *Studies in Biblical Theology*, 2nd series, 25 (Naperville: Allenson, 1972); M. Eugene Boring, “Revelation 19-21: End Without Closure,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* Suppl. 3 (1994), 56-84 and *Revelation: Interpretation Commentary Series* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 226-231; Wilfrid J. Harrington, *Revelation: Sacra-Pagina Series 16* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1993), 229-235 and “Positive Eschaton Only: Revelation and Universal Salvation,” *Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association* 15 (1993), 42-59. Also, although Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New York; Cambridge University Press, 1993), 101-104, 137-140, eschews universalism, he comes perilously close to accepting it in some discussions of the conversion of the nations.

⁷ Vernard Eller, “How the Kings of the Earth Land in the New Jerusalem: The World in The Book of Revelation,” *Katallagete* (September, 1975), 24.

Timothy 2:3-4 are taken to foreshadow this outcome which is reckoned to find its climax in Revelation (Rev 1:7; 5:13; 14:6-7; 21:24-27).⁸

While it is conceded that there also exist many texts that suggest final salvation will be limited to those who faithfully serve the one God of Abraham and Jesus, it is frequently asserted that the trajectory of the final triumph of God's love for all—resulting in universal salvation—carries greater weight. These two strands (limited and universal salvation) thus stand in a paradoxical relationship. Many argue that the weighty emphasis, implicit in the biblical story, of the potentially terrible consequences for failure to worship the Creator and live faithful lives is trumped by the mercy of a redeeming and gracious God.⁹ God desires all to be saved and, because he is God, it will be done. That is the claim. In a culture where a premium is placed on tolerance, and even believers are deeply uncomfortable about the doctrine of hell, universal salvation presents an attractive option.

Our Proposal

As already seen, discussions about election and predestination have far reaching implications. We wish to probe the most far-reaching issue of all: is the final movement of the pendulum of God's action toward limited or universal salvation? By and large most ordinary Christians believe in limited salvation. Salvation is ultimately God's work. People have the capacity to come to faith. Those who do not believe bear responsibility for the consequences of their actions. On the other hand, some view the matter differently. Christ is the same substance as the Father who is Creator and Redeemer.

⁸ Harrington, *Revelation*, 231, lists these sets of texts as clear evidence that scripture teaches universal salvation.

⁹ Harrington, "Positive Eschaton Only," 47; cf. Boring, "End Without Closure," 81, puts it this way: "Our decisions are open, and they matter. What they cannot do is nullify the ultimate decision of God who triumphs without ever violating our freedom." In other words, for now, the two strands remain in constant tension. But in the *eschaton* God will resolve them in favor of universal salvation.

God's work as Creator has a universal thrust. If Christ is both Creator and Redeemer, why should one not conclude too that God has elected or determined to redeem all of his creation? This theological discrimen functions as a basic presupposition for those believing in universal salvation.

Procedurally, this essay will trace the chief theological features which inform the modern movement toward universal salvation and assess its viability. We will observe that the idea of universal salvation is rendered problematic by the biblical witness. The latter houses these questions within a strong eschatological framework. We will argue that although the Bible strongly asserts the universal claim of God over creation, the *consistent* witness of scripture is in the direction of limited salvation. Our goal is to provide the ordinary Bible student with resources enabling him or her to see the scriptural framework for approaching the difficult issues of divine determinism in light of modern challenges.

Universalism and Its Theological Underpinnings

From the first book of the New Testament to the last there is abundant textual evidence that scripture teaches there will be some who will not participate in the benefits of the new creation (Matt 13:30, 49; 25:41, 46; Rev 14:10-11; 20:15; 21:8). The rest of the New Testament seems to be consistent with this witness (2 Thess 1:7-10; 2 Peter 2:9). With several notable exceptions this conclusion constitutes a broad consensus of the key Christian thinkers with respect to interpreting biblical texts until the nineteenth century.¹⁰ In the nineteenth century widespread cultural disenchantment with

¹⁰ The most notable exception, of course, was Origen, a leader in the ancient Greek-speaking church. As noted by Richard Bauckham, "Universalism: A Historical Survey," *Themelios* 4/2 (September 1978), 49-50, in his very informative historical overview of those in church history who accept universal salvation, Origen's universalism was a product of the logic of his theological system. Heavily influenced by Platonism, he believed in the restoration (Greek *apokatastasis*) of all things to ultimate Being (God). Humans have free will and so will fall into various levels of

belief in a God who punishes some in hell led many to search for a theological rationale for universal salvation. Theologians engaging in this task sought to take selected texts out of scripture and unite them in new directions of theological argument.

