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Universalism and Evangelical Theology: An Historical Theological Perspective

David Hilborn and Don Horrocks

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Introduction: Thomas Talbott and The Possibility of 'Evangelical Universalism'

THE traditional view of universalism and evangelicalism is that they are mutually exclusive.[1] In a historical survey of universalism published for the British evangelical journal *Themelios* in 1979, Richard Bauckham associated the doctrine with 'less conservative' theologians, and barely mentioned anyone who could be classed as an evangelical.[2] Likewise, while charting the recent growth of more radical soteriologies among evangelicals, Daniel Strange has nevertheless concluded that 'even those evangelicals who are

1 Among numerous expressions of this traditional view, see Derek J. Tidball, *Who Are the Evangelicals? Tracing the Roots of Today's Movements* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1994), pp. 151-52;, Alister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), pp. 236-40; Donald R. Dunavant, 'Universalism' in A. Scott Moreau (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), pp. 988-89; James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 47.

2 Richard J. Bauckham, 'Universalism: A Historical Survey', *Themelios* 4:2 (1979), pp. 48-54.

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very optimistic about the numbers of people who will eventually be saved still do not believe in universalism; for 'it is not a matter of degree to move from the belief that the majority of humanity will be saved to a belief that all will be saved, but a matter of kind'. In fact, Strange's assessment of the current scene leads him to declare that he knows 'of no published evangelical who holds to the doctrine of universalism'.[3]

Plainly, however, Strange's assessment begs the question whether there are *any* conditions under which an evangelical who did embrace universalism could continue to be classed as 'evangelical'—and if so, what those conditions might be. One such case is Thomas Talbott who teaches philosophy at Willamette University in Salem, Oregon. Formed in a deeply conservative evangelical church community, he pursued graduate work at Fuller Seminary. Talbott's years at Fuller saw him radically reject the Calvinism in which he had been schooled—a rejection which led, in time, to the formulation of a dogmatic universalism driven by the eschatological imperative of 'love's final victory'.[4]

Where, as we shall see, certain evangelicals have tentatively envisaged a 'wider hope' for the unevangelised and others have extended a broadly Arminian emphasis on freewill beyond the grave for those who do not hear the gospel in this life, Talbott maintains a Reformed emphasis on the fixed and eternal nature of God's salvific decrees, but dismisses the idea that these decrees entail a so-called 'double predestination'—that is, the election of some to everlasting life and others to hell. Talbott echoes familiar Reformed thinking when he states that while our choices in respect of the gospel 'most assuredly can affect our chances for happiness in the present and in the near term future', they 'cannot alter our final destiny'. But he starkly departs from Reformed understanding when he suggests that this 'final destiny' is the same for all—namely, a universally 'glorious inheritance' of 'union with God and reconciliation with others'. As Talbott expresses it in his main treatise on this topic, *The Inescapable Love of God*, 'when the Hound of Heaven has finally closed off every alternative to such a union, we shall then, each of us, finally embrace the destiny that is ours'.[5]

Now it should be acknowledged from the outset that Talbott himself does not offer a straightforward 'test case' for the possibility of 'evangelical universalism'—not only because he is relatively so dogmatic about the salvation of all, but also because he now seems fairly unconcerned about whether his own belief in universal salvation would disqualify him *ipso facto* from being categorized as an evangeli-

3 Daniel Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation among the Unevangelised: An Analysis of Inclusivism in Recent Evangelical Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), p. 31.

4 Thomas Talbott, *The Inescapable Love of God* (Salem: Universal Publishers, 1999), pp. 1-22, 219.

5 Talbott, *The Inescapable Love of God*, pp. 219-20.

cal.[6] Even so, it is noteworthy that Talbott's various articles on universalism for *Faith and Philosophy, Religious Studies and The Reformed Journal* during the past decade have been concerned to engage and dialogue above all with evangelical scholars, and above all, to influence evangelical thinking on this topic.[7] As such, Talbott's work prompts reflection not only on current evangelical theological thinking about universalism, but on the historical context of such thinking. In particular, it prompts consideration of whether there are precedents within the evangelical tradition both for the more specific universalist arguments which Talbott adduces, and for universalist soteriology in general.

I shall show here that from time to time, some who might *on certain grounds* be defined as 'evangelical' have, in practice, held either universalist or universalistically-inclined views. Granted, it will also become clear that the grounds in question, and the precise mode or shade of universalism adopted in each case, may be debatable: as Jerry Root notes in a review of the subject for the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, there are 'about as many varieties of universalism as there are people writing about it'.[8] Granted, too, we shall see that opinions differ as to which of these varieties, if any, might be compatible with an authentic evangelical theology. Yet since Talbott has been so active in provoking present-day evangelical debate on universalism, it would be helpful to examine ideas from his own evangelical lineage which to one degree or another might be said to prefigure the ideas that he is now propounding.

Evangelicals and Universalism in the Post-Reformation Period

Just as Augustine laid the ground for the anathematising of universalism at the Second Council of Constantinople (553),[9] the magisterial Reformers revealed their own considerable debt to Augustine when they robustly repudiated universalism. For Luther in par-

6 An attitude borne out, for instance, by Talbott's avowed dislike of institutional Christian labels, and by his decidedly unevangelical equivocation in describing the Christian faith as 'one of the principal sources—if not *the* principal source—of moral and spiritual enlightenment in the world'. (*The Inescapable Love of God*, p. 33) Indeed, Talbott's published work does not occupy itself much at all with the question of evangelical identity and its parameters.

7 E.g. with John Piper in 'God's Unconditional Mercy: A Reply to John Piper', *The Reformed Journal*, June 1983, p. 13; William Lane Craig in 'Craig on the Possibility of Eternal Damnation', *Religious Studies*, 28 (1992), pp. 495-519; Lorraine Boettner in 'Punishment, Forgiveness and Divine Justice', *Religious Studies*, 29 (1993), p. 157; Michael Murray in 'Universalism and the Supposed Oddity of Our Earthly Life: Reply to Michael Murray', *Faith and Philosophy* 18:1 (January 2001), pp. 102-109; Jerry Walls in 'Freedom, Damnation and the Power to Sin with Impunity', *Religious Studies* 37 (2001), pp. 417-434, (n.1, n.19).

8 J.R. Root, 'Universalism', in Walter A. Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology (second ed)* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book Academic, 2001), p. 1233.

9 John. H. Leith (ed.), *Creeds of the Churches (Third Edition)* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 50.

ticular, universalism represented an offence against the cardinal principle of justification by faith alone. Without such justification by faith, he was adamant that it would be impossible for anyone to escape 'sin, death [and] hell'.[10] Inasmuch as it had located salvation in cosmic restitution rather than the victory of Christ on the cross, the universalism systematised in the third century by Origen in his doctrine of *apokatastasis* contrasted starkly with Luther's theological foundations. Calvin's rejection of universal salvation took a somewhat different form, but the contrast was equally sharp. For Calvin, it denied that biblical process of election whereby God had chosen Israel from among the nations under the old dispensation, and had decreed in the new that only some had been predestined for everlasting bliss.[11]

In noting all this, however, we should remember that the Reformation had a radical as well as a magisterial wing. This radical wing, as exemplified by the Anabaptists, did much to shape evangelicalism's distinctive practical emphases on personal conversion, holiness and discipleship. Indeed, as George Hunston Williams has shown, even among paedobaptist evangelicals in the magisterial Reformation traditions, it contributed to an ecclesiology centred on the idea of the church as a covenanting community of the faithful.[12] Generally, this ecclesiology went hand-in-hand with the doctrine that only some, and not all, would be saved. Yet it was on the fringes of the same radical Reformation that universalism would re-emerge as a force to be reckoned with.

