



God's Saving Purpose and Prayer for All the Departed

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ABSTRACT

Throughout much of church history Christians have prayed for the dead. Historical, liturgical and pastoral contexts suggest that, while Anglicans may pray for the continual growth of the faithful departed, we have seldom prayed for advancement from purgatory or deliverance from hell. In this paper I defend all three, noting where my argument departs from and intersects with historic Anglican positions. I offer an outline of theology from the perspective of death, arguing that prayer for all the departed is one aspect of a tightly knit web of doctrines including theology proper, creation, salvation and consummation. Petitions for all the dead are not inconsequential. Instead, the final destiny of human persons raise the most basic of theological questions, matters which go to the center of God's purpose in creating spiritual beings and redeeming sinful humankind.

KEYWORDS: Anglican, heaven, hell, prayer for dead, purgatory, universalism

Throughout much of church history Christians have prayed for the dead (PFD), and the Anglican tradition cautiously accepts the practice. Its purpose may be thanksgiving or intercession; its subjects may be the saved or the damned; its setting may be private or public. Historical, liturgical and pastoral contexts suggest that, while we may pray for the continual growth of the faithful departed, Anglicans have seldom prayed for advancement from purgatory or deliverance from hell. In this paper I defend all three. I offer an outline of theology from

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the perspective of death, arguing that PFD is one aspect of a tightly knit web of doctrines including theology proper, creation, salvation and consummation. John Polkinghorne notes that 'eschatology is ... the keystone of the edifice of theological thinking, holding the whole building together'.² And so petitions for the dead are not inconsequential. Instead, the final destiny of human persons raise the most basic of theological questions, matters which go to the center of God's purpose in creating spiritual beings and redeeming sinful humankind.

Historical Context

There is no clear command, example or prohibition of PFD in Scripture.³ In the ancient church remembrance of the dead at the Eucharist began early and was widespread. It thanked God that the departed were at rest in Christ and asked that they be brought safely to resurrection in God's eternal Kingdom. PFD gradually came to be associated with belief in a process of sanctification after death – culminating in the medieval doctrine of purgatory as a place of temporary punishment and purification for those who die in grace but unready for heaven. The idea that individuals in purgatory can be helped by the prayers and works of the church on earth gave rise to abuses – most notably, the promiscuous selling of indulgences, the proximate cause of the Reformation. Protestants – including the English Reformers – affirmed justification by faith alone and rejected the idea that individuals must pay for their own sins after death. The *Thirty Nine Articles* denounces the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory. The *Homily on Prayer* (19.3) teaches that prayer cannot help the dead because eternal destiny is settled at death, when – following immediate judgment – the saved are made perfect and united with Christ in heaven and the damned are separated from God in hell. The 1549 prayer book included PFD both at the Eucharist and in the burial service; these were removed

2. J. Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope and the End of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 140.

3. It might be wondered, for example, why St Paul did not comfort the Thessalonian believers by encouraging them to pray for the departed, about whose fate they worried – since the dead had died before the second advent of Christ which they believed was imminent. First, any such claim involves an argument from silence – which is always theologically hazardous. Second, there was simply no need for the Thessalonians to pray for the departed since the dead, St Paul reassures them, are not in any danger of missing Christ's return. They will be resurrected and, together with living believers, will share in his victory. See 1 Thess. 4.13–18.

in the 1552 revision – where prayer is for the church militant on earth, not for the whole of Christ's church (including the church expectant in purgatory). While the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century divines condemned intercession for the delivery of souls from purgatory, some – such as Archbishop James Ussher – accepted commemoration of the righteous dead as practiced by the early church. In the 1662 prayer book a petition was added to the Prayer for the Church: 'we also bless thy holy name for all thy servants departed this life in thy faith and fear; beseeching thee to give us grace so to follow their good examples, that with them we may be partakers of thy heavenly kingdom'. The nineteenth-century Anglo-Catholic movement sought to recover the Catholic roots of the Church of England. *Tract* 72 reproduced Ussher's statement on PFD, and in *Tracts* 79 and 90 John Henry Newman argued that, rightly understood, many Roman Catholic practices – including PFD – are compatible with the *Thirty Nine Articles*. While there were differences between them, both he and Edward Pusey rejected a punishing purgatory but accepted a sanctifying process after death and prayer for the increased bliss of the Christian dead. The evangelical Church Association opposed the Oxford movement. *Tracts* 3 and 214 repeat the arguments of earlier formularies, condemning all PFD as unscriptural, incompatible with salvation by grace, inseparable from belief in purgatory and rejected in Anglican tradition. In 1873 a guild was founded to promote celebration of All Souls Day with masses of intercession for those in purgatory, practices which the 1906 Royal Commission on Ecclesiastical Discipline declared inconsistent with Anglican teaching.

The problem of hell also divides Anglicans. While some church fathers taught universal reconciliation, St Augustine's doctrines of particular salvation and eternal damnation became the orthodox positions which have dominated Western theology. Universalism was condemned as heresy by the Fifth Ecumenical Council in 553. Both before and after the Reformation, hell was understood as retributive justice for deserving sinners. Church of England formularies affirmed unending punishment, but in omitting Thomas Cranmer's 42nd Article, did not condemn universalism.⁴ Ussher rejected the 'doubtful

4. T. Cranmer, 'Forty-two Articles', found at <https://mywebpace.wisc.edu/dgehring/web/hist361/week5.html>. 'All men shall not be saved at the length. They also are worthy of condemnation who endeavor at this time to restore the dangerous opinion that all men, be they never so ungodly, shall at length be saved, when they have suffered pains for their sins a certain time appointed by God's justice.'

conceits of God's mercifully dealing with the wicked in the world to come'. Because this life determines spiritual destiny, no help can come to the damned after death – and so it is a 'wrong end' to pray for their salvation.⁵ In the nineteenth century Frederic Farrar and Frederick Maurice questioned the traditional view of hell, arguing that because there is no limit to God's love, death is not a decisive break, post-mortem repentance is possible and most – if not all – sinners in hell will eventually be restored to God. Both Newman and Pusey disagreed. While embracing inclusivism (most people, including those who do not hear and believe the gospel, will be saved) and escapism (the damned can be saved from hell), they rejected universalism – arguing that everlasting punishment is a correlate of free will. William Alger and Samuel Cox opposed retributivism, claiming that hell's purpose is reformatory and salvation beyond death is possible. The 1864 Oxford Declaration reaffirmed eternal hell against Henry Wilson's call for greater theological latitude in the Church of England. In the twentieth century John Robinson and John Hick professed universal salvation while John Stott and Tom Wright defended eternal damnation – as does the revised Catechism.⁶

In the 1960s the Church of England Commission on Christian Doctrine examined theology and practice concerning the dead. It rejected a punishing purgatory and disagreed on intercession for the dead, but accepted commemoration of the faithful departed as theologically and liturgically appropriate. While acknowledging that PFD is a divisive issue, the Commission did recommend three general prayers which it believed would be acceptable to all Anglicans. The first is a general intercession for the church, including the Christian dead: 'May God in his infinite love and mercy bring the whole Church, living and departed in the Lord Jesus, to a joyful resurrection and the fulfillment of his eternal kingdom.' The second are commendations and thankful remembrances for specific individuals: 'We commend *N.* to God', 'We commend to God almighty this our brother *N.* here departed', and 'We thank thee, O God, for the life and witness of thy servant *N.*, whom we remember before you this day'. The third is a general prayer for all the departed – including the non-Christian dead – which acknowledges both that we do not know how God deals with those who have died outside of faith in Christ and that God desires the

5. J. Ussher, 'Tract 72: Archbishop Ussher on Prayers for the Dead', found at <http://anglicanhistory.org/tracts/tranct72.html>, p. 20.