Fundamental to theological proposals housed in the biblical tradition are the doctrines of creation and redemption. Ever since the early centuries of Christianity, assisted by the development of Trinitarian thinking, these doctrines have been linked closely. As a co-agent with God in creation (Col 1:15-20), Christ's redemptive life could be viewed as an ongoing expression of the divine creative power.¹¹ Some began to argue that since God's work as Creator has a *universal* thrust, it follows that Christ's redemption also has *universal* consequences.¹² On these grounds some influential theologians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries began to make a case for universal salvation. Aided by the growth of liberalism in elite European society they were seeking to underscore what many people wanted to accept anyway.

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) was a key figure who marched to the drumbeat of the modern tempo. In his classic, *The Christian Faith*, he developed a comprehensive argument for universal salvation.¹³ This theological treatise brought to full expression Schleiermacher's basic view that at some precognitive level all human beings apprehend the Creator through a sense of "absolute dependence." This sense of "absolute dependence," or

sin. In Christ, some return to the Father in this life but with others it will take a process of time extending into eternity. But because God is God and everything emanating from him will be returned to him (cf. 1 Cor 15:28), in the end, all will have closure in ultimate reconciliation. Clearly this is a highly speculative philosophy intertwining Platonism and scripture.

¹¹ Mark Ellingsen, *Doctrine and Word: Theology in the Pulpit* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 33.

¹² Ellingsen, *Doctrine and Word*, 33.

¹³ William C. Placher, *A History of Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 274.

awareness of the divine, was always present in the world. But since the incarnation its most coherent expression is in Christ.¹⁴ When one is touched by the story of Jesus, he or she is regenerated and sanctified. Schleiermacher thought that this sense of a divine-consciousness, although deeply embedded in the life of the church, would ultimately extend to all creation.¹⁵ He bolstered this claim with a creative reworking of the doctrine of election. A long line of theological giants (e.g., Augustine and Calvin) had left a theological legacy that Christ's redeeming work was only effective for the sake of that portion of humanity whom God elected from the beginning.¹⁶ Schleiermacher knew this tradition well.¹⁷ He culminated his magnum opus, *The Christian Faith*, with a discussion of election and predestination.¹⁸ But he makes a major revision. He flatly rejects the idea of the *decretum absolutum* (double predestination). He claims that, from the beginning, *all* have been elected to salvation through Christ! And since Christ is Creator, as well as Redeemer, even despite the apparent unfaithfulness of many, God's electing purpose to

¹⁴ For Schleiermacher, Christ was the purest expression of "god-consciousness."

¹⁵ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (trans. edited by H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart of the second German edition 1830; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928), 549-551.

¹⁶ Ellingsen, *Doctrine and Word*, 34. It is important to understand the logic informing this position. The design is to protect and enhance a sense of God's glory and sovereignty over the creation. God took such care with his work of creation that he set apart a group of 'the elect' from the 'foundation of the world' to manifest his glory. This is entirely a matter of God's choice. Therefore, individual salvation comes down to God's decision – not ours! Supposedly this perspective, properly received by awestruck mortals, promotes respect and gratitude for God's glory. Neither Augustine or Calvin flinched with respect to the consequences for those not chosen.

¹⁷ This is the notorious doctrine of double predestination. Because the decree was before (*supra*) the creation and fall (*lapsus*) it is sometimes called the supralapsarian decree. This is to be distinguished from another version (the infralapsarian decree) which supposedly is understood to be made after (*infra*) the fall.

¹⁸ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 536-560; 717-722.

reconcile all will not fail.¹⁹ Indeed, for those already blessed with faith, to think otherwise would not be worthy of their claim that they were living in keeping with the mind of Christ which, above all, is love.

Although he had fundamental differences with Schleiermacher, the twentieth-century theological giant, Karl Barth, came to a similar position on election.²⁰ One should not construe what God did at the foundation of the world as a decision to elect some and reject others. There is no decree of God with respect to salvation apart from Jesus Christ. Barth spells this out in a treatise of over five hundred pages in his *Church Dogmatics*.²¹ Barth sought to shed light on what was revealed in scripture about God's mysterious purposes on these matters. He concluded there was no such thing as a mysterious decree made with respect to individual salvation at the beginning of time. Instead, Jesus Christ is the prototype of both election and rejection.²² It is not that God chose us, but God chose Christ—to be both rejected and elected. As the rejected One he took upon himself the rejection of the sinner; as the elect One, all are elected to salvation in Christ, the prototype of the new creation.²³

¹⁹ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 709-716. Here the biblical teaching on the last things seemed to be understood as an extended metaphor on all things being subject to God (1 Cor 15:27-28).