The South German Anabaptist Hans Denck (c.1495-1527), not only opposed paedobaptism: even before he formally joined the Anabaptist movement he was imprisoned at Schwyz in 1525 for promoting the Origenist doctrine that at the Last Judgement even Satan will be spared. On his release, Denck is reported to have been baptised by the German Anabaptist leader Balthasaar Hübmaier. Hübmaier himself never embraced universalism, but does seem to have been more generally influenced by Denck's emphasis on the universality of God's salvific will, and by his commensurate stress on the freedom of all to choose salvation.[13] On some assessments, indeed, this is closer to what Denck himself actually taught.[14]

As it turned out, Denck's soteriol-

10 Martin Luther, 'Preface to the New Testament', in John Dillenberger, (ed.), *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings* (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), pp. 15-17.

11 John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, Trans. F.L. Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), III:24:xii-xvii, pp. 978-87.

12 George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation, (Third Edition)* (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2000), pp. 1289-1311; Keith G. Jones, *A Believing Church: Learning from Some Contemporary Anabaptist and Baptist Perspectives* (Didcot: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1998).

13 Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, pp. 256-57.

14 Morwenna Ludlow, *Universal Salvation: Eschatology in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 2.

ogy failed in any decisive way to penetrate those Mennonite and Hutterite movements which would subsequently develop as the main strands of Anabaptism. However, traces of it did resurface in the mystical writings of the German Lutheran, Jakob Boehme (1575-1624). Coloured by a theosophical interest in alchemy and astrology, Boehme's work attacked the Reformed doctrines of election and reprobation as incompatible with Scripture's portrayal of a God engaged in universal revelation and renewal.[15] It would be hard to construe Boehme's idiosyncratic writings as 'evangelical', or even systematically universalist,[16] but he was read extensively by others who did operate within more thoroughly evangelical theological contexts. Hence Peter Sterrey (1613-72), an English Independent minister who served as a chaplain to Oliver Cromwell, sought to co-opt Boehme's concepts into a detailed scheme of universal redemption, as did his protégé, Jeremiah White (1630-1707).[17] Like Thomas Talbott today, both men insisted that the God whose supreme attribute is love would not finally withhold that love from any of his creatures.[18] Boehme would have an even greater impact, however, on the Pietists.

Universalism and Pietism

Pietism emerged in mid-seventeenth century Germany as a reaction against the increasing scholasticism of the Lutheran church, and the religious entanglements of the Thirty Years War (1618-48).[19] This context helps to explain why some Pietists were inclined to explore the universalising visions of Boehme, even if they typically declined to infer universal salvation as such from them. Certainly, leading Pietists such as Philip Jakob Spener, August Hermann Franke and Nikolas von Zinzendorf all drew on Boehme's work.[20] Moreover, under the influence of such Pietists, and also prompted by one of Boehme's greatest champions, the English spiritual writer William Law (1686-1761), John Wes-

15 Robin Waterfield (ed.), *Jacob Boehme: Essential Readings* (Wellingborough: Crucible Books for the Aquarian Press, 1989).

16 Morwenna Ludlow, 'Universal Salvation and a Soteriology of Divine Punishment', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 53:4 (2000), p. 459.

17 Jeremiah White, *The Restoration of All Things: or, A Vindication of the Goodness and Grace of God, to be Manifested at Last, in the Recovery of his Whole Creation out of Their Fall* (Third Edition, with additional preface) (London, 1779 [1712]).

18 White, *The Restoration of All Things*, p. 910; Sterrey, cit. D.P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), p. 111. Compare Talbott, *The Inescapable Love of God*, pp. 200-220.

19 For more detail on the origins and development of Pietism see W.R. Ward, 'German Pietism, 1670-1750', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 44 (1993), pp. 476-504.

20 The precise effect of Boehme on these Churchly Pietists is, however, a matter of scholarly dispute: see Rufus S. Jones, *Spiritual Reformers of the 16th and 17th Centuries* (London: Macmillan, 1914), pp. 153ff; Chauncey David Ensign, 'Radical German Pietism' (Boston: Boston University Th.D. thesis, 1955), p. 21; Ernst Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1965), pp. 10ff.

ley would go on to study him in some depth. Admittedly, Wesley was far from convinced by Boehme's mysticism, and followed Spener, Franke and von Zinzendorf in resisting his universalist tendencies.[21]

Yet Wesley did strongly promote the work of another Lutheran Churchly Pietist who was at least discreetly prepared to embrace universalism—the biblical critic Johannes Albrecht Bengel (1687-1752). Bengel's groundbreaking exegetical study *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* was much consulted and admired by Wesley.[22] What was less well known was that while publicly upholding orthodox Lutheran soteriology, Bengel privately inclined towards a doctrine of universal reconciliation. Bengel's reticence to publish his views is explained by Helmut Thielicke as stemming from the conviction that 'not everybody was ready' for such a doctrine: 'If it came into the hands of the wrong person—the person who would construe it legalistically—it would have a devastating effect. This effect would be much the same as that of untimely preaching of predestination. Improperly understood, this too could be taken fatalistically…'[23]

The same tension between private universalism and public orthodoxy was a feature of the moderate German Pietist grouping founded in 1708 by Alexander Mack and known as the New Baptists, or Brethren (now called the Church of the Brethren). Particularly among those of this grouping who settled in colonial America from 1719 onwards, universal restoration was well known. Yet as Donald Durnbaugh notes, it was never officially preached, lest it detract from the Brethren's traditional evangelical emphases on conversion, personal sanctification and social activism.[24] Insofar as it was disseminated at all, it seems to have been promoted on the Brethren's behalf by leaders belonging to a more overtly radical stream of Pietism.

Here, figures such as Johann Wilhelm Peterson (1649-1727), Ernst Christoph Hochmann von Hochenau (1670-1721) and George de Benneville (1703-93) married a more separatist mindset with more explicitly Boehmist ideas, and were happy on this basis to promulgate final cosmic restoration—a doctrine which, as David Ensign

21 Writing in 1752, Wesley reflected: 'The mystic divinity was never the Methodists' doctrine. They could never swallow…Jacob Behmen [aka Boehme], although they often advised with one that did [William Law]'. John Wesley, Letter to Bishop Lavington (Exeter), 8 May 1752, in John Telford (ed.). *The Letters of John Wesley*, A.M., (8 Vols.) (London: Epworth Press, 1931), Vol. 3, p. 321.

22 Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 188; 'Bengel, Johannes Albrecht', in F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone (eds.), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church (Second Edition)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 158.

23 Helmut Thielicke, The Evangelical Faith: Volume III—The Holy Spirit, the Church, Eschatology (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982 [1973]), p. 455.

24 Donald F. Durnbaugh (ed.), *Meet the Brethren* (Elgin, Ill.: The Brethren Press for the Brethren Encyclopaedia Inc., 1984), p. 9.

