

WHY I AM NOT A UNIVERSALIST (BUT SOUND LIKE ONE) Reflections on David Bentley Hart's *That All Shall Be Saved*

Brad Jersak

"For we labor and struggle to this end because we have hoped in a living God who is the savior of all human beings, especially those who have faith."

—1 Timothy 4:10

In Praise of Hart

At long last. I'm grateful that Dr. Hart pushed through his recent health challenges to finish both his translation of the New Testament and his new release, *That All Shall Be Saved*. His recovery is vital to the Body of Christ as we will have great need of him for some time.

Among the guilty pleasures of reading his instant classic, *That All Shall Be Saved*, are Hart's combination of high-minded formal logic, precise (and sometimes obscure) word selection and his occasionally snarky tone. I know the objections: "He should use more accessible language so I don't have to use up the precious thirty seconds it takes to learn a new word." And, "Christians shouldn't be as rude as their Calvinist critics, because it's not very Christlike to be grumpy toward idiocy." Apparently, suffering fools gladly is a mark of spiritual maturity. I get it. We like to pretend we're nice. But consider...

First, I believe in striking a balance between clarity for the reader and a teacher's responsibility to nurture the saints to full maturity. Hart is regularly chided for leaving even thoughtful readers in the dust of academic jargon and philosophic mazes. But perhaps he's only guilty of oversteering against a far greater problem: Christian teachers who cripple their students by infantilizing them, creating suggestible acolytes distracted by every trendy quasi-theological squirrel. In an era where the dominant Christian diet is not even milk, much less meat, and the new wine is reduced to grape Kool-Aid, I'll happily excuse Hart if he doesn't provide us with toilet-time reading. Really, do we want to learn something or simply nod [off]?

And yes, fans of both N.T. Wright and DBH were amused (if not slightly embarrassed) witnesses of their prickly exchange regarding their respective Bible translations. Best marketing scheme ever!

Still, without excusing uncharitable debate, I sheepishly confess to enjoying Hart's tart prose and spicy counterpoints to his Calvinist opponents. For so long, I've tried (against my nature) to take the high road of the soft answer that turns away wrath ... but after nearly two decades of relentless trolling by neo-Reformed dilettantes, it feels *nice* when a bigger, smarter brother appears on the schoolyard and treats the meanies to a sound

pummeling. I said it *feels nice*. I didn't say nice is a fruit of the Spirit, hence the 'guilt' in my 'guilty pleasure.'

Initially, I was worried that Hart's unwillingness to [Robin] parry opponents' jabs with winsome cheer might cause him to dismiss Calvinist claims without directly dismantling them—waving them off as too inane to bother with. Happily, in *That All Would Be Saved*, my worries proved to be unfounded. Hart shreds them head-on in one shriveling sortie after the other, laying bare why he found their case for infernalism so ludicrous to begin with.

The Heart of the Matter

At the heart of Hart's argument is the nature of God. George MacDonald once said, "*Good souls many will one day be horrified at the things they now believe of God. They can make little progress in the knowledge of God while holding evil things true of him.*" Hart argues this truth convincingly. Two significant points are etched in my mind as abiding takeaways:

1. That if God is willing and able to bring all things to a good end, then he will, and not to do so would demonstrate that he is either woefully incompetent or pure evil.
2. That the notion of eternal conscious torment is infinitely disproportionate to any lifetime of crimes one could achieve (even for Hitler), such that a God who inflicts fiery torment forever could not in any true sense be said to be called *good* or *just*.

A key element to Hart's case is that the **words** we use to describe the ineffable, though miserably inadequate, **must mean something** and should not be rendered incoherent. He refutes the idea that God could consign anyone to everlasting, boiling bitumen and still be called *love* or *good*. He points out the absurdity of claiming divine love IS what compels God to stoke the flames forever, or that he's bound to do so to dignify the 'free will' of someone who allegedly 'chooses' everlasting damnation. As if they would so choose once Christ is revealed before unveiled eyes. As if the event of death leaves God bankrupt of redemptive options. Biblically, logically and rhetorically, Hart exposes such doctrinal acrobatics as blasphemous.

