

Choosing Hell: A Lutheran View of Free Will

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The existence of hell is, for most Christians, an article of faith. Scripture and tradition leave little ambiguity with regard to a place of eternal anguish, one that is populated by those that have made a free, conscious choice for separation from God. Hell is an existential reality even among Christian universalists, who maintain that despite the certainty of hell, all persons will experience salvation due to the irresistible and gracious will of God.¹ The point at issue is free will. Universalists view the freedom of “choice” for hell over heaven as logically incoherent. How, they argue, can persons who repent under the duress of some forcibly imposed punishment be said to have made the choice freely? Opponents of universalism respond that some persons choose to be irrational and dispute even basic laws of logic. Scripture and experience point to continued human rebellion in the face of punishment or threats of punishment.²

I maintain that the universalist position is fatally flawed since it erroneously states that the person who is liberated from ignorance will choose God’s gracious offer of salvation infallibly. Philosophers refer to the distinction between *compatibilist* freedom and *libertarian* freedom. A choice made in a compatibilist sense is made on the basis of judgments about what is best, independent of coercion. Choices of this kind are compatible with choices determined by prior conditions, and thus *could not have been otherwise*. Libertarian free choices, conversely, are such only if it is possible for the person to have chosen otherwise. For universalists, the only choice available to them comes from the libertarian position. Ironically, and contrary to their assumptions, they could not have done otherwise than to accept God’s offer of salvation, since they could not make a free, libertarian decision. In this paper I will examine the work of the Christian universalist Thomas Talbott in some detail, offer a critique of his libertarian free will position, and then present a logical alternative, namely the Lutheran compatibilist theory.

FREE WILL AND CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALISM: THOMAS TALBOTT

Thomas Talbott is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Willamette University and has offered cogent apologies for Christian universalism, primarily before his retirement in 2006. In his work *The Inescapable Love of God*, Talbott asserts that God’s primary directive

in the created order is redeeming sinners, reconciling to himself those who have fallen into the grip of moral corruption. Most, if not all, Christians share Talbott’s view.³ The differences, however, are found over the relative success of God’s salvific endeavor. Talbott organizes his thinking using a set of three propositions:

1. It is God’s redemptive purpose for the world (and therefore his will) to reconcile all sinners to himself;
2. It is within God’s power to achieve his redemptive purposes for the world;
3. Some sinners will never be reconciled to God, and God will therefore either consign them to a place of eternal punishment, from which there will be no hope of escape, or put them out of existence altogether.⁴

Regardless of theological convictions, at least one of the propositions must be false. Moreover, each of the propositions appears to have some degree of scriptural support. In defense of Proposition 1, one draws attention to those passages that speak clearly of God’s gracious desire to reconcile all persons without exception, and that failure would be a tragic defeat on his part (2 Pet 3:9; 1 Tim 2:4; Rom 11:32; Ezek 33:11; Lam 3:22, 31-33). Proposition 2 is supported by those texts that imply that God is able to accomplish all of his divine purposes, subsume all things under Christ, and by this same Christ gain acquittal and life for all who trust in him (Eph 1:11; Job 42:2; Ps 115:3; Isa 46:10; 1 Cor 15:27-28; Col 1:20; Rom 5:18). Lastly, Proposition 3 is underlined by Scripture passages that imply that at least some persons are lost and will be forever separated from God in hell (Matt 25:46; Eph 5:5; 2 Thess 1:9).⁵ That each proposition has biblical support means that none of them may be discounted due to poor textual attestation, and thus at least one of them must be false.

This paradigm leads Talbott to conclude that much can be known about various Christian theologies by examining which propositions they finally reject. A theologian can show affinity for two of the propositions, but ignore or equivocate on the third. Another may be perfectly comfortable with propositions 1 and 2, and maddeningly circumspect on proposition 3, averring that the ultimate fate of the wicked is an outcome that is known to the Heavenly Father alone. Still another may reject proposition 1—God seeks to reconcile all sinners without exception to himself—outright, while making a concerted effort to prove that God possesses not only the desire to save, but also

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¹ Gregory MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 9-34; Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 44-47.

² Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 52-65.

³ John Sanders, *No Other Name* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 11-34.

⁴ Thomas Talbott, *Inescapable Love of God* (Salem: Universal Publishers, 2002), 43.

