

How Does a Sovereign God Love? A Reply to Thomas Talbott

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Reading Thomas Talbott's article "On predestination, reprobation, and the love of God" (RJ, Feb., 1983) brought back a grievous experience I had when some of George MacDonald's sermons were published in 1976 (*Creation in Christ*). I had relished three of MacDonald's novels and the *Anthology* compiled by C.S. Lewis. Then I read this sentence, and the budding friendship collapsed: "From all copies of Jonathan Edwards portrait of God, however faded by time, however softened by the use of less glaring pigments, I turn with loathing" (*Creation in Christ*, P. 81). I was-stunned. George MacDonald loathed my God! Over the last fifteen years since I graduated from college all my biblical studies in seminary and graduate school have led me to love and worship the God of Jonathan Edwards.

So to read the words of Thomas Talbott brought up all those feelings of sadness and loss again. He writes: "I will not worship such a God, and if such a God can send me to hell for not so worshipping him, then to hell I will go" (p. 14). Can Christian fellowship have any meaning when we view each other's God like this? I hope some wiser reader than I will write and tell us how we can be brothers in Christ and loathe each other's God. And if this is impossible, what does it imply for -our standing in the church?

My purpose here is simply to do what a pastor is supposed to do when "men rise from among our own number speaking perverse things to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:30). I want to try to defend the doctrine of God's sovereign predestination against Talbott's criticisms and so "preserve the truth of the gospel" and magnify God's glorious grace. I hope no one clucks his tongue, saying, "God does not need our defense." I know that. But the sheep do. That's why there are shepherds. I would recommend as an articulate antidote to Talbott's nonbiblical argumentation the biblically saturated essay by Geerhardus Vos, "The Spiritual Doctrine of the Love of God," now found in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Richard B. Gaffin). First I will try to restate Talbott's arguments fairly, and then I will reply.

Restatement

Talbott says, "The whole point of the doctrine of predestination, therefore, is that there are persons whom God could redeem but whom, for one reason or another, he chooses not to redeem" (p. 12). (By "could" he means that "nothing beyond God's-own will or nature prevents him from redeeming" a person.) These people whom God chooses not to redeem are the non-elect. "It immediately follows that they are not an object of God's eternal love" (p. 13). "A person whose intention is the ultimate harm of another simply cannot be motivated by love for the other" (p. 13).

This has four consequences for theology, the first two of which are for Talbott "enough to discredit the Reformed doctrine of predestination, quite apart from any other consideration" (p. 13). (1) "God himself fails to love some of the very persons he has commanded us to love." (2) "the very God who commands us to love our enemies fails to love his enemies." (3) "Loving-kindness is not an essential property of God, not part of his essence," (4) "God is less loving, less kind, and less merciful than many human beings." "These four implications," he says, "should be quite enough to reduce the Reformed doctrine of predestination to a complete-absurdity" (p. 14).

-In the second half of his essay Talbott refers to a "purely logical paradox that the doctrine of predestination generates." -He defines love for God as our "approval of everything about-him" and "gratitude to God for what he has done for us" (p. 15). Then he says, "it is logically impossible to love [God] unless he first loves us. I simply can't love God unless he first loves me." You can't feel gratitude to a God who decrees your damnation. I suppose the unstated premise between this observation and the inconsistency of Calvinism is that Calvinists summon all men to love God, even the nonelect.

Finally, Talbott argues that perfect love for our neighbor would prevent us from believing the doctrine of predestination; and the fact that so many people do believe it shows their deep rebellion against God's command to love their neighbor. There are three options: either we love our neighbor less than perfectly, or we love (approve and thank) God less than perfectly, or we can't believe God chooses not to love our neighbor.

Reply

Though I might want to say things differently, I accept Talbott's statement that the doctrine of predestination implies that there is nothing beyond God's own will and nature which stops him from saving people. What stops him from saving some is, in fact, *ultimately* his own sovereign will. "In order that the *purpose of God* according to election might remain" he loved Jacob and hated Esau (Rom. 9:12,13). Therefore, I also accept the inference that there are people who are not the objects of God's electing love.