This, of course, does not scratch the surface of Hart's fine book and exquisite arguments, but I'm committed to internalizing his mind on the subject because I believe "the faith once delivered" now depends on retracing our steps to those patristic fathers and mothers whose vision of God was devoid of retribution and who believed Christ was both able and committed to the "restoration of all things" (*apokatastaseôs pantôn* – Acts 3:21). As Hart says, the alternatives deserve the atheism they generate.

In reading *That All Shall Be Saved*, it feels to me we've heard the last word—Hart marks out a corner the church must make (or else). His central themes and beautiful vision forge a path beyond the medieval-modernist hybrid of Dante literalized, where Christianity will otherwise come to its terminus. And rightly so.

Another Boring Rebuttal from Hopeful Inclusivism

And now I'll risk my humble retort as a "hopeful inclusivist"—à la Hans Urs von Balthasar, Metropolitan Kallistos Ware and most probably, Maximos the Confessor. Since publishing [*Her Gates Will Never Be Shut*](#) (Wipf & Stock, 2009), I have, until now, preferred the moniker and theology of "hopeful inclusivism" over universalism for very specific reasons. Hart has some stern and stinging words for this approach. I wish the sting had come through a sound castigation of our position rather than via hints of misrepresentation. I'll do my best to explain this claim, knowing I'm addressing an intellectual superior who already admits boredom with the topic.

Hopeful inclusivism, as described by von Balthasar and Ware, proposes that we cannot presume to say that all will be saved, nor may we *presume* that even one soul will be lost. The issue is *not* the universal scope of Christ's redemptive work. Instead, their quarrel is with how the –ism itself generates *presumption*, in both pop universalists and their infernalist opponents. Rather than certitude in any dogma, however biblical or rational, our faith and hope lean wholly on the Person of Jesus Christ. Hart may not perceive this distinction because he is not inclined to presumption, but it's a temptation that ensnares many a common universalist. That's the concern and has been ever since Origen noticed it among immature disciples.

Further, *hopeful inclusivism* insists on the principle of human freedom, whereby salvation ultimately includes our *participation* through a *willing human response to Jesus Christ*. Some adherents to HI note that we may *believe by faith* the many Scriptures that foresee a universal willing response while also rejecting the Calvinist-style determinism where the elect *must* irresistibly bow. We're concerned to *affirm ultimate redemption* without nullifying the *authentic human freedom* (which is why we venerate Maximos).

I'm not sure that Hart would disagree with these points in the end. The nub of his impatience with Balthasar et al. revolves around the word 'hope,' just as my quarrel with universalism is *not* Hart's arguments, but with what the term 'universalism' has come to mean.

Hope versus Wishful Thinking

In *That All Shall Be Saved*, David Bentley Hart expresses impatience with those who speak in terms of 'hope,' naming Hans Urs von Balthasar and certainly knowing Metropolitan Ware also "dares to *hope* that all be saved."

At the risk of joining the Calvinists in Hart's shredder, I will admit I was frustrated by how he projected hedge-betting and wishful thinking onto the word 'hope.' How had he missed the rich, sturdy and objective sense of the term used both in the Scriptures and by the hopeful inclusivists? Here is the one area where I thought Hart was unfair, only

because I know it's unlikely that he was careless. To reduce 'hope' to 'wishful' or even 'doubtful' in the Bible or in von Balthasar is straw-manning that deserves pushback.

Hopeful inclusivists do **not** regard ultimate redemption as something we hope for wistfully. Not at all. On this point, DBH could have successfully steel-manned us and still made his point. But he didn't—and this made me second guess whether he had been similarly slapdash with the Calvinist infernalists. I double-checked and no, I don't think he was. Glad to know.

But back to *hope*. Would Hart dismiss the author of Titus as a hesitant vacillator when he says we are “*awaiting the blissful hope, and the appearing of the glory, of the great God and of our savior, the Anointed One Jesus...*”? Of course not, since the *hope* and *glory* we await is none other than the *sure* appearance of our God and of his Christ. There is no double-mindedness or wavering—there's no sense that the *parousia* is contingent or could swing either way. There is no free-will opt-out in that **hope**. Jesus is coming *for sure*. That is our *hope*, our *faith*, our *conviction* and *sure foundation*.

It's not about 'hoping for' with crossed fingers. It's 'hoping in' confidently in a Person. To quote the old hymn, “My **hope** is built on nothing less than Jesus blood and righteousness.”

