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# *Perdition: Some Reflections on a Difficult Doctrine*

WALTER MOBERLY

The purpose of this paper is to think aloud in an exploratory way on a difficult subject, that is the nature and place of perdition, or lostness, in Christian theology. The aim is to consider some of the general issues at stake and to re-examine some of the New Testament data. The intention is not to be comprehensive, but simply to raise certain issues which seem to me important.<sup>1</sup>

It is a difficult subject for a variety of reasons. There is the deeply disturbing nature of the subject matter itself. There is the fact that the Bible says all too little to give definite answers to some of the questions we may ask. There is the remarkable lack, comparatively speaking, of serious wrestling with the subject in modern theological debate. Given the inherent importance of the subject, one might have expected extended and searching debate. In fact, for a variety of reasons, it has been relegated to the sidelines of theological debate. It has often been the books, plays, pictures and films of recent years, rather than theological writings, in which some of the problems of lostness have been raised most acutely.

Before proceeding, a brief word on terminology. Traditionally in Christian theology the state of lostness has usually been described by such terms as 'hell' and 'damnation'. Since these terms have such emotionally charged overtones it is likely to be helpful if they are laid aside for present purposes, except insofar as the discussion specifically requires them. It will be preferable to use 'lostness', which is a term of usefully general connotation, or else 'perdition', which is a traditional term without, I hope, too many overtones.

The discussion will inevitably pose problems of fundamental importance for our understanding of the nature of evil, salvation, and the ultimate purposes of God. The fact of evil in our world is clear. That there is a problem with life as we know it and that some kind of remedy (salvation) is needed would, I presume, be granted by all. It is in the analysis of the

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1 I have not attempted to provide comprehensive documentation in footnotes, as I feel this is unnecessary in such a piece of general reflection. This is not of course to deny my indebtedness to a large number of writers. The few works which are cited will enable anyone unfamiliar with the field to begin to find their way within it.

I am grateful to Dr. Frances Young, Martin Mosse, Nick Hall, and Revd. John Wenham for reading and commenting on a draft of this paper.

problem and in the solution offered that the Christian will be distinguished from other people. The heart of the problem, in Christian understanding, is the separation or alienation between God and man (original sin). This leads in human experience to disregard of God and his ways for man such that man succumbs to ways that are evil (moral sin). And this is accompanied by human disorientation and disintegration (lostness). The answer lies in what God has done for man in Jesus Christ; through Christ man can be reconciled to God (saved) and become a participant in God's victory over evil and the restoration of the created order.

It is when one tries to define more closely this general scheme of things that disagreements among Christians arise. The particular problem under consideration here concerns what happens to that part of mankind that does not, so far as is humanly discernible, become reconciled to God through Christ. What then happens? Although this can be approached primarily from the point of view of the empirical effects of alienation from God in this life – What does it feel like? How does it work out? – Christian theology has traditionally concentrated on two more fundamental issues.

The first issue is whether this alienation from God is true at some ultimate ontological or metaphysical level. This is sometimes debated in terms of subjective or objective reconciliation. Is it the case that mankind has been objectively reconciled to God through Christ, and all that is needed is man's subjective realization and appropriation of this? That is, say, 'All are right with God, but not all recognize that they are'. Or is it the case that man remains objectively alienated from God (under the wrath of God) and only becomes objectively reconciled at the moment of subjective response to God through Christ? That is, say, 'Not all are right with God, but only those who respond to Christ'. Whether or not this particular way of putting the question is the most helpful need not be gone into here. The essential point is that the nature of salvation and lostness needs to be understood, insofar as this is possible, at the level of man's *being*, rather than merely his empirical awareness. This, of course, is the realm of a theology of the atonement.

The second problem, which will be our chief concern here, is whether alienation from God is true not only of this life, but also beyond this life, in eternity. All Christians agree that the salvation which begins in this life continues and is consummated in eternity. Is this true also of lostness? Traditional Christian theology in its classic form has said yes – ultimate perdition is a reality. Much modern theology (and some ancient) has said no – all ultimately will be reconciled to God. Perdition is replaced by universalism.

One's answer to this second question may well be significantly influenced by one's answer to the previous question about the nature of the atonement. Those who adopt something like the first position mentioned above, that man already is somehow reconciled to God and just needs to recognize this, will probably tend to a universalist position. Those who

adopt something like a second position, that man outside of faith in Christ is still somehow unreconciled, will probably be more inclined to acceptance of perdition. It is my impression (though I cannot justify it here) that much modern opinion about perdition and universalism may have been controlled by (*inter alia*) prior decisions about the atonement. Given the inherent connection between the issues this is hardly unreasonable. But it is still desirable to consider perdition and universalism as far as possible in their own right; which in turn might also shed fresh light on the atonement.