25 Ensign, *Radical German Pietism*, pp. 285-86.

notes, would become a 'major distinctive' of Radical Pietism.[25] Another member of this set, the German writer George Klein-Nicolai, pseudonymously penned in 1700 a pamphlet entitled *The Everlasting Gospel*, which appears to have been taken to America by the first Brethren émigrés, and which was in effect the first universalist tract published in the New World.[26]

If the Brethren formed something of a bridge between moderate and radical Pietism, this role was confirmed by the fact that although Hochmann would later plough his own ecclesial furrow, he worked closely with Mack at the inception of the movement, and drafted a statement of faith which it used extensively in both Germany and America for several decades.[27] Similarly, while De Benneville was an avowed separatist who went on to emigrate and found his own independent house church in Oley, Pennsylvania, his services nevertheless attracted a wide range of Pietists—right wing, left wing and moderate alike.

No doubt, part of his appeal to the more 'evangelical' members of his congregations was his own tireless evangelistic zeal. Confounding the later stereotype that universalists lack motivation for mission, De Benneville insisted on the obligation of any who believe in final restitution to 'proclaim and publish to the people of the world a Universal Gospel that shall restore, in time, all the human species without exception'. To leave people ignorant of this grand divine plan was, for De Benneville, to deprive them of the essential ground, joy and purpose of their life. Hence, as he put it: 'My happiness will be incomplete while one creature remains miserable'.[28]

A similar conversionist zeal characterised two English universalists who emerged from the archetypally evangelical stable of Methodism. James Relly (1722-78) and his disciple John Murray (1741-1815) reflected John Wesley's interest in Pietism, but unlike Wesley, followed those strains of it which pointed to the final redemption and restitution of all. Wesley's embrace of Arminian soteriology may have led him to assert that in God's providence all *could* be saved because Christ died for all and not, as in classical Calvinism, for the elect alone; Relly and Murray, however, interpreted Romans 5:18 and 1 Corinthians 15:22 to mean that Christ's death had *in fact* atoned for all, and saved all, on the grounds that the universality of Adam's sin in humanity must be matched by nothing less than the universality of humanity's salvation in the New Adam, Jesus Christ.[29] In this, they

26 James Alexander, 'Universalism among the Early Brethren', *Brethren Life and Thought*, XXXII, Winter 1987, p. 29.

27 Richard V. Pierard, 'Hochmann Von Hochenau, Ernst Christoph', in J.D. Douglas (ed.), *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), p. 473.

28 Cit. Bell, *The Life and Times of Dr. George De Benneville*, 1953, p. 62.

29 James Relly, *Union: Or a Treatise of the Consanguinity and Affinity Between Christ and His Church*, (London 1759); John Murray, *The Life of Rev. John Murray, Preacher of Universal Salvation, Written by Himself, with a Continuation by Judith Sargent Murray* (Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1870).

foreshadowed the treatment of the same Pauline texts offered by Thomas Talbott in chapter 5 of *The Inescapable Love of God*.[30]

Relly was expelled from the Methodist Connexion for these views in 1751, and established a sect which Murray joined. In 1770, Murray emigrated to New England, and at Barnegat Light, New Jersey, later that year preached a sermon which paved the way for the establishment of the first church to style itself as explicitly 'Universalist', rather than as incidentally or implicitly drawn to universal restoration—a church which he helped to found in 1793 as the Universalist Society of Boston.

Once officially formed in this way, the Universalist Church appears to have been less inclined to check itself against the doctrinal orthodoxy of mainline Protestantism in general, and of evangelical Protestantism in particular. This turn from orthodoxy was embodied by Hosea Ballou (1771-1852)—a former Calvinistic Baptist who was ordained as a Universalist minister in 1794. Freed from catholic and credal constraints, Ballou's theological explorations led him, in time, not only to deny the punitive fires of hell, but also to disavow the Trinity, the deity of Christ and vicarious atonement.

As Harry Skilton has observed, 'When Ballou arrived on the scene, most Universalists were orthodox in theology, except for their belief that all men would be saved. But his extensive preaching, writing, and training of ministerial students, influenced them towards Unitarianism.'[31] This confluence of Universalism with Unitarianism—culminating as it did much later with the formation of the Unitarian Universalist Association in 1961—can be seen to account in no small measure for the growing resistance of evangelicals to universalism and final restitution through the nineteenth century.

Universalism and Evangelicalism in the Nineteenth Century

While various seventeenth and eighteenth century universalists came from evangelical backgrounds, and while some managed to remain discreetly within mainstream evangelical churches, universalism itself was hardly seen as compatible with evangelical belief. Indeed, as intentional universalist churches multiplied, and as universalist thought gained influence through the succeeding century, evangelicals distinguished themselves as those most vigorously opposed to incipient universalism, and to the unitarian theology with which it became increasingly yoked.

There is not time here to rehearse the many polemics written by traditionalist evangelicals against universalism in the nineteenth century.[32] However, one momentous episode from the history of the organisation for

30 Talbott, *The Inescapable Love of God*, pp. 55-80, esp. 56-66.

31 Harry Skilton, 'Ballou, Hosea', in J.D. Douglas (ed.), *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), p. 98.

32 But see Geoffrey Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

which I work illustrates very clearly the depth of evangelicalism's retrenchment on this and related issues during this era. Keen to establish its doctrinal rectitude from the outset, the inaugural conference of the World's Evangelical Alliance in 1846 included a specific affirmation of 'the eternal punishment of the wicked' in its Basis of Faith. This clause was inserted partly in response to universalism, and partly to repudiate the spread of annihilationist views under unitarian sponsorship.[33] Yet in 1869-70 the Alliance was shaken to its core after one of its Honorary Secretaries, T.R. Birks, published an esoteric study called *The Victory of Divine Goodness*.[34]

An Anglican priest, Birks had distinguished himself as a leading opponent of Darwinism. In this volume, however, he argued for a 'semi-restitutionist' view in which those consigned to hell might yet develop some sense of the new divine order, eventually possessing part, if not all, of its glory. Placed under intense pressure after a succession of fraught Alliance debates on the matter, Birks resigned his secretaryship. Even this, however, was not enough to prevent the departure of a significant number of the Alliance's Council, in protest at the fact that Birks was not also publicly censured for his views.[35]

If the 'Birks Affair' typified mainstream evangelical hostility to even quasi-universalist theology during this era, Birks was not quite alone among evangelicals in seeking to apply the benefits of the gospel to those who have died without professing Christ. More positive evangelical responses to universalism were certainly rare, but there were exceptions, and these exceptions are important—not least insofar as they offer pointers to the modern-day debate which Thomas Talbott has stoked up.

Like Birks, F.W. Robertson of Brighton (1816-53) was an evangelical who came to favour a 'remedial' process of purgatorial sanctification over penal retribution—a process which he saw as extending beyond the grave, and which he defended on the premise that 'the law of the universe is progress'.[36] More significant, however, was the similarly 'progressivist' soteriology developed by the Scottish lay theologian Thomas Erskine of Linlathen (1788-1864). Along with his friend John MacLeod Campbell, Erskine was honoured by the respected Tübingen scholar Otto Pfleiderer for having made the 'best contribution in dogmatics' from Britain between 1825 and the early 1890s.[37] More pertinently for our present topic, however, he stands out as one of the very few seri-

33 Hilborn and Johnston, *The Nature of Hell* (ACUTE Report) (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000), pp. 63-4.

34 T.R. Birks, *The Victory of Divine Goodness* (London: Rivingtons, 1867).

35 For a full account of the 'Birks Affair' see Ian Randall and David Hilborn, *One Body in Christ: The History and Significance of the Evangelical Alliance* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), pp. 122-133.

