

Predestined to Glory: The Extravagant, Prodigal, and Omnipotent Love of God

by Fr. Aidan Kimel

I have followed the work of the esteemed philosopher Dr Eleonore Stump since her days at Virginia Tech. It is with great interest, therefore, that I read her article "[The God of Love](#)."¹ After reading the first paragraph, with its claim that "universalism is not only not a consequence of God's love; it is not so much as compatible with God's love," I knew I had to attempt a response. The extravagant and prodigal love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has been the heart of my preaching and parochial ministry since my ordination in 1980. At each step of the way, the logic of love has guided my theological convictions.

Divine love and universalism are incompatible, Stump argues, because salvation is the union of two *free* wills, divine and human. God graciously offers sinners his forgiveness and love, but he must wait upon their free consent. He will not force anyone into his Kingdom. It takes two to tango. As Stump wrote in 1986: "It is not within the power even of an omnipotent entity to make a person freely will anything."² In the literature, this position is known as the free-will defense of hell. Given her belief that universalism includes "the thesis that God unilaterally brings it about that all human beings are brought to heaven,"³ Stump's assertion of incompatibility initially seems airtight.

Yet there is an immediate problem: *all* Christian universalists, whether patristic or modern, agree with Stump that salvation requires the *free* union of wills, divine and human. This is as true for [Origen](#) and [St Gregory of Nyssa](#) as it is for modern universalists such as [Sergius Bulgakov](#), [Thomas Talbot](#), and [David Bentley Hart](#).⁴ Each advances their own speculations on how God might providentially bring the wicked to embrace his forgiveness and love---ranging from purifying fire and the healing of the passions, deliverance from ignorance and delusion and the restoration of rational freedom, to transformative encounter with God in his infinite Goodness, Truth, and Beauty---but each affirms the free decision of the sinner as a necessary condition for eschatological blessedness. Stump's claim of incompatibility must therefore be judged a generalization too inaccurate and imprecise to be accepted.

¹ Eleonore Stump, "The God of Love," *Church Life Journal* (13 April 2023).

² Eleonore Stump, "Dante's Hell, Aquinas's Moral Theory, and the Love of God," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 16 (1986): 194-195.

³ Stump, "God of Love," fn. 1.

⁴ For patristic universalists, see Ilaria Ramelli, *A Larger Hope?* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2019); for discussion of the above-mentioned modern universalists, see Alvin F. Kimel, Jr., *Destined for Joy* (Amazon, 2022).

I find curious Stump's claim that the omnipotent God *cannot* effect the free conversion of the wicked, given that so many Latin theologians have advanced doctrines of predestination that presuppose precisely this divine power and competence. St Augustine of Hippo, St Fulgentius, and St Thomas Aquinas immediately come to mind.⁵ Those within this tradition call it efficacious grace. I understand this is a contentious position in the Catholic Church, but it is difficult for me to see how it can be rejected out of hand. In the words of Augustine:

For this reason we must see how it is that we say what the apostle most truthfully said of God, *who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth* (1 Tim 2:4). Since not all are saved, but many more are not saved, it seems that what God wills to happen does not happen because a human will frustrates the will of God. . . . The words of the Lord in the gospel make the matter even clearer when he rebukes a wicked city with the words, *How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!* (Mt 23:37) as if God's will had been overcome by the will of men and the most mighty one were unable to do as he willed because the very weak prevented him by not being willing. Where is that omnipotence that has done whatever it willed in heaven and on earth if he willed to gather together the children of Jerusalem and did not do so? . . . But he gathered together the children he willed to gather together despite her unwillingness, for in heaven and on earth he did not will some things and do them and will others but not do them, but he did everything he willed.⁶

Clearly the Doctor of Grace does not believe that the Omnipotence can be frustrated by the recalcitrant wills of fallen human beings. "Therefore this grace . . . is rejected by no one," he asserts, "no matter how hard-hearted he may be."⁷ Augustine teaches that faith is a beneficent gift of God. This gifting does not coerce the sinner against his will; it liberates the will and directs it to its proper object. "What is more absurd," asks Augustine, "than to say that someone unwillingly wills what is good?"⁸ More directly: Who is drawn if he is already willing? And yet no one comes unless he wills to come. Therefore he is drawn in a marvelous way so that he wills, by him who knows how to work in the human heart itself.⁹ Hence we may conclude that

⁵ On Augustine, see Jesse Couenhoven, *Predestination* (New York: T&T Clark, 2018), 19-49. In addition to Couenhoven, my interpretation of Augustine is deeply informed by Han-Luen Kantzer Komline, *Augustine on the Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁶ Augustine, *Enchiridion* 97.

⁷ Augustine, *Predestination of the Saints* 8.(13).

⁸ Quoted by James Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 197.