When we turn to the New Testament I think it would be widely agreed that the general tenor of its writings does *prima facie* suggest the real possibility of ultimate lostness. The teaching of Jesus constantly touches on the themes of reversal, exclusion and loss. Warning is given on the need to avoid the 'unquenchable fire' of hell (Mk. 9:43). When Jesus' teaching is perceived to have disturbing implications about lostness and the question whether or not this is so is put to him directly, he gives no straight answer but he certainly does not repudiate the underlying implication, even while he leaves open the question of whom it may apply to (Lk. 13:23-30). St. Paul divides humanity into 'those who are being saved' (*hoi sozomenoi*) and 'those who are being lost' (*hoi apollumenoi*) (1 Cor. 1:18, 2 Cor. 2:15). While it is the present participle he uses, indicating that the state is not yet finally fixed but still open to change – as Paul himself knew from his own experience – it is hard to escape the implication that the present process will finally lead to a permanent condition, as much for those who are being lost as for those who are being saved. Elsewhere it is explicitly said that 'those who do not know God and who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction (*olethron aionion*) away from the presence of God' (2 Thess. 1:8-9). St. John likewise, in some of his most famous passages, does not argue but takes for granted that, apart from Christ, the world is perishing (John 3:16, where the same verb, *apollumi*, is used as in Paul) and is confronted by judgment and death (John 5:24). It is unnecessary at present to argue this in detail. The point is simply the clear *prima facie* impression the New Testament conveys, which has not unnaturally given rise to the traditional Christian belief in perdition.

Given the selective nature of the present article, the discussion will take the following form. First, a number of general reflections will be offered on some of the problems that any Christian theologizing in the area of salvation and perdition must take into account. Secondly, some theological objections to any doctrine of ultimate perdition will be considered. Thirdly, there will be a brief re-examination of some of the crucial gospel texts. Finally, a few brief suggestions will be offered as to the form that a contemporary belief in perdition might take.

### **Five Problematic Issues**

(1) First, it is important not to make the New Testament into *bad* news for mankind. Despite the clear general tenor of the New Testament on the

reality of perdition, it, as a whole, does not give the impression, that some post-Augustinian and Reformed theology gives, that the majority of the human race of all periods of history is doomed to perdition. Logically, such a conclusion might seem to follow from the fact that the majority of mankind lives, and has lived, outside the sound of the gospel (and even those who live in a culture with a Christian tradition and heritage may never really have heard or seen a true witness to Christ and may be purely formal in their acceptance or rejection of the gospel). Yet though the New Testament in no way minimizes the continuing reality of sin and evil and opposition to Christ, it is nonetheless fundamentally optimistic. The New Testament celebrates the universal sweep of the work of Christ, and triumphantly proclaims the victory of God. Admittedly this is not necessarily incompatible with the possibility of a majority of God's creation being lost; but that is not the overall impression that the New Testament conveys.

The implications of this overall impression can be explored in a variety of ways, two of which may be mentioned here. First and foremost, one can argue that to see mankind as a '*massa perditionis*' is unacceptable because it fails to do sufficient justice to the goodness of millions of ordinary people and the joys and beauties of ordinary life. Or, to put the same point more technically, it reflects an inadequate doctrine of creation. In general terms, it is important to hold a right balance between a theology of creation and a theology of salvation. There is little doubt that some Christian traditions have laid so much emphasis upon the need for salvation that interest in, and concern for, this world in its own right has been pushed into the background. But the Bible is quite clear that this world, however flawed, is still God's world, and man is still in the image of God. The life of this world, therefore, even outside of explicit recognition of Christ, still matters and cannot simply be relegated to perdition. For present purposes the important point is that a full biblical doctrine of creation must be given its proper place. If this is done, with the consequence that all life is viewed positively as a gift of God possessing dignity and value, then, however much one must also recognize the evil and sin that spoils and destroys creation, there should be less likelihood of an unbiblical theological pessimism setting in.

Secondly, one must note that the New Testament draws an important, though not well defined, distinction between sin and guilt. Although all have sinned (eg Luke 11:13, Rom. 3:23), it is unclear how far and in what way all may or may not be guilty before God. The idea seems to be that sin somehow needs to be *consciously* appropriated by man for man to become truly culpable before God (see eg Rom. 5:13, John 9:41, 15:22-24)<sup>1</sup>. Admittedly some Christian theology has obliterated this distinction

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1 To say this is not in any way to deny the importance of unconscious and supra-personal dimensions of sin and evil. See the important short article by F. Young, 'Salvation Proclaimed: XIII. Some concluding reflections', *Expository Times* 94, 1983, pp 100-104.

between sin and guilt. Augustine, for example, argued that man inherited from Adam not just the condition of estrangement from God, but also a share in Adam's culpability for that condition. Thus every human being from birth is not only sinful but is also guilty. The exegetical foundation of Augustine's view, however, resting heavily as it does upon a misinterpretation of Romans 5:12, is unsound.<sup>1</sup> The New Testament has a far less straightforward picture of man's guilt before God. In addition to texts like Ephesians 2:1, 3 ('dead in your sins . . . by nature children of wrath') one must hold in balance the implications of passages such as Acts 14:16, 17:30. This cannot be explored here. The point is that, despite human sin, there can be a certain ambiguity over unregenerate man's position before God.