Hans Urs von Balthasar and Kallistos Ware, like Isaac the Syrian and Maximos the Confessor before them, all argue that our salvation includes a *necessary, authentic and willing human response*. We'll go there momentarily, but first, written into von Balthasar's **hope** are two clearly expressed riders:

1. Balthasar urges us not to **presume** all will be saved. “Presume.” **Words matter**. My friend Robin Parry identifies as an “evangelical universalist.” He believes with complete confidence that all shall be saved. But neither is there any hint of presumption in his argument. Even universalism of the boldest flavor ought not *presume* that all will be saved, for the sin of presumption lies not in the surety of one's hope for ultimate redemption but in taking so great a salvation for granted—i.e. the arrogant and groundless certitude of those many universalists who skirt the essentials of the gospel, central to which is *faith in Jesus Christ*. *Faith in Christ is not presumption, just as hope in Christ is not vacillation.*

2. Balthasar holds to the *principle of human willingness* but also cites approvingly the straightforward claim that having seen the beatific vision, it is **infinitely unlikely** that **any** would turn from it. **Words matter**. Hart doesn't take the plain meaning of these words seriously, or else he believes that von Balthasar didn't. I do. He means, to my mind, just what he says: **infinitely unlikely**. Some fifth-grade math should do the trick here. It is not 1% likely that some will be lost. It is not 1×10^{-n} likely that even one should be lost. It is *infinitely unlikely* that any should be lost at all. Such is the *hope* of one who's *hope* IS our Lord Jesus Christ and not in the rationalistic certitude of a doctrine.

To sum up the surety of our blessed Hope, and what hopeful inclusivists mean by the term, Richard John Neuhaus explains,

“I believe, I have a confident faith, that I will be saved because of the mercy of God in Christ. It is sometimes said that Protestants, who subscribed to “justification by faith,” *know* they will be saved, while Catholics only *hope* they will be saved. That is a distinction without a difference. Faith is hope anticipated, and ***hope is faith disclosed toward the future.***”

DBH may imagine anemic definitions of hope, but he should dignify hopeful Inclusivists with the right to define their own labels according to Scripture and the tradition.

Or maybe he’s right. Has modern 'hope' strayed so far from its objective biblical foundations that it too is no longer useful? Is hope so weakened by time and use that it has truly become synonymous with 'doubt' as Hart seems to assume? I no longer have *doubts* about ultimate redemption, but if referring to our blessed *hope* is reduced to 'vacillation' or 'doubt,' why would DBH choose that word when translating 1 Tim. 4:10, or why can't von Balthasar likewise be trusted to mean what the Bible meant. That verse stands as both my affirmation and critique of Hart. Again,

“*For we labor and struggle to this end, because we have hoped in a living God who is the savior of all human beings, especially those who have faith” (1 Timothy 4:10).*

Free(d) Will

When it comes to the 'free will' defense for eternal conscious torment or any voluntary opt-out that trumps ultimate redemption, I would concur with Hart's critiques virtually down the line. In a nutshell, [I think] he believes (as do I) that a willing human response to Christ is intrinsic to salvation, but who can say that in this life, the human will is ever truly 'free'?

Of course, *Calvinist universalists* equivocate on the first point, denying human freedom altogether. They believe that Christ has unilaterally chosen *all* to salvation (unconditional election of all people) and that *all* will respond to Christ because of God's *irresistible* grace. For the Reformers in Augustine's monergist lineage, the human *will* is virtually irrelevant (nuances aside): we move from bondage of the will to the flesh to bondage of the will to God by divine fiat. We are saved by sovereign grace alone—not by any human work. Even your faith was pure gift. It's not about choosing our “Yes” to Christ. Christ chose me; I did not choose him. Calvinist salvation is entirely unilateral, not reciprocal.

Maximos saw it differently. In my reductionist interpretation of his work, humankind was created with a will designed to naturally and freely desire the good at all times. But the *natural will* became dysfunctional in and since the fall. Now we waver, second guess and inevitably turn from the good. Maximos described this dysfunctional inclination as

the *gnomic will* ... it's *not* absolutely bound (as with certain Reformers) such that it could never turn to the good. But on any given day, we might find ourselves pursuing Christ, then suddenly deceived or seduced by the world, the flesh or the enemy into the nearest ditch.