⁵ Talbott, *Inescapable Love of God*, 43-56.

that he, in some clandestine manner, offers salvation to everyone equally.⁶

Talbott identifies three distinct schools of modern Christian thought whose tenets require special attention. The Augustinians (whom some have deemed Calvinists) accept propositions 2 and 3, but in the end reject the idea of proposition 1, God's desire to save all of humankind. The Arminians, named for Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609), who oppose the Calvinist doctrines of limited atonement and (double) predestination, reject proposition 2. Universalists, those who believe all persons are eternal recipients of the grace of God, reject proposition 3 because they accept without reservation propositions 1 and 2.

Consideration of the propositions brings into focus the seeming futility of debate from differing theological frameworks. For example, for Arminians and universalists, the Augustinians are ignoring the clear biblical teaching that God wills the salvation of all persons. To Augustinians and universalists, the Arminians have come to the false conclusion that God is not almighty and thus some of His divine redemptive purposes can be contravened. Lastly, the claim of Arminians and Augustinians against universalism is the latter's rejection of the plain meaning of Scripture concerning the existence and irrefutable nature of eternal punishment in hell.

Is Christian universalism a heretical position? Talbott responds by claiming that Arminians, Augustinians, and universalists each may claim the support of Scripture for their respective positions. How then, Talbott wonders, could universalism be deemed heretical if it enjoys biblical attestation similar to others?

If it is not heretical for the Arminians to believe that God, being unlimited in love, at least wills (or sincerely desires) the salvation of all (proposition [1]), why should it be heretical for the universalists to believe this as well? And if it is not heretical for the Augustinians to believe that God, being almighty, will in the end accomplish all of his redemptive purposes (proposition [2]), why should it be heretical for the universalists to believe this as well? And finally, if it is not heretical to accept proposition (1), as the Arminians do, and not heretical to accept proposition (2), as the Augustinians do, why should it be heretical to accept both (1) and (2)?⁷

These considerations lead Talbott to pose a second question to those who would deny his universalist doctrine. Talbott raises the case of the evangelical Christian mother whose son is found guilty of several grisly murders and is sentenced to death for his crimes. The mother is asked if she still supports her son, given the monster he has become. The mother is shocked by the question: "Of course I still support him. He is my son. I love him. I have to support him!"⁸ The mother in no way condones her son's violent, anti-social behavior, or objects even to the pronouncement of capital punishment. Yet she continues not only to support her son in every way possible, but also to hope for his ultimate reconciliation with God. Talbott asks the poignant question: "How

could God's grace possibly reach this suffering mother unless it should also find a way to reach (or transform) her son?"⁹

Holy Scripture describes heaven as the place where God will wipe every tear from our eyes (Rev 21:4). It is also a place where there is no more pain, sorrow, suffering, or death. Those in heaven will have no worries or fears. So, Talbott wonders, how could someone fully enjoy the blessings of heaven with the knowledge that one or more of their loved ones are suffering eternally in hell? If human beings are to love their neighbor as they love themselves, they could not remain unaffected by a family member or friend coming to a bad end. Talbott is unconvinced by what he deems a "standard" Christian response, that God in his mercy obliterates all knowledge of lost persons from memory so that the heaven-bound need not suffer worry and thereby lose their perfect, future happiness.¹⁰ For Talbott, this assertion of admittedly well-meaning Christians is diametrically opposed to the assurance of Jesus Christ that in the Resurrection we shall "know the truth, and the truth will set us free" (John 8:32).

The upshot of Talbott's considerations is his bold contention that if Augustinianism or Arminianism is accepted, then the only logical conclusion is that those who spend eternity in hell must have made a conscious choice to end up there. Talbott's uncritical understanding of God's love for humankind is crucial here. In Talbott's opinion, if God is shown to love all persons deeply and consistently, the view that one may "choose" to reside in hell eternally is incoherent. For one to choose hell the choice must be fully informed and without ambiguity, the person must attain what he or she desires, and as a result must never, at any time in the future, regret the choice. In other words, the chooser must be free from ignorance and delusion at the time the choice is made and forever afterward. Jerry Walls writes, "Talbott thinks there is an obvious and important asymmetry between choosing fellowship with God as an eternal destiny, on the one hand, and choosing hell as an eternal destiny, on the other. Whereas the first of these obviously is possible, the latter is not."¹¹

That one should "prefer" forcibly imposed, eternal punishment, and freely choose it without coercion is, for Talbott, incomprehensible. "For how could a decision to live apart from God survive without regret a full disclosure of truth about the chosen destiny?"¹² Talbott suggests that the prospect of spending eternity in a place of such malignant suffering, particularly if it could be avoided simply by exercising a different choice, would cause even the most recalcitrant sinner to repent and "believe." Moreover, such a choice for God would do nothing to alter the status of their free will. All sinners, by virtue of their desire to avoid eternal torment, must in the end renounce their selfishness and happily accept God's free offer of everlasting bliss.