(2) It is important not to base one's theology upon too narrow a model of human response. Most theological systems, naturally and rightly, take as their norm the response to God of an adult, for adulthood is where human awareness and action are fully developed. This norm should not, however, be treated too rigidly, or else it would exclude too many. Primarily, it would exclude children, who obviously should be treated as children and not as 'mini-adults'. A child's response (or lack of it) to God will be that of a child with less rational and articulate elements than would be natural in an adult. The younger the child, the more its response to God will be mediated through its response to its parents who initially stand in place of God to a child. The younger the child, the less appropriate the adult model becomes. In this regard one should also include those who are born in some way mentally subnormal or defective, or who suffer debilitating mental illness. For although they may attain adult years, they may never be able to attain an intellectual, emotional or spiritual capacity beyond that of a child.

The problems raised by trying to fit children within a theological system based on adult response are readily apparent. First and foremost there is the sheer number of children who never reach adulthood. I have no idea what percentage of all humans ever born have died in infancy, but the percentage must be considerable – certainly far more than 50 per cent. A theological system which has nothing to say about these, or, worse, has only a word of condemnation, must itself stand condemned. This was perhaps most famously and painfully exposed in the controversy over 'unbaptized babies'. Are such infants to be condemned either because they were not baptized or because they failed to make an adult response? John Stuart Mill's famous saying about preferring to be in hell with unbaptized babies than in heaven with the God who rejected them is apposite. The picture of God implied is emphatically not that of the New Testament.

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1 A thorough and still valuable discussion of Augustine's position can be found in N. P. Williams, *The Ideas of the Fall and of Original Sin*, Longmans, London 1927, ch. 5, esp. pp 378f.

In general, one may say that the whole issue is to do with one's understanding of the nature and development of human personality. It is more clearly realized today than it was in some previous ages that man's personality is not so much something static or given, as a potentiality, something which needs to grow and be realized. Personality growth and development, for better and worse, takes place throughout life and is significantly dependent upon response to the people and experiences that occur throughout life; and in the first few years of life personality development is also dependent upon, and restricted by, the anatomical and biochemical development of the human brain. When a child dies in infancy, with its personality potential entirely, or almost entirely, unrealized, it is extremely difficult to fit such a child into *any* scheme of life after death at all.

The problem becomes even yet more intractable when one goes a stage further back, prior to birth. What is the status of the foetus in the womb? At what stage does the foetus count as a distinct human being? What happens to foetuses that are aborted? The tangles and complexities of recent debate, not least with regard to the Warnock Report, illustrate well how hard it is for anyone, theologian or otherwise, to produce satisfactory answers to the questions that may be asked. The Bible, of course, makes clear that even the earliest, pre-natal stages of life are in no way excluded from God's providential purposes (eg Ps. 139:13-16). But while this clearly prescribes a practical attitude of reverence and care, it does not help much in the formation of a systematic theoretical understanding, which is the present concern. What is clear is that a theology which operates almost entirely in categories appropriate to adulthood will be severely restricted in its ability to further understanding with regard to that large portion of humanity which, in various ways, is not adult and needs to be understood on its own terms.

(3) It is important not to base theological reflection upon too individualistic an understanding of man. The biblical understanding of man is that man is a social creature who finds his meaning and purpose not just in relation to God but also in relation to his fellow man. It is true of life generally that man's character, habits, beliefs, assumptions, values, etc. are formed through interaction with the family, society and culture in which he lives. With regard to salvation, therefore, in the Old Testament it is the people of Israel, in the New Testament it is the Church, the body of Christ, to which the believer necessarily belongs and in the context of which he grows to maturity and fullness of salvation. The solidarity in Adam is replaced by the solidarity in Christ. Any understanding of perdition, as of salvation, will have to take this corporate, relational dimension of man into account.

The implications of corporateness in this context are not easy to grasp. For the question of the relationship of different individuals to their various corporate contexts is not one that, even in principle, is susceptible of tidy definition. Christian discussion of the point is perhaps most often focused

in the context of mission and missionary strategy. How far, for example, should one concentrate on converting individuals in isolation from their family, tribe, culture, etc., and how far should one concentrate on converting or 'christianizing' the larger entities of family, tribe, culture, etc. in which the individual lives? How far can the fellowship of a church truly nurture an individual unless that church itself is rooted in his culture? And so on. Obviously in an ideal situation there should be both individual and corporate response, but in a fallen world it rarely happens. Usually something rather less must be settled for, which leaves room for significant differences of emphasis.

No definitive answer can be given to the question as to how far and in what way an individual's basic sense of identity and personality may relate to his corporate involvements. This in turn makes it difficult to determine how far and in what way a person is to be held responsible for his own fate. This does not deny personal freedom and responsibility; but it does qualify it.