Maximos went on to famously argue that Christ assumed the human will to heal the human will through his willing surrender to the Father's will, especially in the Gethsemane. As through a human will humankind fell, so through Christ's human will, humankind will be saved. How? Christ heals and restores the natural will and finally *freed* it, even if at the final judgment, for it would be unjust for Christ to condemn and exclude anyone for rejecting him with a dysfunctional will. That would be like condemning a blind man for being unable to see. But when every eye shall see him, freed from the deceptions of this present evil age (most notably our egoism) and apart from the blindness of the fallen will, we will *activate our redeemed will* and freely desire God's will. We will love God because he first loved us.

Perhaps I am mistaken and Hart can show us this is not what Maximos meant. But it is what *I* mean after reading him. I hope (maybe in Hart's wishful thinking way) that this is also what Hart meant in his book. The *freed will* shall not remain fallen, nor will it opt out of the Good when we behold the Son with unveiled, healed spiritual eyes. My point is that *this IS the hopeful inclusivist position* and for all the reasons both Hart and Maximos recount. That is, I'm saying Hart has co-opted Maximos for his universalism when von Balthasar may be his rightful heir apparent.

Said another way, Maximos prescribes the position adopted by H.I. (when articulated rightly by its own adherents within the parameters carefully laid out by Maximos). If Hart agrees with Maximos as I suppose, he has a high view of the freed and healed natural will and its role in our salvation ... but in his rhetoric, he may sound to some like he undermines 'free will.' That's mainly because he first needs to thoroughly take down the problematic free-will opt-out defense of the infernalists. I understand this. I just wish he hadn't misrepresented *hopeful universalism*, as it is sometimes called. The pseudo-enemy he describes and rejects (as I would) could instead be dubbed *gnomic universalism*. Have at it. But I don't think it fair to relegate von Balthasar or Ware to that camp. Or if their caution is so problematic, it should be for Origen as well, as we'll see.

The Amorphous Imprecision of “Universalism”

As Hart himself argues, **words mean something**. And their meaning derives, not primarily from prescriptive dictionary etymology, but at least includes descriptions of a word's evolving dominant usage. And when a word suffers accretions and contortions through misuse or new use, they may even become so sullied as to warrant disuse.

I prefer not to identify with the label 'universalism,' not because I object to Hart's thesis as such—I don't—but because that term has suffered decomposition beyond his best use of it. Today, the *majority* who identify as universalists do *not* merely believe “that all shall be saved.” Pop universalism—now the default account of the doctrine (as used by

proponents and detractors)—denies that we even need salvation or a savior to begin with. The infernalist critics then weaponize this assumption as slander against its best and most responsible theologians so that universalism comes to mean:

1. Jesus doesn't matter,
2. the Cross doesn't matter,
3. sin doesn't matter,
4. there is no final judgment,
5. faith in Christ doesn't matter.

In other words, the Incarnation of the Christ has become dispensable in pop universalism. That is *not* Hart's position. Or Robin Parry's. Or Thomas Talbott's. Or Fr. John Behr's. Or Gregory of Nyssa's. Or Isaac the Syrian's. Or Maximos the Confessor's. Or that of Sergei Bulgakov or St. Silouan the Athonite. All of these surely affirm ultimate redemption without ever compromising the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I, too, believe that ultimately, every eye will see Christ, every knee will bow to Christ, every tongue will confess Christ. It's there in our Bibles. I believe that Christ will restore all things and reconcile all things, in heaven and on earth and under the earth. The apostles say so. I believe God so loved the world that he sent his Son to save the world and draw all men to himself. I've read those red-lettered words. I believe Paul's claim that Christ will bring every enemy under his feet, including death, and hand the kingdom over to his Father so that God will finally be all and in all. I believe that as in Adam all died, so in Christ, all will be made alive (Rom. 5, 1 Cor. 15). I am convinced that whatever destruction Adam wrought in us all, "how much more" the redemption of Christ has and will overcome death for us all. I believe this. The infernalists cannot affirm these Scriptural truths without endless caveats and contortions that nullify them.

