

## Hell as the Love of God

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Last modified: August 10, 2017

### Introduction: How to Think About Hell?

This evening I'd like to talk about hell. Is hell a flaw in the character of God? I'd like you to pair up with the person next to you. I'd like one of you to play a non-Christian and ask the toughest questions you can about hell. If you are a non-Christian, play yourself! Then, to the other person: Try to answer that question. [2 minutes for discussion]

Some people, especially those who have experienced enormous amounts of oppression and injustice, say that they find the idea of heaven and hell helpful. After all, it satisfies a sense of longing that we know we have for something greater, a perfect world, and some kind of consequence for good and evil. But it raises other questions. I heard the following question being tossed around: 'Why does God give an infinite punishment for a finite crime?' The answer often given for that is that we are offending an infinite Person, God – though I think that is an inadequate answer, as the answer raises a more problematic question: 'Why does God keep people in hell if they want to get out and be with Him? Does He really care about reconciliation after all? What difference does it make that this is in the afterlife?' You could kind of understand hell being a purgatory, so if you have a little brother that really needs a time out and even a spanking, then hell is God's super time out and super big spanking! But why would God keep them in there eternally? Maybe Hitler. But who else? It makes God seem arbitrary, and not actually who He says He is, since He says that He is love and that He hates for anyone to experience death or be lost (Ezk.18:23, 32 – 33; 1 Tim.2:3 – 4)

Now there are a lot of misconceptions about what heaven and hell are. I like ice cream. So it's really easy for me to imagine heaven as a place where I can eat lots of ice cream and not get fat, get diabetes, or get gas. I mean, who wouldn't want to go to a place like that? What is hell like? Again, it's natural to start with myself and ask yourself, 'What do I fear and hate?' I hate needles. Whenever I go to the doctor, I hate shots or blood tests because I hate getting stuck by needles. So it's natural for me to think that hell is full of not only fire and whatever else is there, but needles that stick me all the time. But is that the most accurate way to think about hell? Is it right to start with you want and what you don't, raise that to the nth degree, and get heaven and hell?

Here's the problem. Doesn't that just make Jesus the gatekeeper to what you want and avoiding what you don't? Just deal with him once and then you're done with him! What if your desires are messed up? What if you can't start with yourself, and your desires *by yourself*? Does an alcoholic get lots of alcohol in heaven? Does a porn addict get lots of porn in heaven? What if God is actually trying to fix your desires? Then you can't just start with yourself and your current desires.

That is why we have to start with Jesus. What is God trying to do through Jesus? Father Michael Himes, a very beloved Jesuit professor at Boston College, writes:

Of course, the question of punishment, i.e. of hell and damnation will arise in many people's minds, and quite rightly. But damnation does not mean that God ceases to love the one damned. If that were true, then the sinner would be more powerful than God, since the sinner would have the power to make God, who is love, *agape*, something less than God. No, God's love is constant, unchanging and perfect. Damnation means that the sinner refuses finally and absolutely to accept being loved and to love in response. The damned may not love God, but God continues to love the damned. After all, the love of God is what holds us in existence. If God does not love you, you're not damned. You simply aren't. What supports our existence and holds us in being is God's love. We exist by the fact that God gives God's self to us at every moment. Therefore, of course, God loves the damned. God loves everything that exists just because it exists. Indeed, that is what makes it exist: God loves it into being.

Let me give you an image which comes from Gregory of Nyssa at the end of the fourth century. The difference between heaven and hell is described in this story he tells: Picture yourself walking out on a bright sunny day with healthy eyes. You will experience the sunlight as something wonderful and pleasant and beneficent. Now, picture yourself walking out on exactly the same bright sunny day, but with a

diseased eye. You will now experience the sunlight as something terrible and painful and awful, something to shy away from. Well, the sun didn't change. You did.

That is the point about heaven and hell. Heaven and hell are exactly the same thing: the love of God. If you have always wanted the love of God, congratulations, you got heaven. If you don't want the love of God, too bad, you are stuck for all eternity. God remains God. God makes the sun shine on the just and the unjust, the rain fall on the good and the wicked. If you don't want rain or sun, too bad, you are still going to get them. The question is not that God changes in response to us. It is that we are judged by our response to the absoluteness of God's self gift. (Michael Himes, S.J., *Doing the Truth in Love*, p.14 – 15)

But is that really true? Many of you have never heard it that way, except maybe in C.S. Lewis' book *The Great Divorce*. You might be asking, 'Does that make sense?' And if you like that, you might be asking, 'Is that really true?' I'm going to look at three categorical reasons why it is true: Theology, Church History, and Scripture.

### **Part One: Theology**

Theology is the attempt to articulate the character of God in a coherent way. It comes about because when you read through the Bible in a chronological way, starting from Genesis, you get the sense that God has these different characteristics, or attributes. When you see God blessing Adam and Eve, giving them all kinds of fruit trees without having to work hard for their food, it's easy to say, 'That's God's love!' But then you come to the Flood of Noah or Sodom and Gomorrah and see God taking people's lives. So you might say, 'That's God's wrath, or justice.' Then you get to Israel sinning in the wilderness and disobeying God, so that God takes some of their lives. You might say, 'That's God's holiness.' But Moses gets to see God up close and personal. So you might say, 'That's God's mercy.' The impression you get is that God is a bunch of lightswitches. He turns some characteristics on and then off, on then off. But is this the best way to understand God? Is God really a bunch of lightswitches???

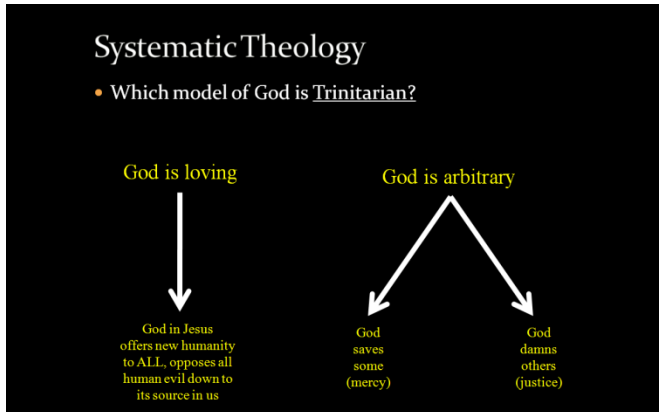
Jesus told us that God is 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit' (Mt.28:18 – 20). That means that in Christian faith, God is a Trinity. He is a relationship of love between Father and Son, where the Spirit is the bond of love between them. And that matters for how we think about God's character. From all eternity, even before God made anything, there was the Father loving the Son, the Son loving the Father, and the Holy Spirit, uniting them and being loved by them. That's God's very *nature*. But if we are looking at the Muslim God, for example, who is not a Trinity but a Singularity, that God would be represented by this large, opaque dot.

This comparison between the large opaque dot Singularity God and the Trinity God is the question of what is the nature of each God. Before the Trinity created anything, before anything else existed, how can you describe the Trinity? Is the Trinity loving? Yes! There is love here between the Father and Son and Spirit. Is the Trinity personal? Yes! Relational. Communal. Unified. Family in the best sense. Friendship in the best sense. Other-centered. You can say all these things about the Trinity. You can roll that up into the statement, 'God is love.' But when you turn to the Singularity, can you say that the Singularity is loving? No. Why not? Because that God isn't loving anyone. It's not fundamentally in that God's *nature*. Is that God relational, personal, friendly? No, not in his very *nature*. Apparently that God is perfectly fine with being alone. (In both Christian and Muslim theologies, God created the world not because of a need in Himself to be loved, but simply out of a free, unconditioned choice to do so; therefore there is no 'need' in God, as if God was lonely and 'needed' company.) That means the Singularity is unconstrained – that God can do good or evil, be loving or unloving, personal or impersonal. But the Trinity is constrained – the Triune God must be loving, personal, relational, and so on. In order to be consistent, that is what the Trinity must do.

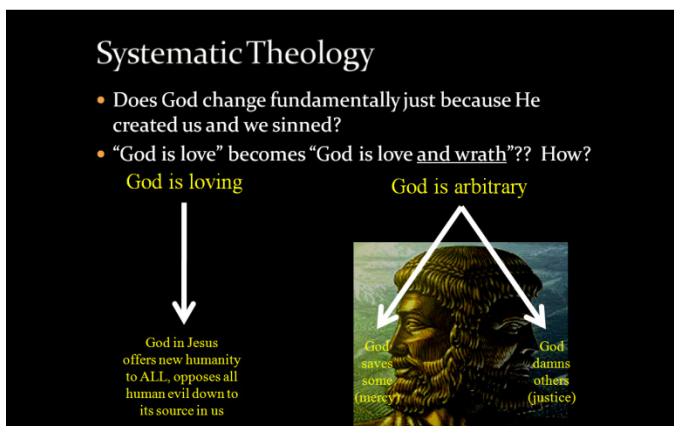
Once God creates everything, then what? God then takes on secondary characteristics towards creation that flow out of his nature. For example, God is holy – *to us*! But before God created everything, *He was not holy*. Why? Because holiness by definition means 'to be set apart.' If there is nothing else to be set apart *from*, then God cannot be *holy*. So God's holiness is a secondary characteristic that He has towards the creation and towards us. Why is God holy? Holiness (secondary characteristic) flows out of His love (primary characteristic). God is the most radically loving, other-centered Being in the entire universe. No one *loves* like God. He is without equal. Fundamentally, God's holiness comes from His love and flows out of it.

The same is true for God's *wrath*. God's wrath is a secondary characteristic towards the creation. God's wrath is *not* a primary characteristic in God. Was there anything the Father was upset with the Son about? No. And since

everything God does must flow out of who God is, God's wrath must be related to God's love, be shaped by it, and flow out from it. What does that mean? Let's take a look at this contrast:



In the diagram on the right, God saves some people, presumably out of His mercy-love-forgiveness. But he also damns others eternally, from His justice-wrath-holiness that is *coequal and opposite* His mercy-love-forgiveness. So if you roll up those two actions into a character, you get *God is arbitrary*. What kind of being is that? If Mako is nice to Fred but mean to George, how would you feel about me? You would ask, 'What kind of person is that?' And if you said, 'But Mako has a good side, and you can just get on it,' another person would rightly ask, 'But if Mako is arbitrary, he's a jerk, and I don't want to get on his good side. I don't like him because of *who he is*.' When Christians present God to non-Christians, that's often what they think. Perhaps because that's often how we present God to them! God has a good side – just believe in Jesus. But their response is, 'God has a good side? That means God has an evil side. What kind of being is this???' He is two faced! That's why Father Michael Himes said that sinners do not change God. God is love. Does God change just because He created us and we sinned? If He is a Trinity, then God is love. If God is love, then He has to treat everyone the same, ultimately, in relation to eternity. So how can 'God is love' become 'God is love and wrath' as in the two faced god on the right?