(4) One's understanding of perdition and the problems which it poses is significantly dependent upon one's understanding of the nature and extent of good and evil. If one in essence envisages life as a battle between good and evil, with the good being saved and the evil being lost, then, although it still raises problems of its own, the picture does not fundamentally offend one's moral sense. The problem, however, is not just that most people are neither clearly good nor clearly evil but rather a complex mixture of both good and evil. Rather, and this is perhaps more important, there is the fact that the New Testament does not present things in these terms. Not only is there the paradox of grace, which means that it is not 'the good' as such who are saved, but also the battle is between Christ and evil rather than between good and evil. The good that is victorious over evil appears to be restricted to, or identified with, the sphere of Christ and his operations among men.

Such an apparent identification of goodness with Christ has led to two natural moves. On the one hand Christians have argued that true goodness is indeed more limited and evil more widespread than might at first sight appear. As Article XIII puts it, 'Works done before the grace of Christ, and the Inspiration of his Spirit, are not pleasant to God . . . yea rather, for that they are not done as God hath willed and commanded them to be done, we doubt not but they have the nature of sin'. It is undoubtedly true that deepening moral and spiritual awareness often brings a deeper perception of the pervasiveness of sin.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand Christians have argued that we should extend our concept of Christ and of his operations among men. Because there is goodness, even where Christ is not known, this must be because Christ is at work unknown and unrecognized. One notable

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1 See further below, pp 60ff.



formulation of this position is to be found in Rahner's argument for 'anonymous Christians'.<sup>1</sup>

It is not the present purpose to develop or criticize either of these approaches, for the primary concern is simply to indicate the nature of the issues at stake. It would seem to me, however, that both the moves outlined above are in principle correct. They must therefore be held in tension together. This means that a Christian understanding of goodness will not be entirely straightforward but rather complex and paradoxical; and this will necessarily bear upon one's understanding of salvation and perdition.

(5) The fifth and final issue follows on from the previous one. It concerns the necessity and centrality of Christ to salvation, with its corresponding implication that apart from Christ one is lost. In what sense is it true that only through Christ can one be saved? This takes one to the heart of New Testament theology. The issue is not simply the meaning and status of such famous texts as John 14:6, Acts 4:12. It is rather to do with the whole New Testament understanding of Christ as representing the supreme and decisive revelation and action of God. If the life, death and resurrection of Jesus genuinely bear the significance that the New Testament attributes so that, as Paul constantly argues, it is Christ and Christ alone who is necessary for salvation, it is *prima facie* difficult to question this and argue that one can be saved without Christ without thereby casting doubt on the New Testament generally.

Nonetheless, this question is more complex than initially appears. For, in the first place, what of the Old Testament? There we find that there are men and women with a deep and living (saving) faith in God, who did not know Christ. If it was possible then, why should it not still be possible now? Although the coming of Christ has made it important that one should go beyond the faith of the Old Testament and means that we *should* have faith in God through Christ, it does not necessarily follow that this makes it in principle impossible to have faith in God without Christ. (Unfortunately the technical problems raised by the biblical conception of salvation history cannot be discussed here).

Secondly, one may note the remarkable way in which the Old Testament, for all its exclusivism and particularism, has two outstanding men of God who are not Israelites at all, that is Noah and Job. Despite their being outside the covenant people of God, Noah and Job are appealed to by Ezekiel (Ezek. 14:14, 20) as exemplars of true righteousness. Admittedly the righteousness of these men is patterned on that found within Israel. But the point remains of this striking recognition of men truly knowing God beyond the limits of God's chosen people.

Thirdly, the fact that the New Testament presents faith in Christ as

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1 A helpful summary of Rahner's writings on this subject is by K. Riesenhuber, 'The Anonymous Christian according to Karl Rahner', in A. Röper, *The Anonymous Christian*, Sheed & Ward, New York 1968.

continuous with the faith in God that was acceptable in the Old Testament (so eg Rom. 4) leads to the question as to what constitutes the content of acceptable faith. If the answer is given in terms of repentance, trust, obedience, humility and love, directed in the first instance towards God and then secondly to one's fellow man, then one might reasonably conclude that wherever such characteristics are present, there is true salvation, whether or not Christ is known.

What then should one say about those who would appear to have a righteousness acceptable to God, but apart from Christ? Perhaps one should allow a distinction between 'being a Christian' and 'being saved'. It must be admitted that New Testament theology knows of no such distinction. Nonetheless it can be argued that *biblical* theology does, when one considers the nature of faith in the Old Testament. The New Testament itself recognizes such righteous faith in its pre-Christ material, that is in the figures of Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary, Simeon, and Anna (Luke 1-2). Although there is no question but that such people *should* have faith in Christ since his coming (so, for example, Cornelius, who clearly had a living faith in God before becoming a Christian (Acts 10, esp. vv 1-4)), a biblical theology may still be able to recognize the validity in principle of faith in God without knowledge of Christ, even though such faith is now a second best and ought to be led on from there to Christ.