²⁰ Generations of lecturers have amused students with the purported quip featuring Barth's comment on a bust of Schleiermacher in his study: "It has to be either him or me."

²¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/2, The Doctrine of the Word of God*, part 2 (trans. G.W. Bromiley; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 3-506.

²² Barth, *Doctrine of the Word of God*, part 2, 94-144.

²³ Bauckham, "Universalism: A Historical Survey" (52), puts it succinctly, "Predestination thus becomes not an equivocal doctrine of God's Yes and No, but a fully evangelical doctrine of God's unqualified Yes to man. The reality of man—of all men—is that in Jesus Christ the reconciliation of all men has taken place. The gospel brings to men the knowledge of what is already true."

Like Schleiermacher, Barth's doctrine of election becomes central to his theological system.²⁴

Barth denied persistently that he taught universal salvation. Any claim that God must save all is a denial of his sovereign freedom.²⁵ Yet it is difficult to see how Barth could escape the logic of his conclusion. Of course, Barth did not deny the widespread phenomenon of unbelief. He came up with a contrived explanation. He argued, somewhat unpersuasively, that most humans perversely choose to live unaware that we are chosen for a higher purpose. Put bluntly, Barth pictures humans as elected for glory but unaware of it!

But how do you preach a gospel of bringing people to "accept that they have been accepted," to paraphrase a contemporary of Barth? If we are already part of the elect, where is the motivation to change?

The traditional model used in evangelistic preaching of moving from plight to solution seems to have gone out the door. Arguably Schleiermacher and Barth were the two most influential theologians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although vastly different in their approaches, in the fertile soil of modernity, the effects of their theological underpinnings for the

²⁴ Edward L. Miller and Stanley J. Grenz, eds., *Fortress Introduction to Contemporary Theologies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 12, states incisively Barth's position, "Every teaching of Christian theology begins and ends with the biblical teaching about Jesus Christ, and every teaching about Jesus Christ begins and ends with election."

²⁵ Barth, *Doctrine of the Word of God*, part 2, 422-423, discusses the text, "Many are called but few are chosen" (Matt 22:14). What Barth seems to be claiming is that those who deny the reality of election ("the many") by living perversely (Rom 1:18-32) function in a twilight existence always under the threat of final separation from God. God's refusal to change this situation may have given Barth cause for agreeing to the charge of universalism. As Bauckham, "Universalism: A Historical Survey," 54, notes with respect to Barth, God never withdraws the threat of acquiescing to human perfidy and giving humans up to the consequences of their actions. At the end of the day, final salvation is not a given but a hope.

acceptance of universal salvation have been enormous. For example, consider the impact it has on motivation for mission in most mainline churches.

But has all this been a colossal detour for the church? As popular as it is, does the proposal for universal salvation have a solid grounding in the biblical story? I will now assess briefly why the vision of universal salvation is problematic as a theological construct. We will conclude by noting how the Bible unfolds its own particular view of God's universal sovereignty.

Universal Salvation: A Critique

The basic proposal of those who accept 'universal salvation' is that all human beings will finally achieve redemption on the grounds of God's gracious love.²⁶ Since we are conducting this discussion within the parameters of the Christian faith, an immediate problem emerges; namely, this proposal stands in tension with a number of texts of scripture (viz., Matt 10:18; 22:14; 25:31-46; Mk 16:16; Rom 2:6-16; 2 Thess 1:7-10; Rev 14:9-11). Is it true that in every instance God's triumphant and all-conquering love finally wins over the tide of evil that rolls forward throughout history with its corollary, the stubborn resistance of the human heart?

Given the above-mentioned texts, it is hardly incontestable that those who entertain such proposals adopt creative readings of scripture. The most common approach is akin to what the Germans call *Sachkritik* (a kind of criticism that rejects one witness of scripture in favor of highlighting another theological principle also appearing in the text).²⁷ Earlier we noted that the

²⁶ Harrington, "Positive Eschaton Only," 46. This is opposed to the alternative position that salvation is limited. These limitations may vary according to various theological views, but it does presume that on the grounds of what we do in this life, some will be saved and others eternally lost.