When he has been asked to defend his position, Talbott has argued that the choices to which he refers are free in the libertarian interpretation of freedom. There are two key claims that must be perceived and understood:

- (1) A person S performs an action A freely at some time *t* only if it should also be within S's power at *t* to refrain from A at *t*, and

⁶ Thomas Talbott, "Towards a Better Understanding of Universalism" in *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate*, ed. Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Partridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 6-13.

⁷ Talbott, "Towards a Better Understanding of Universalism," 11.

⁸ Thomas Talbott, "Christ Victorious" in *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate*, 16.

⁹ Talbott, "Christ Victorious," 16.

¹⁰ Talbott, *Inescapable Love of God*, 81-106.

¹¹ Jerry Walls, "A Philosophical Critique of Talbott's Universalism" in *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate*, 110.

¹² Thomas Talbott, "Freedom, Damnation, and the Power to Sin with Impunity" in *Religious Studies* 37, 420.

- (2) It is within S's power at t to refrain from A at t only if refraining from A at t is psychologically possible for S at t .¹³

Here we find Talbott expressing reservations over unlimited libertarian freedom. There is no necessary connection between possessing the power to accomplish something and being psychologically capable of it at the same instant. Augustine contended that the redeemed in heaven are no longer tempted to do what is evil in the sight of God.¹⁴ They see with unflinching clarity that God is the source of their happiness and joy, and sin is the nexus of all that is miserable and deadly. Thus the "choice" for hell is no longer a psychological possibility for them. But, Talbott continues, it does not follow that the redeemed no longer possess the power to sin—it has simply become psychologically unfeasible.¹⁵

So imagine now a person S in a state of prolonged misery or suffering or sadness, such as one might experience in hell as traditionally conceived; imagine also that S knows *all* the relevant facts about the source of S's own misery. Given that all of S's ignorance has now been removed and all of S's illusions have finally been shattered, what possible motive might remain for embracing such eternal misery freely?¹⁶

RESPONDING TO TALBOTT'S UNIVERSALISM

It must be allowed that Talbott's arguments are cogent and relatively compelling. He has almost single-handedly advanced interest and scholarship pertaining to eternal salvation or damnation. Talbott's primary directive is not the overthrow of historic Christianity, but rather a reformulation of doctrine that grants primacy to God's gracious will to bring about the salvation of all persons. This is a laudable goal, particularly because he does not simply assert that all will be saved, but rather offers a methodological summary of how such universal salvation might be accomplished. Nevertheless, Talbott cannot be credited with an unimpeachable thesis, as the following critique will show.

Talbott may be best described as a "free will libertarian." As such, he is correct to assert that God intends to bring all persons into eternal union with himself and never predestines persons to hell, which is the erroneous Calvinist doctrine of "double predestination." Talbott's universalism is diametrically opposed to the aptly named "restrictivism," which contends that salvation is restricted to those that hear the gospel message of Jesus Christ and accept it by faith during their lifetimes. Restrictivism implies that the majority of persons are headed to damnation, and severely limits God's expressions of love directed to them.¹⁷ Given that restrictivism makes

salvation extremely difficult to attain, universalism is a more attractive option for the evangelically-minded.

Talbott's program, however, is not without error. Talbott challenges the notion that the redeemed in heaven will not be concerned with family members and friends suffering in hell. John Sanders, writing in response to Talbott's universalism, grants that the various human relationships he has nurtured are deeply connected to his identity. He wonders what, for example, "God may have to do in heaven to my memory of my life with my wife."¹⁸ If God can accomplish individual salvation, why can he not bring about salvation universally, particularly in the case of the loved one of a member of the elect? The trouble with this view is that the grief experienced by the eternal death of a loved one is inherently personal—it is limited to something missed by the individual. The source of personal grief is tied to the fact that an individual's personal life is altered permanently. According to Sanders, Talbott errs by assuming that he will necessarily possess all memories and connections to his reality after he is taken up into union with the Father. This is a mistaken presupposition, since in the course of a lifetime relationships change repeatedly, often with the result of tremendous loss. We are never, however, concerned that those changes will be somehow carried over in their essential characters into eternity. "If God can bring about such changes in me that I do not grieve over very important changes in my relationships, then it is also possible that God can bring it about that I would not be eternally miserable if someone I loved rejected God's love."¹⁹