36 A. Brooke Stopford (ed.), *Life and Letters of Fred. W. Robertson*, Vol. II (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, & Co., 1882), pp. 155-6.

37 Otto Pfleiderer, *The Development of Theology in Germany Since Kant and its Progress in Great Britain Since 1825 (2nd Edition)* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1893), p. 382.

ous, consistent, self-declared universalists of the nineteenth century who nevertheless sought to maintain an evangelical identity.[38]

Erskine was one of the first British theologians to undertake theological fact-finding tours of Europe following the end of the Napoleonic wars, and it was on these trips that he came under the influence of key German theologians who were following in the footsteps of Friedrich Schleiermacher.[39] Rejecting the Augustinian-Calvinist defence of eternal damnation, Schleiermacher asserted a new eschatology based on the election of all humanity to salvation in Christ. More specifically, he sought to assimilate Platonist, Romantic and pantheist concepts within a doctrine of final restoration which stressed the ability of human beings ultimately to recover from the deleterious effects of sin. In this respect, he effectively further radicalised that 'left wing' German Pietist tradition which had leant towards universalism in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[40]

Erskine's theological formation was not, however, exclusively continental. His preferred reading as a youth had included the essays of the General Baptist theologian, John Foster (1770-1843). One of the most intellectually gifted evangelicals of his time, Foster regarded eternal punishment as unjust, and developed a doctrine of progressive universal redemption based on God's unfolding 'education' of all those made in his image.[41] Certainly, Erskine read Foster's Book, *On a Man Writing Memoirs of Himself*, at the age of 17, and realized, as a kind of spiritual awakening, that life was a school, and that education was for eternity.[42]

If Foster was an early inspiration, Erskine's soteriology was also profoundly shaped by William Law.[43] We have already seen how influentially Law championed Boehmist and Pietist thought in the eighteenth century, and have noted his importance as a mentor to John Wesley.[44] Erskine read Law assiduously, quoting from his later mystical works and tracking down his sources—not least in the writings of Boehme.[45] Indeed, having been thus

38 For more on Erskine's evangelical credentials see Don Horrocks, 'The Soteriological Eclecticism of Thomas Erskine of Linlathen: Theological Innovation in an Age of Reconstruction', (Ph.D., Brunel University, 2001) (due for publication by T&T Clark, 2003.)

39 Horrocks, 'Soteriological Eclecticism', p. 254ff.

40 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), §5, 18-26; §76. 3, 317; §81. 1, esp. 333; §81.4, 338, §89. 1, 366.

41 Nicholas R. Needham, *Thomas Erskine of Linlathen: His Life and Theology*, 1788-1837 (Edinburgh: Rutherford House Books, 1990), p.29; Leroy Edwin Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers: Volume 2* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1966), pp. 318-20.

42 John Foster, *Essays* (London: The Religious Tract Society: nd).

43 Horrocks, 'Soteriological Eclecticism', pp. 207-13.

44 Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century (Third Edition)* (London: Harbinger Books, 1962 [1867]), Vol. 2I, pp. 331, 344.

45 See e.g., Henry F. Henderson, *Erskine of Linlathen: Selections and Biography* (Edinburgh and London: Oliphant Anderson & Ferrier, 1899), pp. 26-30.

inspired to read Boehme in the original German, Erskine developed a noticeably Boehmist theodicy, which cast the religious life as a universal, moment-by-moment struggle between good and evil instincts, played out in a process of purification and reconciliation with God. This process was presented by Erskine as culminating in the eventual defeat of evil by good, and the victory of God's final purpose.

Following Law, Erskine invoked Romans 5:18 and 1 Corinthians 15:22 to argue that corporate humanity should be understood in terms of the terms of 'the two heads, Adam and Christ,—each being the head of all men, and therefore all men having a part in each; Adam being the corrupt fountain, and therefore rejected, Christ being the renewed fountain, and therefore elected'.[46] In this, he anticipated Thomas Talbott's plain assertion that 'the very same "all" who died in Adam shall be made alive in Christ'.[47]

Even more pertinent for present-day evangelical debates about the scope of salvation, however, was Erskine's concept of a 'post-mortem dimension', in which the journey of faith was seen as continuing for all beyond the grave.[48]

One of the more intriguing trends in current evangelical theology is the growing number of evangelical theologians since the 1960s who have either endorsed or seriously entertained the concept of 'second chance' or 'post-mortem' evangelism. This group now includes, at least, George Beasley Murray, Charles Cranfield, Donald Bloesch, Clark Pinnock, Gabriel Fackre and Nigel Wright.[49] Like Millard Erickson, I suspect that the group will grow—although whether any its living members move on to fuse the wider hope which their sympathies represent with actual universalism—as Erskine did—remains to be seen.[50]

In addition to his 'softening' of Scottish Reformed soteriology, Erskine also significantly influenced the later

46 Thomas Erskine, *The Doctrine of Election* (London: James Duncan, 1837), p.305.

47 Talbott, *The Inescapable Love of God*, p. 64.

48 Thomas Erskine, *Essay on Faith* (Edinburgh, 1822), p. 91. Erskine admitted that, because from everyday observation the divine process of education into righteousness was not generally evident, it was logically necessary for him to extend the process for an infinite period into post-mortem experience: Thomas Erskine, *The Spiritual Order* (Edinburgh, 1871), pp. 69-70, 75.

49 G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), p. 258; C.E.B. Cranfield, *First Epistle of Peter* (London: SCM, 1954), p. 91; C.E.B. Cranfield, 'The Interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6', *Expository Times*, 69 (September 1958), p. 372; Donald Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology, Volume 2* (San Fransisco: Harper & Row, 1978), pp. 226-28; Clark H. Pinnock, 'The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions', in Mark A. Noll & David F. Wells (eds), *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 165-67; Gabriel Fackre, 'Divine Perseverance', in John Sanders (ed.), *What about Those Who Have Never Heard? Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1995), pp. 71-95; Nigel Wright, *The Radical Evangelical: Seeking a Place to Stand* (London: SPCK, 1996), pp. 99-102.

50 Pinnock, for one, strongly resists identification of each doctrine with the other:, Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), p. 170.

nineteenth century holiness movement—a movement which was steeped in German Pietist thought and peopled by figures with known universalist inclinations. His work was certainly read and discussed by those who attended the landmark Broadlands conferences, which began just after his death, in 1873, and which continued until 1888.

One such attendee was Andrew Jukes (1815-1900). Jukes had been an Anglican clergyman in Hull, but had subsequently joined the Plymouth Brethren. In 1867, he published a book entitled *The Restitution of All Things*, which spurred considerable soteriological controversy. Notably, Jukes cited both Erskine and Law in support of his position.[51] Like Erskine, he disavowed the notion that 'God can only save men through Christ in this present life'. Rather, citing texts such as John 12:24, Romans 6:3-5 and 2 Corinthians 11:12, Jukes construed death not as a 'point of no return' for the impenitent, but as a potential gateway into a new form of life in Christ. Jukes conceded that those impenitent would still undergo judgement: indeed, he averred that this would consign them to the 'lake of fire which is the second death', as described in Revelation 20:14. For Jukes, however, the fire in question was understood as purgatorial rather than either endlessly punitive or terminally destructive.