6. See G. Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

salvation of all people: 'O God of infinite mercy and justice, who has made man in thine own image, and hatest nothing that thou hast made, we rejoice in thy love for all creation and commend all men to thee, that in them thy will be done, in and through Jesus Christ our Lord.'⁷

I turn now to defend intercessory prayer for all the dead, noting where my argument departs from and intersects with historic Anglican positions. I do not offer an exercise in speculative philosophy, but a theological inference from divine revelation and central convictions of Christian faith. My view is prescriptive (expressing what we theologically should think of ourselves as doing when we PFD), not descriptive (stating what Anglicans actually do think they are doing). Anglicans normally pray only for those who have died in the faith, with most provinces following the wording – sometimes amended – of the 1662 prayer book.⁸ The 1979 Episcopal Church (USA) *Book of Common Prayer* is almost alone in including prayers for all the departed.⁹ While such intercessions are not widely accepted across the Anglican Communion,¹⁰ Form IV follows the wording suggested by the Commission on Doctrine: 'we ... commend all men to thee, that in them thy will be done.' I use this form – 'we commend to your mercy all who have died, that your will for them may be fulfilled' – to consider what we pray for (what God's will is for human beings) and

7. Archbishops' Commission on Christian Doctrine, *Prayer and the Departed* (London: SPCK, 1971), pp. 51, 52, 55.

8. See, for example, the 1929 Scotland BCP, 1954 South Africa BCP, 1962 Canada BCP, 1966 New Zealand BCP, 1996 Nigeria BCP (all found at www.justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp), the Church of England Common Worship texts (found at www.churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/worship/texts.aspx) and Anglican Church of Kenya, *Our Modern Services* (Nairobi: Uzima, 2002).

9. The Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Seabury, 1979), Rite I follows the 1662 prayer book wording. Rite II has six forms of prayers of the people, all of which include a petition for the dead. Form I identifies those who died in the hope of the resurrection *and* all the departed; Form II mentions the departed, those who have died; Form III refers to the departed and the saints; Form IV prays for all who have died; Form V distinguishes those who have died in the communion of God's church *and* those whose faith is known only to God; Form VI is for all who have died.

10. The 1982 Scottish Liturgy, Intercession Form 1, has a petition for all the dead: 'For those who are separated from us by death; that theirs may be the kingdom which is unshakeable, we pray to you, O Lord' (found at http://www.scotland.anglican.org/media/liturgy/liturgy/scottish_liturgy_1982_a4.pdf). The 1989 New Zealand Prayer Book (San Francisco: Harper, 1997, p. 483) contains a general petition for all the departed: 'We remember those who have died. Father, into your hands we commend them.'

whom we pray for (why we commend all, saved and damned alike, to God's mercy).

Theological Assumptions

What We Pray: 'that your will for them may be fulfilled'

In the prayers we ask that God's will for the departed be fulfilled. But what is God's will for the dead? For that matter, what is God's will for the living – or for human beings at all? 'To understand the end', Wright advises, 'begin with the beginning'.¹¹ God's purpose for humankind is rooted in God's nature, the very essence of which is self-giving love (1 Jn 4.8, 16). Inwardly, God is Trinity – a communion of persons eternally bound together by the mutual exchange of love and shared life. And outwardly, Timothy Jackson says, 'the primary moral attribute of the biblical God is steadfast love (*hesed, agape*), a willing of the good for all creation'.¹² This love is an essential property that defines the identity of God, not an accidental quality that God just happens to have. As a relational being, God created human persons with a relational purpose. We are called to enter a friendship with God that grows and deepens in this life and throughout eternity. This relational understanding of God's purpose stretches from God walking in the garden with our first parents (Gen. 3.8) to the feast of union between Christ and the Church (Rev. 19.6–7; 22.17). God's desire is expressed in the formula of promise given Israel – 'I will be with you, and you shall be my people, and I will dwell in the midst of you' (Exod. 29.45; Lev. 26.11–12; cf. 2 Cor. 6.16). The end of all history is described with the same pledge: 'the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them' (Rev. 21.3).

God's purpose in creating human beings is relational – that we share in the loving life of the triune God (2 Pet. 1.4). This suggests a relational anthropology. The *imago dei* is the power to form relationships; we are created for lives of love, to enjoy fellowship with God (and neighbor). Two implications follow. First, we are essentially spiritual beings – creatures who are structurally oriented to God and who find our deepest fulfillment in loving communion with God. Desire for God is an elemental part of human nature; believers and non-believers alike are

11. M. Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), p. 197.

12. T. Jackson, *The Priority of Love* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 72.

spiritual beings who long, often unconsciously, for intimacy with the God for whom they are meant and in whose love they find their *summum bonum*. 'You have made us for yourself, O Lord', St Augustine said, 'and our hearts are restless until they rest in you'.¹³ Second, we are essentially free beings. While God wants fellowship with us, love cannot be forced; we must willingly reciprocate God's love by our own decision. Loving relationships of any kind require free will, and so God has endowed human beings with the ability to choose between genuine alternatives.

Given God's relational nature and purpose, the doctrines of sin, salvation and individual eschatology are better understood personally than legally. God's reason for making each person is that they might enjoy union with God. But because we are free, we can reject God's love. In a relational hamartiology the essence of sin is not breaking rules; it is breaking relationship, turning away from communion with God. The result is alienation; our relationship with God is estranged. In a relational soteriology the essence of salvation is not legal acquittal; it is restored relationship, the mending of our separation from God. Renewed fellowship requires both that God act (by offering salvation and assisting us to respond) and that we act (by freely accepting God's love in repentance and faith). Friendship with God begins in this life and is perfected in the next. In a relational eschatology the essence of consummation is complete communion with God in the Kingdom where creation is restored and sin, suffering and death are destroyed. Our destiny is to 'dwell in the house of the Lord' (Ps. 23.6), finding fullness of joy in God's presence.

In PFD when we pray that 'your will ... may be fulfilled' we are not, the Commission on Doctrine says, 'pleading with a reluctant God to change his mind'.¹⁴ Instead, we are asking for the completion of God's creative and redemptive purpose – that all persons participate in the mutual love of the Trinity.

For Whom We Pray: 'we commend to your mercy all who have died'

The Augustinian tradition claims that God has two separate goals for humanity: for some, salvation (demonstrating mercy), for others, damnation (demonstrating justice). But Scripture and plain reason indicate that God's love and salvific will extend to everyone. First, in

13. Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1 (trans. H. Chadwick; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 3.

14. Archbishops' Commission, *Prayer and the Departed*, p. 19.

the biblical witness St Paul asserts that God 'desires everyone to be saved' and that God's grace has appeared 'bringing salvation to all' (1 Tim. 2.4, 11). St Peter states that God is 'not wanting any to perish' (2 Pet. 3.9) and St John says that Jesus' death was 'the atoning sacrifice ... for the sins of the whole world' (1 Jn 2.2). Second, theological reasoning implies that God loves everyone. God's reason for making each person is that they might enjoy friendship with God, and so it would be irrational for God not to call some into that relationship. To create persons for union with God and then refuse to try to bring this about would destroy the very meaning of God's intent in making them at all – frustrating both them and God. Third, moral reasoning shows that God's love is universal. All human beings have the same inherent worth and each person's spiritual welfare is as important as everyone else's. Thus love, as a matter of rational consistency, treats all individuals the same.¹⁵ God does not have two goals – salvation for the elect and damnation for the rest. Instead, God has only one purpose for humanity – that all share in the union with God for which they were created.¹⁶

But does God's intent to enter relationship last forever? Does God's saving love include only the living or also the dead? To answer, consider a different question. The prayers of the people ask God to do something. Any sensible intercessory prayer must be for things that are possible for God to do (such as heal an illness). Senseless prayers, by contrast, ask things that are impossible for God to do (such as create a square circle). PFD is sensible only if it is possible for God's will for the dead to be fulfilled. Assume, for the sake of argument, that God desires salvation for the damned. For this to happen, both God's offer of grace and their ability to respond must continue beyond death. These two conditions constitute an open view of death. The closed view – found in *Homily 19.3* – says that eternal spiritual destiny is fixed at death, when all chance for reconciliation with God ends.¹⁷ The open view – taught by Farrar, Maurice and Pusey – states that death

15. I develop these arguments in J. Gould, 'The Grace We Are Owed', *Faith and Philosophy* 25 (2008), pp. 261–75; 'Broad Inclusive Salvation: The Logic of "Anonymous Christianity"', *Philosophy and Theology* 20 (2008), pp. 175–98; 'Earning, Deserving, and the Catechism's Understanding of Grace', *Anglican Theological Review* 91 (2009), pp. 373–94.