I also believe these biblical promises will only occur:

1. because of Christ,
2. through the Cross,
3. where sin and death are defeated,
4. that all will pass through a restorative judgment into life, so that
5. all who see him will willingly respond in faith to the all-merciful One.

In other words, in these five points, I've rejected what the word *universalism* has come to mean for *most* universalists and for *most* of its opponents. And so have Hart, Parry, Talbott and so on.

Does citing this catena of Scriptures make me sound like a universalist? I resist the charge because so many universalists are now just pluralists (any path gets you there, without faith in or need of the Lamb of God, crucified and risen). Thus, I am *not* a universalist in today's common use of the term. [I consistently say so when I write or teach](#), despite the slander. I prefer phrases such as '[hopeful inclusivism](#)' or 'ultimate redemption' – as in *ALL are included* in Christ's saving work and will ultimately be saved

as they place their hope in him. H.I. believers embrace the possibility (or more boldly, the reality) of post-mortem repentance because death has been defeated and Christ now holds the keys of death and hades.

Hart's Patristic Universalism

The universalism Hart advocates is a specific subset that some call *patristic universalism*. Unlike pop universalism, Hart retains all the key vital features found in two of my favorite saints, St. Gregory of Nyssa (which is also to say, St. Macrina the Younger) and George MacDonald. Hart might describe these elements differently, but in general, they expand on the tenet proffered earlier:

- Jesus Christ alone is the author and finisher of our salvation.
- The Incarnation of Christ, climaxing in his Passion (death, *descensus* and resurrection) is the fundamental means by which God saves us and restores all things.
- Sin and death matter greatly, but Christ has already and will ultimately overcome sin (by his freely given forgiveness) and death (by raising up humanity in his resurrection).
- There will be a final judgment, and although it's nature, duration and details are held in mystery, the agenda and outcome are revealed as entirely restorative and redemptive.
- That all sentient beings will ultimately willingly embrace this salvation through the *restoration of their natural wills*, established in Gethsemane and effected by the beatific vision, when every eye sees him, every knee willingly bows and every tongue joyfully confesses the Lordship of Christ.

DBH's patristic adaptation of the universalist label may work with his fans, but I suspect he'll confound and confuse both disciples and detractors who assume universalists abandon any the above essentials because that's exactly what *most do*. This isn't Hart's fault. The problem is with the term and with sloppy readers (if they even bother with reading). If we're to call Hart a universalist on his own terms, then I recommend always including the patristic modifier and insisting others do so also. So, disagree with him if you like, but as a *patristic universalist*, Hart cannot rightly be accused of heresy. Indeed, far less so than his critics.

Origen's Cautious Universalism

Hart rightly looks to Origen as a patron saint for patristic universalism and is among Origen's best apologists, along with John Milbank and Fr. John Behr, whose newly released edition of *First Principles* is no doubt history's most significant rehabilitation of Origen's memory since Gregory the Theologian and Basil the Great compiled his *Philokalia*. And I've never seen a better or more concise defense of Origen's *apokatastasis* than Hart's [First Things tribute to "Saint Origen."](#) That two-page gem stands as definitive and irrefutable.

With that background, I note how Origen is frequently derided anachronistically for his eschatological optimism when in fact, he showed humility and expressed caution beyond what you see later in either Nyssa or Hart. It's not that Origen wavers in his faith that all will be saved. Rather, Origen faces the same dilemma we've run into again today:

What do we say to the immature? On the one hand, if we threaten them with hellfire, why would they embrace Christ, except out of fear? The typical hellfire rhetoric may have worked for St. John Chrysostom or Jonathan Edwards, but it is no longer effective anyway. It creates atheists.

But on the other hand, if we tell the masses all shall be saved, won't the immature reply, "Then what's the point? Why bother with Jesus?" And they ask it rhetorically, without hearing our response. We already see both sides of this problem on a massive scale. It's a theological pickle—a pastoral double-bind for preachers.

Among the fathers, including Origen and maybe Maximos, the revelation of *apokatastasis* is worthy of an 'honorable silence,' divvied out with caution lest the immature misappropriate it as license, whether for hedonism or as a path away from the gospel altogether.

"These are matters hard and difficult to understand," he writes. "...We need to speak about them with [p.199] great fear and caution, discussing and investigating rather than laying down fixed and certain conclusions" (*On First Principles* 1.6.1).