On this basis, he repudiated both the traditional view of hell and the increasingly popular concept of annihilation for the unredeemed. Furthermore, as a variation on Erskine's post-mortem evangelism, he proposed that in God's restitution of the cosmos, those who have known Christ prior to judgement might, as the 'Firstfruits', minister salvation to those who have not hitherto believed. Jukes had been well regarded by the Brethren for several 'orthodox' works on the Bible, but this somewhat esoteric defence of universalism lost him a great deal of support, and he latterly returned to the Church of England.[52]

Thomas Talbott does not mention Jukes in any of his published defences of universalism; indeed, he cites very few historical precedents for universal salvation from within his own evangelical tradition. An important exception, however, is a novelist and spiritual writer who also became a popular speaker at Broadlands: the Scottish Congregationalist George MacDonald (1824-1905).[53] Talbott pays particular tribute to MacDonald's *Unspoken Sermons*, recognizing in them a template for his own version of universalism.

MacDonald promulgated universal-

51 Andrew Jukes, *The Restitution of All Things*, (W. Knochaven, California: Scripture Studies Concern and Concordant Publishing Concern, 1976 [1867]), p. 190.

52 Jukes, *The Restitution of All Things*.

53 MacDonald travelled to Linlathen especially to meet Erskine, who approved of his work. See letters from Erskine to MacDonald (undated) in Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University: General MSS 103, Box No.2, Folder No.68.

54 Talbott, *The Inescapable Love of God*, pp. 12-15; George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons* (London: Longman, 1886); *Lilith: A Romance* (London: Ballantine, 1971); Rolland Hein, *The Harmony Within: The Spiritual Journey of George MacDonald* (Chicago: Cornerstone Press, 1999).

ism, too, in popular fantasy epics like *Lilith*.[54] He was raised in a strongly Calvinist home, was ordained in 1851, and was linked with various evangelicals throughout his life. Later, he was commended by C.S. Lewis, who did not finally embrace his universalist outlook, but who took the epigraphs for his best-selling books, *The Problem of Pain* and *The Great Divorce* from MacDonald, and who drew extensively from his insights on the last things.[55] Despite all this, it should be noted that MacDonald was dismissed after just two years in pastoral charge for his unorthodox views.[56]

Along with MacDonald, Talbott does also briefly mention the nineteenth century Princeton theologian Charles Hodge (1797-1878).[57] Potentially this is fascinating, for although Hodge was in many respects a classical Calvinist, he applied the Calvinistic principle of unconditional election 'universally' to children who die in infancy. As Hodge saw it, 'The Scriptures nowhere exclude any class of infants, baptised or unbaptized, born in Christian or heathen lands, of believing or unbelieving parents, from the benefits of redemption in Christ.'[58] Indeed, building on the 'private judgements' of the eighteenth century evangelical Anglicans John Newton and Augustus Toplady, Hodge argued that the death of a child in infancy was, *ipso facto*, proof of their inclusion in the 'election of grace'.[59] More specific warrant for this view was adduced by Hodge from Romans 5:18. As he read this text, 'All the descendants of Adam, except Christ, are under condemnation; all the descendants of Adam, except those of whom it is expressly revealed that they cannot inherit the kingdom of God, are saved.'[60]

This position was also adopted by Hodge's protégé, Benjamin B. Warfield (1851-1921). Alongside his combative defences of the Westminster Confession and biblical inerrancy, Warfield echoed Hodge's statements on this matter in an extended essay published in 1897 as 'The Development of the Doctrine of Infant Salvation'.[61] More recently, other Reformed theologians, including Roland Nash and Lorraine Boettner, have expanded on Hodge and Warfield's position, contending that since our final judgement is conducted on the basis not of our sinful *condition* as members of fallen humanity, but on the basis of the sinful *deeds* we commit 'in the body' (2 Cor. 5:10), morally unaware infants cannot be condemned to hell. Indeed, Boettner has concluded strikingly that this in itself ensures that the population of heaven may well

55 C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London: Fount, 1977 [1940]); C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce: A Dream* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1946).

56 Hein, *The Harmony Within*.

57 Talbott, *The Inescapable Love of God*, pp. 60, 77, 119.

58 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), pp. 26-27.

59 Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1*, pp. 26-27. John Newton, *Works, Volume 4* (London, 1808), p.182; Augustus Toplady, *The Works of Augustus Toplady* (London, 1837), pp. 645-46.

60 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), pp.26-27.

61 Benjamin, B. Warfield, 'The Development of the Doctrine of Infant Salvation', in *Two Studies in the History of Doctrine* (New York: Christian Literature Co, 1897), pp. 143-239.

comprise over half of all those who have ever lived (i.e., who have ever been conceived).[62] As it is, Warfield's own paedo-universalism contributed to his suggestion that 'the number of the lost in comparison to the whole number of the saved will be very inconsiderable'.[63]

Oddly, Talbott ignores all this and instead critiques those points in Hodge's more general exegesis of election and salvation which resist his own, unqualified universalism.[64] Yet Hodge's position on infant death ought not to be overlooked in our context, for while it is very specific and limited in its application of universalist principles to one quite particular group, the bases on which it rests could, at least theoretically, be extended to other groups who cannot necessarily express faith in Christ for themselves—for example, those with severe mental disabilities and those who have not had an opportunity to hear the gospel. Nash accepts the former while resisting the latter, but other evangelicals, like Gabriel Fackre and John Sanders, have certainly sought to extrapolate from the 'universal' salvation of infants and the mentally disabled to a radically inclusive view of salvation for godly members of other faiths—if not to the absolute universalism advocated by Talbott.[65]

Evangelicals and Universalism in the Past Century

Possibly the most important conduit of universalistic influence on evangelicals in the past hundred years or so is a scholar who was neither fully aligned with evangelicalism nor finally committed to Talbott's style of dogmatic universalism—namely, Karl Barth (1886-1968).

Evangelical scholars continue to debate the nature and extent of Barth's universalist sympathies, and whether in this sense his thinking on hell and salvation is compatible with an evan-

62 Roland H. Nash, *When a Baby Dies: Answers to Comfort Grieving Parents* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), pp. 60-65; Lorraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1992), pp. 145-46.

63 Benjamin B. Warfield, 'Are They Few That Be Saved?', in *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1952), p. 350. This is also due to Warfield's postmillennial optimism about a major surge of conversions in the generations prior to Christ's return.

64 Talbott, *The Inescapable Love of God*, pp. 60, 77, 119.

65 For a summary of arguments supporting this view, see John Sanders, *No Other Name: Can Only Christians Be Saved?* (London: SPCK, 1992), pp. 61, 70, 206, 231-32, 287-305.

66 For discussion of this debate see John Colwell, 'The Contemporaneity of Divine Decision: reflections on Barth's Denial of "Universalism"', in Nigel de S. Cameron (ed.), *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992), pp. 139-60. See also Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), pp. 97ff.; G.C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), pp 290ff; *Return of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 390; D.G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology (Vol. 2)* (San Francisco: Harper Row, 1979), pp. 224ff.; D.A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), pp. 143-44.

gelical perspective.[66] The debate is a complex one, but centres on an apparent tension in Barth's recasting of the Reformed doctrine of election. Barth is keen to redefine the 'double decree' proposed by John Calvin, whereby God predestines certain individuals to heaven and others to hell. Recognizing the potentially dualistic and 'arbitrary' strains in this view of election, Barth seeks to reconfigure it by focusing not on the eternal fate of particular human persons, but on the redemptive person and work of Jesus Christ.