16. See J. Bonda, *The One Purpose of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

17. Church Association, 'Tract 126: Prayers for the Dead (Extract from Homily 19.3)', found at: <http://www.churchsociety.org/publications/catracts.htm>. 'Every mortal man dieth either in the state of salvation or damnation ... the soul of man

is not a point-of-no-return beyond which forgiveness is impossible. God never stops offering salvation and individuals never lose their freedom to accept. I turn in a moment to defend these claims; here I am simply pointing out that they are necessary assumptions if prayer for all the dead is to be sensible.

But, it might be objected, the closed view of death is clearly taught in Scripture. An exegetical study is beyond my purpose, but consider four passages commonly taken to show the finality of death. First, in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus the damned Dives is told, 'between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us' (Lk. 16.26). This parable does teach the general truth of rewards and punishments after death, but we must be careful not to infer too much from its details – especially since the point of both stories in Luke 16 concern the just use of wealth, not personal eschatology.¹⁸ Second, Heb. 9.27 states that 'it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment'. The traditional interpretation is that there are no more chances for salvation after death, but the verse simply does not teach that. It does say that we live and die once and that judgment comes after death; but it does not say what the purpose or result of judgment is, that God's love stops reaching out to the damned or that they cannot be saved beyond the grave.¹⁹ The same is true for 2 Cor. 5.10 – 'all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body'. While our choices for or against God during earthly life are important, time in the body is not decisive for a person's spiritual destiny.²⁰ Finally, consider Jn 5.28–29: 'the hour is

(*F*'note continued)

passing out of the body, goeth straightways either to heaven, or else to hell, whereof the one needeth no prayer, and the other is without redemption'.

18. J. Sanders, *No Other Name* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 191. See also N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), p. 176: this parable 'use[s] stock imagery from ancient Judaism, such as "Abraham's bosom," not to teach about what happens after death but to insist on justice and mercy within the present life.'

19. See R. Neuhaus, *Death on a Friday Afternoon* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), p. 52: 'it seems doubtful that [Heb. 9] is intended as a schedule, stating in a punctiliar way a sequence of events. Not too much weight should be placed on what is, after all, a subordinate clause in a passage making the point that Christ had to die only once for our sins.'

20. There is an intrinsic relationship between our actions in this life and our destiny in the next. Heaven is not an arbitrary reward nor hell an arbitrary

coming when all who are in their graves will hear [the voice of the Son] and will come out – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.’ We are told here about a resurrection of judgment, but are not told that this judgment brings eternal damnation or that the state of being condemned constitutes God’s final dealing with the damned.²¹ Scripture, then, does not explicitly teach the closed view of death or rule out the open view. There are, I will claim, strong theological arguments for seeing the open view as a reasonable inference from what is revealed in Scripture.

God’s love is inclusive; it is not limited to those in the Christian West, but reaches to all nations and historical times. And God’s love is eternal; it is not restricted to the living, but extends to the dead and includes both the saved and the damned. This is why we offer petitions for all who live and for all who have died, saint and sinner alike.

Theological Implications

I turn now to consider in detail what we pray for the departed. For none of them has God’s will been completely fulfilled: those in heaven have not yet been resurrected in God’s new creation, those in purgatory lack mature love and are not fully united with God, and those in hell are separated from God.

We Pray for the Resurrection of Those in Heaven

In Greek philosophy, the future state is one of disembodied spiritual survival – and many people think that we go to heaven as immaterial souls when we die. But this is not the Christian vision of the life of the world to come.²² The final destiny is resurrection of the material body in a restored creation. At death the righteous enter into joy, but not fullness of joy. They are with Christ in an interim state, but do not achieve complete blessedness until resurrection at the last day. The intermediate hope of the perfectly good is Paradise or heaven,

(Footnote continued)

punishment for how we live this life. Rather, how we live shapes us into certain sorts of persons, and our afterlife destinies are extensions of the characters we have chosen in this life. See W. Mattison, *Introducing Moral Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), pp. 206, 264.

21. See Bonda, *One Purpose of God*, p. 121.

22. This section draws on N.T. Wright, *For All the Saints* (New York: Morehouse, 2003) and *Surprised by Hope*.

a temporary place of restful happiness in the presence of God. The ultimate hope is the renewal of the entire cosmos, including bodily resurrection and the coming of Jesus in person to an earth made new. As Kendra Hotz and Matthew Matthews put it, 'Christian hope longs not for a flight of our souls from our bodies to a purely spiritual realm that replaces the present creation; rather, we long for the "new creation" that embraces and restores the goodness of the present material order.'²³ This view – which contradicts the formularies' claim of immediate translation to the final state – is held by many Anglicans, including Ussher, Newman, Pusey, the Commission on Doctrine and Wright.

God's ultimate will for human beings – resurrection in a recreated earth – is still future for both the living and the dead. Because the saints in heaven are in an imperfect condition, having not yet 'experienced the completeness of redemption', we pray 'that they may come to the fulfillment of God's complete purposes' – that all creation be restored and that God's reign fully come.²⁴ In the words of the Commission on Doctrine, we petition God to 'bring the whole Church, living and departed ... to a joyful resurrection and the fulfillment of his eternal kingdom'. We ask that, as they await the completion of salvation, the saints 'be refreshed and filled with God's joy and peace'.²⁵ This, Ussher notes, was the meaning of PFD in the ancient church: its focus was the day of resurrection.²⁶ This petition is fully in line with Anglican tradition – at least among those who assume an intermediate state between death and resurrection. I move, then, to controversial matters.

*We Pray for the Sanctification of Those in Purgatory*²⁷

Neal Judisch summarizes the argument for purgatory as follows. Union with God requires moral perfection – an ability to love with all our hearts. Few people achieve holiness in this life. God cannot

23. K. Hotz and M. Matthews, *Shaping the Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), p. 74.

24. Wright, *For All Saints*, p. 24.

25. Wright, *For All Saints*, p. 39; cf. *Surprised by Hope*, p. 172.

26. Ussher, 'Tract 72', pp. 10, 12, 25.

27. Prayer for the faithful departed assumes the doctrine of the communion of the saints, which teaches that God's people include all Christians, living and dead. There is a mystical and practical unity and interaction between God's people on earth and God's people in heaven, a bond that is not broken by death. We can be helped by the prayers of the saints and the dead can be helped by the prayers of the church. Just as intercessions aid in sanctifying the living, so PFD assists those in purgatory to grow in holy love.

unilaterally give us a radically altered nature at death. Therefore, there is some kind of post-mortem process of spiritual growth by which we are transformed into the kind of beings who can enter perfect and eternal union with God.²⁸

The inner life of the triune God is one of persons in communion, and God made human beings to enjoy that fellowship eternally. As long as we are focused on ourselves, we cannot give ourselves to God in love or participate fully in God's relational life. Human sinfulness has two dimensions, and salvation deals with both. Sin creates a problem between us and God; it alienates us from God objectively. Justification removes the guilt of sin and puts us right with God. But sin is also a problem within us; it makes us self-centered subjectively. Sanctification frees us from sin's power and makes us loving. Being forgiven and being purified are two different things. An alcoholic son does not stop having a drinking problem just because his parents pardon him for wrecking the family car. He still needs moral reform. In the same way, a relational change in God's attitude to us does not automatically change our characters. While not mutually exclusive, and while salvation brings both pardon and healing, it is, John Hick says, 'this reality of persons transformed, or in process of transformation, from self-centeredness to God-centeredness, that constitutes the substance of Christian salvation'.²⁹

