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WRATH THAT ENDURES FOREVER

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Universalists commonly talk about the love of God that endures forever. They often argue that since God is love he will eventually draw all humanity to himself. Further, they cite Paul's letters as evidence that even the apostle assumed God loves all his creation, wicked and righteous, with an everlasting love. Whatever the merits of the philosophical argument—that God to be God must always love his creation—this article challenges the latter assumption that Paul believed God always loves. Rather, it will be argued that the apostle assumed that once the wicked portion of humanity was under eschatological wrath, God would withdraw his love from the wicked.[1]

I. THE WRATH OF GOD

Paul uses many words to denote God's anger. The most serious is *orgē* ("wrath") because in Pauline theology, as we shall see, it expresses the utter hopelessness of the wicked in the face of an angry God.

Other Pauline words such as *apobolē* ("rejection"), *apotomia* ("sternness"), *ekkathairō* ("cleanse"), *epitimia* ("punishment") and *echthros* ("enemy") indicate anger but have more breadth. Unlike *orgē*, often Paul uses them in a way that suggests salvation still lies within the grasp of the unrepentant even though God is angry with their behavior.

For example, in Rom 11:15 Paul talks about God's plan to save the world. He says of Israel, "For if their rejection (*apobolē*) is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?" Here Paul hints that those rejected might eventually be accepted. In 11:22–23 Paul's use of *apotomia* in relation to the unbelieving allows for hope even though God is said to be a stern Father: "Consider therefore the

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[1] Usually particularism is tied to the concept of an eternal, conscious hell. Particularism, however, can be expressed in other ways. Annihilation of the wicked at or some time after death, for example, might be a preferable belief to a particularist than endless punishment in hell. Recently annihilation has been espoused by C. Pinnock, "Fire, Then Nothing," *Christianity Today* 31 (1987) 40–41; E. W. Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of Final Punishment* (Fallbrook: Verdict, 1982). But just as there are distinctions within the scope of particularism, there is one common agreement: The wicked are excluded from salvation. This article argues that Paul was a particularist and that in the end the wicked will be separated eternally from the righteous.

kindness and sternness (*apotomia*) of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in." Here again hope surfaces for eventual salvation.

These terms for anger differ significantly from Paul's use of "wrath" (*orgē*). When he applies eschatological *orgē* to unbelievers he intends it to be final, but when he uses parallel terms for *orgē*, such as "rejection" or "sternness," his terms are more flexible. Sometimes they are final, yet often they allow for hope even in the face of unbelief. So "sternness" in Rom 11:22-23 allows for the reversal of faith: Those who enjoy kindness might in the end receive sternness, and those under sternness, perhaps kindness.[2]

The point is that while parallel terms allow for hope, *orgē* does not. When Paul wishes to stress the fierce anger of God and the utter hopelessness of the wicked he uses *orgē*. He chooses this term to underscore the fact that in the *eschaton* rebellious sinners have no hope of salvation. They will be taken from the presence of God and the righteous and placed, in effect, beyond the pale of God's love. The righteous go the way of life, the wicked the way of death.

In Paul's letters *orgē* is used in two ways: (1) He talks about wrath already at work in the present age (Rom 1:18-32; Eph 4:17-19; 1 Thess 2:16); (2) he specifies an eschatological wrath to fall on the wicked in the age to come (Rom 2:5, 8; 1 Thess 1:10; 5:9).[3] In the present age God pours out *orgē* on rebellious men and women who continually reject his ways. God "gives them over" to their sinful desires (Rom 1:24, 26, 28). "Those who do such things," says Paul, "deserve death" (1:32). In the age to come the outpouring of *orgē* takes place at the end during the complex of events known as the "day of wrath" (Rom 2:5, 8), commencing, it appears, with the wrath of the *parousia* (1 Thess 1:10; 5:9).

