

Hell as the Love of God

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Introduction: How to Think About Hell?

[For groups - 2 minute discussion] 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.

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

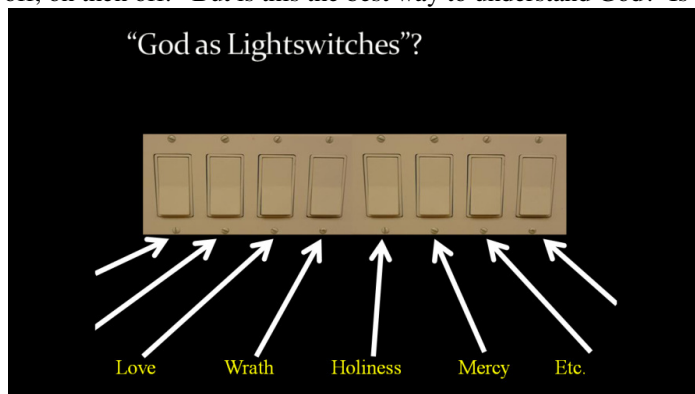
diseased eye. You will now experience the sunlight as something terrible and painful and awful, something to shy away from. Well, the sun didn't change. You did.

'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.

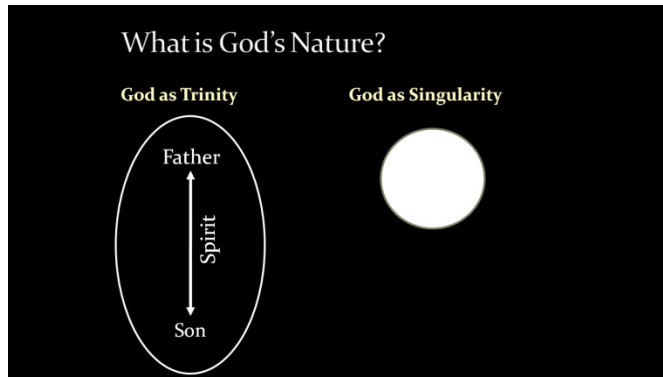
Part One: Theology

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 in the Spirit, where perhaps 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*.

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' (1 Jn.4:8).

But when you turn to the Singularity, can you say that the Singularity fundamentally *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 be loving or unloving, be personal or impersonal, do good or evil. 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. As the theologian Athanasius of Alexandria said when we consider any god or God, 'their deeds must correspond to their natures.'¹

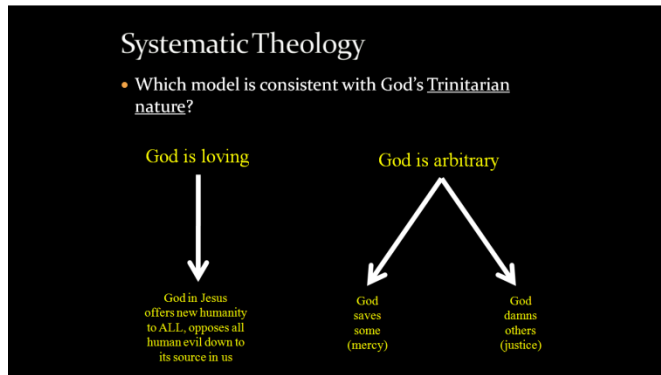
Once God creates everything, then what? God then relates to His creation. His activities flow out of His nature. For example, God is holy. But before God created everything, *He was not holy*.² Why? Because holiness by definition means 'to be set apart.' If there is nothing else to be set apart *from*, then God cannot be *holy*. So God's holiness is God's activity towards the creation, to create a space for it and for us, as Paul says, 'In him we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28), and, 'In him all things hold together' (Col.1:17). Why do we call God holy? Because God creates space for that which is not God; He sets Himself apart from all created things. Holiness also refers to *moral difference*. Once again, God's love is first and foremost what makes Him holy. God is the most radically loving, other-centered Being in the entire universe. *No one loves like God*. God's holiness (an activity; a secondary characteristic) flows out of God's love (His nature; a primary characteristic). It is a particular way God applies His love towards us.