²⁷ A discussion of whether this principle can fit into a defensible doctrine of interpretation of scripture would take us too far afield and must be left for another day. Suffice it to say it is used widely. See Richard Hays, "Scripture-Shaped Community: The Problem of Method in New Testament Ethics," *Interpretation* 44 (1990), 46-47, for a good example of its use.

key passages are Isaiah 66:18-23, Romans 11:32-36, and I Timothy 2:3-4 which routinely are set forth in favor of this view. These texts function as the foundation for an overarching theological proposal that there will be an ultimate reconciliation between God and all human beings. Scriptures to the contrary are dismissed.

Such a proposal is open to question not only because of its attitude to scripture but also for two other reasons. First, it is unclear whether the key texts cited affirm universal salvation. Second, on theological grounds, such a picture arguably trivializes the reality of evil and denies the ultimate significance of the last judgment. We will note both of these points briefly.

Isaiah 66:18-24 is one of the most far-reaching passages in scripture. It is the basis for the influential vision of a 'new heavens and a new earth' (cf. Isa 65:17). This descriptive phrase is used again in Revelation 21:1-8, where it functions as an image for God dwelling eternally with his people. However, in both passages the immediate context indicates those who oppose God's way are judged and separated. The passages assert that the glory of the unity between God and his people is to be viewed in contrast with the dire outcome of those who oppose God's way (Isa 66:15-16; Rev 20:11-15; 21:8, 27; 22:11, 15).

Similarly, while it is true that Romans 11:32 speaks about God having mercy on all, this must be viewed in light of the wider argument over the role of Jew and Gentile in God's plan found in Romans 9-11. Paul is saying that at various times in history both Gentiles and (now) Jews have found themselves trapped in a web of disobedience to the divine mandate (Rom 11:32a). But this is all part of a mysterious wider purpose. This purpose has finally allowed many Gentiles to come to faith and it ultimately will work the same way for many in Israel. As Romans 11:14, 20, and 23 show emphatically,

Paul was under no illusion that every last Gentile or Jew would accept the claims of the gospel.

Finally, 1 Timothy 2:3-4 should also be examined in its context. The basic topic under discussion in the text is prayer.²⁸ Believers are exhorted to pray for all men—even those authorities who are not believers. One never knows who will hear the word and believe and be saved, because God is no respecter of persons (1 Tim 2:3-4). Even today, who can predict which person will come to faith? Yet as 1 Timothy 2:5-7 points out, salvation comes through acceptance of the one gospel. The underlying presupposition is that those who do not accept it or fall away will be lost (1 Tim. 1:6-11; 4:1-2; 5:24; 6:9-10). God's desire for all to be saved does not overrule the freedom he gives to his creatures to make choices and accept their consequences.

Our textual analysis was brief and cursory. Yet contrary to what is sometimes asserted,²⁹ we believe that if it were extended we would see that there is no stream of texts in scriptures asserting universal salvation.³⁰ Second, we venture to assert that such a position severely undermines the basic coherence of the Christian story. Especially, this is the case with respect to a key pillar of this story: the pervasiveness of evil and its defeat at the last judgment. Some years ago J. A. T. Robinson wrote a short book that has served as a manual for many arguing in favor of universal salvation.³¹ His analysis was primarily philosophical and theological. His central point was

²⁸ N. T. Wright, "Towards a Biblical View of Universalism," *Themelios* 4/2 (September 1978), 57.

²⁹ Harrington, "Positive Eschaton Only," 46.

³⁰ Even if one is committed to *Sachkritik* as a valid principle of biblical interpretation, it is open to question whether it is applied appropriately in this instance. It does not appear that universal salvation is a presupposition of any biblical writer. Of course one *can* ignore scripture on these matters altogether and still assert the outcome of universalism as a theological principle. That discussion is for another place.

³¹ J. A. T. Robinson, *In the End, God ... : A Study of the Christian Doctrine of the Last Things* (London: James Clarke Co., Ltd., 1950), 99-123.

that an omnipotent *loving* God must, in the end, triumph over human resistance; otherwise this would be an infringement on the very meaning of omnipotent power. Here is an astonishing expression of faith. The power of God's love is so great that it will irresistibly elicit the free choice of all humans (even Hitler?) to surrender to it. It is claimed that the language about judgment and eternal separation in the Bible is not about absolute reality. This language functions metaphorically. Potentially it is there to remind us of the seriousness of our present need to respond to the divine overture.³² Sooner or later all will surrender to this 'irresistible call.'