In the diagram on the right, God is loving. God is like a surgeon, who loves all human beings, who sees that we all have a disease in our bodies. God's wrath is directed at the disease, the corruption in our human nature. Why? Because He loves us. God's love is directed at our personhood, in a personal and loving manner. So His wrath flows out of His love and serves His love, like the wrath of a surgeon who loves His patients. So what did God have to do, because of His nature? God shared in our diseased human nature so that we might share in His healed human nature. He took a human body in Jesus. He defeated the disease in Jesus' body through life, death, and resurrection. And He shares the healed humanity of Jesus with us by His Spirit, so that we could start to be healed and restored to who God always meant for us to be. And if people in eternity want to deny their disease and all the addictions that come from it, then *hell will also be the love of God*. God doesn't change. He continues to hate the disease in us, because He loves every person. Did anyone else notice that the two faced Janus god is a problem? And that it didn't match up with the Trinitarian God of Christianity? Yes! Everyone in the early church noticed that this was a problem. So let's look at church history.

## Part Two: Church History

Irenaeus of Lyons in what is now southern France was the earliest writing theologian outside of the New Testament. He lived from 130 – 200 AD. He said: ‘For one and the same God [who blesses those who believe] inflicts blindness upon those who do not believe, but who set Him at naught; just as the sun, which is a creature of His, [blinds] those who, by reason of any weakness of the eyes cannot behold his light; but to those who believe in Him and follow Him, He grants a fuller and greater illumination of mind.’ (*Against Heresies* 4.29.1; cf. 4.39.1 – 4)

Origen of Alexandria in northern Egypt was another early theologian, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. He said: ‘...the sun, by one and the same power of its heat, melts wax indeed, but dries up and hardens mud not that its power operates one way upon mud, and in another way upon wax; but that the qualities of mud and wax are different, although according to nature they are one thing, both being from the earth.’ (*De Principiis*, book 3, chapter 1 ‘On the Freedom of the Will’, paragraph 11)

Anthony the Great, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, was an Egyptian monk and founder of monasticism. He said, ‘God is good, dispassionate, and immutable... Thus to say that God turns away from the wicked is like saying that the sun hides itself from the blind.’ (*Philokalia*, Vol.1: On the Character of Men, 150) We can be sure that Athanasius also agreed. Athanasius wrote a biography of Anthony the Great to promote him. Athanasius was bishop of Alexandria during the early 4<sup>th</sup> century, gave us the final form of the 27 book New Testament, and was author-defender of the Nicene Creed.

Athanasius of Alexandria, who lived from 298 – 373 AD, the great defender of the Nicene Creed, who also gave us the final form of the New Testament canon, said: ‘For a servant of the Lord should be diligent and careful, yea, moreover, *burning like a flame*, so that when, by an ardent spirit, he has destroyed all carnal sin, he may be able to draw near to God who, according to the expression of the saints, is called ‘*a consuming fire* [Exodus 24:17; Deuteronomy 4:26; Hebrews 12:29]’ Therefore, the God of all, ‘Who makes His angels [spirits],’ is a spirit, ‘and His ministers *a flame of fire* [Psalm 104:4; Hebrews 1:7].’ Wherefore, in the departure from Egypt, He forbade the multitude to touch the mountain [Exodus 19:23], where God was appointing them the law, because they were not of this character. But He called blessed Moses to it, as being fervent in spirit, and possessing unquenchable grace, saying, ‘Let Moses alone draw near [Exodus 24:2].’ He entered into the cloud also, and when the mountain was smoking, he was not injured; but rather, through ‘the words of the Lord, which are choice silver purified in the earth [Psalm 12:6],’ *he descended purified*. Therefore the blessed Paul, when desirous that the grace of the Spirit given to us should not grow cold, exhorts, saying, ‘Quench not the Spirit [1 Thessalonians 5:19].’ For so shall we remain partakers of Christ, if we hold fast to the end the Spirit given at the beginning. For he said, ‘Quench not;’ not because the Spirit is placed in the power of men, and is able to suffer anything from them; but because bad and unthankful men are such as manifestly wish to quench it, since they, like the impure, persecute the Spirit with unholy deeds.’ For the holy Spirit of discipline will flee deceit, nor dwell in a body that is subject unto sin; but will remove from thoughts that are without understanding [Wisdom 1:5].’ Now they being without understanding, and deceitful, and lovers of sin, walk still as in darkness, not having that ‘Light which lights every man that comes into the world [John 1:9].’ Now a *fire* such as this laid hold of Jeremiah the prophet, when the word was in him *as a fire*, and he said, ‘I pass away from every place, and am not able to endure it [Jeremiah 20:9].’ And our Lord Jesus Christ, being good and a lover of men, came that He might cast this upon earth, and said, ‘And what? Would that it were already kindled [Luke 12:49]!’ For He desired, as He testified in Ezekiel, the repentance of a man rather than his death [Ezekiel 18:32]; so that *evil should be entirely consumed in all men, that the soul, being purified, might be able to bring forth fruit*; for the word which is sown by Him will be productive, some thirty, some sixty, some an hundred. [Mark 4:20] Thus, for instance, those who were with Cleopas, although infirm at first from lack of knowledge, yet afterwards were *inflamed* with the words of the Savior, and brought forth the fruits of the knowledge of Him [Luke 24:13 – 34]. The blessed Paul also, when seized by this *fire*, revealed it not to flesh and blood, but having experienced the grace, he became a preacher of the Word [Acts 9]. But not such were those nine lepers who were cleansed from their leprosy, and yet were unthankful to the Lord who healed them [Luke 17:11 – 17]; nor Judas, who obtained the lot of an apostle, and was named a disciple of the Lord, but at last, ‘while eating bread with the Savior, lifted up his heel against Him, and became a traitor.’ But such men have the due reward of their folly, since their expectation will be vain through their ingratitude; for there is no hope for the ungrateful, *the last fire*, prepared for the devil and his angels, awaits those who have neglected divine light. Such then is the end of the unthankful.’ (Athanasius of Alexandria, *Third Festal Letter* (of 331 AD), paragraphs 3 – 4)

Ambrose of Milan, who lived from 337 – 394 AD, and was a towering figure intellectually and politically because he excommunicated Emperor Theodosius until he repented of ordering a massacre, said, ‘And Isaiah shows that the Holy Spirit is not only Light but also Fire, saying: And the light of Israel shall be for a fire. [Isaiah 10:17] So the prophets called Him a burning Fire, because in those three points we see more intensely the majesty of the Godhead; since to sanctify is of the Godhead, to illuminate is the property of fire and light, and the Godhead is wont to be pointed out or seen in the appearance of fire: For our God is a consuming Fire, as Moses said. [Deuteronomy 4:24] For he himself saw the fire in the bush, and had heard God when the voice from the flame of fire came to him saying: I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. [Exodus 3:6] The voice came from the fire, and the voice was in the bush, and the fire did no harm. For the bush was burning but was not consumed, because in that mystery the Lord was showing that He would come to illuminate the thorns of our body, and not to consume those who were in misery, but to alleviate their misery; Who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, that He might give grace and destroy sin. [Matthew 3:11] So in the symbol of fire God keeps His intention... What, then, is that fire? Not certainly one made up of common twigs, or roaring with the burning of the reeds of the woods, but that fire which improves good deeds like gold, and consumes sins like stubble. This is undoubtedly the Holy Spirit, Who is called both the fire and light of the countenance of God... And as there is a light of the divine countenance, so, too, does fire shine forth from the countenance of God, for it is written: “A fire shall burn in His sight.” *For the grace of the day of judgment shines beforehand, that forgiveness may follow to reward the service of the saints.* (Ambrose of Milan, *On the Holy Spirit*, book 1, chapter 14, paragraphs 164 – 165, 169 – 170)

Augustine of Hippo, in Roman North Africa during the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, said, ‘O God, *you are the consuming fire* that can burn away their love for these things and re-create the men in immortal life.’ (*Confessions* book 5.3) ‘I have been divided...until I flow together unto You, *purged and molten in the fire of Your love.*’ (*Confessions* book 11.29) To explain that, he also said, ‘Every inordinate affection is its own punishment.’ (*Confessions*, book 1.19). You could say, ‘Every inappropriate love is its own punishment.’ Here’s how I imagine a dialogue between Jesus and a person who meets him:

*Jesus:* Hello there!

*Person* (rather taken aback): *You...so it’s true...*

*Jesus:* Yes, it is me.

*Person* (sighing): Well, I hope you’re going to treat me well for all the good I did? Lots of ice cream?

*Jesus:* I think you have the wrong idea about what’s going on here. I don’t have ice cream.

*Person:* What do you mean? I don’t understand. I did a lot of good on earth.

*Jesus:* You did do some respectable things, because you were made in my image and you retained a sense of goodness that comes from me.

*Person:* What?! That goodness came from *me*! So I should be able to get all the ice cream I want now, right?

*Jesus:* I’m afraid you have the wrong idea. I am only offering myself.

*Person:* You? I don’t want you. I thought there was some reward involved.

*Jesus:* There is only me. Everything else is connected to me, so if you don’t receive me, everything else here will be a terrible hardship to you.

*Person:* What? How could you treat me like this?

*Jesus:* You feel I have wronged you?

*Person:* Of course! Look at all the good I’ve done!

*Jesus:* Indeed, but there are many thing you did that are not good, and much good you failed to do. That points to the need you have to receive from me a new human nature, the human nature I lived and died and rose again to create in my own physical body. Will you receive me now?

*Person:* No! I’m *offended*! How can you say I need to be healed? Transformed? I’m not that bad.

*Jesus:* You are indeed. You have trained yourself to become addicted to ice cream, and much more: flattery, money, quite a bit of alcohol and porn, and independence. And your corrupted human nature is resisting me.

*Person:* I’m resisting you, because you never gave me what I wanted in life. Even now you’re not giving me what I want, and what I deserve!

*Jesus:* I think you’re mistaking me for someone else. I’m giving you what you *need*. You need to be with me, to be joined to me, and to be like me. You need to be loved by me and healed and transformed by me.

*Person:* I refuse to believe that! That is insulting!

*Jesus:* It is the truth. I only tell the truth.

*Person:* Look at how you’re treating those people over there. Why don’t you treat me better?

*Jesus:* I treat all people the same. I give myself to them, and ask that you give me your very self. They have chosen to say 'yes' to me.