⁹ Augustine, *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians* I.37.

Augustine would vigorously disagree with Stump's view that God is helpless when confronted by definitive rejection. Raising the dead is God's specialty.

Long ago I became persuaded me that as the transcendent wellspring of being, God's relationship to the world is best understood as noncompetitive. God does not inhabit the same metaphysical plane as his creatures; he is not other to us as a being among beings. We are not autonomous agents acting out our lives on a deistic stage. Everything that is---every being, every action---depends upon God's continuous outpouring of being. James Ross offers this beautiful image: "The being of the cosmos is like a song on the breath of a singer."¹⁰ Consequently, our divine Creator need not *force* us to do anything. His relationship with us is too close, too intimate. Consider a novelist. The author of a novel does not make her characters do something; she makes them doing it. So it is with God. He does not make us act; he makes us freely acting. God is the direct and primary cause, with ourselves as the simultaneous secondary cause, of our free intending, willing, and acting.¹¹ Philosophers term this understanding *double agency*. To therefore think of our Creator as violating our personal integrity by his beneficent bestowal of virtues and powers is, I suggest, a category mistake. It assumes a competitive relationship between Creator and creature, as if our freedom requires the absence of divine agency. Our willing is comprehended within the divine willing. While the noncompetitive position may not mandate Augustinian predestination, it is certainly compatible with it.¹² God turns us to himself not by coercive invasion but by "the sweet attractiveness of truth and the force of our own desire and delight in it."¹³

Humanity is intrinsically ordered to eternal happiness. We are created for God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in him. Hence we may speak of predestinating grace as a blessed necessity that liberates persons for the realization of their eschatological end. This grace must succeed, for the Good is its final cause. As the Bishop of Hippo puts it: "They receive the Holy Spirit so that there arises in their minds a delight in and a love for that highest and immutable good that is God."¹⁴ Grace disentralls the will from its enslavement to disordered desires and enables the apprehension of the captivating truth of the gospel. Grace bestows a liberty that cannot resist grace. It cannot be otherwise, for in our postlapsarian condition we cannot heal our hearts of stone. Jesse Couenhoven elaborates:

¹⁰ James F. Ross, "Creation II," in *The Existence and Nature of God*, ed. Alfred J. Freddoso, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 128.

¹¹ Hugh J. McCann, *Creation and the Sovereignty of God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 103-108.

¹² On the compatibility of predestination with double agency, see W. Matthews Grant, *Free Will and Divine Universal Causality* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 171-181.

¹³ Phillip Cary, *Inner Grace* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 109.

¹⁴ Augustine, *The Spirit and the Letter* 3.5.

In his late works, Augustine writes of the gift of charity, the principle of love that changes the sinner's fundamental orientation from one of carnal concupiscence to one of love for God because of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that is made possible through incorporation into Christ. This gift---which is an internal work, not merely a divine manipulation of external circumstances---draws us into the good by giving us a renewed knowledge of and delight in the good. . . . More accurately, operative grace gives *libertas* back to sinners. Like the medicine of Christ that it is, the Holy Spirit mends the will's sickness, its dysfunction, and its inability for good and replaces it with a power for good more like God's own. This is not an alien power, because we were made to have this power for good. In addition, such divine surgery does not violate human free choice, since *liberum arbitrium* consents to the leading of the *voluntas*, which is transformed by the Spirit. To the contrary, grace's healing makes choice more powerful since by orienting it toward the good, it is made truly free and (eventually) less fragmented. Thus, for Augustine, faith is both a deterministic gift from God and the result of human consent.¹⁵

The gift of the Spirit is the decisive difference between Adamic freedom (the ability to choose between good and evil) and the freedom of grace (the necessary embrace of the good): by the gift of charity we now love and delight in the irresistible Goodness of God. We are perfected not by the addition of a *created* quality but by *uncreated grace*, the dynamic and enlivening presence of the Holy Spirit. "In the absence of this *uncreated* grace," Stephen Duffy comments, "choice there may be, but not ordered choice begotten of love above all and in all."¹⁶ The freedom granted by grace thus anticipates the eschatological liberty the saints enjoy in heaven. Although Adam and Eve were created with a natural desire for God, they were not perfectly united to him as the saints are; they were not yet deified. The saints so partake of the divine nature that they share in the divine inability to sin.¹⁷

We may, by way of analogy from finite causal relations, call this determinism; but not all determinations are inimical to human flourishing. True liberty is not the capacity to make alternate choices between *this* and *that*---and certainly not between heaven and hell---but the ability to flourish as creatures ordered to deification in Christ. That God acts unilaterally to deliver us from our passions and grant us freedom in the Spirit is restoration of our authentic selves; that he predestines us to eternal happiness in his Trinitarian life is the ultimate expression of his love and the glorious fulfillment of our divinely ordained destiny.