But as attractive as this theological vision may be, surely this is a deep distortion of the biblical narrative. Whether it is the first or the twenty-first century, it strains credibility to claim that, in the end, we are all disposed to submit to the way of love. This is to lose touch with reality. History teaches us otherwise. The Bible from beginning to end takes evil with absolute seriousness. The theme of the wrath of God runs wide and deep in scripture. Only a judgment that has real consequences can do justice to the intense and pervasive conflict with the kind of evil both our Lord and the people of faith in history have encountered. Thus we conclude that not only is the doctrine of universal salvation unable to be grounded decisively in the biblical text and the story of the people of God, it fails to take seriously the process the Creator inaugurated through the death and resurrection of Christ to bring about the ultimate defeat of evil at the end of the age. A major part of the Christian hope is that this process will culminate in the last judgment (Heb 9:27; Rom 14:10-12; 2 Cor 5:10).

³² Robinson, *In the End, God . . .*, 119, "Hell is an ultimate impossibility because *already* there is no one outside of Christ. Whenever the New Testament speaks from this point of view, this is its message." Of course advocates of universal salvation readily admit that there are many who resist the divine calling to the grave. Some who take this position are not above invoking some version of a 'second chance' in the world to come.

The Biblical Framework for Issues of God's Sovereignty

Biblical universalism consists of one God and one way of obedience (righteousness by faith) to him. It is universal in the sense that God's offer of salvation is for all. To those who pursue this way the end-times visions of the Bible are filled with promises of hope. To those who refuse this way there is no hope (1 Thess 4:13). It stresses that God's door is always open but we are free to slam it in his face. As N. T. Wright notes:

This view specifically excludes the other sort of 'universalism,' because scripture and experience alike tell us that many do miss the one way of salvation which God has provided.³³

The Bible teaches the universality of God. It does not teach universal salvation.

Without question the notion that not all will enter into eternal life is inherent to the Christian story (Matt 7:13-14). As one of the great texts in this area asserts, "Many are called, but few are chosen" (Matt 22:14). This brings us back to the questions we raised at the outset. Are these matters decided from the beginning of time? Are questions of God's choices and human freedom destined to be concealed in unresolvable tensions? When these issues come up in Bible class is it best to steer clear of them?

What is striking is that in the centuries covered during the writing of the scriptures it is difficult to find a theoretical discussion in the text itself that deals with the issue of divine sovereignty vis-à-vis human freedom. By and large it does not appear that this issue seemed to be a topic of conversation among the people of God. This suggests that we may be approaching the question wrongly. Indeed, once we decide that from the beginning of time God chose a select few to be saved it must necessarily follow that he rejected others. Without question, people during the biblical period were capable of

³³ N. T. Wright, "Toward a Biblical View of Universalism," 58.

drawing this conclusion.³⁴ Yet people in the biblical period did not talk in these terms. The idea of double predestination or supralapsarianism is not only absent in biblical vocabulary but is in tension with passages such as 1 Timothy 2:4 and 1 John 2:2. The early Christians could readily see that these ideas cannot cohere with the fundamental claim that God is a God of love.³⁵

The Bible avoids addressing definitively the issue of predestination of individuals to heaven or hell. It does not teach that there is a special category of the elect that is given a special grace to bring them to salvation. This is not just because biblical thinking is primarily in images where opposite conceptions can be housed under one roof in a kind of mosaic.³⁶ But, far more profoundly, questions about divine election and human freedom are framed in a different context.

It is important to note that overtones of issues of predestination emerge out of the doctrine of creation. But they involve reflection about the role of the human in the total created order. Specifically, biblical thinking presumes that the first creation *prefigures and incorporates* the whole history of the world.³⁷ Whether it be as a heavenly reality or something in God's mind it existed from the creation. It follows that the conclusion to all things at the end of the age will correspond to the reality of the first creation. Thus the

³⁴ Krister Stendahl, "The Called and the Chosen: An Essay of Election," in *The Root of the Vine: Essays in Biblical Theology by Anton Fridrichsen and other Members of Uppsala University* (London: A & C Black, 1953), 72, notes several instances in non-biblical writings (cf. CD 2:7; 4:3; 2 Baruch 30:2; 75:5).

³⁵ What father could be called 'loving' who would decide to separate himself eternally from his children before they were born?

³⁶ Contra Stendahl, "The Called and the Chosen," 67.