*Person:* Even my wife? You took her from me! Twice. At her so-called 'conversion.' And then she died. You took her. Now I demand that you give her back to me. I want to see her.

*Jesus:* She is not yours.

*Person:* She loved me, until you started taking her from me!

*Jesus:* I did not cause her death. I healed her from our mutual enemy: the corruption of sin, which leads to death of all kinds.

*Person:* You corrupted her. You stole her from me! Give her back to me the way she was.

*Jesus:* You would do her evil just trying to possess her, by reducing her to her former state of weakness when she accepted your ego. But that is not possible, for she is now who I made her to be. She does love you, but only because she shares my love for you. She would say the same things to you that I am saying to you now. Would you like to hear her now?

*Person:* No! I don't need her! And I don't need you! Leave me alone!

*Jesus:* I will not leave you alone. I *cannot* leave you alone. It is not my nature. I love you.

*Person:* You love me? You're stalking me!

*Jesus:* For all eternity, I will call out to you to surrender yourself to me, to let me burn away the thing in you that should not be there, and replace it with my very self. That is my love.

*Person:* Nothing you do could make me love you. You're repulsive, and the closer you get, the more I hate you. Stop! You're tormenting me!

*Jesus:* *You* have made it so.

That is what Augustine and the others mean when they say, 'Every inappropriate love is its own punishment.'

Maximus Confessor, scholar and monk at Constantinople in the 7th century, said, 'God is the sun of justice, as it is written, who shines rays of goodness on simply everyone. The soul develops according to its free will into either wax because of its love for God or into mud because of its love for matter. Thus just as by nature the mud is dried out by the sun and the wax is automatically softened, so also every soul which loves matter and the world and has fixed its mind far from God is hardened as mud according to its free will and by itself advances to its perdition, as did Pharaoh. However, every soul which loves God is softened as wax, and receiving divine impressions and characters it becomes the dwelling place of God in the Spirit.' (*Chapters on Knowledge*, par.12)

John of Damascus, Syrian priest who lived in the 7th and 8th centuries under Arab Islamic conquest, said, 'In eternity God supplies good things to all because He is the source of good things gushing forth goodness to all... After death, there is no means for repentance, not because God does not accept repentance – He cannot deny Himself nor lose His compassion – but the soul does not change anymore... people after death are unchangeable, so that on the one hand the righteous desire God and always have Him to rejoice in, while sinners desire sin though they do not have the material means to sin... they are punished without any consolation. For what is hell but the deprivation of that which is exceedingly desired by someone? Therefore, according to the analogy of desire, whoever desires God rejoices and whoever desires sin is punished.' (*Against the Manicheans* 94.1569, 1573)

Isaac the Syrian, in the 8th century, said: 'The sorrow which takes hold of the heart which has sinned against love, is more piercing than any other pain. It is not right to say that the sinners in hell are deprived of the love of God...But love acts in two different ways, as suffering in the reprov'd, and as joy in the blessed.' (Cited in Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p.234; and Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, p.181 – 82)

'The Eastern Orthodox church teaches that heaven and hell are being in God's presence which is being with God and seeing God, and that there is no such place as where God is not, nor is hell taught in the East as separation from God. One expression of the Eastern teaching is that...God's presence...is punishment and paradise depending on the person's spiritual state in that presence.' (Wikipedia, "Christian Views on Hell")

Jakob Boehme (1575 – 1624), a German mystic, said, 'Hell is in heaven and heaven is in hell. But the angels see only the light, and devils only the darkness.'

So who believes this?

- The united church for a thousand years+
- The entire Eastern Orthodox church
- C.S. Lewis (Anglican), *The Great Divorce*
- J.R.R. Tolkien (Catholic), *The Lord of the Rings*
- Karl Barth (Reformed), *Church Dogmatics*
- T.F. Torrance (Reformed), *Atonement*
- Donald Bloesch (Reformed), *The Last Things*
- Roberta Bondi (Methodist), *Out of the Green Tiled Bathroom*
- Michael Himes (Catholic), *Doing the Truth in Love*
- Karl Rahner (Catholic), *Theological Investigations Vol. VI, 'Hell' in the Encyclopedia of Theology*
- Hans Urs Von Balthazar (Catholic), *Dare We Hope 'For All Men to Be Saved'?*
- Pope John Paul II (Catholic), *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*
- Richard John Neuhaus (Catholic)
- Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J. (Catholic)

### Part Three: Scripture

Now that we see how the theological logic helps us think about God's character, and now that we see we're in quite good company in church history, let's look at Scripture. Let's first look at the motif of fire, from Matthew's Gospel. John the Baptist and Jesus repeatedly speak of hell as fire and darkness. Here is how they start:

Fire as a Literary Theme: Starting Point	
<p><sup>3:10</sup> The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the <b>fire</b>. <sup>11</sup> As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove his sandals; he will baptize you with the <b>Holy Spirit</b> and <b>fire</b>. <sup>12</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clear his threshing floor; and he will gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with <b>unquenchable fire</b>.</p>	
Fire as Purifying, Light	Fire as Destroying, Darkness
<p><sup>3:16</sup> After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw <b>the Spirit of God</b> descending as a dove and lighting on him, <sup>17</sup> and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.'</p> <p><sup>4:16</sup> 'The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great <b>light</b>, and those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, upon them a light dawned.'</p> <p><sup>5:14</sup> You are the <b>light</b> of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; <sup>15</sup> nor does anyone <b>light a lamp</b> and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives <b>light</b> to all who are in the house. <sup>16</sup> Let your <b>light</b> shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.</p> <p><sup>6:22</sup> The eye is the <b>lamp</b> of the body; so then if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of <b>light</b>. <sup>23</sup> But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!</p>	<p><sup>5:22</sup> Whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the <b>fiery hell</b>.</p> <p><sup>8:12</sup> But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the <b>outer darkness</b>; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.</p> <p><sup>13:40</sup> So just as the tares are gathered up and <b>burned with fire</b>, so shall it be at the end of the age. <sup>41</sup> The Son of Man will send forth his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, <sup>42</sup> and will throw them into the <b>furnace of fire</b>; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.</p> <p><sup>13:49</sup> So it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous, <sup>50</sup> and will throw them into the <b>furnace of fire</b>; in that place there will be weeping and</p>

<p>17:1 Six days later Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves. <sup>2</sup> And he was transfigured before them; and his face shone like the <b>sun</b>, and his garments became as white as <b>light</b>...<sup>5</sup> While he was still speaking, a <b>bright cloud</b> overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, 'This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to him!'</p> <p>25:1 'Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten virgins, who took their <b>lamps</b> and went out to meet the bridegroom. <sup>2</sup> Five of them were foolish, and five were prudent. <sup>3</sup> For when the foolish took their <b>lamps</b>, they took no oil with them, <sup>4</sup> but the prudent took oil in flasks along with their <b>lamps</b>. <sup>5</sup> Now while the bridegroom was delaying, they all got drowsy and began to sleep. <sup>6</sup> But at midnight there was a shout, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' <sup>7</sup> Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their <b>lamps</b>. <sup>8</sup> The foolish said to the prudent, 'Give us some of your oil, for our <b>lamps</b> are going out.' <sup>9</sup> But the prudent answered, 'No, there will not be enough for us and you too; go instead to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' <sup>10</sup> And while they were going away to make the purchase, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast; and the door was shut. <sup>11</sup> Later the other virgins also came, saying, 'Lord, lord, open up for us.' <sup>12</sup> But he answered, 'Truly I say to you, I do not know you.'</p> <p>28:1 Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave. <sup>2</sup> And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. <sup>3</sup> And his appearance was like <b>lightning</b>, and his clothing as white as snow.</p>	<p>gnashing of teeth.</p> <p>18:8 If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into the <b>eternal fire</b>. <sup>9</sup> If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into the <b>fiery hell</b>.</p> <p>22:13 Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the <b>outer darkness</b>; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' <sup>14</sup> For many are called, but few are chosen.'</p> <p>24:50 The master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour which he does not know, <sup>51</sup> and will <b>cut him in pieces</b> and assign him a place with the hypocrites; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.</p> <p>25:30 Throw out the worthless slave into the <b>outer darkness</b>; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.</p> <p>25:41 Then he will also say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, accursed ones, into the <b>eternal fire</b> which has been prepared for the devil and his angels...' <sup>46</sup> These will go away into <b>eternal punishment</b>, but the righteous into eternal life.'</p>
<p>Acts 2:1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup> And there appeared to them <b>tongues as of fire</b> distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. <sup>4</sup> And they were all filled with the <b>Holy Spirit</b> and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance.</p>	

Is fire positive or negative for us? If we are baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire, it's positive. The Spirit refines us like precious metal in fire. The Spirit took Jesus' humanity and empowered him to resist temptation (3:13 – 4:11). Jesus then said that his presence was giving forth 'light' (4:16). His followers would become the new temple-presence of God; they would be like a lamp, which of course gives off light by a burning fire within (5:14 – 16). In each of us, our eye's spiritual focus serves as a lamp (6:22 – 23). Very importantly, the next time the Spirit's presence is manifested on Jesus, the Spirit transfigures him (17:2, 5), and presents Jesus as the new temple-presence of God on a mountain. Like at the baptism of Jesus, the Father and the Spirit acknowledge Jesus' identity publicly, and this literary symmetry is important because it establishes the 'Spirit and fire' baptism that Jesus is putting his human nature through, by which he gives forth light through his very own humanity. The parable of the



ten virgins uses the motifs of the lamp, oil, fire, and light to represent our calling (25:1 – 13). If not, fire is negative. The fire appears to us as destructive. But it depends on us. The same is true in Jesus' use of 'fire and darkness' throughout the Gospels.