28. N. Judisch, 'Sanctification, Satisfaction, and the Purpose of Purgatory', *Faith and Philosophy* 26 (2009), p. 170. The argument can be formalized in logical notation as follows:

M: Entering full union with God requires moral perfection

T: We become morally perfect in this life

D: We become morally perfect at the moment of death

A: We become morally perfect after death in the next life

1. M

2. $M \supset (T \vee D \vee A)$

3. $T \vee D \vee A$ *Modus Ponens* 2,1

4. $\sim T$

5. $\sim D$

6. A *Disjunctive Syllogism* 3,4,5

29. J. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2nd edn, 2004), p. 44. J. Walls (*Heaven: The Logic of Eternal Joy* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002], p. 50) agrees: 'the heart of salvation is to change us so we gladly love and obey God. This is how we are united to him in a relationship of mutual love ... The essence of salvation is real transformation that allows us to love God and enjoy fellowship with him. The element of forgiveness, although crucial, is secondary to this.'

Salvation, Maurice agrees, is primarily deliverance from internal sin, not external punishment.

To enjoy the fellowship of the Trinity eternally we must be able to love perfectly. This either happens before death during this life, at the moment of death or after death in the next life. The first option is clearly false. At death most believers' ability to love is fragmentary; they are in right standing with God but are not ready for the most intimate fellowship with God. This leaves two options. Either we are instantly sanctified by a unilateral act of God at the moment of death or we are gradually sanctified by our own free choices in the period after death.

Protestants have typically believed the first option – at death God abruptly transforms us into morally perfect people without our cooperation. Wright says that 'although during the present life we struggle with sin, and may or may not make small and slight progress towards genuine holiness, our remaining propensity to sin is finished, cut off, done with all at once, in physical death'. Wright cites a number of texts – Jn 11.25–26, 13.10 and 15.3, Rom. 5.2, 6.6–7 and 8.10–11, Col. 2.11–13, and 1 Jn 1.7 – which, he claims, indicate that 'bodily death itself actually puts sin to an end'.³⁰ Regardless of a believer's degree of sanctification, God gives them a completely loving character at death, thus instantly preparing them for full entry to God's presence.

This view of moral transformation is troublesome for several reasons. First, the biblical texts offered by Wright simply do not say that the death of the body gets rid of all that is self-centered. Nor does belief in progressive purification after death contradict these verses. In Rom. 6.6–7 St Paul considers an objection: should we sin more in order to experience more grace? His answer concerns baptism, not physical death. Baptism unites us to Christ's death (thus separating us from a sinful way of living) and to Christ's resurrection (thereby creating a new quality of life apart from sin). Baptism does not eradicate our sinful nature, since St Paul goes on to urge continual moral effort to behave in keeping with the new life of righteousness, not the old life of sin (6.12–13). Nowhere in this discussion of baptism does St Paul imply – as Wright somehow assumes – that bodily death instantly transforms our characters. The same goes for Col. 2.11–13, where St Paul indicates that spiritual circumcision of the heart – putting off the sinful nature which acts against God – occurs at baptism. He is not talking about physical death at all, but about regeneration to a new way of living in this life. And in a verse Wright does not cite – 1 Cor. 15.50–53 – it is

30. Wright, *For All Saints*, pp. 29–32; cf. *Surprised by Hope*, p. 170.

physical change – ‘this perishable body [putting] on imperishability’ – not moral change which occurs ‘in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye’ at the *parousia*.

Second, instantaneous divine transformation would make us passive in the process of sanctification. Salvation, recall, involves both an objective change in relational status that happens between God and us and a subjective change in moral condition that happens within us. Justification, an instantaneous event, is God’s act alone – it is God who welcomes us back into fellowship on the basis of Christ’s merit (Rom. 5.1). But sanctification, a gradual process, requires active cooperation between us and God (Phil. 2.12–13). Moral growth involves habituation; virtues like love are developed by repeated actions which engrave specific attitudes and behaviors into our characters until they become second nature. Moral goodness must be chosen by us, not done for us; it must be cultivated, not conferred. If God were to perfect us immediately and unilaterally, we would inherit a ready-made moral character, not one that is truly our own.³¹

Third, instant sanctification provided by God would disrupt the continuity of personal identity – the property of remaining the same through change. Gradual alteration preserves identity while instantaneous transformation does not. If a newborn baby changed directly into an elderly senior, we would not think the two individuals were the same person. In the same way, if a very imperfect believer dies and at death God instantly gives her loving dispositions, then the individual who lived on earth and the one who exists after death are not the same person since their moral characters share little in common (just like if Adolf Hitler took a pill that at once gave him the virtues of St Francis). Instantaneous purging annihilates the person by abruptly removing properties by which they are, at least partly, constituted. Gradual sanctification maintains identity because the individual at different stages of moral development – the earlier imperfect person and the later perfect one – are connected together as a single person.³²

31. This argument is made in D. Brown, ‘No Heaven without Purgatory’, *Religious Studies* 21 (1985), pp. 447–56. I do not mean to suggest that God’s work plays no part in human sanctification. While we contribute to developing holiness and love, our growth is always a gift of God’s grace through the operation of the Holy Spirit.

32. This argument is made in J. Barnard, ‘Purgatory and the Dilemma of Sanctification’, *Faith and Philosophy* 24 (2007), pp. 311–30. The Hitler example comes from M. Adams, ‘Divine Justice, Divine Love and the Life to Come’, *Crux* 13 (1976–77), p. 25.

Purgatory is thus a logical implication of understanding salvation as moral renewal, in which we take part, that enables us to love God perfectly. John Paul II summarizes:

Purgatory is the process of purification for those who die in the love of God but who are not completely imbued with that love. Sacred Scripture teaches us that we must be purified if we are to enter into perfect and complete union with God. Jesus Christ, who became the perfect expiation for our sins and took upon himself the punishment that was our due, brings us God's mercy and love. But before we enter into God's Kingdom every trace of sin within us must be eliminated, every imperfection in our soul must be corrected. This is exactly what takes place in purgatory.³³

I must now address two objections. First, it might be thought that belief in purgatory contradicts Scripture. Wright argues that purgatory is incompatible with Jesus' promise 'today you will be with me in Paradise' (Lk. 23.43) and St Paul's teaching that to depart this life is to be with Christ (2 Cor. 5.8; Phil. 1.23).³⁴ This problem is answered, however, when purgatory is understood as part of heaven, not as a third place intermediate between heaven and hell, when it is seen as a lesser heaven rather than a lesser hell. The ECUSA Catechism teaches that we pray for the dead because 'we trust that in God's presence those who have chosen to serve him will grow in his love, until they see him as he is'.³⁵ All departed believers are in God's presence, but only some – those who are perfected in love – see God as God is. This same thought is in the ECUSA Contemporary Collect for

33. John Paul II, cited in Judisch, 'Sanctification', p. 167.

34. Wright, *For All Saints*, pp. 21–25 and *Surprised by Hope*, p. 169.

35. *Episcopal Book of Common Prayer*, p. 862. The brief catechism found in most prayer books dates from 1662 and covers the Apostles' Creed, Ten Commandments, Lord's Prayer and Sacraments; it does not mention prayer for the dead. The 1982 Revised catechism of the Church of England (found at <http://frsimon.wordpress.com/2009/02/21/revised-catechism-of-the-church-of-england/>), while discussing the Christian Hope, has no entry on prayer for the departed; the same is true of the Anglican Church of Kenya (see the Catechism in *Our Modern Services*). The catechism used by the Province of Southern Africa does discuss PFD in question 139: 'Why do we remember the dead in prayer? We remember them, because we still hold them in our love and because we trust that in God's presence those who have chosen to serve him will grow in his love, until they see him as he is' (found at <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/resources/acis/docs/cat1.cfm>). The entry is identical to the Episcopal catechism, except – significantly – for the rewording of 'praying' for the dead as 'remembering' the dead.