In his essay "Freedom, Damnation and the Power to Sin with Impunity," Talbott states that he affirms free will libertarianism, the ability to do otherwise than was done at some point in time. This free will, however, does not carry with it the possibility that in those instances that we do as we should there was an equal chance that we could have chosen to do wrongly. Talbott maintains that if such were the case, God could not be said to act freely since by definition God is never free to do wrong.²⁰ Along a similar line Alvin Plantinga reasons that God has libertarian free will in many areas, such as in the creation of a particular number of feline species, but lacks what he calls a "morally significant freedom" to do evil.²¹ Applying this logic to humanity, it may be argued that we, in our libertarian free will, "ask" God to purify us in such a manner that the free will to do evil is removed from us. In any case, Talbott is exercising inappropriate license when he claims that humanity has libertarian free will in all things other than salvation. It is sophistry to aver that human beings lack the freedom to reject God on a permanent basis. Talbott attempts to alleviate the threat of attack by claiming his free will libertarianism applies only to the final judgment, when, he says, humanity may no longer choose to reject God's grace and do what is evil.²²

Unlike his methodology, Talbott's eschatology displays a remarkable lack of nuance. He is, correctly, in agreement with Augustine that the will of God cannot be defeated. Yet he fails to acknowledge that God does not "fail" in specific situations if particular

¹³ Talbott, "Freedom, Damnation and the Power to Sin with Impunity," 426.

¹⁴ John Sanders, "Historical Considerations," in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 80-85.

¹⁵ Talbott, "On the Divine Nature and the Nature of Divine Freedom" in *Faith and Philosophy* 5:1 (1988), 13.

¹⁶ Talbott, "Freedom, Damnation, and the Power to Sin with Impunity," 423.

¹⁷ Sanders, *No Other Name*, 37-79.

¹⁸ Sanders, "A Freewill Theist's Response to Talbott's Universalism" in *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate*, 172.

¹⁹ Sanders, "A Freewill Theist's Response to Talbott's Universalism," 172.

²⁰ Some have suggested that God does indeed have libertarian free will to do wrong, but freely chooses not to do so. S. Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 86-96.

²¹ Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980).

²² Talbott, "Christ Victorious," 22-25.

persons decide to disobey him. With respect to his ultimate purpose and design, God never fails. God chose, in his perfect love and forbearance, to grant human beings libertarian free will. He created the mechanism by which humanity could experience his grace and mercy and freely respond to it, fully realizing that we may not reciprocate. Sanders calls this “the risk God was willing to take.”²³ God was willing to be vulnerable, to have his will defeated from moment to moment by those whom he created. The evil that occurs at every moment is most certainly contrary to the will of God, but God’s ultimate purpose will not be defeated because of it. Talbott believes that in placing salvation outside the locus of free will God is protecting himself from vulnerability and failure. The heart of the Incarnation, however, is the grace-filled and merciful God leaving himself open to being despised, rejected, and crucified, in order that no child is left behind. He grieves when his children choose a different path, but he is never defeated by their choice.

The criteria Talbott establishes for fully free and rational choice are also ill-conceived. First he maintains that a free choice must be informed to the point that no ignorance of the consequences of the choice remain. Human beings must be completely apprised of the implications of their decision for damnation or salvation. Second, no amount of deception may be tolerated, for deception clouds the truth, and if we do not have the entirety of the facts, we cannot be held responsible for a “poor” decision. Third, God must, in a manner unknown to the sinner, remove any trace of sinful desire and impart a moral purity that manifests itself with good and pure decisions. In other words, Talbott is proposing that we must be remade in God’s image to the degree that we are “like” God, indistinguishable from him.²⁴

Given Talbott’s rejection of the theory that God selectively obliterates portions of memory, his criteria for fully free choice are disingenuous at best. Scripture denies that anyone is righteous, so the person to which Talbott refers—fully informed, wise, and pure—will not be found. In fact, if such a transformation does indeed take place, how can the decision of that human-divine hybrid be in any way a fully free and rational choice? Such a person would have no option but to “choose” God, since he or she would already be divine, if in a somewhat attenuated state.²⁵ Sanders finds much of the predestination doctrine Talbott rejects in these criteria, since those who have been purified in this manner could not decide to reject God. Talbott asserts that if only we were to consider all the evidence carefully we would see that rejecting God and choosing hell is fundamentally irrational. This may be the case if humanity were fundamentally good. Yet no matter how rational we think we are, there are many times when we know the truth but fail to act on it.