From the Pauline concept of our being 'in Christ', Barth construes a soteriology in which the Son himself is elected *on our behalf*. As the universal 'elected man', his election is at once both an election to damnation (as he is accursed for us on the cross) and to eternal life (as his death makes atonement for the sin of the cosmos and as he is raised to glory). By concentrating divine damnation on the cross in this way, Barth argues that what appears to be God's reprobation is in fact an act of 'rejecting love'. Moreover, being divine, this act is so pervasive in its effect that there is no 'hiding' from it: all are implicated in the redemption it achieves:

> For in [God's] union with this one man [Jesus Christ] He has shown His love to all and His solidarity with all. In this One He has taken upon Himself the sin and guilt of all, and therefore rescued them all by higher right from the judgment which they had rightly incurred, so that He is really the true consolation of all. In Him He is our Helper and Deliverer in the midst of death. For in the death of this One it has taken place that all we who had incurred death by our sin and guilt have been released from death as He became a Sinner and Debtor in our place, accepting the penalty and paying the debt.[67]

While this undoubtedly looks like universalism, it must be understood in terms of an ontic or 'objective' change which still calls for noetic uptake—that is, a response of faith. What is either unclear, or so complexly wrought that it has appeared unclear to many evangelicals since, is the extent to which Barth understands this faith-response to be decisive in *effecting*, rather than merely *disclosing*, divine salvation for any particular person.

Given the cosmic scope of election 'in Christ', Barth is mostly reluctant to envisage the possibility that anyone might either reject it or be rejected from it. At certain points, however, he does appear to countenance such rejection on the grounds that God's all-encompassing love must be a love that liberates people to isolate themselves from his reach if they are insistent on so doing.[68] As Barth sums it up: 'To the man who persistently tries to change the truth into untruth, God does not owe eternal patience and therefore deliverance.' The doctrine of final restitution, or *apokatastasis*, may have appeal in terms of 'theological consis-

67 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.2*, Trans. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), p. 613.

68 Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.2*, pp.186ff., 602-40. For more detail on this see Colwell, 'Divine Decision', pp. 146-60.

tency', but to insist upon it is, for Barth, to risk 'arrogating to ourselves that which can be given and received only as a free gift'.[69]

As Roger Olson notes, Barth has particularly influenced 'self-identified progressive evangelicals who reject fundamentalism and liberal theology', and who have found in the Swiss theologian a way through the Scylla and Charybdis which they perceive these two modes of thought to represent.[70] Prominent among the first wave of these 'progressive' evangelicals were Bernard Ramm (1916-92) and Donald Bloesch (1928-).

A conservative Baptist, Ramm spent a sabbatical year under Barth at Basel in 1957-58 and thereafter sought to assimilate his insights into a self-consciously evangelical framework.[71] While upholding not only the reality of hell, but also the validity of preaching it from time to time,[72] Ramm's absorption of Barth nevertheless clearly prompted him to shift from the traditional emphasis placed on damnation by evangelicals:

> Every sensitive evangelical is a universalist at heart. He agrees with Peter when he wrote that 'the Lord…is not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance' (2 Pet. 3:9). In perhaps that passage of Scripture which represents the sovereignty of God the strongest—Romans 9—God's attitude towards Pharaoh is that he endured him with much patience (Rom. 9:22). The idea that God is as much glorified by the damnation of the lost as by the salvation of the saints as held by some Calvinists is hard to reconcile with Ezekiel 18:23: 'Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?' No person on the face of the earth wants everybody in heaven more than an evangelical. Only an evangelical really knows in depth the meaning of sin, the wrath of God, the reconciliation of the cross, the victory of the resurrection, the tragedy of judgment, and the glory of the New Jerusalem. Every person who fails of this final beatitude can only be of pain to him.[73]

Ramm's implication that hell awaits only those who persistently resist God's call is reflected and intensified in the work of Bloesch. Schooled in Reformed and Lutheran Pietism by a father who ministered in the German evangelical Church at Bremen, Indi-

69 Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV*.3, Trans. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), p. 477.

70 Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1999), p. 589.

71 For a biography and review of Ramm's work, and a discussion of the influence of Barth on his thought, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'Bernard Ramm', in Walter A. Elwell (ed.), *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), pp. 290-306. Also Millard J. Erickson, *The Evangelical Left: Encountering Postconservative Evangelical Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997), pp. 23-28.

72 Bernard Ramm, *The Evangelical Heritage: A Study in Historical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1973), p. 72.

73 Ramm, *The Evangelical Heritage*, pp. 136-37.

ana, Bloesch was later profoundly shaped by Barth's thinking while studying at Chicago Theological Seminary in the 1950s. He has since projected Barth's soteriological optimism beyond the grave, into post-mortem evangelization, and even into a qualified form of restitutionism:

> We do not wish to put fences around God's grace…and we do not preclude the possibility that some in hell might finally be translated to heaven. The gates of the holy city are depicted as being open day and night (Isa. 60:11; Rev. 21:25), and this means that open access to the throne of grace is possible continuously. The gates of hell are locked, but they are locked from within…Hell is not outside the compass of God's mercy nor the spheres of his kingdom, and in this sense we call it the last refuge of the sinner. Edward Pusey voices our own sentiments: 'We know absolutely nothing of the proportion of the saved to the lost or who will be lost; but this we *do* know, that none will be lost, who do not obstinately to the end and in the end refuse God'.[74]

Another American theologian from the evangelical Reformed community who has argued for the salvation of all but those who intentionally and finally reject God, is Neal Punt. In a series of studies beginning with his 1980 volume *Unconditional Good News,* and continuing through *What's Good about the Good News?* (1988) to *So Also in Christ* (2002), Punt has set out a case for what he calls 'biblical universalism'. Central to this case is Punt's contention that all persons are elect in Christ except those whom the Bible explicitly confirms will be eternally lost—namely, those who consistently repudiate or maintain conscious indifference towards God's revelation of himself in gospel presentation, in creation or in the witness of conscience.[75] In Punt's terms, 'For those who are finally lost, the Bible reveals no other cause than their own wilful, persistent unbelief and sin. For those who are saved, it is God alone who graciously, sovereignly elects and saves them.'[76]

Hence for Punt, election to salvation remains unconditional and by grace alone, as in classical Calvinism; but eternal condemnation is recast as conditional upon sinners' wicked works. In other words, humans cannot earn their salvation—but some humans do earn their damnation. Like Hodge and Nash, Punt dismisses as unscriptural the concept that anyone is destined to hell solely because of their solidarity with Adam, and the original sin which accrues from that solidarity. Rather, he argues, they fail to 'inherit the kingdom' on the basis of their own 'actual, wilful and persistent sin' (cf. 1

74 Donald Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology Vol. 2* (San Fransisco: Harper, 1979), pp. 226-28. For another 'progressive' evangelical similarly influenced by Barth, see Richard Quebedeaux, *The Worldly Evangelicals* (San Fransisco/London, 1978), p. 152

75 Neal Punt, *So Also in Christ: Reviewing the Plan of Salvation* (Northland Books, 2002), p. 83.

76 Neal Punt, *What's Good about the Good News? The Plan of Salvation in a New Light* (Northland Books, 1988), p. 44.

Cor. 6:9-10; Rev. 22:15).[77]

Punt's thesis is perhaps weakest in the area that concerns Talbott most: the area of theodicy. Specifically, he appears to leave unresolved the *inevitability* or otherwise of the persistent, wilful sinning committed by persistent, wilful sinners. Is such sinning chosen purely by those few who in doing so deliberately forfeit the election to heaven they once shared with everyone else on the basis of Christ's 'universal' redemption? Or is such sinning foreknown, and/or foreordained by God? Punt stresses that 'no one conceived and born in sin has the capacity within himself or herself to choose the good', but maintains, in true Reformed fashion, that goodness is imputed by Christ.[78] Yet the logical consequence of his position is that this imputation must either be ineffective in the case of those who finally reject God, or else actively withheld from them by God in the first place. Either option presents a considerable moral problem for a system which claims to be so thoroughgoing in its assurance of 'good news'.