But notice this: 'Fire and darkness' come from Israel's refusal to come up Mount Sinai to meet with God. This is what Moses said: 'You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain burned with fire to the very heart of the heavens: darkness, cloud and thick gloom...' I was standing between the LORD and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the LORD; *for you were afraid because of the fire and did not go up the mountain* (Dt.4:11; 5:5). Fire and darkness are literary motifs related to Israel's failure at Mount Sinai. They said, 'No' to God's invitation to come higher up and further in, and *remained on the outside of God* instead. (For more information on these New Testament passages on fire and darkness, as well as the Old Testament's treatment of these motifs, see my paper, *Hell as Fire and Darkness: Remembrance of Sinai as Covenant Rejection in Matthew's Gospel* found here: <http://nagasawafamily.org/matthew-theme-fire-and-darkness-as-hell.pdf>)

Fire is symbolic of God's refining presence in the Pentateuch. When God closes the garden to Adam and Eve, the first incidence of fire anywhere in Scripture occurs. Guarding the way to the tree of life is a flaming sword (Gen.3:24), probably symbolizing the word of God (Rev.1:16, etc.) which can cut/circumcise/burn uncleanness away. Both the fire motif and the sword motif anticipate circumcision/cutting/burning something away from people so they could eventually return to the tree of life. God then appears as a fire in the burning thorn bush (Ex.3:2; Acts 7:30). God also appears as fire on Mount Sinai inviting Israel higher up and further in (Ex.19:13; Dt.5:5). See also Hebrews 12:18 – 29, where the writer says that we come not to the fiery Mt. Sinai, but to a new Mt. Zion after having been cleansed and perfected through Jesus, 'for our God is a consuming fire.' And God in Israel's Temple was acting like a dialysis machine. He said, 'Give me your impurity, and I will give you back My purity.' It was like Jewish circumcision, cutting something unclean away from the person, and cleansing the person. The laying on of hands on the animal symbolized placing the corrupted part of us and giving it to God to consume. God consumed it with fire directly, or indirectly consumed it through the priests. God then gave Israel back innocent, uncorrupted animal blood. So God used the sacrifices as a way of refining and purifying Israel.

Fire is symbolic of God's refining presence in the beautiful and massive prophecy of Isaiah. Isaiah says, 'When the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and purged the bloodshed of Jerusalem from her midst, by the spirit of judgment and the spirit of burning, then the LORD will create over the whole area of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, even smoke, and the brightness of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory will be a canopy.' (Isa.4:4 – 5) Then, Isaiah's unclean lips are cleansed with a fiery, burning coal (Isa.6:6). That is very significant! Fire *becomes destroying* for those who want to hold onto their impurity (Isa.10:16 – 17; 29:6; 30:27 – 30; 66:1 – 24 which is also connected to the theme of renewal of God's presence on Mt. Zion, a retelling of Sinai)

Fire is symbolic of God's refining presence in the book of Ezekiel. God's throne is described as 'a great cloud of fire...like glowing metal in the midst of the fire' (Ezk.1:4, 13, 27; 8:2). 'Because all of you have become dross, therefore, behold, I am going to gather you into the midst of Jerusalem. As they gather silver and bronze and iron and lead and tin into the furnace to blow fire on it in order to melt it, so I will gather you in My anger and in My wrath and I will lay you there and melt you. I will gather you and blow on you with the fire of My wrath, and you will be melted in the midst of it. As silver is melted in the furnace, so you will be melted in the midst of it; and you will know that I, the LORD, have poured out My wrath on you.' (Ezk.22:19 – 22) This leads to a purified Israel (Ezk.36:16 – 36)

Fire is symbolic of God's refining presence in Malachi. Malachi says, 'For He is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the LORD offerings in righteousness.' (Mal.3:2 – 3)

Fire is symbolic of God's refining presence in the Psalms. 'For You have tried us, O God; You have refined us as silver is refined ...We went through fire and through water, yet You brought us out into a place of abundance.' (Ps.66:10, 12) Psalm 18:6 – 14 also seems to use Mt. Sinai and the fire there as a reference point.

As I said before, fire is symbolic of God's refining presence as Matthew used that language: 'The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. As for

me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove his sandals; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clear his threshing floor; and he will gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.’ (Matthew 3:10 – 12) How you experience divine fire depends on you. Positively, you can bring that fire into yourself: ‘You are the light of the world... nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.’ (Mt.5:14 – 16). But negatively, you can resist the cleansing of Jesus. In this example, you can resist Jesus’ call to reconciliation, so: ‘Whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.’ (Mt.5:22, etc.)

Luke also uses fire as symbolic of God’s refining presence, in Luke – Acts. John the Baptist speaks of the fire of the Holy Spirit (refinement) or wood-burning (destruction) (Lk.3:9 – 18). At Pentecost, the Spirit comes with ‘tongues of fire’ (Acts 2:1 – 3), which symbolically makes each believer a mini Mt. Sinai, since Pentecost commemorates the giving of the Sinai Law. How you experience divine fire depends on you.

Paul also uses fire as a symbolic of God’s refining presence. ‘Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work. If any man’s work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.’ (1 Cor.3:12 – 15)

Peter, in his second letter, uses fire as symbolic of God’s refining presence. Peter says that in Christ, ‘we have become partakers of the divine nature’ (2 Pet.1:4). He says that we grow in certain ‘qualities’ (1:8, 9) of character which relate to our ‘purification from former sins’ (1:9). Peter coordinates the believers to Jesus, who was transfigured with divine glory (1:16 – 17); so we, too, must be purified. We must not be overcome by sensuality (2:2, 7), that is, ‘the flesh in its corrupt desires’ (2:10), to ultimately be ‘slaves to corruption’ (2:19 – 22). The purification experienced by the transfigured Jesus will then become a burning fire throughout the creation (3:10 – 18). We are to be found in him ‘in peace, spotless, and blameless’ (3:14), while the whole creation is purified by divine fire.

The book of Revelation uses fire as symbolic of God’s refining presence. Jesus is described first with fire. ‘His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace’ (Rev.1:14 – 15; 2:18). He says, ‘I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see.’ (Rev.3:18). But then, fire is destroying for those who cling to impurity: ‘tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb’ (Rev.14:10) And of course the famous lake of fire passage: ‘And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire’ (Rev.20:12 – 15).

In other words, fire is a literary theme in each book. You cannot draw conclusions about fire from only the passages where fire is destroying. That is a methodological mistake. Just to show you other examples of that methodological mistake, let’s take Acts as an example. (1) Take tongues and the Spirit. Do we examine only times when the Spirit bestows tongues on believers (Acts 2:1 – 11; 10:44 – 48; 19:1 – 6)? If we did, then we would conclude that when the Spirit comes, people must speak in tongues. But the problem is that the Spirit comes without causing people to speak in tongues, in the narrative of Acts itself. (2) Take imprisonment. Do we only examine times where God breaks the apostles out of jail (Acts 5:18 – 20; 12:4 – 10; 16:23 – 26)? If we did, then we could expect God to break us out of jail whenever we get thrown in jail for our faith. But no: The problem is that there are times the apostles are in jail and God doesn’t cause a jailbreak to free them (Acts 4:3 – 23; 8:3; 23:10 – 18; 24:27; 25:14; 26:32; 28:17 – 31). (3) Or take the apostles’ speeches and evangelism: Do we give evangelistic speeches only appealing to creation, as the apostles did for Gentiles (Acts 14:14 – 17; 17:22 – 31)? Or only appealing to fulfillment of

Messianic passages, as the apostles did for Jews (Acts 2:14 – 36; 3:11 – 26; 4:8 – 12, 24 – 30; 5:29 – 32; 7:2 – 53; 8:32 – 35; 23:1 – 12; 24:10 – 21; 26:1 – 23; 28:17 – 28)?

Illus: Symeon ‘the New Theologian’ (949 – 1022 AD), considered one of the three greatest teachers of the church by the Eastern Orthodox, demonstrates that the church understood ‘fire’ in Scripture as a positive thing, representing God’s divine nature:

‘What I have seen is the totality recapitulated as one,  
received not in essence but by participation.  
*Just as if you lit a flame from a flame,  
it is the whole flame you receive.*’

And:

‘By what boundless mercy, Savior,  
have you allowed me to become a member of your body?  
Me, the unclean, the defiled, the prodigal.  
How is it that you have clothed me  
in the brilliant garment,  
radiant with the splendor of immortality,  
that turns all my members into light?  
Your body, immaculate and divine,  
is all radiant with *the fire of your divinity*,  
with which it is ineffably joined and combined,  
This is the gift you have given me, my God:  
that this mortal and shabby frame  
has become one with your immaculate body  
and that my blood has been mingled  
with your blood.  
I know, too,  
that I have been made one with your divinity  
and have become your own most pure body,  
a brilliant member, transparently lucid,  
luminous and holy.  
I see the beauty of it all. I can gaze on the radiance.  
I have become a reflection of the light of your grace.’ (*The Book of Mystical Chapters* 78)

Illus: Niketas Stethatos (c.1005 – c.1090 AD) is considered a saint in the Orthodox church. He was a follower of Symeon the New Theologian and wrote the most complete biography of him, *Life of Symeon*. Stethatos said:

‘Once a soul has been *consumed*  
in the depths of God’s love  
and has tasted the sweet delight  
of God’s intellectual graces,  
it can no longer bear to stay frozen  
in its own former condition  
but is impelled to rise ever higher to the heavens.  
The higher it ascends through the Spirit,  
and the deeper it sinks into the abyss of God,  
the more it is consumed by the *fire of longing*  
and searches out the immensity  
of the even deeper mysteries of God,  
strenuously trying to come into that blessed light,  
where every intellect is caught up into ecstasy,  
where the heart knows it can finally rest  
from all its strivings

and find its rest in joy.’ (*The Book of Mystical Chapters* #94)

Now when we read Revelation especially, and the lake of fire passage, we have to be careful about what is *literal* and what is a *literary* reference to a previous part of the biblical story. This book is a unique genre that makes use of a lot of literary symbolism. Let’s take another passage in Revelation.

22:1 Then he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of [Jesus], <sup>2</sup> in the middle of its street. On either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. <sup>3</sup> There will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of [Jesus] will be in it, and His bond-servants will serve Him; <sup>4</sup> they will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads. <sup>5</sup> And there will no longer be any night; and they will not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God will illumine them; and they will reign forever and ever.

What is literal is that the new heavens and new earth will be a physical place. In contrast with many other belief systems where the soul leaves the body because the physical body and the physical world is bad, Jewish and Christian believers believe that the world will be physically resurrected. God said way back in Genesis 1 that the physical world, including human bodies, are good and very good. God has never backed away from that declaration, and His commitment to restore what He originally designed as good. Therefore God is bringing heaven back to earth in a reunion. So we will not be souls floating around. We will have new physical bodies to live in a new physical, recreated world. What is also literal is that this will be a world where humanity and nature are reconciled. Today, humanity and nature are not reconciled together. Anyone studying ecology and environmental sciences knows that painfully well. But when heaven is reunited with earth, there will be a city (New Jerusalem) with a river in the middle of a street. The materials of the city will be natural materials. I imagine it to be like Rivendell or Lothlorien in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Does it *literally* mean that everyone in heaven has the name ‘Jesus’ written on their foreheads? Maybe. But it does refer *literarily* to other places in the Bible. Bearing signs of being God’s covenant people on your heart, hands, and head: ‘These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart... You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead.’ (Dt.6:6 – 8). Might it also mean that when we see each other we’ll see Jesus? I think so. So in that sense, his name will be written on our foreheads. We will partake of him and what he has done.