It would seem that God can appreciate freedom and rationality and God has no need to go through bondage and irrationality in order to arrive at this appreciation. So why do we have to go through this horrendous process? Overall, it appears that Talbott has moved much further in the Calvinist direction than simply on the issue of election. It seems he

would have God say in preparing to create us, “Let us bring forth evil that good may result.”²⁶

A NEW PROPOSITION: LUTHERAN COMPATIBILISM

To this point I have argued that Talbott’s free will libertarianism is an unscriptural and inconsistent doctrine. It serves by unfortunate sophistry to defend a universalism that Talbott feels is necessary. The question I will consider in the remainder of the paper will be: if libertarian free will is inappropriate, what, if anything, should be proposed to take its place? Free will libertarianism states that God has granted free will to persons such that when choices are made, God does not necessarily know ahead of time what decisions will be made. Tied up in the concept of choice is freedom from constraints or pressures that emerge from internal or external forces. Furthermore, if God possesses foreknowledge of all choices, libertarians argue, persons are not truly free to choose since the decision has, for all intents and purposes, already been made. Divine foreknowledge means that free will is an illusion.

I am willing to concede that free will implies free choice. But free choice does not imply the freedom to choose what is contrary to one’s nature. The Lutheran Fathers debated the Roman Catholics and the Calvinists on this very issue. While they did not use this terminology, they were in fact lobbying for what has become known as the *compatibilist* understanding of freedom of choice. Compatibilism is the view that while persons do exercise free will, they may choose only that which is consistent with their nature and that there are innate influences and constraints on their choices of which they are unaware.²⁷ With regard to the current issue, in libertarian free will a sinner may choose to accept or reject God’s gracious invitation independent of his sinful condition. In compatibilist free will, conversely, a sinner may choose to do only that which is compatible with his fallen nature.

In the Solid Declaration of the Lutheran *Book of Concord*, original, pre-existent sin makes all persons enemies of God until the Holy Spirit, through the inspired and inerrant word of God, by grace, without cooperation, converts, regenerates, and renews them. The unregenerate man cannot by any “natural powers” understand, accept, or believe the grace of God offered through the gospel.²⁸ This is the first assumption of compatibilism, that those who were slaves to sin but released by the power of the Spirit will choose God because their free will has no capacity to countermand their nature, which was dead in trespasses and sins but is made alive in Christ Jesus. The Solid Declaration maintains that the more zealously one tries to comprehend spiritual truths, the less one understands and believes them (1 Cor 2:14; 1 Cor 1:21; Eph 4:13-14; Matt 13:11-13; Rom 3:11-12; Eph 5:8; Acts 26:11; John 1:5; Eph 2:1,5; Col 2:13).²⁹ Compatibilism holds that the will is free only insofar as its nature allows it to be free. The Solid Declaration appealed to the Church Fathers who defended a “bound” free will that has a “capacity” for freedom in such a way that by divine grace it can be converted to God and become truly free, a

²³ Sanders, “A Freewill Theist’s Response to Talbott’s Universalism,” 174.

²⁴ Sanders, “A Freewill Theist’s Response to Talbott’s Universalism,” 179.

²⁵ In Eastern Orthodoxy the state that Talbott is advocating is called “divinization,” the subsuming of all human characteristics into a quasi-divine being.

²⁶ Sanders, “A Freewill Theist’s Response to Talbott’s Universalism,” 185.

²⁷ Strange, “A Calvinist’s Response to Talbott’s Universalism” in *Universal Salvation: The Current Debate*, 148.

²⁸ *The Book of Concord*, Solid Declaration II, 5-7, 520-521.

²⁹ *The Book of Concord*, SD II, 9-11, 521-522 (Tappert).

condition for which it was originally created.³⁰ This is in complete agreement with compatibilism, which allows for free will to be altered and that altered state to become the norming feature of choice.