¹⁵ Jesse Couenhoven, *Stricken by Sin, Cured by Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 100.

¹⁶ Stephen J. Duffy, *The Dynamics of Grace* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993), 118.

¹⁷ Jesse Couenhoven, "[Augustine's Rejection of the Free-Will Defence](#)," *Religious Studies*, 43 (2007), 288.

Thesis: God the Father has predestined humanity to eternal glory in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In my judgment, the argument from efficacious grace is the most elegant and robust defense of the universalist hope now on display.¹⁸ Yet as compelling as I find Augustine's construal of absolute predestination (minus reprobation), my faith that God will save all does not rest upon it. It firmly rests, rather, upon the Father who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ as absolute, unconditional, omnipotent love. At this point I would normally shift into preaching mode, quite likely choosing the three parables of Luke 15 as my text: the good shepherd, the woman and the lost coin, the forgiving father. These parables authorize the preacher to speak of the love of God in terms of such extravagance and prodigality that even the most sentimental among us will be scandalized.

Here is the critical difference between universalists and proponents of eternal damnation: universalists are horrified by the claim that God would condemn his children to everlasting torment. [St Isaac the Syrian](#) speaks for all who confess the greater hope:

It is not the way of the compassionate Maker to create rational beings in order to deliver them over mercilessly to unending affliction in punishment for things of which He knew even before they were fashioned, aware how they would turn out when He created them---and whom nonetheless He created.¹⁹

For Isaac, Gehenna belongs to God's providential and merciful care for humanity. Its purpose is not retributive but remedial and restorative and is therefore of limited duration. To think otherwise, he declares, is blasphemy:

The Kingdom and Gehenna are matters belonging to mercy, which were conceived of in their essence by God as a result of His eternal goodness. It was not a matter of requiting, even though He gave them the name of requital. That we should further say or think that the matter is not full of love and mingled with compassion would be an opinion full of blasphemy and insult to our Lord God. By saying that He will even hand us over to burning for the sake of sufferings, torment and all sorts of ills, we are attributing to the divine Nature an enmity towards the very rational being which He created through grace.²⁰

¹⁸ See John Kronen and Eric Reitan, *God's Final Victory* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 127-151.

¹⁹ Isaac of Nineveh, *The Second Part* 39.6.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 39.22.

And so the saint prophetically announces that the all-loving God will one day demonstrate his "immense and ineffable compassion" by releasing the lost souls from their Gehennic purgations and raising them into glory and joy.²¹

Isaac confronts us with two incompatible apprehensions of the divine love---a love that would never condemn the wicked to everlasting perdition and a love that does. Consider the dual wills distinction invoked by Stump: God *antecedently* wills the salvation of all human beings; but once human history gets launched, he *consequently* wills the eternal damnation of the impenitent. In this sense, his consequent will represents an "unfulfilled desire" in God. This then raises the question whether God is disappointed by humanity's rejection of his offer of salvation. No, replies Stump, "because that outcome is in accordance with God's consequent will. God is not disappointed in having his will fulfilled."²²

That God cannot be disappointed by the fulfillment of his will follows from the classical understanding of divinity, yet it seems odd that Stump would speak anthropomorphically of God having unfulfilled desires. This cannot be the case for the eternal, immutable, and simple Creator who is infinite in his perfection. God, as the scholastics say, is *actus purus*. His desiring is his willing. In the *eschaton*, when God is all in all and all of creation has become theophany, the meaning of the antecedent is necessarily revealed in the consequent. As Hart astutely observes: "Given the metaphysics and logic of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, any distinction between what God wills and what God permits necessarily collapses at creation's eschatological horizon; so too any distinction between God's antecedent and consequent wills."²³ His antecedent will is thus identical to his consequent will. Precisely at the point of final judgment, the divine love is unveiled as *conditional*: God wills the salvation of sinners *only if* they repent. Love saves and love damns. Such is the inexorable logic of conditional love.

Stump tells us that God loves the reprobate, yet he has condemned them to dwell in interminable suffering and torment. They have been cast into the outer darkness of their alienation. Their everlasting misery is, as ecclesial tradition has long taught, their just punishment. St Bonaventure states the scholastic maxim: "God cannot permit any misery to exist in us except as a punishment of sin."²⁴ We may no longer paint lurid pictures of hell, but the horror remains and rightly so. Everlasting perdition is the worst possible end for human beings. Forever imprisoned in what Stump calls their second nature, the vicious nature they have acquired for themselves,²⁵ the

²¹ Ibid. 39.6.

²² Stump, "The God of Love."

²³ David Bentley Hart, "[What God Wills and What God Permits](#)," *Public Orthodoxy* (5 May 2020).