Another example of literary interpretation is the ‘lake of fire’ passage (Rev.20:14 – 15). The ‘lake’ was prefigured by the Red Sea and the Sea of Galilee. God drowned the Egyptians who pursued Israel in the Red Sea, in the Exodus. Jesus drowned pigs possessed by demons in the Sea of Galilee (Mt.8:28 – 34; Mk.5:1 – 20; Lk.8:22 – 39). The Sea of Galilee was considered unstable, dangerous. In fact, it tapped into a bigger theme from Scripture. The Jewish preference for ‘land’ for humanity as opposed to the ‘sea’ came from Genesis 1, where God made the land to be the place of stability as opposed to the sea which was a place of chaos. And of course, fire refers to God’s refining power, which might feel like destroying power if you identify yourself with the corruption that God wants to burn out of you, but that is your choice. So the ‘lake of fire’ is a physical region where people experience the refining love of God as torment, because they have become addicted to something else; they experience no stability. What is Jesus refining/burning out? The corruption in human nature, first in himself, then us (Gen.6:5 – 6; 8:21; Dt.30:6; Jer.4:4; 17:1 – 10; 31:31 – 34; Ezk.11:19; 36:26 – 36; Mt.15:18 – 20; Rom.2:28 – 29; 6:1 – 11; 8:1 – 4). God is healing us through Jesus’ new humanity and his Spirit (Rom.6:1 – 11; 8:1 – 4) with our willing partnership (Rom.4:1 – 5:11). God continues to do that in hell, which is what makes hell, well, *hell*. It’s not so much that God ‘puts’ people into hell, but that hell is a condition of being that people have rejected Jesus so deeply that they continue to reject Jesus even while he is loving them. Jesus offers to heal and transform their human nature; they refuse; they find it insulting that he would demand this. And they continue to resist the love of God.

Illus: T.S. Eliot said it eloquently in his poem *Four Quartets*:

The dove descending breaks the air  
With flame of incandescent terror  
Of which the tongues declare  
The one discharge from sin and error.

The only hope, or else despair  
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre-  
To be redeemed from fire by fire.

Who then devised the torment? Love.  
Love is the unfamiliar Name  
Behind the hands that wove  
The intolerable shirt of flame  
Which human power cannot remove.  
We only live, only suspire  
Consumed by either fire or fire.

EXPOSITION: Later in Romans, Paul gives instructions to Christians on how to love their enemies. This passage is really important. <sup>17</sup> Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. <sup>18</sup> If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. <sup>19</sup> Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord. <sup>20</sup> But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in doing so you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.' (Romans 12:17 – 20) Paul is concatenating Proverbs 20:22, 24:29, and 25:21. The point here is that God will take vengeance on those who do violence to the Christians, but that vengeance will be precisely *by God working in and through the Christians showing love to the aggressors*. Love given in response to hate will feel like burning coals on one's head. That means that 'the wrath of God' is also the love of God. Paul is not saying, 'Christians cannot do evil, but God can.' Instead, God's love also contains and shapes God's wrath if a person refuses Him.

EXPOSITION: The key question to ask when we are looking at the topic of hell is not just, 'How is *hell* described?' but 'How is *sin* described? What does *sin do to us*?' In John's Gospel, we see that the ultimate result of rejecting Jesus is self-negation. In John 18 – 19, sin is expressed in terms of self-negation. Jesus, when he was arrested, boldly stated his identity and said three times, 'I am' (John 18:5, 6, 8). But Simon Peter, Pilate, and the Jews negate their own identity. Simon Peter, while trying to follow Jesus into the courtyard of the trial, was confronted by people who suspected him of being a follower of Jesus, and he said three times, 'I am not' (John 18:17, 25, and implicitly in v.27). Pilate, when Jesus was standing right in front of him, should have cared about truth in legal proceedings, but said in abdication, 'What is truth?' (John 19:38) The Jews, who cried out at every Passover that they had no king but God, said, 'We have no king but Caesar' (John 19:16). I believe this pattern of self-negation is at the heart of sin and therefore represents what will happen to those in hell.

EXPOSITION: In the book of Genesis, the same thing happens. Sin is self-negation. God made humanity in His image, and turning away from God meant that humanity was turning away from being human. We started becoming inhuman. The same thing is true in Romans. Paul says three times in Romans 1:21 – 32 that God 'gives them [i.e. people] over' to their own choices, and they reap the consequences of self-negation. Because God is life itself, when people turn away from Him, things experience death a little. In the Bible, whenever people spurn God and turn away from Him, God gives us what we want. But now, God has entered into human form as Jesus. He's entered humanity itself, making Jesus the only place God and humanity are fully together, *so humanity has nowhere to hide anymore*. Jesus healed and transformed human nature in himself (Rom.8:3; 6:6), by killing the 'old self', i.e. our internal resistance to God, and being resurrected as God's new humanity. Jesus is humanity's destiny and purpose, exemplar and savior. Anyone who rejects Jesus is trying to reject God's ultimate purpose, which is union with Himself to refine away the corruption of sin in human nature. In Romans 1:18, Paul, the author, says that the wrath of God is revealed against the unrighteousness and ungodliness of people, but not against people per se. The wrath of God is against our sin, specifically the internal corruption which Paul calls 'the flesh' in Romans 7:14 – 8:11. Jesus is God's solution for this rebellious flesh. That is why the wrath of God is the wrath of a surgeon that burns against the cancer in our body. But the wrath of God is not against our personhood per se. It's just that people who refuse Jesus think that the cancer is actually *who they are*. They are in love with a *false self*.

ILLUSTRATION: When I was a junior in high school, I was like this: I loved a false self. I discovered this when I went with some Christian friends on a spring break trip to Mexico. I thought that we'd build buildings like Habitat for Humanity does. Instead, we played with kids and told them Bible stories. I didn't like kids back then. And I didn't like this trip. First of all, I wasn't a Christian, and we were telling kids Bible stories. I felt kind of awkward.

Second, the poverty that I saw really disturbed me and made me think. Third, I felt like no one really understood what I was going through. I was a competitive swimmer taking a week off out of the competitive season. No one does that! Fourth, the kids didn't even appreciate it. I would have felt a little better if they understood that I was a serious athlete and scholar – because that's what my school awards told me about myself – and that I had a bright future – I wanted to play water polo for Stanford and was working hard towards that goal. I wanted those kids to appreciate me for who I thought I was. But all they asked was, 'Are you coming back tomorrow? Are you coming back tomorrow?' Those kids loved the real me. I loved a façade that I had created. And it struck me that God's love was kind of like that. Not as simplistic as a child's, but He loves the true me: insecure, filled with longing and hope and frustration and needs to be loved, and in fact needing to be filled by the Spirit of Jesus. But I loved the false me. So God's love was torment.

ILLUSTRATION: C.S. Lewis in *The Great Divorce* describes this. In this fictitious story, there is a bus that goes from hell to heaven, so people in hell can see heaven. But the strange thing is that people from hell reject heaven and return to hell. One such person is a man who was an actor in his earthly life. He's in hell. When he gets to heaven, he meets his ex-wife. They hadn't parted well, but she's happy to see him. Now he carries around a tall mannequin of a very debonair, handsome gentleman sporting a sharp tuxedo. He carries this thing around, and wants everyone to relate to the mannequin as if it were him. He himself is short, ugly man. But the way he thinks of himself and the way he would like other people to relate to him is as if he were tall, debonair, and handsome. He's furious that no one does. His wife ignores the mannequin and keeps speaking to the real him. But he insists that the real him is this mannequin. He loves a false self. So the love of God in heaven, which can only deal with the truth, is torment.

ILLUSTRATION: In the movie *Spiderman 3*, Spiderman destroys the black suit Venom. (On youtube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AIxWDh0hRWQ&feature=related>, watch from 2:00 mark) The reason I like that as an illustration is because it shows how Spiderman did not want to kill Eddie. Spiderman wanted to destroy Venom. But Eddie wanted the black suit Venom, and jumped into the fire. He chose to be identified with the problem. The same is true for hell, except that the destruction is eternal. The wrath of God is directed against that problem in us, but not our personhood. But because people choose to be identified with the problem God is trying to burn away, they will burn eternally.

EXPOSITION: Sin is self-trashing and self-defeating. Notice that Jesus says that salt can become mixed with other things: 'You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men.' (Mt.5:13) He also says, in the context of talking about anger, that by harboring and nursing our anger, we are self-trashing and self-defeating:

'But I say to you that everyone  
who is angry with his brother  
shall be guilty before the court; and  
whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,'  
shall be guilty before the supreme court; and  
whoever says, 'You fool,'  
shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.' (Mt.5:22)

The consequences are not 'external punishments.' They go hand in hand with the acts themselves. Everyone angry with his brother will be liable to judgment by others local to him. Everyone who announces his anger in accusation broadcasts his venom and anger problem. That's like, for a Jewish person, becoming liable to the highest court in the land, the Sanhedrin. Then, everyone who uses the 'you fool' label and excommunicates another person, cutting off relationship, out of anger alone, will be excommunicating himself from the community of faith.

ILLUSTRATION: I think people who claimed to be Christians but were really racists will be confronted by their addiction when they meet the real Jesus. In 1966, Robert Kennedy undertook a tour of South Africa in which he championed the cause of the anti-Apartheid movement. His tour gained international praise at a time when few politicians dared to entangle themselves in the politics of South Africa. Kennedy spoke out against the oppression of the native population. He was welcomed by the black population as though a visiting head of state. In an interview with LOOK Magazine he said: 'At the University of Natal in Durban, I was told the church to which most of the white population belongs teaches apartheid as a moral necessity. A questioner declared that few churches allow

black Africans to pray with the white because the Bible says that is the way it should be, because God created Negroes to serve. 'But suppose God is black,' I replied. 'What if we go to Heaven and we, all our lives, have treated the Negro as an inferior, and God is there, and we look up and He is not white? What then is our response?' There was no answer. Only silence.' (*Ripple of Hope in the Land of Apartheid: Robert Kennedy in South Africa*, June 1966)

**EXPOSITION:** What about Jesus apparently pushing people away when they want him? This happens in two places in Matthew's Gospel: 'And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness'' (Mt.7:23). 'Later the other virgins also came, saying, 'Lord, lord, open up for us.' But he answered, 'Truly I say to you, I do not know you.' (Mt.25:11 – 12) This is interesting because these two sit on opposite sides of a giant chiasm running through all of the Gospel of Matthew. So they are definitely parallel and related, if not basically identical. In both cases, they want a reward from Jesus, but not Jesus himself. They do not want his heart transformation for themselves. The false prophets are inwardly ravenous wolves because they reject the heart-level teaching of Jesus (Mt.7:15 – 23). They just want a reward for doing something sexy, like casting our demons. But they don't want to let Jesus into their hearts to clean up all the junk there. The other five virgins lied about having oil; they had no oil to begin with and did not want to carry it (Mt.25:2). Oil represents the Holy Spirit and the internalized word of Jesus. They don't even care about the wedding party and ceremony itself because their role was to have lit lamps for the celebration. Maybe they just want the party favors! They still don't have oil. So in that sense, Jesus denies them what they want because he doesn't have 'a reward' apart from himself. But they don't want *him*. But what does he do? He keeps calling them to repentance, shown by their existence eternally, his refining fire, and his nature of love.