I did not always believe these things. And my journey toward this doctrine of predestination was not along philosophical or confessional routes. It has been the route of biblical exegesis. I believe in the doctrine which Talbott calls blasphemy primarily because I cannot escape its presence in God's Word, nor do I any longer want to escape it. But I do want to see its consistency if possible. I also believe it is an essential part of a pure gospel. Therefore I will try to answer Talbott's several criticisms.

Talbott objects that this doctrine implies that "God himself fails to love some of the very persons whom he has *commanded* us to love. " In order for this to be a telling criticism we must assume (1) that the love we are commanded to show our neighbor is identical with the love God fails to show him, and (2) that there is nothing in the different natures of God and man that would make it right for God to reserve prerogatives for himself that he denies to us. I think the first assumption is at least biblically questionable and the second is biblically false.

It is questionable that we are commanded to love in a way which God fails to love. We are never commanded to dispense electing love. We are not given the assignment of *ultimately* determining anyone's destiny. We are commanded to show kindness' and patience. We are commanded to call men to repentance. We are commanded to do all manner of good deeds that people might be won over to give God glory (Matt. 5:16). Of course, this is all within the context of a fallen world where kindness to one man is limited by justice to another.

But God does not fail to show *this* love to-all men. "He makes the sun to rise on the evil and the good" (Matt. 5:45). "He did good and gave you from heaven rains-and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:17). There are riches of divine kindness which beckon all men to entrust their souls to the faithful Creator (Rom 2:4).

But even more important, Talbott seems to assume that the difference between God and man would not justify God acting differently toward people than he commands us to act toward people. Surely this assumption is wrong. First of all, God knows all things and is all wise. We are not only finite but sinful. As Jonathan Edwards said concerning God's right to do what we are forbidden to do,

It may be unfit and so immoral, for any other beings to go about to order this affair; because they are not possessed of a wisdom, that in any other manner fits them for it; -and in other respects they are not fit to be trusted with this affair; nor does it belong to-them, they not being the owners and Lords of the universe. (*Freedom of the Will*, New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 41 1)

When God says - "See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand," he is claiming moral prerogatives which we are denied. When God takes the prerogative of putting a hardening upon part of Israel until the full number of the gentiles comes in (Rom. 11:25), his command to the entering gentiles is, Do not boast over the branches" (11: 18). Instead, we are to be like Paul, who magnified his ministry "in order to make my fellow Jews jealous and thus save some of them" (11: 14). God's command concerning the Israel whom he had hardened (Rom 9:18), 11:7-10, 25) is that we strive for their salvation; that is, love them. In this age we are to love whom he hardens. This is not inconsistent because God is God and has wise purposes for both his sovereign hardening and our evangelism.

Talbott's second objection to predestination is that it implies that "the very God who commands us to love *our* enemies fails to love his enemies.

I don't think this is essentially different from the first objection. The answer is the same. Yes, God does withhold electing love from his enemies, but we are not commanded to show them *electing* love. Yes, we are commanded to love our enemies in many ways, but God also loves these enemies in the same ways (Matt. 5:45).

But Talbott will no doubt stress that our intention should be for the eternal welfare of our nonelect enemy; yet God's intention (we say) is for his enemy's perdition. Two observations weaken this objection: (1) *Our* intention concerning another person's eternal destiny is always conditional. Since we are not God, we acknowledge that the loved one for whom we pray may not be elect. We pray and we strive "that they be saved" (Rom. 11: 14), but finally we bow to the divine decree (Acts 13:48). (2) God's intention is not simple but complex. It is not psychologically or biblically adequate to say God wills the perdition of his enemies. "He wills all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). "I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God; so turn, and live" (Ezek. 18:32). The historic distinction between God's will of command and will of decree (or: revealed will and secret will) is not a philosophic creation to justify determinism in the face of opposing evidence. It is the necessary outgrowth of sustained exegetic labor that tries to take all Scripture seriously. It receives classic statement from the biblically steeped Jonathan Edwards:

So God, though he hates a thing as it is simply, may incline to it with reference to the universality of things. Though he hates the sin in itself, yet he may will to permit it, for the greater promotion of holiness in this universality, including all things, and at all times. ("Miscellaneous Remarks," *Works II*, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, P. 528)

Therefore, in one sense God does love his enemies and in one sense he does not. In the sense that he does, so should we. In the sense that he does not, we are now in no position to follow as mere creatures. The potter has rights which the pots do not have.