A somewhat different universalist apologia appears in the Dutch Reformed scholar Jan Bonda's magnum opus, *The One Purpose of God*, published by Eerdmans in 1993.[79] Bonda bases his position on a close exegesis of Paul's Letter to the Romans. For example, chapter 3:29-30 of the epistle is interpreted as confirming that God means to save all people—not just those who believe, but all Jews and all Gentiles. The final salvation of Israel, which Bonda infers particularly from chapter 11 and takes to include Jews who refuse the gospel, is, he says, a clear indication of God's universalistic purpose for the world as a whole. Hence the 'coming of the kingdom' in the New Testament is applied to the time when God will draw all—dead and alive—back to himself. Bonda readily concedes the same problems of human freedom and salvation with which Talbott grapples, but unlike Talbott, is thereby led towards a hopeful, rather than an absolute universalism—one based on a general rather than a 'limited' model of atonement.

Just as Bonda develops his universalism from a particular text of Scripture, so with the growth of systematic universalist theologies across various traditions in recent years, evangelical biblical scholars have been led to reinvestigate the key verses cited in defence of the view that all will be saved. The majority of such evangelical exegetes, from N.T Wright to I. Howard Marshall, have ended such investigations by reaffirming the traditional distinction between the salvation of some to eternal life and the condemnation of others to hell.[80] A few, however, have been persuaded that certain texts do genuinely point in a

77 Punt, *So Also in Christ*, p. 83.

78 Punt, *So Also in Christ*, pp. 60-61.

79 Jan Bonda, *The One Purpose of God: An Answer to the Doctrine of Eternal Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

80 N.T. Wright, 'Towards a Biblical View of Universalism', *Themelios* 4:2 (January 1979), pp. 55-58; Ian Howard Marshall, 'Does the New Testament Teach Universal Salvation?' in John Colwell (ed.), *Called to One Hope: Perspectives on the Life to Come* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), pp. 17-30.

universalist direction.

Writing for broadly evangelical publishers like Word and Baker Books, Andrew Lincoln has inclined towards the view expressed so firmly by Talbott, that the Pauline texts most often cited in defence of the universalist position—Ephesians 1:10, Romans 5:18 and 1 Corinthians 15:22-28—do, in fact, envisage a universal salvation.[81] Similarly, Richard Bell—a New Testament scholar in the evangelical Anglican tradition—has developed his earlier Pauline studies to argue in a recent paper on Romans 5:18-19 that since Paul believes all human beings participate both in Adam's sin and in Christ's 'righteous act', a universal salvation is affirmed there.[82] This is, claims Bell, 'the natural reading of the text and the context supports it'.[83]

Indeed, Bell goes on to suggest that these two verses do not bear an isolated witness to universalism: as he puts it, '2 Cor. 5:19 speaks of God being in Christ, reconciling the world to himself [and] Phil. 2:11 says every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.'[84] Bell concedes, however, that such universalist teaching is 'clearly at variance' with other parts of Romans—most notably 11:25-32, which implies the condemnation of at least some Gentiles, even while affirming a full salvation of Jews.[85]

In attempting to explain and resolve this difference, Bell suggests that Romans 5 offers an a-temporal, mythical representation of the reconciling act of Christ, whereas Romans 9-11 is more immediately focused on the historical contingencies of Paul's missionary project. Hence, while the earlier text assumes the perspective of eternity, in which God will eventually reconcile all people and all things to himself, the later text is seeking to account for the fact that some of the Gentiles to whom Paul has been sent are *currently* rejecting his message, and is not occupied by whether or not they might eventually be saved:

> …Rom. 9-11 is concerned with the bringing of the reconciling word to human beings through the mission of the Church: Rom. 10:8 speaks of the word which creates faith…and 10:14-18 is about the necessity of bringing the gospel to Jews and Gentiles… Rom. 5:18-19, on the other hand, has as its central focus the reconciling act of Christ (and the act of Adam which brought enmity between God and man). And Paul in speaking of this reconciling

81 Andrew Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet: Studies in the Role of the Heavenly Dimension in Paul's Thought, With Special Reference to His Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991) [Originally Cambridge University Press, 1981]; *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary 42 (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), pp. 32-44. See also, Andrew Lincoln and A.J.M. Wedderburn, *The Theology of the Later Pauline Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

82 Richard Bell, 'Rom. 5:18-19 and Universal Salvation', *New Testament Studies*, 48 (2002), p. 417.

83 Bell, 'Rom. 5:18-19 and Universal Salvation', p. 427.

84 Bell, 'Rom. 5:18-19 and Universal Salvation', p. 429.

85 Bell, 'Rom. 5:18-19 and Universal Salvation', p. 430.

> act of Christ which brings justification for all does not trouble himself here with the problem as to how the reconciling word is actually brought to human beings. Again, his perspective is mythical rather than historical.[86]

If all this is evidence that certain reaches of evangelical scholarship may be edging towards universalism, it also recalls the central problem which I raised at the beginning of this paper, and which must attend any account of 'evangelical universalism'—namely that for most evangelicals, and for many non-evangelicals besides, the very concept itself is an oxymoron. However conservative a person's background and theological formation has been, the historic evangelical norm is that once that person embraces universalism, he or she *de facto* forfeits any authentic claim to the description 'evangelical'. The same outlook also tends to hold that however orthodox someone may be in other areas, affirming universalism effectively cancels out their evangelical credit, and leaves them short of the doctrinal standard required to belong to the evangelical constituency. In this sense, while those we have cited as 'evangelical universalists' may be defined as evangelicals *historically* and *socio-culturally* in relation to their background, education and church allegiance, many would argue that they cannot be regarded as evangelical in a *theological* sense once they have advocated universalism.

We have already mentioned that while Strange shows modern-day evangelicals adopting a range of positions on the fate of the unevangelized—from restrictivism through universal opportunity and inclusivism to post-mortem evangelism—he reports that universalism has no recognized place within evangelicalism's bounds. In this, he is undoubtedly reflecting a broad consensus—a consensus underlined by Gregory Boyd and Paul Eddy's recent study, *Across the Spectrum: Issues in Evangelical Theology*. Boyd and Eddy also list evangelical proponents of views stretching from restrictivism to post-mortem salvation, but implicitly bracket universalism off with that pluralism which sees all religions leading to God, and which, as far as they know, is 'universally rejected by evangelical Christians'.[87]

In 2000, the UK Evangelical Alliance's report *The Nature of Hell* acknowledged the possibility of salvation for at least some who have not heard the gospel, and while finding 'no convincing warrant in Scripture' for post-mortem regeneration, did at least recognize certain advocates of it to be genuine evangelicals.[88] However, when it came to universalism, the verdict was far harsher—it was not only 'divergent from authentic evangelical faith', but would seriously undermine the integrity of any evangelical who

86 Bell, Richard, 'Rom. 5:18-19 and Universal Salvation', p. 431.

87 Gregory A. Boyd and Paul R. Eddy, *Across the Spectrum: Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), p. 179. Discussion of 'The Destiny of the Unevangelized Debate' as a whole is on pp. 178-92.