²⁴ Bonaventure, *Breviloquium* III.5.3.

²⁵ Stump, "Dante's Hell," p. 196.

damned are overwhelmed by the suffering generated by depraved appetites divorced from all goods, ceaselessly subjected to the ferocious attacks of their accusing conscience, all hope for a meaningful and happy existence extinguished, hatred and despair mercilessly devouring heart and mind. Theirs is a phantasmagoric, nightmarish existence. What is hell but madness and never-ending agony? If the image of a torture chamber is deemed inapposite, then think of a medieval asylum for the insane.²⁶ If God still loves the irredeemable, it is more akin to hatred than love. "God loves every man, and every creature also, in that he wills some good for every one of them," states Thomas. "But he does not will every good for every one, and is said to hate some in so far as he does not will for them the good of eternal life."²⁷ The divine wrath forever rests upon the impenitent.

We might try to relieve God of final responsibility by assigning him the role of passive observer: the reprobate have freely brought this fate upon themselves---they have damned themselves---but that is a difference without a difference. In the Kingdom, the Creator and Judge of heaven and earth has the last word. His will be done. Self-damnation is divine damnation.

Stump has advanced a free-will defense of eternal perdition. This leaves her vulnerable to one damning objection: *God was free not to create rational beings*. Surely this is what the Triune Deity of absolute love would have done if he could not ensure the eternal blessedness of all. Hence the challenge of Hart's aporetic triad:

- God freely created the cosmos *ex nihilo*.
- God is the Good and wills himself as the final good of rational creatures.
- God will condemn a portion of his rational creatures to everlasting torment.²⁸

One may coherently affirm any two of the above propositions but not all three simultaneously. As far as I can see, the only escape from the dilemma is to tweak proposition #2: for a greater (unknown) good, God may sacrifice the infinite good of some. But this is a Faustian bargain that nullifies the gospel! The Father of Jesus will not leave even one of his children behind. "Christ died for the ungodly!" (Rom 5:6). If God eternally wills *himself* as our final good, does it make sense to speak of a higher good than *theosis*, than our becoming gods in God? "It is by one and the same act," Michael Dobbs reminds us, "that God wills both his own goodness as his proper

²⁶ For an Orthodox reflection on the sufferings of the damned, written from a free-will perspective, see Dumitru Stăniloae, *The Experience of God* (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2013), vol. 6. Stăniloae offers a more serious and honest reflection on the infernal torments than attempts to diminish and minimize their severity (Hell Lite).

²⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I.23.3. Thomas is here speaking of predestination, but his statement equally applies to the free-will defense of hell.

²⁸ David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 89-91.

object and the existence of creatures as ordered to his goodness."²⁹ To this glorious end the eternal Word enfleshed himself as Jesus Christ; to this end he suffered death on the cross, rose from death on Easter morning, and ascended into heaven to present to his Father a redeemed humanity united in himself--the New Adam. In the words of St Athanasius: "God became man so that man might become God."³⁰ Therefore, proposition #3 is false.

Universalists reject all conditionalist construals of the divine love.³¹ The God of the gospels wills the infinite good of all human beings, without limit or qualification. He commits himself to fulfill in all sinners the necessary conditions of salvation. He is the good shepherd who recklessly abandons his flock to search for the one lost sheep and is not satisfied until he finds it and restores it to his flock. He is the woman who frantically turns her house upside down to retrieve the one lost coin. He is the Great High Priest who offers himself on the cross in atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. He is the Crucified who shatters the gates of hades and rescues all its inhabitants.³² He is the theanthropic Christ who rises from death and inaugurates the New Creation. In the words of the John the Elder: "God is love" (1 John 4:8).

I do not know how to negotiate the differences between the universalist vision and the dogmatic commitments of the Catholic Church. I once asked the Lutheran theologian Robert W. Jenson how God's love can be described as unconditional, given the plain teaching of Scripture. His reply: "Go back and reread the Bible." I eventually came to realize that a hermeneutic change and paradigm shift was needed. So it may be for Catholicism. Nothing less than the gospel is at stake. For many the greater hope is judged too good to be true. I therefore proffer the wisdom of George MacDonald: "If you find what I tell you untrue, it will only be that it is not grand and free and bounteous enough. To think anything too good to be true, is to deny God---to say the untrue may be better than the true---that there might be a greater God than he."³³

²⁹ Michael J. Dobbs, *The Unchanging God of Love*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 208.

³⁰ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 54.3.

³¹ On the difference between unconditional and conditional love, see Kimel, 45-93.

³² That Christ rescues *every* soul in hades is asserted both by many of the Eastern Fathers and the liturgical hymnody of the Orthodox Church. See Hilarion Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011).

³³ George MacDonald, *Donal Grant*, chap. 45.