Talbott's third objection is that "loving-kindness is not an essential property of God, not part of his essence." He reasons that "if loving-kindness is an essential property of God, then it is logically impossible for him to act in an unloving way- " And if God ultimately acts toward the nonelect in an unloving way, then some alternative explanation must be found for the claim, in I John 4:16, that "God is love." Talbott assumes that God's character of love is inconsistent with his treating any individual in a way that is not loving. But this assumption is not defensible from Scripture. We are not encouraged even by Johannine theology to infer from the statement "God is love" that God relates to individuals only in terms of love. John is probably the most "Calvinistic" writer in the New Testament. "No one can come to me unless it is granted to him by my Father" (John 6:65, given as a reason why Judas did *not* come, a clear instance of reprobation, also implied in the term son of perdition that the scriptures might be fulfilled," t7: t2). "The reason why you do not hear [my words] is that you are not of God" (8:47). "You do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep" (10:26). "Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice" (I 8:37). Both in the Gospel (t: 12, t 3)-and the first epistle (5: 1, cf. 4:7) regeneration is "not of the will of man" but precedes and enables faith. This prior electing work is what it means to be " of God " and " of the truth " and " of my sheep.

John also makes clear that those who are not born of God, and therefore do not believe but do evil, are punished by God. In the end all men will be raised, "those who have done good to the resurrection of life, -and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment" (John 5:29). And if we let Matthew (25:46) of John of Patmos (Rev. 14: 1 1) speak, we learn that this judgment is not remedial or temporary but punitive and everlasting. It is precisely the loving Father of the disciples of Jesus who cuts off the unfruitful branches and throws them into the fire to be burned (John 15:2,6).

If Talbott responds that God is still dealing with the condemned in hell in terms of love (wishing he could save them but being "unable" to because of other commitments, e.g., to their free will), then my answer would be: (1) Calvinists could say the same thing (God wills their salvation in one sense but is "unable" to save them because of other commitments, e.g. the preservation of *his* glorious freedom and the maximizing of his mercy to the elect); but (2) it is biblically unwarranted to speak of God's loving those condemned to hell because nowhere is the final judgment viewed as remedial or temporary.

The meaning I would attach to the statement "God is love" is this: it belongs to the fullness of God's nature that he cannot be served but must overflow in service to his creation. The very meaning of God is a being who cannot be enriched but always remains the enricher. To be God is to be incapable of being a beneficiary of nay person or power in the universe. Rather, Godness involves a holy impulse ever to be benefactor. But it is not for us to insist that the best or only way for God to exert maximum love is to treat no individuals unlovingly. On the contrary, Scripture teaches us that "to make known the riches of his glory for the vessels of mercy" God does prepare vessels for destruction (Rom. 9:23; see John Piper, *The Justification of God*, chapters three and ten, for the exegetic evidence that this text refers to the eternal destiny of individuals).

Talbott argues further that the Reformed doctrine of predestination makes God less loving, less kind, and less merciful than many human beings. Specifically, he argues that in Romans 9:3 Paul out loves Calvin's God when he says, "For I wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race. " Paul is willing to go to hell for them, but God just passes over them.

One of the questions Paul tries to answer in Romans 9-11 is why most of God's chosen people are accursed and cut off from Christ. It appears as though the word - of God has fallen (9:6). He gives two

answers. First, the Jews failed to fulfill the law of righteousness because "they pursued it by works, not faith. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone" (9:32). And second, "Israel failed to obtain what it sought. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened" (1:7). Unlike Talbott, the apostle Paul acknowledges, indeed praises (Rom. 1:33-36), the sovereign plan of God which involves the hardening of his kinsmen. Therefore, he does not cry down God's decree in Romans 9:3 but rather says that if God could allow it, he would be willing to relinquish his place as "elect" so that "the rest" could become elect. Paul does not deny the wisdom or love of God in making "vessels of wrath" (9:22); he simply expresses what David and many (Calvinistic!) parents have felt for unrepentant children and loved ones: "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son! (2 Sam. 18:33).