the Departed: 'we pray that, having opened to him the gates of larger life, you will receive him more and more into your joyful service'.³⁶ Heaven has different levels. At death those who possess saving faith but imperfect character enter the purgatorial level where they enjoy communion with God, albeit incompletely. As they grow in love for God, they move to the beatific vision level where they see God as God is. In this model of purgatory, all of the saved (the perfectly good and the partly good) are in the conscious presence of Christ – but only the former are completely united with God. Purgatory is not, as Wright thinks, an unbiblical 'semi-salvation ... in some dismal and perhaps painful waiting-room'.³⁷

Second, it might seem that belief in purgatory contradicts Anglican teaching. Point 22 in the *Thirty Nine Articles* says, 'The Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory ... is a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture'.³⁸ While the Reformers had good reason to reject the scandals involving indulgences, pardons, relics and invocations to the saints, it is possible – as Newman argued – to believe in purgatory without accepting 'the Romish doctrine'.³⁹ Wright boldly asserts that 'there is [only] one doctrine of purgatory, that taught by Rome, and Anglicans reject it'.⁴⁰ But this is flatly false, since the satisfaction and sanctification views are clearly different. In the satisfaction theory the purpose of purgatory is to remove guilt by paying for sins which are not repented of before death. The problem with this view is that, according to Scripture, Christ alone makes complete and final satisfaction for sin. 'The blood of Jesus ... cleanses us from all sin' (1 Jn 1.7) and since 'in him we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins' (Col. 1.14), 'there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Rom. 8.1). As Wright says, 'the idea that

36. *Episcopal Book of Common Prayer*, p. 253. The two traditional ECUSA collects for the departed are for grace to follow the example of all the saints now at rest and for remembrance of a specific individual – 'that thou wilt receive him more and more into thy joyful service' (p. 202). See also the Rite I burial prayers (p. 481): 'Grant that, increasing in knowledge and love of thee, he may go from strength to strength in the life of perfect service in thy heavenly kingdom.' Rite II burial prayers make no such reference. Most Anglican prayer books (for example, the Church of England, Anglican Church of Canada and New Zealand Prayer Book) use the wording: 'work in them the good purpose of thy perfect will.'

37. Wright, *For All Saints*, pp. 51, 53.

38. *Episcopal Book of Common Prayer*, p. 872.

39. This section draws on Barnard, 'Purgatory'.

40. Wright, *For All Saints*, p. 28.

Christians need to suffer punishment for their sins in a post-mortem purgatory ... reveals a straightforward failure to grasp the very heart of what was achieved on the cross'.⁴¹ But while the imperfect do not need further punishment, they do need additional purification. In the sanctification theory that I have defended the purpose of purgatory is not to pay for sin, but is to complete the process of transformation which is necessary for eternal fellowship with God. As Justin Barnard puts it, 'on the satisfaction model, what gets purged through the purgatorial process is the penalty for sin ... By contrast, what gets purged in the sanctification model is the disposition to sin.'⁴²

The nineteenth-century Tractarians and pietists agreed that union with God requires holiness; this emphasis on sanctification led to belief in a maturing process after death and – given the communion of saints – PFD. They found support in Patristic teaching about post-mortem purification and St Catherine of Genoa's vision of purgatory as morally dynamic preparation for our true end in love of God.⁴³ Many Anglicans have abandoned the Reformers' assumption that death in and of itself perfectly sanctifies a person's character. While some avoided the term 'purgatory', Ussher, Newman, Pusey, Maurice, Claude Moss, C.S. Lewis and the Commission on Doctrine all embrace the idea that those who die in a state of grace and favor with God but who are not free of sin and ready for complete union with God need a period of growth in their ability to love.⁴⁴ A punishing purgatory

41. Wright, *For All Saints*, p. 30.

42. Barnard, 'Purgatory', p. 326. Judisch, 'Sanctification', argues that the two models are identical when properly understood.

43. See Rowell, *Hell and Victorians*, pp. 37, 104.

44. Consider, for example, what J. Newman ['Tract 90,' found at <http://anglicanhistory.org/tracts/tract90/section6.html>] says. In distinction to the Romish doctrine of a punishing purgatory, there are three non-Romish doctrines: 'a primitive doctrine ... concerning the fire of judgment'; a 'cleansing' involving the pain of 'the absence of God's presence'; and 'another purgatory ... in which the cleansing is but a progressive sanctification. None of these doctrines does the Article condemn.' Or consider O. Thomas's conclusion (*Introduction to Theology* [Cambridge: Greeno and Hadden, 1973], pp. 169–70): 'Article 22 denies the "Romish doctrine of purgatory" but may be interpreted not to rule out other doctrines of purgatory. If it is affirmed that all die imperfect and that the fulfillment involves the perfection of all persons, then the alternatives would seem to be a sudden transformation or a process of moral growth involving purgation from sin. The prayers for the dead in the Book of Common Prayer imply the latter view.' Also, consider Pusey (cited in H. Liddon, 'Life of Edward Bouverie Pusey', found at <http://anglicanhistory.org/pusey/liddon/4.16.html> Liddon,

aimed at pardon is inconsistent with Anglican teaching, but a purifying process aimed at moral improvement is not.

Seeing purgatory as 'heavenly sanctification' answers both objections.⁴⁵ And so we pray that the faithful departed in purgatory complete the process of sanctification, that the selfishness which remains in their characters is purified, that they are perfected in their ability to love and soon come to complete union with God. We pray that in God's presence they grow in God's love and service until they see God as God is.

*We Pray for the Salvation of Those in Hell*⁴⁶

As the logical complement of heaven, hell is a necessary part of Christian theology. God's purpose in creation is that all persons freely choose relationship with God. But we can refuse, and hell is what happens when we do. Hell is a place of separation, a natural consequence of rejecting God and living a self-centered life. Hell is possible and, sadly, actual. But is it permanent – or can those in hell return to God? If hell is escapable, then God's offer of salvation and the sinner's ability to accept must continue past death. I now defend my earlier claim that both do. While the Catechism limits PFD to the saved, there are good reasons to extend it to the damned.

God's Love Does Not End at Death. God's love applies not just to this present life, but to the future as well. Marilyn Adams offers this argument: 'if His primary purpose in creating us is that we should become the sort of persons who can and do enter into loving personal

(Footnote continued)

p. 5): 'our own consciences may tell us that, our repentance for our sins [and our longing for the sight of God] having been very imperfect, ... we are not fit to behold Him. This, perhaps, more than the direct dread of hell, is the source of the fear of death to many. They trust in God's mercy in Christ, that they shall be saved; but they feel themselves unfit to enter into His Presence. To be admitted into any vestibule of His Presence – where they ... may be ever freed from the slough which has clung to them in this life – this is not too high for their hopes.' Finally, see C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1963), pp. 106–11 (Letter XX).

45. This term comes from D. Vander Laan, 'The Sanctification Argument for Purgatory', *Faith and Philosophy* 24 (2007), pp. 331–39.