II. PUNISHMENT AND REFORMATION

To establish whether Paul allows for hope in his use of *orgē* we must decide whether he thinks eschatological *orgē* punishes or reforms. If it punishes, then wrath is final and there is no appeal for the wicked; they are cut off from God's love. If it reforms, then wrath functions as a part of his love. God loves his creation, and while his anger may endure for a time and seem like punishment it is always constructive, ultimately producing good for his creation.

[2] Much the same may be said about parallel words such as *ekkathairō* ("clean out," 1 Cor 5:10), *epitimia* ("punishment," 2 Cor 2:6), *echthros* ("enemy," Rom 5:10; 11:28). Other negative terms for wrath seem less hopeful because of their contexts: *adokimos* ("worthless," Rom 1:28); *anathema* ("cursed," Gal 1:8-9; cf. Rom 9:3); *dikē* ("punishment," 2 Thess 1:9); *thlipsis* ("suffering," 2 Thess 1:6-7); *katakrinō* ("condemn," 1 Cor 11:32).

[3] Paul's other references to *orgē* are ambiguous. We cannot tell whether they refer to present or final wrath (Rom 3:5; 4:15; 5:9; 9:22; 12:19; Eph 2:3; 5:6; Col 3:6). Also, Paul uses another word (*thymos*) for divine wrath, but only in Rom 2:8, and there it is coupled with *orgē*. Elsewhere in Paul *thymos* refers to human anger (2 Cor 12:20; Gal 5:20; Eph 4:31; Col 3:8).

Naturally it is difficult to discuss punishment and reformation in Pauline theology without some reference to the wider issues generally raised in this kind of discussion. Always in the background the practical questions of fairness arise. To say that God exacts retribution from the wicked following death seems unworthy of a God of love. Conceivably Paul was struck by the same thought. H. H. Farmer, for example, thinks it madness to suggest that the divine love will dispatch vast numbers of persons to everlasting damnation. He wonders how God's love should be viewed were some of his creation to fall irretrievably into hell, or were they to be annihilated. For Farmer such a fate might be considered a victory of sorts if the God under consideration were a God primarily of justice, but for a God "who is primarily love it could only be the most absolute form of defeat."[4] In effect it becomes a first-class Pyrrhic victory: A part of God's creation is destroyed, their destruction diminishes the joy of the redeemed, and the divine love appears to suffer a grievous defeat.

If eschatological wrath operates retributively,[5] it offers no recourse for the wicked in hell. It only punishes, and this would seem to diminish God as a God of love. Endless retributive wrath—whether it be annihilation or hell—seems incompatible with a loving God. Wrath is therefore said not to be retributive at all, but God's chastening response to disobedience. Simply put, wrath is not the opposite of God's love; it is an element of his love. So perhaps even in Paul's theology wrath should be viewed as an aspect of divine love designed to lead rebellious ones to repentance, not as a fixed, unalterable condition. Postmortem punishment, then, would be a painful process, but one that would correct, leading to the betterment and purification of souls.[6]

If we wanted an example of how reformative wrath might work, we could cite the seventeenth-century Cambridge Platonists Peter Sterry and Jeremiah White. They described God's wrath as a consuming love, a raging fire that "burns upon sin and opposition" until the impurities of the soul evaporate in the flames of love. To evangelicals this might sound like a candy-coated dilution of Paul's theology, but Sterry and White insisted that in reality God's wrath is none other than simple reforming love. Direct contact with this kind of love would not be easy for the wicked. Divine love would produce bliss in the saved, but for the rebellious it would produce unspeakable agony—until ultimately salvation was achieved.[7]

All will acknowledge, I think, that a doctrine of reformative wrath is attractive; it has the advantage of making God's wrath seem purposeful.

[4] H. H. Farmer, *The World and God: A Study of Prayer, Providence and Miracle in Christian Experience* (London, 1935) 255; *God and Men* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1947) 169.

[5] By retribution I mean punishment, whether in the form of annihilation or an eternal conscious hell.

[6] Origen *Against Celsus* 5.15; 6.25; Gregory of Nyssa *Dialog on the Soul and Resurrection*; *The Catechetical Oration* 8.26, 35; John Scotus Erigena *On the Division of Nature* 5.31–32.