If Talbott cannot imagine the psychological possibility of praising God's sovereignty-over men's lives and yet weeping over an unrepentant son, it is owing to the limits of his simple emotional capacities, not the impossibility of the two emotions in one godly heart. It would be worth his while to ponder how Paul can say, "*Be anxious* for nothing" (Phil. 4:6) and also say, "There is the daily pressure upon me of my *anxiety* for all the churches" (2 Cor. 11:28). There is a profound implication here for how we *experience* the sovereignty of God in our every day affairs.

In the last half of his essay, Talbott says that we cannot love our neighbor perfectly if we approve of a God who refuses to promote our neighbor's interest. Therefore, to love our neighbor as ourselves. The answer to this criticism is already contained in the preceding paragraphs. But I will stress it again. The reprobation of any individuals is not part of God's revealed will. Therefore, we are in no position to eliminate people on that basis from our love. We are to strive with Paul by every means to save some (1 Cor. 9:22); Rom. 11: 14), and leave the limitations of electing love to God.

But if Talbott- argues that in principle we cannot love all perfectly because we approve the reprobation of some, then the answer I suggest is that "perfection" -of love cannot be measured by the happiness of all men nor of any individual person. The measure of perfection must begin with God. Perfect love toward all and toward- any is love which accords with God's loving purposes. And God's loving purposes toward creation involve the hardening of some and the bestowing of mercy on others (Rom. 9:18). His purpose is also that we not know which are the hardened but that we show love to all by seeking their salvation.

Finally, Talbott argues - that it is logically impossible to love God if he does not first love me, because love to God includes heartfelt gratitude for what he has done for me.- One problem with this criticism is that it assumes that love to God can happen *logically* only when some benefit (other than beholding God's character and action) comes to me. This is a problem because, as Jonathan Edwards says, the first and basic ground of true worship is the "transcendently excellent and amiable nature of divine things, as they are in themselves, and not any conceived relation they bear to self" (*Religious Affections*, New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 240). If this is so, then it is *not logically* impossible even for a nonelect person to worship God. It would not *be logically* contradictory for such a person to approve of God's glorious plan of redemption and to be **thankful** that he has a part to play in magnifying the glory of God's mercy (Rom. 9:22,23). Of course, this sounds absurd to us because we know from Scripture that precisely such worship would mark a person as elect and born of God. The old test of whether we love God enough to be damned for his glory does not create a *logical* but a biblical and *theological* problem. A God who would damn a person who loves him enough to be damned for his glory is not found in the Bible and would not be worthy of worship because in damning such a person he would belittle his own glory.

Of course, in one sense, it is impossible for the nonelect to love God. But it is a moral impossibility, not a logical or a physical one. "They loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). Men *cannot* love God if they "hold down the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom. 1: 18) and are blind to God's glory "due to their hardness of heart" (Eph. 4:18). Therefore when I John 4:19 says that "we love God because he first loved us," the point is that God's love had to regenerate our hearts (John 1: 13) and demonstrate atoning love in Christ (I John 4: 10) in order to enable us to love him. This verse cannot be used, as Talbott uses it, to show that love to God is *logically* impossible for the nonelect. The verse only confirms the moral inability to love God apart from his prevenient grace.

A Personal Conclusion

I know this reply presents a very lopsided view of biblical predestination by focusing on reprobation. I do not apologize for focusing on what Geerhardus Vos calls "The Biblical Importance of the Doctrine of Preterition" (*in Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 412-14). But I must emphasize that the overwhelming emphasis of Scripture is on the appointment to eternal life and on the true guilt of those who are lost.

Talbott refers several times to his own daughter. In one place he says, "If God has indeed-passed over her, how can the mother possibly believe that he is worthy of her worship?" (p. 14). I can hardly escape the impression from this and many other statements that God does not stand as *the* measure and judge at the center of Talbott's thought and affections. I have three sons. Every night after they are asleep I turn on the hall light, open their bedroom door, and walk from bed to bed, laying my hands on them and praying. Often I am moved to tears of joy and longing. I pray that Karsten Luke become a great physician of the soul, that Benjamin John become the beloved son of my right hand in the gospel, and that Abraham Christian give glory to God as he grows strong in his faith.

But I am not ignorant that God may not have chosen my sons for his sons. And-, though I think I would give my life for their salvation, if they should be lost to me, I would not rail against the Almighty. He is God. I am but a man. The potter has absolute rights over the clay. Mine is to bow before his unimpeachable character and believe that the Judge of all the earth has ever and always will do right.

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