The early Lutherans were concerned that free will libertarianism implied that it is within the human will to accept or reject the gospel independent of any divine assistance. To allow for such a contravention of monergism undermines the person and work of the Holy Spirit, whose activity would become unnecessary. The work of the Holy Spirit is to set sinners free from bondage to sin. The Lutherans consistently maintained that left to themselves, humans have no libertarian free will to choose the redemptive good, since their affections are entirely in bondage to sin:

The free will by its own natural powers can do nothing for man's conversion, righteousness, peace and salvation, cannot cooperate, and cannot obey, believe, and give assent when the Holy Spirit offers the grace of God and salvation through the Gospel. On the contrary, because of the wicked and obstinate disposition with which he was born, he defiantly resists God and his will *unless the Holy Spirit illuminates and rules him*.³¹

It remains, then, that man's will is truly free only in the compatibilist sense, since, given the desires of his fallen nature he can choose only to do evil. Free will libertarians contend they have solved this difficulty by proposing a scheme whereby God offers hearers of the gospel *prevenient grace*, initial grace, which temporarily overcomes the sinful nature and allows them to choose to accept Christ. Martin Luther could not accept a *prevenient grace* doctrine on the grounds that if it were available and issued inconsistently, there would be many persons existing in a quasi-regenerate state who could theoretically believe the gospel independent of the salvific work of the Holy Spirit. Not only would this be tantamount to Pelagianism, but those in possession of *prevenient grace* would exist with little or no certainty of salvation.³² Holy Writ nowhere claims that human beings are free to choose for or against God apart from their natural desires. We either desire Christ or we despise him, and those that desire him do so as a result of grace and not due to their natures (John 1:13; Rom 9:16).

Finally, Luther, in his memorable debate over free will with the Roman Catholic humanist Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, identified the key error of free will libertarianism as its appeal not to Scripture and tradition but to philosophy. Luther took the compatibilist position that there is free will that leads to salvation, but that will is transformed by the Holy Spirit and informed by the covenant grace of Christ:

A man should know that with regard to his faculties and possessions he has the right to use, to do, or to leave undone, according to his free choice, though even this is controlled by the free choice of God alone, who acts in whatever way he pleases. On the other hand in relation to God, or in matters pertaining to salvation or damnation, a man has no free

choice, but is a captive, subject and slave either of the will of God or the will of Satan.³³

Since in his thought Christ is central, Luther felt comfortable in asking Erasmus, in effect: does God will the salvation of all people with weak and ineffectual love, or does God love his elect with a resolute, immutable will that accomplishes what it seeks?³⁴ Luther's firm belief in the power of the Holy Spirit to convert, explicated so succinctly in his Small Catechism,³⁵ allowed him to view the transformation from sinner to saint as a gentle act of grace. The Heavenly Father does not will anyone to perish, just as a caring parent would not want her child to be struck by a car. Instead of coercion, God changes a heart of stone into a heart of flesh, and His children obey not out of fear, but out of thankfulness. Libertarian free will declares that a child should be free to choose whether he would be struck by a car or not. Leaving a child unaided in the midst of danger is inviting disaster. For Luther, God saves us, not because some of us are more humble or intelligent, but because of the sacrifice of Christ. Libertarianism cannot offer this kind of comfort.

CONCLUSION

In this short paper I have engaged the Christian universalist paradigm, pointed out its weaknesses, and offered a logical alternative. The challenge for Christian compatibilists will be overcoming the postmodern tendency toward "softening" difficult biblical doctrines in favor of more inclusive language and positions. Compatibilism allows for the confidence and comfort that come from being divinely selected, while at the same time protecting the basic human desire to make up our own mind and decide what we feel is the best option for us. It is not unloving to present the reality of hell—persons must be made aware of the dangers of their possible decision against God. At the same time God has risked rejection by submitting himself to human choice. In order for God to be truly loving he must grant free will to his created order. This is the message of Lutherans on the doctrine of free will. In this respect Talbott was correct: given all the facts, why would anyone choose eternal suffering over eternal blessing? We may never know.

³³ Luther, *De Servo Arbitrio*, 143.

³⁴ Luther, *De Servo Arbitrio*, 117-124.

³⁵ "I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith." *The Book of Concord*, SC II, 6, 345 (Tappert).

³⁰ *The Book of Concord*, SD II, 23, 525 (Tappert).

³¹ *The Book of Concord*, SD II, 18, 524 (Tappert). Emphasis mine.

³² Luther, *De Servo Arbitrio* in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, trans. Philip S. Watson, ed. E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 239-246.