[7] D. P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell: Seventeenth-Century Discussions of Eternal Torment* (London, 1964) 105–115; E. H. Plumptre, *The Spirits in Prison and Other Studies on the Life After Death* (London: Isbister, 1884) 192–193.

God is not a cosmic maniac gleefully extracting retribution from the fallen part of creation for no purpose at all, except perhaps for revenge. God is above mindless anger. His wrath is good and just, designed to reform and reclaim. Certainly he is angry with sin and rebellion, and severe judgment will indeed fall on unrepentant sinners. But unbridled anger is not his way. He loves all his creation—even in his anger.

Yet when we examine *orgē* in Paul we find no reason to assume that it has reformative elements. For example, Paul begins and concludes his first letter to the Thessalonians with words of encouragement about the eternal hope believers have in Jesus (1 Thess 1:4-10; 4:13-5:11). He also gravely warns of the coming wrath that will engulf unbelievers. But there is no thought of reformation for the wicked. They receive only wrath (1:10; 5:9). In 5:1-11 Paul makes a sharp distinction between the fates of the wicked, calling one the sons of light and the other the sons of darkness. Those of the day will have eternal peace, but those of the night will be destroyed by the wrath (*orgē*) of God (5:3, 9). If a universalist argues that wrath is chastening anger in Paul, then he needs to show why *orgē* should be understood as reformation—especially since there is no occasion where the apostle uses *orgē* in a reformative sense.[8] *Orgē* appears to be unrelenting anger without any connotation of reformative love.

If Paul understands God's *orgē* not as a chastening, reforming love that eventually leads to salvation but as unrelenting punishment, then it makes little sense to say that God still loves the wicked after they have been annihilated or while they burn in everlasting hell. (At least, our use of the word "love" in this context would differ radically from any ordinary understanding of the word.) If Paul thinks hell is eternal punishment, then it seems reasonable to say that once the wicked are under eschatological wrath God is finished with them. They are cut off from his love.

III. DIVINE WRATH: THE OPPOSITE OF LOVE

The challenge facing particularists is to show why eschatological wrath should be understood as eternal punishment, whether it be annihilation or an everlasting hell. If there is no reason to assume that eschatological wrath extends eternally, then perhaps universalists are right: God loves his creation infinitely, and—after an appropriate duration of punishment for certain wicked ones—he will restore all humanity to himself.

Equally, the challenge facing universalists is to show why *orgē* should be understood in any other way than the common meaning of the word. If in Paul *orgē* is said to have the additional meaning of "wrath that reforms," then some basis for this interpretation must be provided. Short of appealing to the cosmic reconciliation texts, there seems to be little reason to think that *orgē* reforms the wicked in the afterlife.

Of course, the reformation interpretation is advanced by the fact that God is love. Did Paul think God loves—now and forever—all the people he

[8] See n. 13 below.

created, and would he ever act contrary to the ultimate welfare of his creatures? Some say that God will always love his creatures, that his love is sovereign. To them divine love should not be limited by divine wrath, nor should it be considered parallel to wrath, justice or man's freedom. Wrath and justice are not on the same level as God's love; they are manifestations of that love. J. A. T. Robinson writes: "[Wrath and justice] are but ways in which such love must show itself to be in the face of its denial."[9] So when faced with rebellious children, God chastens in order to reform—just the way a parent might punish a child he loves. God's love is eternal and sovereign, and his love for every human being, rebellious or not, is incontrovertible. In the end, says Robinson, "God is the eternal 'Yea.'"[10]

Robinson's point is well-founded, at least, in preexilic OT writings. Not always opposites, love and wrath are at times inseparable. W. Eichrodt calls this "love concealed in wrath."[11] Prior to the exile God's people are most often the recipients of his wrath.[12] But after the exile God's wrath "increasingly centered on the heathen and unfaithful in the community."[13] The wrath of God prior to the exile was largely intended to reform God's people. Afterwards it still retained a sense of reformation, but more and more it operated retributively (punishing rather than reforming). The focus of God's anger shifted, therefore, from chastening Israel in the hope of bringing about repentance to punishing Israel's enemies—both the heathen outside the camp and unfaithful Jews within.