**PRINCIPLE:** God in His truth cannot tolerate any lies or addictions. So for people in hell, the love of Jesus is torment and torture. It's not just what might be going on among people. The most serious thing is what's going on with God. People in hell love a false self, they worship false things, and they will still want what is false even those desires cannot be satisfied. The only reality that will be available is God's reality.

**PRINCIPLE:** Emile Durkheim said, 'To pursue a goal which is by definition unattainable is to condemn oneself to a state of perpetual unhappiness.' But Jesus still sees the true self God created, and he insists that people allow him to kill the corruption in our nature, the corruption that causes our addiction to things other than God. Jesus will either ignore your façade or be angry with it. As Paul says in Romans 1:18, the wrath of God is against the unrighteousness and ungodliness of people. But it is not against *people per se*. God's wrath is against the corruption in us, the sin in us. It is the wrath of a surgeon who wants to destroy the cancer he hates in the body of the person he loves. So for that person, Jesus' insistence will feel like torture. And they will spend eternity in eternal Jesus-denial, which is also eternal self-denial and self-destruction. They love a false self that they invent: someone independent and freewheeling, or moral and upright on their own strength, or someone who is absolutely important and central to someone else's life. But God loves the self He created and loves. So God gives them existence because He loves them. Hell is God's refusal to let go. And He will constantly call to the people in hell to turn back to Him and love Him, but they won't.

**PRINCIPLE:** Why do we get to the place where we deceive ourselves so much? It's because of our choices. We participate in shaping our own humanity. Physiologically, that is true. If you're a man (I'm not sure how this works out for women) and you take cocaine, play lots of video games, or watch pornography, the same pathways in your brain get stimulated. Then your body produces more testosterone, which causes the hemispheres of your brain to become more separated. That hurts your capacity for deeper emotional life. That means you'll be drawn into the same fantasies as before, and more strongly so. So you have the same desires for love, and meaning, and relationship, but you have these addictions to falsehoods that never satisfy you. I think 'addiction' is a good way of understanding what happens in hell. It's having an addiction that cannot be met because the thing you're addicted to simply cannot exist in the truth of God's presence, because God only deals in reality.

**Conclusion**

Let me summarize what I just said in this table:

Two Main Views of Hell

From: External Punishment	To: Internal Self-Destruction
God's wrath – like a judge in the justice system	God's wrath – like a surgeon in a hospital

God hates you, punishes you by throwing you into a prison or torture chamber	God hates the disease in your body, denies your addiction, and keeps insisting that you let him perform the surgery.
You desire to be with God, but He says no	You desire to be without God, but He says no
Hell is against your desires	Hell is your desires; they're messed up
Hell is God's infinite wrath and retributive justice	Hell is God's infinite love and restorative justice
Scriptures emphasized: <i>What</i> it's like	Scriptures emphasized: <i>Why</i> it's like that
'Original sin' = inherited guilt	'Ancestral sin' = inherited corruption
Fire is punishing	Fire is refining
Darkness is being abandoned by God	Darkness is their self-imposed blindness, un-creation
Sin is lawbreaking	Sin is addiction and self-destruction, then lawbreaking
God's wrath is against us for lawbreaking, for the consequences of sin	God's wrath is against the corruption in us, the source of our sin (Rom.1:18; 7:14 – 8:4)

Here are the implications of the early Christian view of hell:

God's Character

- God is 100% good, trying to undo 100% of the evil of humanity
- Consistently and thoroughly Trinitarian

Church Unity

- The teaching of the earliest, united church, for a thousand years+
- Everyone else must explain their departure from this

Personally Relevant

- What/Who do you desire?
- Urgency: Address your addiction now; later is harder (see Appendix A)

### The Central Questions

What are the major questions that result from understanding hell as the love of God?

First, the objections that some people put up don't stand. Is God unfair or unloving or unjust by having hell? No. Hell is not the infinite justice of God. It is His infinite love, truthful and relentless love. He cannot stop calling out to people, and calling them to Himself in the person of Jesus. His transforming love will never stop. It is not His nature.

Secondly, heaven and hell are not whether we're morally good enough. Heaven and hell are not primarily rewards and punishments. They are simply extensions of what's happening in our hearts right now. They are what we *want*. The reward for following Jesus is...Jesus! It's not ice cream. In the same way, the consequence of sin is...the sin. It's terrible. And God doesn't have to invent other consequences for it.

But if we don't come to Jesus, what happens to all our desires? For a while, we become very good at satisfying our desires on our own in our own self-centered ways. But then it starts happening. We start to not like interruptions and uncertainty. We don't like it when other people ask us to be flexible, or to give up something. We hate not getting our way. We start to become rigid about how life must be for us. And by the time we're old, our self-centeredness rules us. We become addicted to something that is an illusion. And we view God as the one who denies us the thing to which we are addicted. That is hell.

And that's why I would encourage you to investigate Jesus now, while you're young. Do you ever notice that when a person gets old, it's really hard for them to change? That's because as you get older, your choices have shaped you. You become more and more yourself. If you're grumpy and cranky as old people, it probably means that you started to become grumpy and cranky as young people – it's just that they had more ways of hiding it when they were younger. Or they had ways of making it funny. If they are arrogant and self-centered when they're old, it probably means that they started to become arrogant and self-centered when they were young; it's just that they had ways of working with it or making it funny. As you get older, you show who you are. It's the same thing that happens with your desires. The way you deal with your desires, over time, becomes rigid. It comes to the point



where it seems like you can no longer control yourself. So heaven and hell are simply places where you get what you want, and that starts now. You are conditioning your human nature – your heart – as we speak!

If you think that you can *plan* to just ‘choose Jesus right before you die,’ there is a risk. The issue is that you will eventually become a person who will not choose Jesus. You’re already choosing against him in favor of other things. And just like the two brothers who stole from my wife and me, it becomes harder and harder to choose out of those things and step into Jesus’ truth and love. You start to want lesser things so much, it’s hard to turn around. It’s not impossible in old age, but it’s much harder.

If you want more time now to yourself, and don’t want to give yourself to Jesus now, then *what makes you think you will want to give yourself to Jesus later?* You are conditioning your human nature to feel that. You are shaping your own heart. There will be all the time in eternity to not give yourself to Jesus. You feel like Jesus is in a rush to have you now? In eternity, you will tell him to his face he’s in a rush.

If you want to avoid doing evangelism now, and speaking of his love to others now, then *what makes you think you will want to speak of his love to others later?* You won’t. You already begrudge it, because you feel shy or embarrassed or feel put upon by him. But you are conditioning your human nature to feel that. In eternity, you will continue to feel put upon by him. He will want his name upon your forehead, to identify you as his own so that everyone can see it, and have you be glad about that fact, but you will have conditioned yourself to conceal your decisions, to be all ‘private’ about yourself, to be in control of the way you appear to others. In eternity, you will tell him to his face that you want to control your appearance.

Some of you may be starting to see yourself more clearly now. If you haven’t committed yourself to Jesus and allowed him to begin transforming you and your desires, I think you have a lot of thinking to do. I hope you will come talk to me about that. Let’s talk about your questions. Let’s talk about the historicity of Jesus and his resurrection and why I think all this is true and factual. Please! There is a loving God who loves you! I know it for a fact. And He has provided for you a new human nature in the person of Jesus.

For those of you who are Christians, notice what I just did? I talked about hell, the wrath of God, and all that and still said confidently that God loves each and every person, that Jesus is for each and every person. Some of you are unsure of that. So you wind up talking about Jesus, but hoping that non-Christian people don’t ask you about hell. You wind up feeling like you’re hiding part of the character of God behind your back, while you talk about the good stuff. But I brought it all out onto the table. There is nothing about the character of God that I’m embarrassed about, or feel uneasy about. God is all good, and all love! Is there a wrath of God? Yes! But it’s driven by the love of God, through and through. The wrath of God works with the love of God, because the wrath of God is trying to burn away the rebellion and corruption in every cell in our body, because God in His love is wanting that very thing for each and every person!

You may even call yourself a Christian now, but let’s forget about labels and what you think you can label yourself in order to not be reflective. Let’s talk about what’s in your heart. What do you want? Is it Jesus and what he is doing in the world? The central fact of heaven is the throne of Jesus right smack in the middle, and his name on each person. The garden and all the good stuff is only the result of that. Do you want Jesus to be lord, absolutely with no ifs ands or buts? Or do you really want something else? Don’t ask yourself, ‘What are the physical qualities of heaven and do I like them?’ because of course you’d answer yes. Ask yourself, ‘What are the relational qualities of heaven and do I like them?’ Do you like the idea of Jesus being king? Who is Jesus? And do you want him? That is the central question.

If you have friends and family who do not know Jesus, we have to pray for them. We’ve got to allow Jesus to love them through us. Because the stakes are high and because Jesus wants them. College is a critical time in people’s lives, and we have to bring Jesus to people on this campus because people allow themselves some openness in certain moments. That is the urgency.

## Appendix A: Is There an Urgency? A Sample Dialogue

*Apathetic Dawdler:* I actually like what you're saying here, because I feel like there's not a rush for me to come to Jesus!

*Me:* What do you mean?

*Apathetic Dawdler:* I mean that you're not threatening me with hell. Other Christians would try to make me feel scared that I could die on my car ride home, and then I'd be in hell because I didn't accept Jesus right here, right now. You make it sound like I have a lot of time.

*Me:* Well, I think there is still a real urgency to looking into Jesus now.

*Apathetic Dawdler:* Why?

*Me:* Because you change yourself! Do you think you can live a self-centered life, and then when you're old and on your deathbed, you can accept Jesus?

*Apathetic Dawdler:* Exactly!

*Me:* But what makes you think you will become the type of person who will want to give your life to Jesus later, if all you want now is more time to yourself?

*Apathetic Dawdler:* What? Why? Won't it be easy?