Such an approach not only enables a recognition of the possibility of salvation within the sphere of other religions, it also opens the way to recognize that one may be right with God in the context of no religion at all. This is a particularly difficult area, where at least two considerations are fundamental. First, if it be accepted that religion as such is but a means to an end, that is the knowledge of God, it may be possible that one can achieve the end without the recognized means. Some atheism appears to be essentially a rejection of a debased conception of religion and may represent in part a quest for an authentic understanding of God, even though it may not be couched in such terms. Secondly, one needs to allow that if salvation produces certain empirical characteristics within man ('love, joy, peace . . .'), then, conversely, the presence of such characteristics may be indicative of salvation. If someone arrives at a state of integrity which is based not on a sense of self-righteousness or personal achievement, but is characterized rather by a humility in which life and personal qualities are treated as gift rather than merit, he may well be regarded as showing qualities that are indicative of the unrecognized presence of God and of salvation.

This discussion necessarily treads on difficult ground. For one is torn between, on the one hand, commitment to the uniqueness and finality of Christ and, on the other, openness to recognize God at work in many and surprising ways. It remains true, however, that to allow the possibility of salvation in the context of other faiths or no faith not only does not deny that Christ should still be recognized in such cases, but also it does not in any way prejudice the extent of such salvation and so lessen the need for

explicit proclamation of Christ to bring salvation where salvation does not yet exist.

Where does this brief discussion of five problematic issues leave us? In brief, it shows that there must necessarily be much flexibility and latitude in any attempt to define a doctrine of perdition. From a human perspective there must be considerable uncertainty and open-endedness. But then, since the Bible stresses that judgment is the prerogative of God and not of man, and since the gospels constantly highlight the surprising and paradoxical nature of Christ's salvation and judgment (see eg Matt. 7:21-23, Mark 3:31-35, 9:38-41, John 9:39-41), a degree of reverent agnosticism may be no bad thing.

### **The Theological Case for Universalism**

While the above considerations must qualify a belief in perdition, they do not deny perdition as a possible reality. Numerous attempts have been made, however, precisely to dispense with perdition altogether. It will be appropriate now to turn to a brief consideration of some of these.

Theological arguments for universalism,<sup>1</sup> that is the belief that all without exception will ultimately be saved, involve, I think, three main considerations. The first is the love of God. If God's love is as great as the New Testament says, how should any part of creation be eternally excluded from it? Would not such exclusion mean a defeat for God's love, and such a defeat is unthinkable? Secondly, there is the Fatherhood (or Motherhood) of God. What parent would be prepared to condemn his child eternally? Deeply moving passages like Isaiah 49:14-15 can be appealed to in this context. Thirdly, there are those passages where Paul apparently teeters on the brink of universalism (eg Rom. 5:18, 1 Cor. 15:22, Eph. 1:10, Col. 1:20).

In the light of such considerations the universalist could argue, say, that there is an unresolved tension within the New Testament. Over against the contemporary apocalyptic background, which quite readily consigned people to perdition, and which was in general adopted rather too readily by the Church, a deeper understanding of God's reconciling love was breaking through. In the New Testament the breakthrough is still only partial, hence the quantity of references to, and assumptions about, perdition. But it is the task of subsequent Christian theology to complete the breakthrough and to demonstrate the universal nature of God's love more clearly than was possible in the New Testament.

Can such a position be sustained? In the first place, its exegetical foundations appear tenuous. In the Pauline references above, any universalistic meaning (in the present sense) seems something of an imposition upon the train of thought. In Colossians 1:20, for example, the

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1 Specifically moral arguments, such as the impropriety of imposing infinite penalty for finite sin, will not be included here, although various moral considerations will be raised in the course of the discussion.

words 'reconcile all things' are not directed to the thought of the universal salvation of all creation. Rather, the thought is that no powers on earth or in heaven can reconcile men to God, since they all need to be reconciled themselves because of their rebelliousness and sin. The stress is not so much on the fact of their reconciliation as on their own *need* for reconciliation which renders them unfit to mediate between man and God; only Christ, and nobody else, can act as reconciler.<sup>1</sup> More generally, it is clearly unsatisfactory when a case appears to be taking proof texts from Paul (or anywhere else), and does not seek to relate rather to the larger context and concerns of Pauline theology. In particular, Paul's theology of human destiny in Romans 9-11 is a key passage for consideration, difficult though it is. Unfortunately it lies beyond our present scope.

What about the love of God? Obviously this is central to the New Testament. Yet does the New Testament mean by this something that can legitimately be used to argue for universalism? Again, this is questionable. It is noteworthy that the explicit statement 'God is love' comes only twice (1 John 4:8, 16), and that in the course of an argument designed to distinguish between true and false claims to faith, with a view to excluding the latter. John is arguing for the essentially moral nature of God, such that any true experience of him will have a profoundly moral effect on the life of the person in question. Those who show no signs of this, who do not love, cannot therefore truly know God, for God is love. Because certain people are not showing this love they are to be excluded from the ranks of true believers. Given such an understanding of the implications of the love of God in this argument, the universalist use of the term is hardly continuous with the Johannine use.