Paul understands God's wrath in a similar postexilic manner. He believes that at the close of the age divine *orgē* will fall only on unbelievers. Believers have been rescued from the *orgē* of God (Rom 5:9; 1 Thess 1:10). To be sure, judgment begins at the house of God, and believers who sin may sometimes endure trials in their earthly life (1 Cor 5:5; 11:27-32). But in Paul's theology the "wrath of God" (*orgē theou*) is reserved for unbelievers. It is far more serious than any chastenings believers might endure. Chastenings reform, but wrath destroys.

Moreover *orgē* in Paul excludes any notion of divine love. When he speaks of wrath, and especially of eschatological wrath, he never hints that it is a manifestation of God's love leading to improvement or repentance. In fact, divine wrath appears to be the opposite of God's love. It does not have that preexilic function of being the austere curtain that conceals God's love. One looks in vain for a remedial use of *orgē*. Paul never suggests that God's *orgē* leads the wicked to repentance, as if it were a chastening anger designed for the good of the recipient.

But it would be a mistake to assume that Paul's use of *orgē* is always final. An exception can be found in Eph 2:3: "We were by nature objects of wrath" (cf. 5:6). Here "God, who is rich in mercy" (2:4), loves those who

[9] J. A. T. Robinson, *In the End God* (New York: Harper, 1968) 115.

[10] J. A. T. Robinson, "Universalism—Is It Heretical?", *SJT* 2 (1949) 145.

[11] W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 1. 288.

[12] Ibid. 464-467; J. Fichtner, *TDNT* 5.397-409.

[13] C. J. Roetzel, *Judgement in the Community: A Study of the Relationship Between Eschatology and Ecclesiology in Paul* (Leiden: Brill, 1972) 19, following Eichrodt, *Theology*, 1. 268-269.

were once "objects of wrath." Note that "wrath" in the expression "objects of wrath" is not final, and hence we cannot say that Paul chooses the word *orgē* only when he wants to designate those forever beyond God's love.

This text, however, does not suggest that God's wrath reforms sinners by inducing repentance. Nor does it imply that wrath conceals God's love, as if wrath ultimately brought good to the recipients, or as if it were an instrument designed to draw erring ones back to himself. *Orgē* here, as elsewhere in Paul, is true anger that does not include nuances of love. Indeed, it is the opposite of love.

The point is that the objects of wrath once lived like the rest of mankind, but no longer. Now "because of his great love for [them]" (2:4) they have been "saved, through faith" (2:8). In this text wrath is not the way God demonstrates his love in the face of rebellion, as Robinson thinks (at least when he thinks generally about the nature of God). Wrath does not function as part of God's love. Rather, it runs parallel to his love. God still loves those with whom he is angry, and when his grace is met with faith, objects of wrath receive the gift of God: salvation. Those under wrath who have no faith but continue in disobedience eventually find themselves under God's eschatological wrath, which in Paul is always final.[14]

In order for Biblical universalism to work, eschatological wrath must be an aspect of God's love. Wrath in the *eschaton* must have a remedial sense, it must seek to reform. Otherwise it remains undiluted anger. But as we have seen, Paul never hints that eschatological wrath reforms or functions as a part of God's love. He never says, for instance, that the wicked will suffer *orgē* in order to bring them to repentance. Rather, one gets the impression that those who fall under eschatological wrath are forever cut off from God's love.

True, 1 Cor 13:8 says that "love never fails." This might suggest that God's love for mankind—all mankind—is eternal. But this misunderstands chap. 13. Paul is not talking about the enduring love of God that guarantees salvation for all. He is addressing Corinthian believers who consider their spiritual gifts unexcelled, not wicked individuals under God's wrath. Paul attempts to convince his readers that spiritual gifts will pass away, but love will endure forever. To extrapolate from this that God's love abides forever on the wicked and righteous alike is unwarranted.