³⁷ As noted by Nils Dahl, "Christ, Creation and the Church," in *Jesus in the Memory of the Early Church; Essays by Nils Alstrup Dahl* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), 127.

events of the end, from this perspective, can be considered to be *preexistent* or *predestined*.³⁸

To pursue this point adequately would take another essay. Suffice it to say that the ultimate rehabilitation of all things by the Creator finds its preliminary visible manifestation in history with the coming of Christ and the founding of the church (Col 1:15-20; Eph 1:3-14; 2:11-22).³⁹ The New Testament presumes that from eternity Christ was designated and predestined to found the church and to bring to final glory his *special people*, sometimes called the “*Jerusalem from above*” (Heb 12:22-23; Rev 21:2). These are the people of the ‘book of life’ who can truly, in a collective sense, be considered to be predestined (Eph 1:4; Rev 13:8). God’s true purpose for the creation is shown in their lives of faith today. It will be fully revealed at the end of the age.

The theological consequences of this way of approaching reality are far reaching. It simply renders irrelevant the detailed metaphysics and fine distinctions many make with respect to God’s foreknowledge and sovereignty vis-à-vis human freedom on the matter of the salvation of individuals. God, as personal, has from the beginning related to the people of his creation. This relationship is open to all. But he will never, on the basis of love, undercut our freedom to choose or reject this relationship. Indeed the Bible simply leaves that issue alone.⁴⁰ Some believe and others do not. That is all that can be said about it.

³⁸ Dahl, “Christ, Creation and the Church,” 127-130.

³⁹ Dahl, “Christ, Creation and the Church,” 128-129.

⁴⁰ This rules out specific ideas that our lives are scripted (contra Rick Warren) or that we, like the potter’s vessel, are passive objects of some version of God’s irresistible grace (Augustine and some Reformers).

On the other hand, we are now able to develop an appropriate appreciation for language about predestination in the scriptures.⁴¹ From the beginning, inherent in the created order, God has destined Christ to relate to a people who would reflect the divine glory. The biblical story is fundamentally an account of how this primordial decision unfolds. From this perspective, the work of Christ was present from the beginning (1 Peter 1:18-20); likewise there would come a people who would accept that work (Rev 13:8 and 17:8), and sadly, a wide number who would reject it (Rev 20:10, 14-15; 21:8).

Conclusion

In this essay our focus has centered on the question of election and predestination. The issue is complicated and covers many areas of theology. We were not able to discuss every text or evaluate every approach. We took up the specific question of whether biblical faith affirms limited or universal salvation. We concluded that it is a fair representation of the biblical witness that God has not predestined all humans to salvation and that salvation is limited. We sometimes hear it stated, “the New Testament and early Christians clearly held that it will be true and is already true that ‘outside Christ there is no salvation’. To which they implicitly add, ‘there is no outside Christ’.”⁴²

At first glance this seems to reflect the sentiment of those wishing to avoid the horrible idea of ‘double predestination.’ Instead these interpreters move to the opposite extreme by asserting that God’s eternal choice of Christ, the new Adam, incorporates all into the sphere of salvation. To be sure, this reminds us of something we should do well not to forget. When the

⁴¹ And there are many texts. The recent monograph by Steven C. Roy, *How Much Does God Foreknow? A Comprehensive Biblical Study* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2006) mentions many of them, although it defends very cogently the neo-Calvinist reading of the scriptures.

⁴² Gerald O’Collins, *Jesus Our Redeemer: A Christian Approach to Salvation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 225.

day is over we are in awe at the simple fact that ‘God so loved the world.’ In Genesis the biblical story does not begin with the election of one group over another. It starts with the account of the creation of Adam who is both an individual and a collective for all of humankind. The Bible ends with the nations streaming into the New Jerusalem which comes from above (Rev 21:23–22:5). From beginning to end the Bible presumes there is one sovereign God who cares deeply for all peoples. God does not wish for any to perish, but is this description enough to make it the final swing of the pendulum in favor of universal salvation?

Nevertheless, it would do us all well to confess that God’s grace is greater than some of the boxes and other limiting boundaries which we often place around the story of salvation. We have noted that the Bible eschews definitive teaching on the matter of individual predestination. No mortal has all the answers on these mysteries concerning eternal destiny. Matthew 25:31-46 notes that there will be surprises at the last day. This we do know: God’s grace and mercy are greater than human wisdom. Our confidence, finally, is not in the brilliance of our explanations but in the One who is the Answer.

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