There is the further point that John connects the love of God with the death of Jesus on the cross (1 John 4:9-10, cf. John 3:14-16) in a way which is characteristic of Paul also (eg Rom. 5:8). This is important because some discussions of the love of God and its implications give the impression of an approach that is more philosophical than biblical. To put it baldly: philosophically, God must represent the absolute and the best. Since love is the highest quality that man can think of, it follows that God must represent this quality absolutely. Therefore the proposition that God is love becomes virtually a necessary truth about God. The difficulty with this is that the New Testament sense of wonderment at the love of God, and its linking of that love specifically with Christ and with his death on the cross, tends to lose its meaning and to recede from view. One is reminded of Pascal's dictum about the difference between the God of the philosophers and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. While no responsible theologian can ignore the proper claims of philosophy and the need for conceptual discipline, the point is that one's philosophizing (as a Christian) should in some sense be subject to the given content of the faith and should not

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1 For a brief discussion of these texts, see N. T. Wright, 'Towards a Biblical View of Universalism', *Themelios* 4, 1979, pp 54-58.

impose assumptions which may fundamentally transform the import of that content.

What of the implications of the Fatherhood of God? First, there is the point that the universal Fatherhood of God, except in the sense of Father as Creator (Acts 17:28f, cf. Mal. 2:10) is not to be found in the New Testament. In the gospels God is primarily Father to Jesus, and secondarily Father to those who are Jesus' disciples.<sup>1</sup> Paul connects human sonship and, by implication, divine fatherhood with the gift of the Spirit (Gal. 4:6f, Rom. 8:14-17) and therefore is also limiting it to Christians.

Secondly, there are clear limits to the extent to which one may appeal to the Fatherhood (or Motherhood) of God on the analogy of human parenthood. Jesus certainly encouraged the analogical use of human fatherhood to give insight into the meaning of divine fatherhood (eg Luke 11:9-13); hence the legitimacy of appealing in this connection to a text like Isaiah 49:14f. But the analogy cannot be pressed too far. For, to take an obvious example, it will break down when applied to the problem of suffering. God does allow things to happen to people which no ordinary parent would permit, and does so for reasons which to a human are unfathomable. To attempt to use such a consideration to try to justify immoral actions (cf. the proverb 'If you see a blind man, kick him; why should you be kinder than God?') is the exact opposite of the biblical approach which is to stress the inscrutability of God and man's need for humility and obedience before him. Whether in Job (Job 38-42) or Paul (eg Rom. 11:33ff.), the emphasis that God is beyond human understanding, and therefore also human analogy, is basic to our understanding of him.

It is in the context of the sovereignty and inscrutability of God that any discussion of salvation and perdition must be set. It will mean that any emotive appeal as to what is or is not proper or possible must be brought before this bar. Nonetheless a certain warning note needs to be sounded, so that God's sovereign inscrutability should not be misused or abused. For one could appeal to it to justify beliefs that should in fact be rejected. While one can appreciate the point of a saying like 'I believe although it is absurd', especially in the light of 1 Corinthians 1-2, one hardly wishes to encourage actual absurdity (eg the damnation of infants). But where does one draw the line? Clearly a deep moral and spiritual awareness is required.

This then raises the further question of how far man's moral sense is reliable. For it is clear that encounter with God and a deepening grasp of the Scriptures can transform one's moral understanding. It is notorious that great saints have a tendency to describe themselves as great sinners. This is easily misunderstood as it is not sin in any moralistic sense that is meant. It is rather that with growing self-awareness the saint perceives the dislocation within himself at the level of will and motivation, and sees more clearly that he is a fundamentally self-centred being. Such a person is likely to feel

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1 See eg J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* I, SCM, London 1971, p 180.

that by the standard of loving God and loving his neighbour he falls so far short of what he could be and should be that he deserves nothing of God except his disfavour and his anger. Of course, the saint knows the mercy and goodness of God and so is joyful and not despairing. But the point is that if he, who knows God and himself far better than the ordinary person, differs from the ordinary person on what God and man are like, especially with regard to what man deserves of God and what it would or would not be right for God to do with man, then it is his understanding that should be given the greater weight. At the very least it is clear that without knowledge of God and humility there is little hope of arriving at any true understanding of the issues.

### **The Evidence of the Gospels**

It will be appropriate to turn now to examine more closely certain key passages in the gospels. For it is the fact that warnings about 'gehenna' – traditionally rendered 'hell' – are found on the lips of Jesus that more than anything else has led Christians down the ages to accept perdition as a real possibility.

The modern inheritor of western culture finds it difficult not to associate perdition with the great medieval pictorial depictions of the damned. Some of the greatest artists, such as Giotto and Michelangelo, have painted unforgettable scenes of demons dragging off the damned to torment. One must of course try to stand back from such images, the more so as they have probably been partly instrumental in making modern man disbelieve in the doctrine they portray.