There is no reason to assume, therefore, that Paul thought that God's love applied to all people at all times.[15] The universalist is mistaken in thinking that God always loves, even in his wrath. Eschatological *orgē* is

[14] In Rom 13:4–5 Paul uses the word *orgē* specifically for believers. But as with Eph 2:3 the wrath forms no part of God's love and has no sense of remediation. Another text, Rom 3:5, asks whether "God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us." Here "wrath" probably does have eschatological elements since it mentions God's judgment of the world (3:6). But far from indicting believers, Paul uses wrath in 3:5 anthropologically to indict the world (or perhaps more specifically Israel, 3:1), which is "under sin" (3:9). In any case there is no hint of hidden love or remediation within God's wrath.

[15] A full discussion would have to account for the so-called reconciliation texts (Rom 8:19–23; 11:26, 32; 1 Cor 15:22; Eph 1:10, 23; Phil 2:6–11; Col 1:20).

not a correcting anger that tutors the wicked after death, eventually leading them to repentance. It is genuine anger devoid of love. In Paul's theology eschatological wrath means that after death God no longer loves the wicked, nor is he prepared to act on behalf of the wicked.

But what does it mean to say that God no longer loves the wicked? Normally when we speak of God's love for his creation we list the ways God has shown his love for humanity. In the OT, for example, the God who loves is the God who delivers his people from the hand of Pharaoh, who supplies a promised land, gives the Torah, protects from enemies, forgives wrongs, and so on.[16] For Paul, as in the OT, God shows his love through his acts in history. His love is revealed in the Christ-event, the Son's selfless act on the cross, his resurrection in power (e.g. Rom 5:8; 8:35). God's love elects the beloved (1:7-8; 9:13, 25; Col 3:12), watches over them (e.g. Rom 8:28, 35; 2 Cor 5:14; 13:11) and delivers them from the wrath to come (1 Thess 1:10).

When we speak of God's love, therefore, we mean his merciful acts in history. His love implies action rather than indefinable feelings divorced from deeds. God is prepared to act on behalf of the nation or individual whom he loves. But as we have seen, when Paul talks about eschatological wrath he never hints that God's anger reforms sinners or purges sins. God does not act on behalf of the wicked. Rather, he separates the righteous from the wicked. There is no meaningful way to say that God loves the wicked after death. When God's wrath finally falls on the wicked, love is not concealed in his wrath.

IV. CONCLUSION

If it is true that (1) *orgē* does not reform and that (2) God's love is positive action on behalf of others, then eschatological wrath for Paul would mean that at the final judgment God no longer is willing to operate on behalf of the wicked. Love would not be concealed in wrath. There would be nothing but wrath for the wicked. To put it another way, God would no longer "love" them. His wrath at the end would be final.

Paul never says explicitly that God's wrath is eternal, but it is clear that he intends it nonetheless. Sometimes wrath is poured out in the present, sometimes at the close of the age. Once under eschatological wrath, however, the plight of the wicked appears to be hopeless. God no longer acts on their behalf but has withdrawn his love from them. His wrath is permanent and eternal.

Universalists will argue that wrath does not function in this way. It is reformative or purgative, not retributive. God loves his creation, they say, and while it may be necessary for him to punish those who persist in wickedness, he does so out of love with the intent to restore.

[16] Cf. G. E. Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (SBT; London: SCM, 1952) *passim.*

But in eschatological wrath, at least, Paul never suggests that *orgē* conceals God's love. To the contrary, in the age to come it excludes love or hope. At times God's anger does bring sinners to repentance, but in these cases Paul chooses words less definitive than *orgē* (e.g. *echthros*, *apobolē*, *apotomia*). These and other terms allow for hope; *orgē* does not. Paul reserves the word *orgē* to stress the utter hopelessness of the wicked who are forever lost. Never does he suggest that eschatological *orgē* is remedial or purgative, and never does he hint that love is hidden in the *orgē*, working out a better fate for the wicked. For Paul *orgē* is the opposite of love, and once life is over, God's wrath is final.