46. The church's prayers are not limited to believers but include 'those who [in this life] do not yet believe, and ... those who have lost their faith, that they may receive the light of the gospel' (*Episcopal Book of Common Prayer*, p. 390). In the same way, I think, we should pray that the damned in hell may find and be found by God.

relationships with Him ... and if His love never ends, [then] it would seem that God would never give up on any one of us or despair of our eventual cooperation.⁴⁷ I have discussed the first premise, so let us consider the second and begin by defining love. To love someone is to will good for them, to actively promote their welfare, to help meet the needs that are necessary for their flourishing and without which they experience serious harm. Because we have been created for relationship with God and find there our supreme happiness, fellowship with God is essential for a person's well-being. To be separated from relationship with God is to find ourselves condemned to permanent frustration since our highest end is not satisfied. Because God loves us, God desires our ultimate fulfillment – our salvation.⁴⁸

This is the nature of God's love. As to its duration, Scripture states that it does not stop. 'The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end' (Lam. 3.22). God's 'steadfast love endures for ever' (Ps. 136). God's persistence is represented in the life of the prophet Hosea (1.14–2.23; 11.1–9), whose desire for relationship continued even when his wife turned to other lovers. Jesus says that, like a shepherd looking for the very last sheep, God actively seeks for every last one of us and will not rest until God finds us and wins us back (Mt. 18.10–14). He depicts God as a heartsick father anxiously awaiting the return of a wandering son (Lk. 15.11–32). The father's longing for reconciliation did not falter when his son cut off contact and moved far away. Loving parents always desire restored fellowship with an alienated child, as does God. Even those who have resisted God and excluded themselves

47. Adams, 'Divine Justice, Divine Love and Life to Come', p. 20. The argument can be formalized in logical notation as follows:

- P: God's primary purpose in creating us is for relationship
- L: God's love never ends
- N: God never gives up on anyone
- 1. $(P \bullet L) \supset N$
- 2. P
- 3. L
- 4. $P \bullet L$ *Conjunction 2,3*
- 5. N *Modus Ponens 1,4*

48. M. Adams ('The Problem of Hell', in E. Stump (ed.), *Reasoned Faith* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993], p. 304) defines an evil as 'horrendous' if suffering that evil means that within a person's experience good is defeated. Earthly life followed by separation from God is an instance of horrendous evil. For an unredeemed person, any temporal happiness enjoyed here will be wiped out by eternal suffering.

from God's presence are precious to God, and death does not end God's desire and work for their salvation.

'There is', Maurice says, 'an abyss of love deeper than the abyss of death'.⁴⁹ And so we must understand hell in light of God's unchanging character. Because love means treating a person in a way that enhances their well-being, God does all God properly can to promote the best interest of all persons.⁵⁰ It is contradictory to say that God loves someone but does not do all God properly can to save them. If at death God gives up and finally rejects a sinner (by withdrawing grace and doing no more to influence them to freely repent), then God is indifferent to their spiritual welfare and God's love is not genuine. To make death a deadline, Maurice argues, is to 'throw an atmosphere of doubt on the whole question whether God loves His creatures [and] desires their salvation'.⁵¹ Thomas Talbott agrees: 'that God should will *some* good for each [person] during, say, seventy years of life on earth is hardly evidence of love, not when that seventy years is followed by an eternity of separation ... The claim that [God] loves a person for a while and then ceases to love that person makes no sense at all.'⁵² Since God never stops loving, God does not cut off opportunities for salvation at death.

A biblical theology must take God's wrath, judgment and hell seriously. We should not, Wright urges, be soft on sin.⁵³ God is

49. F. Maurice, 'The word "Eternal" and the punishment of the wicked', found at http://Anglicanhistory.org/Maurice/jelf_letter1854.html, p. 12.

50. T. Talbott, 'The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment', *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (1990), pp. 23–30. God's goal – to have spiritual beings freely choose friendship with God – limits what God can do. God cannot do everything whatsoever that is within God's power to save people – using deception and coercion, for example. But God will do everything proper – that is, whatever is consistent with respecting free choice – to achieve this end.

51. Maurice, 'Word "Eternal"', pp. 17–18.

52. Talbott, 'Everlasting Punishment', pp. 21, 26; italics in original. The argument can be formalized in logical notation as follows:

L: God loves a person

C: God cannot act against a person's best interest

W: God withdraws grace

1. $L \supset \sim A$

2. L

3. $\sim A$ *Modus Ponens* 1,2

4. $\sim A \supset \sim W$

5. $\sim W$ *Modus Ponens* 4,3

53. See Wright, *For All Saints*, pp. 42–46 and *Surprised by Hope*, pp. 178–83.

committed to setting the world right – and this means eliminating, not tolerating, all that twists creation and vandalizes *shalom*. A good God must condemn evil, and so there is such a thing as judgment. As Wright notes, quoting Miroslav Volf, ‘there must be “exclusion” before there can be “embrace”’: evil must be identified, named and dealt with before there can be reconciliation.⁵⁴ But we must not separate divine justice (exclusion) from divine love (embrace). God’s love takes two forms: kindness and severity – both of which are means of saving grace. Since justice serves love, God’s call to salvation is present even in judgment. From the plagues of Egypt to the prophetic warnings to Israel and Judah, from Jonah’s admonition to the foreign city Nineveh to St Paul’s excommunication of a sexually immoral man, threats and acts of punishment are meant to bring people back to God. The goal of hell is remedial, as the Greek word *kolasis* (‘punishment’ – used by Jesus in Mt. 25.46) suggests.⁵⁵ God’s judgment aims at the sinner’s good, not simply to give them their just deserts. The fact that God judges in order to save means that judgment is penultimate rather than final – and Scripture confirms this. ‘His anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime’ (Ps. 30.5). ‘For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer’ (Isa. 54.7–8). ‘For the Lord will not reject forever. Although he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone’ (Lam. 3.31–33). ‘Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over ... transgression ...? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency’ (Mic. 7.18). ‘You are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing’ (Jn. 4.2; cf. Ps. 103.8–9; Joel 2.13). The prophet Hosea pictures God, not as a

54. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, p. 179.

55. T. Talbot, ‘A Pauline Interpretation of Divine Judgment’, in R. Parry and C. Partridge (eds.), *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 47. This argument extends a common explanation for why God allows suffering in the world. We do not seek happiness in God when things are going well and we have other satisfactions, but pain and suffering can drive us to God. Now if pain can be redemptive in this life, then so can suffering in the next life. See also A. Buckareff and A. Plug, ‘Escaping Hell: Divine Motivation and the Problem of Hell’, *Religious Studies* 41 (2005), pp. 39–54; E. Reitan, ‘Universalism and Autonomy’, *Faith and Philosophy* 18 (2001), pp. 222–40; and E. Reitan, ‘A Guarantee of Universal Salvation?’, *Faith and Philosophy* 24 (2007), pp. 413–32.

remote and austere judge, but as a parent who cannot let go of a wayward child. Having pronounced sentence on Israel (11.5–7 ‘they shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me’), God is unable to cut them off (11.8–9 ‘how can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? ... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger ... and I will not come in wrath’).⁵⁶ We can infer from these texts that, like sinful Israel, the damned who choose against God are still fiercely loved by God and that punishment is not God’s final purpose.

The idea that God – whose essence is ‘everlasting love’ (Jer. 31.4) – continuously offers grace after death to those who have rejected God is consistent with Anglican tradition. As Pusey wrote, ‘the conception of a future purification for those who have not utterly extinguished the grace of God in their hearts ... would put [one] in harmony with the whole of Christendom’.⁵⁷ Indeed, by 1938 many in the Church of England had relinquished belief in a purely punitive hell.⁵⁸ Because hell is reformatory rather than retributive, we can take seriously warnings about judgment without losing hope for final salvation.

Human Freedom Does Not End at Death. Death is not a limit on what God wants and is able to do. From God’s side there are endless opportunities for post-mortem salvation. The damned, however, must accept God’s invitation. The traditional view holds that hell is eternal punishment for past sins committed during earthly life. But hell is not retributive. Even if it was, eternal damnation would be unfair since just punishment is proportionate to a crime’s seriousness and the sins of this

56. J. Van Tholen, *Where All Hope Lies* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 179. This pattern of reversal – judgment followed by promise – is found throughout the prophets. Consider Micah: in 3.9–12 Jerusalem is destroyed, while in 4.1–5 it thrives and prospers once more. In Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem (Mt. 23.37–39), proclamation of judgment (‘see, your house is left ... desolate’) is followed by promise (‘you will ... see me again [and] say “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord”’).