88 Hilborn and Johnston, *The Nature of Hell*, pp. 89-92.

advocated it while claiming still to be an evangelical.[89] The key reasons given for this assessment echoed numerous critiques of universalism offered by evangelicals down the years: it trivialises the radical sinfulness of fallen humanity, and plays down the penalties due for such sin; it compromises morality by denying that good or evil choices make any ultimate difference, and undermines the missionary mandate of Christ by implying that evangelism and conversion are incidental to salvation.[90]

The Alliance report did envisage that some of those evangelical theologians who had embraced 'wider hope' and 'post-mortem' models might in time move further, towards outright universalism.[91] But such a prospect was hardly welcomed. Indeed, it was viewed with a concern similar to that expressed by Millard Erickson seven years previously, when he had suggested that the more radical evangelical soteriologies of John Sanders, Gabriel Fackre, Clark Pinnock and others might become routes through which universalism could pass into evangelical terrain.[92]

As things stand, however, it needs to be stressed that Sanders, Fackre and Pinnock themselves remain opposed to universalism. No doubt Sanders takes a very optimistic view of the population of heaven, and envisages various means other than explicit faith in Christ by which people can be saved, but he finally excludes the universalist position as unbiblical, and thus, unevangelical—albeit 'with regret'.[93] Fackre may advocate post-mortem evangelism, but he dismisses universalism on the basis that even when faced with the risen Christ after death, some may choose to reject him.[94] Likewise, Pinnock maintains from his ultra-Arminian perspective that 'universal salvation is implausible chiefly because God takes no for an answer'.[95]

Despite all this, the review which we have conducted here confirms that determining whether anyone might be defined as a *bona fide* 'evangelical universalist' depends as much on what is meant by the term 'universalist' in any particular instance, as on what is meant by the term 'evangelical'. A little before attesting that he knows of no published evangelical who has embraced universalism, Daniel Strange tellingly writes: 'I do not believe that "universalism" can be a credible option for evangelicals of

89 Hilborn and Johnston, *The Nature of Hell*, pp. 32, 131.

90 Hilborn and Johnston, *The Nature of Hell*, p.31; cf. Edwin Blum, 'Shall You Not Surely Die?', *Themelios*, 4:2 (1979), pp. 58-61.

91 Hilborn and Johnston, *The Nature of Hell*, p. 34.

92 Millard J. Erickson, *The Evangelical Mind and Heart; Perspectives on Theological and Practical Issues*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), pp. 150-52.

93 John Sanders, *No Other Name? Can Only Christians Be Saved?* (London: SPCK, 1994), pp. 106-115.

94 Gabriel Fackre, 'Divine Perseverance', in John Sanders (ed.), *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1995), p. 95.

95 Clark H. Pinnock and Robert C. Brow, *Unbounded Love: A Good News Theology for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), p. 89.

whatever background'. He then adds that 'any serious evangelical theologian whose ultimate authority is Scripture, cannot ignore the clear passages which refer to the reality of judgement and hell and the prophetic element which declares that some will never come to repentance'.[96] Hence, when Strange posits his apparently unoccupied category of 'evangelical universalists', he is in fact positing something which, on his very own terms, is at best an abstraction and at worst an impossibility, since to advocate universalism is from his perspective to deny evangelicalism—or at least to present evangelicalism in an 'incredible' or 'non-serious' way.

Strange does at least implicitly concede that not all universalisms are of the 'dogmatic' sort represented by Talbott: he defines Barth, for instance, as a 'quasi-universalist'.[97] Yet since Strange also asserts that any 'quasi-universalism' which strongly hopes that all will be saved also 'goes against too much biblical evidence to the contrary', it is unclear from his viewpoint which, if any, of the various more subtle gradations of universalism we have surveyed here, might still be deemed 'evangelical'.

Would T.R. Birks' palliative semi-restitutionism qualify? Significantly, while he resigned as an Honorary Secretary of the Evangelical Alliance, he was maintained on the Alliance's membership roll. What of Andrew Jukes, who wrote many other 'sound' volumes as a member of the Brethren, and even in *The Restitution of All Things* maintained a place for divine condemnation, hellfire, protracted punishment and the 'second death', albeit as means to *apokatastasis* rather than eternal reprobation? What of Punt's 'biblical universalism', which Strange does not mention, but which is clearly far from absolute, and which on his criteria probably would not even pass as 'quasi-universalist'?

And what of those—implicitly recognized by Strange when he claims that no *published* evangelicals have embraced universalism—who have yet done so in their lectures, seminars, sermons, dialogues and correspondence? What of Bengel? What of Alexander Mack and the Brethren? What, come to that, of the Scots Congregationalist theologian P.T. Forsyth (1848-1921), whom increasing numbers of evangelicals are claiming as an ally, but who appears at a single place in the whole canon of his work to flirt with the possibility of a final restitution?[98] And what of those several present-day evangelical figures who were identified to me in the course of researching this article as known universalists, but who

96 Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation*, p. 31.

97 Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation*, pp. 31-32.

98 P.T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God* (London: Independent Press, 1957 [1916]), p. 161. Elsewhere, however, Forsyth suggests that this possibility must be left unresolved: *The Work of Christ* (London: Collins, 1965), p. 161. For commentary on this matter, compare, C.S. Duthie, 'Ultimate Triumph', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 14 (1961), p 161; A.M. Hunter, *P.T. Forsyth: Per Crucem ad Lucem* (London: SCM, 1974), pp. 117-24; Ian Howard Marshall, 'Does the New Testament Teach Universal Salvation?', in Colwell (ed.), *Called to One Hope: Perspectives on the Life to Come* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), p. 24-25, n.14.

have yet to declare it formally? Such questions go to the heart of what it means to be an evangelical—and are likely to become more acute if current radical evangelical models of inclusivism, post-mortem evangelism and semi-restitution move closer to universalist soteriologies, as they may well do in the next generation or so.

And what, finally, of Talbott himself? We noted at the outset that his convinced absolutist universalism, and his personal ambivalence about whether he is termed a 'true evangelical' or not, make him a less than obvious model for current universalising trends within evangelicalism. Having said this, his clear regard for Scripture, his focus on personal salvation, and the fact that he has debated his universalist position substantially with evangelical scholars like John Piper, William Lane Craig and those contributing to the book from which this present paper is drawn, suggests that the question of whether that position has antecedents *of any sort* among those who have operated as self-conscious, intentional and persistent members of the evangelical community, is a question which it is both valid and useful to address.

In seeking to answer it, we have seen that while universalism is both multi-faceted and particularly hard to discern among evangelicals, some in the past and present evangelical community have clearly been informed and influenced by it. Thus, insofar as Talbott can in any sense still be counted a member of this community, he stands out not because he is the first to have assimilated universalist ideas, but because, as part of a scholarly discourse which is still perceptibly evangelical, he has done so in such an unconditional, unqualified and explicit a way.