So, I see in some of the fathers an undercurrent of a cautious *apokatastasis* (cf. Ware's "[Dare We Hope for the Salvation of All](#)"), sometimes announcing universal victory even while retaining the rhetoric of hellfire. For example, contrast St. John Chrysostom's boldly universalist [Paschal Homily](#) with his frequent threats of hellfire. Why? Some of our most revered fathers preached hell to manage the spiritually immature with dire warnings of sin's consequences. But why feed the immaturity of fear with more fear? We must ask ourselves how well has that worked for us. In our current climate, that tactic failed on a colossal scale, to the point where converting *away from* Christianity sounds like better news than the gospel!

Paul, whom Hart regards as an obvious universalist, was faced with a similar dilemma in Rome (see Rom. 6:1). His all-inclusive grace teaching sounds like dangerous stuff. Opponents caricatured it as a green light for sin. Their objections included such nonsense as, "Then why not persist in sin so that grace may abound"? But Paul didn't share Origen's caution. He doubled down on grace rather than retreating. He modeled preaching universal grace as truth, *even if* many would malign it as heresy or misappropriate it for licentiousness. Where Origen proceeds with caution, St. Paul does not. St. Gregory of Nyssa does not. Nor does Hart, obviously. And he's in good company with the apostle to the Gentiles and the 'flower of Orthodoxy.'

Still, we note the dilemma because Origen's caution was not empty cowardice. A Christless libertine universalism has indeed once again gone viral that warrants correction.

All that to say, I still think 'universalism' is such a problem-laden, amorphous term that it fails to be as precise as Hart is or needs it to be. It's a dull breadknife in the hands of a master surgeon. Calling it 'patristic' at least fends off some of the libel.

Inclusion: Athanasius, Wesley and the Queer Community

Hence, I have proposed we opt instead for the language of "***inclusion***" that describes the Pauline, Johannine and Athanasian theology of the Incarnation. The term has an abiding and specific heritage in its theological focus on the *inclusion of all* humanity in the Incarnation of Christ—the hypostatic union of natures, divine and human (collectively) in the God-man. And through Christ's Incarnation, our *inclusion en Christo* extends into participation in the perichoretic life of the Trinity. I see this inclusion explicitly in teachers like St. Irenaeus, St. Athanasius, St. Hilary of Poitiers and St. Gregory the Theologian. More recently, it has emerged in the West in the works of J.B. Torrance, T.F. Torrance and C. Baxter Kruger. Likewise, this inclusion is undoubtedly inherent in the Orthodoxy of D.B. Hart.

Incarnational inclusion says all have been included in the Incarnation, and *all have been forgiven and reconciled* (Rom. 5, Col. 1) by the Cross of Christ. Salvation is thus *already* established in the Incarnation, *experienced now* by faith in Christ and *will become* ultimate in our resurrection. For Inclusivists, the future tense in "all shall be saved" means "I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come."

Then again, *inclusion*, too, has a variety of common referents. For example, 'hopeful inclusion' has also been used to describe John Wesley's understanding of a wider hope for salvation among righteous pagans outside explicit Christian conversion and confession.

In Acts, for example, Cornelius the righteous God-fearer is declared 'acceptable' and even 'already clean' prior to his conversion. God has already heard his prayers and approved of his alms-giving. *Before* his new birth in the breaking waters of baptism, Cornelius had been in the womb of Christ, conceived with Christ in the Virgin. Cornelius' name was inscribed in the wounds of Christ's Passion. His inclusion preceded his repentance, because long before he united himself to Christ, Christ had already united himself to Cornelius. Hearing the gospel, according to Wesley, was not, however, unnecessary. It was the culmination of his inclusion—it brought this righteous God-fearer into the deeper experience of his full inheritance in Christ.

More recently, *inclusion* has become a rallying term for progressive Christian sexuality that seeks to make space for the queer community to participate fully within the Christian church. This latter use of inclusion has gained such ascendancy in everyday parlance that to avoid confusion, I wonder if I need to let go of the term for the same

reason I don't use universalism. Namely, when I'm speaking as an *incarnational inclusivist*, most people don't know what I mean, and when they use it, they don't mean what I mean. I'm personally comfortable with the linguistic crossover across these various uses of inclusion because I see how they are related. But I am in such a minority when speaking of *incarnational inclusion* that I can be misunderstood ... and I'd rather be understood than cling to the label. Thus, my pet moniker needs to be judged by the same measure with which I'm judging Hart's. Fair enough.