*Me:* No. Because self-centeredness is addicting. The brokenness in your human nature will become addicted to self-centeredness, self-flattery, self-justifying, self-indulgence, self-importance, and so on. So if that is how you are training your human nature to respond to Jesus, when you meet him, you will probably look at all eternity stretched out in front of you and say, 'Jesus, what's the rush? You've got lots of time in this eternity. How about 10,000 more years of freedom for me, and then I'll accept you?'

*Apathetic Dawdler:* Say, that's right! I'm going to use that with him. See, there is no rush. [smiles]

*Me:* There is a rush, actually. Not a rush because your life might be cut short by a car crash, but a rush because you are always shaping your own human nature and desires to become more and more sinful.

*Apathetic Dawdler:* Why is that?

*Me:* Imagine that you're an alcoholic. And that one day you stand before Jesus and say, 'I'd like alcohol.' Jesus will say, 'I don't have alcohol here for you. But because I love you, I am offering you a human nature that is healed of alcoholism and responsive instead to God the Father. Do you want to receive it?' If you're addicted to alcohol, what will you answer?

*Apathetic Dawdler:* That's a good question. If I'm an addict, I would probably say, 'I don't want what you have. Give me what I want.'

*Me:* Absolutely. So what's your addiction?

*Apathetic Dawdler:* What do you mean?

*Me:* I think you are already pretty addicted to your own self-centeredness. Jesus wants to heal that with the new humanity he has in himself.

*Apathetic Dawdler:* Wait a minute. You're saying Jesus only gives us a healed human nature? I thought he gives us a reward for just believing in him.

*Me:* As if heaven is a place you can eat ice cream and not get fat? Or a place where you'll get whatever you want right now?

*Apathetic Dawdler:* Right!

*Me:* That's not it at all. Jesus is not just a middleman to something else you want. We don't even desire the right things. Heaven and hell are not defined by us. They are defined by Jesus. He shares his perfected human nature, and his perfected desires. So if you want that, you will experience him as 'heavenly.' If you don't, you will experience him as 'hellish.'

*Apathetic Dawdler:* What if we don't want what he wants?

*Me:* Well, then for all eternity, he will never give up on calling you out, calling you to give up your addictions and your very self, and calling you to him. He'll be a stalker to you, saying, 'Hey, I love you. You were made for me. Give up whatever else you want. I am here for you.'

*Apathetic Dawdler:* Yeah, that does sound stalker-ish.

*Me:* That, my friend, is hell. It's being chased around forever by this Jesus who loves you, and wants to change you. But you don't want him because you're addicted to something else. But you can't escape from him.

*Apathetic Dawdler:* Dude, that sounds terrible.

*Me:* Well, it would be if you believe that you are fine, and that you've basically got everything you need.

*Apathetic Dawdler:* This is complicated. So you're saying that I actually can't trust myself completely.

*Me:* That's right. You can't trust yourself completely because you're not okay. The longer you let your desires go on your own, the harder it might be for you to give your life to Jesus. And one day, it might be too late. We are all not just human beings, but human becomings.

*Apathetic Dawdler:* So you think I'm headed for hell, too?

*Me:* I think you are becoming someone who would experience the love of Jesus as hell, because you're so apathetic, and Jesus wants you to be as loving as he is.

*Apathetic Dawdler:* [silence]

*Me:* Don't you look back on your life and see how apathy, lack of love, has hurt other people in your life? Hurt you? The question is whether you want to be in touch with the God of love. Maybe you'd like to read a short and surprisingly fun book by C.S. Lewis about why people in hell want to stay there (it's called *The Great Divorce*), and talk about it with me?

## APPENDIX B: N.T. Wright's View in *Surprised by Hope*

'The traditional view is that those who spurn God's salvation, who refuse to turn from idolatry and wickedness, are held forever in conscious torment... This account is then opposed by the universalists... A middle way is offered by the so-called conditionalists. They propose 'conditional immortality': those who persistently refuse God's love and his way of life in the present world will simply cease to exist... This view is therefore sometimes known as annihilationalism; such people will cease to exist...

'Over against these three options, I propose a view that combines what seems to me the strong points of the first and third. The greatest objection to the traditional view in recent times – and the last two hundred years have seen a massive swing towards universalism in the Western churches, at least the so-called mainstream ones – has come from the deep revulsion many feel at the idea of the torture chamber in the middle of the castle of delights, the concentration camp in the middle of the beautiful countryside, the idea that among the delights of the blessed we should include the contemplation of the torments of the wicked. However much we tell ourselves that God must condemn evil if he is a good God and that those who love God must endorse that condemnation, as soon as these pictures present themselves to our minds, we turn away in disgust. The conditionalist avoids this at the apparent cost of belittling those scriptural passages that appear to speak unambiguously of a continuing state for those who reject the worship of the true God and the way of humanness, which follows from it.

'Using that analysis, though, presents us with the following possibility, which I believe does justice both to the key texts and to the realities of human life of which, after a century of horror mostly dreamed up by human beings, we are now all too well aware. When human beings give up their heartfelt allegiance to and worship that which is not God, they progressively cease to reflect the image of God. One of the primary laws of human life is that you become like what you worship; what's more, you reflect what you worship not only back to the object itself but also outward to the world around. Those who worship money increasingly define themselves in terms of it and increasingly treat other people as creditors, debtors, partners, or customers rather than as human beings. Those who worship sex define themselves in terms of it (their preferences, their practices, their past histories) and increasingly treat other people as actual or potential sexual objects. Those who worship power define themselves in terms of it and treat other people as either collaborators, competitors, or pawns. These and many other forms of idolatry combine in a thousand ways, all of them damaging to the image-bearing quality of the people concerned and of those whose lives they touch. My suggestion is that it is possible for human beings so to continue down this road, so to refuse all whisperings of good news, all glimmers of the true light, all promptings to turn and go the other way, all signposts to the love of God, that after death they become at last, by their own effective choice, beings that once were human but now are not, creatures that have ceased to bear the divine image at all. With the death of that body in which they inhabited God's good world, in which the flickering flame of goodness had not been completely snuffed out, they pass simultaneously not only beyond hope but beyond pity. There is no concentration camp in the beautiful countryside, no torture chamber in the palace of delight. Those creatures that still exist in an ex-human state, no longer reflecting their maker in any meaningful sense, can no longer excite in themselves or others the natural sympathy some feel even for the hardened criminal.

'I am well aware that I have now wandered into territory that no one can claim to have mapped. Jesus, Christians believe, has been to hell and back, but to say that is to stand gaping into the darkness, not to write a travel brochure for future visitors. The last things I want is for anyone to suppose that I (or anyone else) know very much about all this. Nor do I want anyone to suppose I enjoy speculating in this manner. But I find myself driven, by the New Testament and the sober realities of this world, to this kind of a resolution to one of the darkest theological mysteries. I should be glad to be proved wrong but not at the cost of the foundational claims that this world is the good creation of the one true God and that he will at the end bring about that judgment at which the whole creation will rejoice.' (N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), p.181 – 183)

My position is very close to Wright's. So I wish I could write in such a way that did not seem like I was just splitting hairs trying to differentiate what Wright says and what the Eastern Orthodox tradition says. Nevertheless, I think it would be a useful demonstration of theological reasoning to highlight the subtle differences.

It might help to know that the Eastern Orthodox differentiate between 'image' and 'likeness'. Although they are using words from Genesis 1 in a new context to answer new questions, I find it appropriate for this discussion. Russian theologian Vladimir Lossky writes that it takes one will to raise up the image – that is, God simply made

humanity – but it takes two wills to produce the likeness – that is, God calls for free, loving partnership between Himself and each human person.

Hence, our ‘likeness’ to God can certainly be damaged, but I believe the image of God is ontological. It is what constitutes us as human and is not reducible to something else (rationality, emotion, etc.). It is sustained by the providential love of God, precisely because He holds us and upholds us in our very being by His love. Perhaps it is even identical with that very action of God to uphold us in existence: Being in the image of God is the result of God’s providential love to uphold us. So at no point do we as humans – that is, as bearers of God’s image – have an independent existence that can subsist on our own without God constantly willing it. Our very physicality is one expression of this, just as all matter is sacred and originally good, according to Genesis 1. And God never retreats from His commitment to His creation. Thus, God resurrects all things because He loves all things. As I asked above, if God ceases to love a person, then why do they continue existing? Unless, as Wright suggests, there is some free-floating appendage of God’s character that is not actually connected to His love. But I believe that existence itself is an expression of the love of God, because Paul says, ‘All things are from him and for him and to him’ (Rom.11:33 – 36; Eph.1:9 – 10; Col.1:18). At no point does that stop being true. This is the point of the quote by Father Michael Himes in my sermon on hell. For it is the Triune relations that allow us to say that God *is* love; not that God *does* love, or that God *might* love, or that God *did* love, but that God *is* love fundamentally in the very depth of His being. And if God is Triune, then everything He does, and all other characteristics He has, must be in principle rooted in His love.

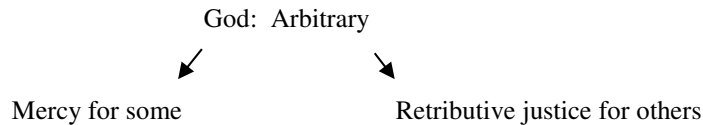
By saying that human beings in hell no longer bear the image of God, Wright suggests that human beings no longer bear resemblance to the inner relation between the Father and the Son in the Spirit. Just as the Son is the Image of God within the Godhead, humans bear the image of God outside of the Godhead. But can God retreat from His commitments?

For God to love others means that He maintains that He is the good to which all human beings are called. For Him to stop loving others, and stop calling out to them, and stop upholding their ontological status as His image-bearers who are still called to develop their likeness to Him, means that God no longer loves them as He loves those people who say ‘yes’ to Him. God would be allowing His character and nature to be changed by those who say ‘no’ to Him. This would, in Father Himes’ language, make the sinner more powerful than God.

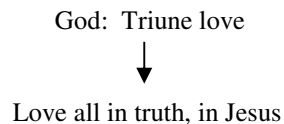
Not only that, then we would have to explain the existence of ex-humans based on some characteristic of God other than His love. But what would that be? What attribute of God holds them in that state? And so, Wright inadvertently implies that people’s ongoing existence in hell is maintained by some attribute of God that is separable in principle from His love. How can such an existence be logically integrated with God’s love? If what Wright says is true, then there must be some characteristic of God that exists outside the loving inner relationships He has within Himself as a Triune being. So what is that grotesque appendage that dangles off the character of God and cannot be integrated with His love? And how is that theology then a Trinitarian theology?