57. Pusey, cited in Liddon, ‘Life of Edward Bouverie Pusey’, p. 7.

58. *Doctrine in the Church of England: The 1938 Report* with a new Introduction by G. Lampe (London: SPCK, 1982), p. 218: ‘Doctrine requires us to repudiate all conceptions of the Judgment which represent God as abandoning the appeal of Love and falling back on the exercise of omnipotent sovereignty to punish those who have failed to respond to the invitation of the Gospel.’ While this report was important, it certainly did not end debate on salvation and hell (as seen in the disagreements between Robinson-Hick universalists and Stott-Wright separatists).

life do not deserve everlasting punishment.⁵⁹ So if hell is eternal, it must be in response to continuing sin in the next life. The damned can choose to repent or not. Those who do leave hell, while those who continue to reject God stay separated from God. Suppose, at the start of a family gathering, I send my daughter to her room for fighting with her cousins, telling her 'when you can apologize and act nicely, you may come out'. I do not want her to be grounded very long, but she may become stubborn, refuse to say she is sorry and miss the entire party. She, not I, determines the length of her sentence. In the same way, if someone remains in hell eternally, this is not because their sins on earth merit everlasting punishment, but because after death they continue to resist God and to suffer separation from God as a continuing consequence.

In PFD we ask that this not happen, that the unsaved turn to God from their wicked ways. But is there reason to think that our prayer will be answered, that they will come to salvation? Eternal stubbornness is theoretically possible. But is it actually possible? Can anyone freely and eternally refuse God's love? Pusey says yes. 'Freewill implies the power ... to persevere in choosing amiss' until evil 'pervade[s] and disorder[s] the whole being' and the person cannot repent. But, he adds an important qualification: 'none will be lost, whom God can save, without destroying in them His own gift of freewill'.⁶⁰ Pusey thinks there are such reprobates; I do not.

Most sinners are not hardened rebels who hate God. Instead of consciously and deliberately rejecting God, they are restless and confused – busily engaged in the pleasures and problems of life and simply not thinking about God much at all. They do not defiantly refuse to believe, but simply find the gospel implausible. They turn from God by misjudging evil to be good – a way of creating a happy life, of satisfying the restlessness they feel as spiritual beings. 'The man at the brothel door', G.K. Chesterton observes, 'is looking for God'.⁶¹ Scripture portrays

59. This argument draws on C. Seymour, *A Theodicy of Hell* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000), ch. 3.

60. Pusey, cited in Liddon, 'Life of Edward Bouverie Pusey', pp. 4–5. Freewill theodicies of hell are defended by S. Davis, 'Universalism, Hell and the Fate of the Ignorant', *Modern Theology* 6 (1990), pp. 173–86 and J. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), ch. 5. See also Wright, *For All Saints*, pp. 42–46; *Surprised by Hope*, pp. 175–83; and ch. 10, 'Hell', in *Following Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

61. G.K. Chesterton, cited in R. Mouw, *Distorted Truth* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), p. 1.

even the most extreme acts – the crucifixion of Christ ('Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing' – Lk. 23.34) and Saul's violent persecution of the church ('I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief' – 1 Tim. 1.13) – as sins of ignorance rather than intentional wickedness.

A good God will not damn a person for decisions made in unfavorable circumstances. But those who resist God and choose hell do so in ignorance of both where true happiness lies and of the awful nature of separation from God. Because 'hell is a horror inconceivable to those who choose it', Charles Seymour says, 'we are not really choosing hell when we reject God in this life, for we have no clear idea what hell is like'.⁶² We cannot choose hell in this life since we are ignorant of its true nature, and we cannot choose hell in the next life once we are fully aware that separation from God brings only sorrow. When the child in her room, who wants to be happy, realizes she is missing the party, she has every reason to change her behavior – at least eventually. No one in their right mind will resist God forever once they experience firsthand the unhappiness of separation from God. Perhaps, though, as Pusey suggests, sinners choose hell eternally because they are enslaved by evil. Choices create habits, dispositions and behavior patterns that are hard to act against. Through the cumulative effect of numerous small decisions we can harden our characters – becoming habituated to bad desires, and unable to freely repent. But if this is the case, then God can gradually release us – repairing, not destroying, our freedom. Talbott concludes:

if God is the ultimate source of human happiness and separation from God can bring only greater and greater misery into one's life, ... then why should anyone want to reject God? Well, the person might be ignorant of certain facts about God, or mired in self-deception, or (perhaps as a consequence of previous bad choices) in bondage to unhealthy desires; any one of these conditions might provide them with a motive for rejecting God. Under such conditions as these, however, it would always remain open to God to remove their ignorance, or to shatter their illusions, or to free them from their bondage to desire; far from interfering with the person's freedom of choice, such actions would ... restore true freedom of choice. And once God has purged the individual of all ignorance and deception and bondage to desire, what motive for rejecting God would then remain?⁶³

62. Seymour, *Theodicy of Hell*, p. 136.

63. T. Talbott, 'Providence, Freedom and Human Destiny', *Religious Studies* 26 (1990), p. 228. The quote is slightly modified. For an exchange on these matters see articles by Walls and Talbott in *Religious Studies* 40 (2004), pp. 203–27.

St Augustine observed that, because we are made for God, we are discontent until we enter relationship with God. This is our essential *telos*, the end that fulfills our nature, the true good for which – as spiritual beings – we naturally long. Through experiencing the miserable consequences of living out of relationship with God, every person in hell will eventually learn – like the prodigal in the pig farm – that rejecting God cannot satisfy, and they will freely turn to God. As Hick says, ‘God does not have to coerce us to respond to him, for he has already so created us that our nature, seeking its own fulfillment and good, leads us to him.’⁶⁴ Even hell is not an end, but a means to the end of salvation.

It is, then, impossible to freely reject God forever. One can reject God eternally only if one is acting in ignorance or bondage (and is thus not free). Or one can reject God freely (but only temporarily). What one cannot do is reject God both freely and eternally. So we can reverse Pusey’s argument: God will eventually evoke a free response from all people, saving them ‘without destroying in them His own gift of freewill’. Thus ‘none will be lost’.⁶⁵ Pusey’s view and my own are not far

64. J. Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 252.

65. The argument can be formalized in logical notation as follows:

S: God can save all persons without destroying their free will

L: None will be lost

1. $S \supset N$

2. S

3. N *Modus Ponens* 1,2

Pusey and I agree on 1; we disagree on 2. As Thomas (*Introduction to Theology*, pp. 168–69) says: the issue of universal salvation ‘comes down to a decision as to whether we are to give more weight to human freedom to turn away from God’s love or to the power of God’s love to win all people freely to himself. Any victory of God which violates human freedom is not a victory of love but of coercion. But it is possible to conceive a love which is so powerful that ultimately no one will be able to restrain himself from free and grateful surrender.’ J. Hick (*Evil and the God of Love* [San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978], pp. 379–80) agrees: ‘it seems ... impossible that the infinite resourcefulness of infinite love working in unlimited time should be eternally frustrated, and the creature reject its own good, presented to it in an endless range of ways.’ ‘The divine Therapist has perfect knowledge of every human heart, is infinitely wise in the healing of its ills, has unbounded love for the patient and unlimited time to devote to him’ (p. 345). If some are eternally damned, then God is either not completely good (and does not want these persons to be saved) or not completely powerful (and is unable to bring them to salvation – in which case God’s purpose fails). Only universal salvation is consistent with a benevolent, omnipotent God.

apart. He believed that God will largely accomplish God's purpose of drawing all persons into a freely chosen relationship with God – that very few will hold out eternally against God's love. I believe God will completely accomplish God's purpose – that none will be forever lost. While one might question my strong conclusion that it is logically impossible to freely reject God forever, the argument at least establishes the weaker claim that it is psychologically improbable that any will refuse God's love eternally. God will never finally reject some persons by withdrawing grace and giving up trying to save them. God continues to love the damned and to do all God properly can to bring about their free repentance. And no person will finally reject God, continuing to choose personal misery by refusing God's persuasive love. While hell is the fate of those who reject God, none will do so forever. Hell is real, but not eternal.