When one turns to the gospels it is clear where the medieval artists drew their inspiration from. Their imagination was captured by two dominical parables, the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31-46) and Dives and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). When these are supplemented by references to exclusion into outer darkness where there is wailing and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 8:12, Luke 13:28, Matt. 22:13, 25:30, cf. 13:42, 50, 24:51), or casting into unquenchable fire (Mark 9:43, 48), one may feel that the artistic tradition was not so wide of the mark.

It seems clear, however, that the imagery as such will not bear the weight that tradition has sometimes laid upon it. The parable of Dives and Lazarus, in particular, cannot be taken as in any way a description of hell. For Jesus is using a well-known scenario of reversal in the afterlife to make his point about riches and repentance.<sup>1</sup> In this scenario it is Hades, the traditional place of the departed, not hell in the Christian sense, that is depicted (Luke 16:23). Even if it were not known to be a traditional scenario, the details of the parable could still hardly be pressed to give information about the conditions of the departed; for then, for example, one would have to interpret reclining in Abraham's bosom literally (Luke 16:23), and also allow for regular conversation between the saved and the

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1 Cf. J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, SCM, London 1972, p 183.

lost (Luke 16:24-31). In general, one should distinguish, as far as is possible, between the point that is being made and the imagery used to convey it. It is highly doubtful, therefore, whether the traditional understanding of hell as involving eternal conscious torment, heavily dependent as it is on the imagery of Dives and Lazarus, is in fact a legitimate interpretation of Jesus' teaching.

Whatever one may make of the imagery of certain sayings and parables, there remains the clear and consistent note of warning about reversal, exclusion and loss in the teaching of Jesus. However uncomfortable such material may be, it is clearly incumbent on the Christian to give it full weight. In order to do this, however, it is necessary first to deal with one preliminary difficulty, that is the question of the authenticity of these dominical sayings. The argument thus far with its references to what Jesus said may seem to beg the question. For can we be sure that Jesus did in fact say these things? It would hardly be responsible to ignore the controverted problems surrounding the sayings of Jesus in the gospels. In the present discussion one particularly important question is the significance one attributes to the fact that many of the sayings and parables about exclusion and lostness are to be found only in Matthew. Does this mean, as some scholars have argued, that some at least of the material owes its origins to the evangelist, or to some Matthean community, rather than to Jesus himself?

This is not the place for any discussion of this problem, but the stance towards it that is being adopted here must at least be stated, even if it cannot be justified. The basic assumption being made here is that questions of authenticity do not in fact make any substantial difference to the issue in hand. For it is a simple fact that it is Jesus *as he is presented in the gospels* who has always been at the centre of Christian faith. However much scholars may be able to penetrate behind this presentation, it is not likely, nor is it desirable, that any alternative presentation could ever command general Christian acceptance. The important issue, therefore, is not whether the evangelists have interpreted the sayings of Jesus, for this is beyond dispute, but whether they have faithfully and legitimately interpreted his sayings, such that it is still the mind of the Master that the reader is presented with. It is surely perfectly reasonable that the Christian should accept that this is so as a matter of faith. To say this is not to query the propriety of scholarly study of the gospels to ensure a responsible use of the material; but it is to query whether general reflection upon, and use of, the dominical traditions in the gospels need wait upon such scholarly work in the way that sometimes seems to be proposed.

What then is one to make of the dominical sayings about reversal, exclusion and loss? The central problem of interpretation concerns whether they refer solely to this life or whether they also refer to man's ultimate destiny. It does seem clear that at least some sayings, such as 'The first shall be last, and the last shall be first' (eg Matt. 20.16) do refer primarily to the crisis for the Jewish people of acceptance or rejection of

Jesus posed by his ministry. As such their applicability to questions of personal perdition is unclear. Is this, however, true of all such sayings? Two brief points may be made. First, it is equally characteristic of dominical sayings about the kingdom or salvation (or whatever term is used) that they usually refer primarily to the immediate context of response. But that clearly does not thereby evacuate such sayings of ultimate significance also. Would not that also hold true then for sayings about exclusion? Secondly, there is the fact that certain of the sayings in question are linked with the image of the Great Assize, or Last Judgment, which thereby suggests their bearing upon man's ultimate destiny (eg Matt. 7:21-23, 25:31-46). The natural assumption would appear to be that Jesus' warnings are applicable to man's ultimate condition. Whatever uncertainty there may be over the form that such ultimate loss might take, the reality of the fact of loss remains the most natural inference from the sayings of Jesus on the subject.

It is this dominical teaching that remains the central element in a Christian belief in perdition. It also provides the biggest difficulty for those who argue that belief in the love of God is irreconcilable with belief in perdition. For if Jesus is the one who supremely knows and reveals the love of God – about which he actually *says* rather little, but which he constantly demonstrates in practice – and he accepts perdition, then the love of God and perdition are not irreconcilable. To say that they are will mean that either 'love' or 'perdition', or both, are being given a content different to that in the gospels.