### APPENDIX C: A Critique of Annihilationism and Universalism

Having this understanding means that we can see God more clearly. In Western Christianity, we are used to thinking of God like this:



But what I'm saying is that God is not two different things. God is one thing. He is love. Like this:



Diagramming God's character like this is helpful. It helps to discipline our thinking. If you divide God's character between two attributes (mercy, retributive justice) in order to explain hell, then when you try to integrate those character qualities up at the top, to try to say what God fundamentally *is*, you wind up having to say that God is arbitrary.

That is one reason why many Christians simply have no explanation for why, if hell is God's prison system from which people want to get out and be with Him, God does not accept them and release them. Is God interested in reconciliation or not? Perhaps that is why, under the logical and emotional pressure to make God be consistently interested in reconciliation and relationship, some become universalists.

However, there are problems associated with universalism. There are the biblical texts, for instance. Taken together, all the biblical texts do not point towards universalism. And the logical problems connected to universalism are many. This universalist framework either means that God is coercive in eternity, or that you know what everyone else will freely choose. In the former case, the universalist framework retains the basic illogic of the character of God, from which it seeks to escape. And in the presumption that God is coercive, only under the threat of hell as a prison system or a torture chamber will people want to be with God. Or in the latter case, you claim to know what everyone else will freely choose, which is impossible.

Perry Robinson, an Eastern Orthodox blogger whom I respect, writes this:

'That there are different forms of Apokatastasis is really irrelevant if they all affirm a hypostatic [i.e. personal] reconciliation of all agents with God. They will still therefore turn on the same problematic assumptions entailed by Origen's errors, namely that the Good is simple and free will entails choosing between objects of contrasting moral worth.

Maximus' reformulation is directly contrary to Origen's at these points, because it is these assumptions that are driving the Monothelite heresy. If Christ had a human free will, then it would have to be either subordinated to the divine motion, in which case it really isn't free, or a will in its own right, or it will be peccable, and so it will be possible for Christ to sin, which is a non-starter. And this is because they assumed that freedom to choose entailed freedom to choose between objects of differing moral value, and in the eschaton there was only one good to choose. This is why the doctrine of the energies undergirds

Maximus' apologetic against Monothelism, for it is exactly the plurality of the energies that makes it possible to choose between different eternal goods that are deity and so makes [Adam's] choice in the Garden between two different divine goods rather than a good and evil option. In this way then, questions about Christ's free will and the free will of those in heaven (and hell) are all tied together and for the same reasons why Universalism falls afoul of Christology by subordinating persons to natural ends.

The most glaring problem with Hart and Kimel is that they can never seem to explain, let alone try, how if scripture so obviously teaches universalism, and it is so taught among the Fathers that both Rome and the Eastern sees so completely failed to transmit this portion of the apostolic deposit AS the faith of the church for century upon century. They have to argue that the overwhelming majority of figures simply and consistently misread numerous texts. How is this not just the same old Protestant (gnostic) song and dance?

If free will is incompatible with a necessary universalism, then this implies that God cannot via the kind of transcendental causation Hart seems to articulate (which is rather Thomistic btw) determine individuals because then they would not be the explanatory terminus for their actions. Welp, that's a Libertarian thesis, not one that is really open to the kind of Augustinian thinking he articulates. What Hart describes is really a will that is free because it is efficacious and successful in willing its natural telos, but a determined will would likewise be efficacious and successful as well. Either one admits that such a will is free (and morally responsible as well) or one admits that it is not. If not, then we are right back to Libertarianism. If not, we are right back to Compatibilism.

As to contingent universalism, that won't work either for the following reason. If it is just the case that in this logically possible world, all persons are ultimately reconciled to God and if God's goodness depends on no one remaining in hell forever, then either it is the case that there are no logically possible worlds where no one stays in hell forever or there are. If there are, then that isn't contingent universalism, but necessary universalism. If there are, then divine goodness depends on a contingent fact. In which case, God is not necessarily Good, but only contingently good. In this way then the Universalist, like the Open Theist has to sacrifice divine perfection to maintain their respective theses.

In this way then it is evident that the Universalist has to deny that God wills the persons he creates to be ultimately self determining.

Here are some other problems. If the fundamentally Platonic view of hell as temporary and that eventually given enough time agents would turn around, why does scripture or tradition give us no examples of this actually happening? And why have no demons apparently done so? Did they lack the requisite amount of time?

And furthermore, if God can bring someone up to the appropriate epistemic level of seeing the inevitability of himself, why wasn't this done with Adam in the first place, preventing all worldly evil to begin with? If on the other hand, if Adam was in a position to see this, how was sin possible? And certainly the fallen angels knew far and away more than we know or Adam knew at the beginning. They were with God. What did they lack? Such a view seems more and more implausible the more one thinks about it.

In this way, Universalism makes the problem worse for now we are stuck with a God who could have skipped all the evil in the world but didn't. And then we either have to make an ad hoc appeal to mystery or we have to hold on to some greater good defense where evil makes goodness shine out all the brighter. That is a dead end since God has no opposite.' (from Facebook group, *Catholic & Orthodox: Steps Towards Union*, found here: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/323912757639023/permalink/1006098149420477/>)

Thus, others favor annihilationism. But this also runs into the biblical texts which strongly suggest that hell is eternal. And the logical problems connected to annihilationism, which seem to undergird the logic of the biblical text, are also many. For instance, God seems to regard His spoken word in creation as unbreakable. Since He created by His word, His utterances, 'Let us make,' in Genesis 1 take the character of promises, not just one-time statements. And God's very character is at stake when He says that He does not, and cannot, in fact, lie (Heb.6:18). God is so faithful to His word that the apostle John could easily deduce that God *is* His Word (Jn.1:1 – 2). To say that God annihilates His creation – in particular, His image bearer – is to require that God become a word-breaker.

Furthermore, what would be the character-based rationale for God allowing those humans who reject Him to pass out of existence? It would have to be His love, in some sense, since God is love, because is a loving fellowship as the Triune God. But this is a logical problem. God, precisely because He is love, eternally and fundamentally, cannot retreat from continuing to uphold human beings as human beings, that is, as His image-bearers patterned after His own Son. And for the same reason, God insists on calling out to them and offering Himself to them, even if they continue to reject Him and receive His overtures as torment. For God to stop inviting people to Himself would mean that He ceases to be good to them. Once again, we must explore the very nature of reality – reality about God and humanity – in order to say what is good and loving.

I think the answers I find in church history are the most satisfying to these questions. We can be hopeful universalists, but not certain universalists. Why? (1) The love of God never changes and never gives up, which means people are just emotionally driven away, step by step. To suggest that you can fall in love with someone you perceive as your stalker, after a prolonged time of hating the stalker, is impossible to explain. It's not that God has the same kinds of motivations, objectively, as a human stalker as we know a stalker today. Rather, it's because that's how God would appear to a person who rejects Jesus on Judgment Day. It's because the person who confronts the full reality of Jesus but rejects him will insist on a romance of equals as the true definition of 'love'. But Jesus is not their equal. So they will continue perceiving Jesus as using power, manipulation of the word 'love', denial of other good things, and narcissistic ego-centrism against him. The person will feel disrespected precisely because s/he will want to escape Jesus and live an existence apart from him, all the while being confronted with the fact that 'in him we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28; Col.1:17). In that sense, it will be a matter of perspective. C.S. Lewis in *The Last Battle* describes the dwarves that way. The person in hell will be imprisoned by his or her own perspective.

Also, *human nature*, and not just the *human will* per se, was meant to be determined in its posture and desires by the human will. I do think that this is what the tree of life was originally for: to be received in love and trust for God, to seal one's love for God into one's human nature and will, by the will. This question is related to its mirror image: Why won't the redeemed sin anymore in heaven? The answer provided by church tradition has to do with human nature being finally determined, in partnership with God, by the human will. If those who are 'in hell' can choose out, then won't the redeemed be able to sin again? Then, we are open to the problem of the 'petulant child,' the spoiled person who presumes on God.

The most elegant answer to both is to say that God made us to be partners with Him in the formation of our human nature. As the Triune God is love in will and nature, He could only make us in His image to be not automatons. Therefore God had to make us one step removed from also being love in both will and nature. But this led to God inviting human beings to use our will in love to bring the life of God and the love of God into our human nature. So God made us to freely choose to always choose Him, forever. But that can go awry. And because there must a relation between our will and our nature, and an impact of our will upon our nature, that impact has to be real and lasting.



## APPENDIX D: Stephen Colbert's Interview with Philip Zimbardo

On February 11, 2008, comedian Stephen Colbert had Stanford psychologist Dr. Philip Zimbardo on his show, and they talked about heaven and hell. <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report/videos/149094/february-11-2008/philip-zimbardo>. Starting from 3 minutes and 25 seconds on that clip, here is their dialogue:

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Zimbardo: Why did the devil make Adam and Eve eat the apple?

Colbert: Because he disobeyed the authority of God. He was non-conformist, doing his own thing, letting it all hang out, did not want to serve the ultimate authority like you say he shouldn't. I'm sorry, the title of your book turns the argument on its head.

Zimbardo: Oh no no no no no no no no

Colbert: Oh yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes

Zimbardo: Lucifer is God's favorite angel –

Colbert: Until he disobeys

Zimbardo: But why does he disobey? Because God says, 'I have just created this perfect creature, Adam, and everybody has to obey him.' And Lucifer says, 'Wait a minute. He's a mortal. Mortals are corruptible. We're angels. I refuse. And that's disobedience to authority. So the reason Lucifer, as the devil, seduced Adam is to say 'God, I'm right and you're wrong. This guy is corruptible. He's not somebody we should respect. He is just an ordinary mortal.'"

Colbert: But in that case, Lucifer was right

Zimbardo: Lucifer was right and God was wrong. If God was into reconciliation, He would have said, 'I made a mistake.' Ok. God created hell. Paradoxically, it was God who created hell as a place for Lucifer and the fallen angels. And had He not created hell, then evil would not exist. So you would not have the sense...

Colbert: Evil exists because of the disobedience of Satan. God gave Satan, the angels, and man free will. Satan used his free will and abused it by not obeying authority. Hell was created by Satan's disobedience to God and his purposeful removal from God's love, which is what hell is: removing yourself from God's love. You send yourself to hell. God does not send you there.

Zimbardo: Obviously, you learned well in Sunday School.

Colbert: I teach Sunday School, mother\*\*\*\*er!

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Hilarious. I agree so much with Colbert there. The only thing I would change is to say that hell is TRYING to remove yourself from God's love. But otherwise, I wholeheartedly agree.