Summary of the Hopeful Inclusivist Defense

1. The *hopeful inclusivist* does not overtly declare a *presumptive universalism* (and neither does Hart). Like Origen (but not Hart or Paul) they typically exercise a *cautious universalism* because of immature adherents and sloppy opponents.

2. *Hopeful inclusivists* who follow Maximos believe in ultimate redemption through humanity's forthcoming *freed-will* "Yes," effected by the transfiguring power of the beatific vision.

3. Like Hart, Talbott and Parry (but unlike *most* pop-universalists), *hopeful inclusivists* believe in *ultimate redemption* by a particular *means*: namely, through Christ, his Incarnation, death and resurrection; through preaching the gospel to all and praying for all; and (like Gregory and Maximos) through restorative judgment and a free and willing response of love and faith in Christ.

4. The *hope* of the hopeful inclusivist is not a wavering doubt nor is it certitude in a doctrine (however biblically or philosophically sound). It has a sure and constant *faith, hope and conviction*: Christ himself.

In the end, Hart rejects *hopeful inclusivism* through a superb articulation of the HI position!—just as we might expect Maximos to rebut modern universalism using Hart's very best arguments!

A Unilateral Compromise

Despite the word count I gave to critiquing this one point of *That All Shall Be Saved*, to say that I love the book is not an indulgent overstatement. I believe it stands as the most important book on the topic, and I see it as virtually irrefutable. I have waited prayerfully and lustily for its arrival. And my high hopes were dramatically exceeded. May it still be in print 100 years from its timely release!

From my years as a fan and follower of Hart, I don't expect him to consider compromising his use of the term 'universalism' or his critique of *hopeful inclusivism*. But I believe he has inspired me to a unilateral compromise of sorts.

I know and accept what Hart and others in his stream mean by universalism. I remain convinced that because most universalists have abandoned Hart's own precision and

faith, the term universalism will not help me articulate what he means by it. To distinguish him from the pluralists and allow for his preference of that term, **I propose we consistently call Hart a “patristic universalist,”** gathering within that phrase the full range of views across the fathers (from cautious to hopeful to dogmatic) from Clement and Origen to Gregory and Maximus. That label might help us draw boundaries with those who would misrepresent Hart.

For my part, I can see how the *hopeful inclusivist* label has begun to serve me poorly on three fronts. 1. At best, it has been a way of denying I’m a pop-universalist to the haters, and that didn’t work anyway. 2. The inclusivist term as I have used it is now relatively archaic vis-à-vis its current usage among progressives for the inclusion of LGBTQ folks in church and society. 3. If a genius such as DBH can so completely misunderstand ‘hope’ in Balthasar or Ware, the word must be a more significant stumbling stone than I realized. For these reasons, I’m inclined to appropriate a bolder phrase that I think encompasses all the patristic, cautious and hopeful universalists: namely, *ultimate redemption*.

UR—*ultimate redemption*—seems to capture both Hart’s intent and my own. UR holds to a confident faith that all will be saved, but only through Christ, by his Paschal victory and through restorative judgment and our willing faith/love response to the Christ.

And while *apokatastasis* has suffered historical misuse, slander and a distorted version was anathematized (maybe, sort of), perhaps *ultimate redemption* is a good, specific English translation for Peter’s intent when he proclaims “the restoration of all things” in Christ. That is, UR retains and affirms the biblical term *apokatastasis* and St. Gregory of Nyssa’s rehabilitated orthodox use of it. It also draws a red line with pluralist universalists, declaring that we do need redemption and we do have a Redeemer.

Trying on my compromise, “I am *not* a universalist, but I would defend the Orthodoxy of DBH’s patristic universalism, because I believe he has made a biblical, theological and philosophical case for ultimate redemption that defies refutation.”

So finally, for the hundredth time, NO, I am not a universalist. Period. But in my affirmation of the New Testament gospel of ultimate redemption, yes, I can sound like one. To me, they aren’t the same thing.