In finishing this section, one final consideration should be mentioned. Although it has been suggested that Jesus' sayings about salvation and about loss are alike applicable to man's condition beyond this life, this should not be taken to imply that salvation and perdition are somehow equal and opposite conditions. Rather, salvation must have an existence and a quality that is not mirrored by perdition. Eternal death is no straightforward opposite to eternal life. The fact that this is so follows from reflection upon the nature of good and evil. For whatever difficulties there are in understanding good and evil, one thing that must be basic to any Christian theology is that good and evil are not equal and opposite, but rather good is in every way prior to evil. Biblical faith is not dualistic. God alone, and not the evil one, is creator. Good comes first, both temporally and qualitatively. Evil is essentially a parasite upon good, invading that which is created good and twisting and distorting it. Since salvation and perdition are human conditions reflecting and embodying good and evil, it follows that the asymmetry between good and evil must entail an asymmetry in salvation and perdition. This means that perdition cannot have the same sort of ultimate quality or reality that salvation has. What perdition might actually involve is, therefore, the question to which we must now turn.

### **An Approach to Formulating a Doctrine of Perdition**

In this concluding section it will be appropriate briefly to outline one



approach to the question of perdition that may be helpful in reformulating a coherent belief. The basis for this is a questioning of one assumption that usually underlies both the traditional doctrine of hell and the doctrine of universalism that has developed in reaction to it. Put simply, this is the assumption that every human being has an immortal destiny. The history of this notion, which is deeply embedded within Christian tradition, need not be examined here. Suffice it to say that there is in fact remarkably little basis for it within the Bible.<sup>1</sup> This raises the question whether it might not be better to suppose that not every human being has an immortal destiny, and to explore the implications of such a belief.

This approach, sometimes known as 'conditional immortality',<sup>2</sup> may be rather baldly stated thus. Man in himself is mortal and doomed to die (cf. Gen. 3:19). God alone is immortal (cf. 1 Tim. 6:16), yet he is able to give immortality to mortal beings by raising them from death (cf. 1 Cor. 15, esp. vv. 51-54). This gift is given in Christ (cf. 2 Tim. 1:10). Insofar as anyone makes a genuine response to God through Christ, then that person receives the gift (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17). The person who makes no response to God and who will not lose his life so as to find it, will have no life beyond that on this earth. He will be excluded from the joy of heaven for he will have ceased to exist. On such an understanding hell or perdition means ultimate extinction.

This approach has many strengths.<sup>3</sup> It appears to fit the biblical data at least as well as any other position. All the biblical references cited in the previous paragraph are representative of attitudes that are widely and deeply rooted in the New Testament. It avoids most of the moral and theological difficulties posed by perdition as traditionally conceived. In particular, it satisfies perhaps the most important of the theological issues outlined above, that is the need to give full weight to a doctrine of creation as well as of salvation. On this view all receive from God the gift of life. Although the world is fallen and man is sinful, life still offers infinite potential. Almost all, even those who live in the most wretched of conditions, prefer to live rather than not to live. Since all life is gift, no one, in principle, should have cause for complaint, even though some enjoy life more fully than others. Those who in this life respond to the call of God's love receive the further gift of eternal life and resurrection from death.

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- 1 This cannot be argued in detail here. One lengthy exposition of this position is to be found in L. E. Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers*, 2 vols. Review and Herald Publishing Association, Washington, D.C. 1966. For a brief statement, see J. Wenham, *The Enigma of Evil*, IVP, Leicester 1985 (previously issued as *The Goodness of God*, IVP, London 1974), pp 34ff.
  - 2 See eg S. H. Travis, *Christian Hope and the Future of Man*, IVP, Leicester 1980, pp 118-136.
  - 3 This is not the place to consider the problems raised by evidence for survival of death from such things as near-death experiences and psychical experiences. For a useful brief analysis of some of the issues, see P. & L. Badham, *Immortality or Extinction?* SPCK, London 1984, chs. 5-7.

Admittedly one may protest that it is unfair that some should receive eternal life and not others. But then the New Testament is quite clear that it is indeed some such unfairness that grace involves (see eg Matt. 20:1-16, Luke 15:11-32, 18: 9-14); otherwise grace would not be grace. Moreover this maintains one of the basic understandings of judgment in the New Testament, which is that all have opportunity, in whatever way, to make some appropriate response to God, and those who do not receive God's grace are those who have in fact chosen not to (cf. John 3:17-21).

This position still needs, of course, to be qualified in the ways outlined in the first part of the discussion. That remains a task for future work. The purpose of this paper is just to raise some of the important issues and to sketch some outlines for a coherent theological belief. As was said at the beginning, this paper represents a thinking aloud, and thinking aloud has a tendency to leave matters only partially dealt with. If, however, the thoughts offered here make some sense, I hope that others may be stimulated to take matters further.

**The Revd. Dr. Walter Moberly** is Temporary Lecturer in Old Testament at The University of Durham.