Plain reason suggests that all will be saved. So does Scripture. There is tension between the New Testament antithesis texts (which warn of a final separation of saved and lost at the last judgment) and *apokatastasis* texts (which declare the ultimate restoration of all things and people to God). Given the control beliefs that God desires relationship with every person and that God's love never ends, the antithesis statements must be read within the context of the *apokatastasis* statements (since only they are finally consistent with a God both loving and powerful who judges in order to save). Scripture describes the *eschaton* in terms of victory and triumph. The Hebrew prophets foretell a day of in-gathering when all people in all nations will know, enjoy and worship Yahweh. 'On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, of well-aged wines strained clear' (Isa. 25.6). 'At that time [God] will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him' (Zeph. 3.9; cf. Isa. 43.5–7; Zech. 2.11). St Paul predicts that 'every knee should bend ... and every tongue should [voluntarily and joyfully⁶⁶] confess that Jesus Christ is Lord' (Phil. 2.10–11; cf. Isa. 45.22–23). In Christ 'God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven' (Col. 1.16, 20; cf. Eph. 1.10). Every power that opposes God will eventually be destroyed – by being redeemed rather than obliterated. The end result means 'justification and life for all' (Rom. 5.18) when 'all persons will be made alive in Christ' (1 Cor. 15.22). God's goal is to integrate all of

66. See T. Talbot, 'Christ Victorious', pp. 23–24 and T. Johnson, 'A Wideness in God's Mercy: Universalism in the Bible', pp. 89–90, in Parry and Partridge, *Universal Salvation*. Also see Bonda, *One Purpose of God*, pp. 220–29.

creation into the life of God – that ‘God may be all in all’ (1 Cor. 15.28). As Wright says, ‘Romans 5 and Romans 8 speak of the great sweep of God’s mercy, reconciling and freeing the whole cosmos. This doesn’t sound like a small group of people snatched away to salvation while the great majority faces destruction.’⁶⁷

If anyone remains in hell forever, then God’s purpose in creating them – that they be united with rather than separated from God – is defeated rather than fulfilled. Imagine a mother with several children, some of whom reject her despite her best efforts at friendship. She dies without being reconciled to them. This mother’s purpose *qua* parent – to have children to love and be loved by – partly fails. In the same way, if any person does not receive God’s love and is eternally damned, then God’s will for them is frustrated.⁶⁸ A permanently occupied hell constitutes an ultimate dualism that leaves God’s victory and happiness incomplete. But the triumph of God’s love and purpose in creation and redemption will be unqualified, a restoration in which all things are gathered to God. Because eternal reconciliation – not eternal punishment or Wright’s solution, annihilation (permanent extinction and oblivion⁶⁹) – is the final word, we can reasonably believe that our prayers for the damned will be answered. It is not, *contra* Ussher, a ‘doubtful conceit’ and ‘wrong end’ to pray for their salvation. Rather, as the Commission on Doctrine recommends (and as Form IV prays), since God desires the salvation of all people, we should ‘commend all men to thee, that in them thy will be done’.

Will all human persons be saved? Separatism says no. Human freedom means that people may become so entrenched in willfulness and pride that they forever refuse God’s offer of salvation. Universalism answers yes. There is a single eschatological destiny in which all persons are ultimately saved and no one is forever separated from God.

67. Wright, *For All Saints*, p. 42. Neuhaus (*Death on Friday Afternoon*, pp. 44–45) agrees: ‘the gospel is sometimes presented as though God is running a desperate rescue mission, saving a few survivors from the shipwreck of what had been his hopes for creation ... God’s plan is not to rescue a religious elite from an otherwise botched creation but to restore all things in Christ’.

68. See Thomas (*Introduction to Theology*, p. 168): ‘Aquinas asserts that God’s purposes can be fulfilled even though some are condemned. God in his love wills that all should be saved, but, because his love is just and holy, some may be condemned. But this amounts to a failure of God’s love and a failure in the fulfillment of God’s purposes for his creation.’

69. Wright, *For All Saints*, pp. 42–46 and *Surprised by Hope*, pp. 175–83. Annihilation is little better than eternal, conscious hell since in both cases a spiritual being loses the positive good of union with God.

Now note: which view is true is irrelevant to prayer for the damned. Intercession for those in hell does not hinge on universalism, only on an open view of death. If post-mortem salvation is possible, then prayer should be offered for the unsaved – whether we believe in God’s ability to bring all to freely choose relationship with God or whether we think that some stubborn rebels may eternally refuse God’s love. Even Pusey – a separatist who defended everlasting hell – encouraged prayer for the damned: ‘instead of being haunted with the thought ... “was he saved?” ... we may commend our departed ones to their Father’s care, sure that if they have not, by an obstinate rejection of Him to the last, shut out His grace and love, they are, in whatever mansion of His, still under the shadow of His hand, longing for their consummation both of body and soul, and prepared and perfected the more by that intense longing.’⁷⁰ Likewise Wright, who seems to allow for post-mortem salvation since ‘we can never say of anyone for certain, including Hitler and bin Laden, that they have gone so far down the road of wickedness that they are beyond redemption’, should be open to prayer on their behalf.⁷¹

So what do we pray for the faithless departed? James van Tholen offers words of counsel to those praying for a loved one who has refused God, words that apply equally to prayer for those in hell: ‘you should not let yourself believe ... that they have wandered too far, that God will have no more to do with them, that [God] will give up on them’.⁷² And so we pray that the damned will be freed from ignorance and bondage, that they yield to God’s persuasive love. We pray that, like the prodigal son in the far country, they come to their senses and return to the Father. We pray that God’s purpose for them will be fulfilled, that in the end they share in the joy of endless union with God.

Final Remarks

Eschatology is a vital part of Christian teaching. Intellectually, reflecting on PFD has much to say about God’s nature and purpose, and integrates central elements of theology – the Trinity, creation, anthropology, soteriology and eschatology. Love is the very nature of God, and so the most basic and enduring attitude of God toward human beings is love. God invites every person to the ‘festival of friends’ – always seeking, whether through mercy or judgment, the

70. Pusey, cited in Liddon, ‘Life of Edward Bouverie Pusey’, p. 6.

71. Wright, *For All Saints*, p. 44.

72. Van Tholen, *Where All Hope Lies*, p. 178.

final well-being of humanity.⁷³ And practically, reflecting on PFD is relevant to pastoral care. Funerals ministry often involves those of unsettled faith and moral character, and is not conducted with integrity if clergy either assume that such persons are hopelessly damned or pretend that they were faithful Christians. Believing that we – clergy who conduct such funerals and survivors who attend – can pray for the sanctification or salvation of the deceased gives funeral services both integrity and compassion.

In PFD we pray for the completion of God's creative and redemptive purpose – the resurrection of the body in a new creation – and that the blessed rest at peace in the Lord. We ask that those who have entered relationship with God but still need purification experience continued growth in the knowledge and love of God. And we pray that those who have rejected God repent and turn to God. In PFD we entrust all of the departed into God's loving care, asking that God's purpose for them – joyful and eternal union with God – be fulfilled.

73. Bruce Cockburn, 'Festival of Friends', on the album *In the Falling Dark* (True North Productions, 1976).