The same is true for God's *wrath*. God's wrath is an *activity* of God towards the creation. God's wrath is *not* a primary characteristic in God. It is not His *nature*. How do we know? In eternity, 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

¹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Contra Gentes* 16.4 writes, 'For their deeds must correspond to their natures, so that at once the actor may be made known by his act, and the action may be ascertainable from his nature. So that just as a man discussing about water and fire, and declaring their action, would not say that water burned and fire cooled, nor, if a man were discoursing about the sun and the earth, would he say the earth gave light, while the sun was sown with herbs and fruits, but if he were to say so would exceed the utmost height of madness, so neither would their writers, and especially the most eminent poet of all, if they really knew that Zeus and the others were gods, invest them with such actions as show them to be not gods, but rather men, and not sober men.' Thus, Athanasius concludes, Zeus and the other Greek gods are both good and evil.

² Athanasius of Alexandria, *Contra Arianos* 1.33 recognizes this distinction when he taught that it is more true, accurate, and faithful to name the Father from the Son than to call God 'Creator' after the creation. Athanasius recognized that God is eternally and intrinsically Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is Creator as well, but only became Creator at the moment He created the creation. He was not eternally Creator, since it is logically impossible to name God 'Creator' before the creation. Thus, it is more functional to name God 'Creator.' It is, of course, a true statement from our vantage point as humans. However, it is more personal, perceptive, reverent, and honoring to name God 'Father' after the Son who existed before creation. Calling God thus, for Athanasius, means that we are perceiving and loving God for who He truly and eternally is, as Jesus has revealed to us.

be a particular activity of God in His love. God's wrath must be shaped by His love, and flow out from it. What does that mean? Let's take a look at this contrast:



In the model 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 with and opposite to* His mercy-love-forgiveness. So if you roll up those two actions into a character, you get the conclusion: *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 model on the left, God is loving, by nature. 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 loving nature? God has surgical wrath towards the sin in us, because sin is a disease and disorder and corruption in us, *and it is not fundamentally us*. So in Jesus, 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 (c.130 – 200 AD) served as bishop of Lyons in what is now southern France. He was the earliest writing theologian outside of the New Testament. He was mentored by Polycarp of Smyrna (died c.155 – 165 AD), who was mentored by the apostle John (died c.90 – 100 AD). Irenaeus 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)

The *Shepherd of Hermas* was the *Pilgrim’s Progress* of its time, an example of Christian allegorical literature from the 2nd century, traditionally associated with Hermas, brother of Pius, a bishop of Rome. It describes those people who inhabit hell eternally by speaking of sin as addictive, and their human nature as corrupted in an advanced form: ‘Thinking, then, that they could find a better, they wander and become wretched, and enter upon pathless places. But those which fell into the fire and were burned are those who have departed for ever from the living God; nor does the thought of repentance ever come into their hearts, on account of their devotion to their lusts and to the crimes which they committed.’ (*Shepherd of Hermas*, ch.7)

Clement of Alexandria (c.150 – c.215 AD) was a prolific teacher in a Christian school in Alexandria, Egypt, which was started, according to church tradition, by Mark the apostolic assistant to Simon Peter. Clement said: ‘But we say that the fire sanctifies not flesh, but sinful souls; meaning not the all-devouring vulgar fire but that of wisdom, which pervades the soul passing through the fire.’ (*Stromata/Miscellanies* 7.6) ‘For there are partial corrections, which are called chastisements, which many of us who have been in transgression incur, by falling away from the Lord’s people. But as children are chastised by their teacher, or their father, so are we by Providence. But God does not punish, for punishment is retaliation for evil. He chastises, however, for good to those who are chastised, collectively and individually... But if one is curable, able to bear (like fire or steel) the outspokenness of the truth, which cuts away and burns their false opinions, let him lend the ears of the soul.’ (*Stromata/Miscellanies* 7.16)

Origen of Alexandria (c.185 – c.255 AD) was taught at the Christian school in Alexandria. He traveled to other church communities like Rome, Caesarea, Antioch, and Palestine, and was the greatest scholar of biblical manuscripts and languages up to that point in church history. His commentaries on Scripture were the most widely read of anyone. Origen 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 of Egypt (251 – 356 AD) was an Egyptian monk and a developer of Christian monasticism. His reputation had spread even before Athanasius of Alexandria wrote a biography about him (*Life of Antony*), but the biography made him enduringly famous. Christians formed monasteries to live like him. Anthony 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)

Athanasius of Alexandria (c.298 – 373 AD) was bishop of Alexandria, the great theological interpreter of the Trinity and the deity of the Son, defender of the Nicene Creed, renowned for his biblical understanding, the leader who gave us the final form of the New Testament canon as we receive it as 27 books. Athanasius 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 (c.337 – 394 AD), was bishop of Milan. He was a towering figure intellectually and politically because he excommunicated Emperor Theodosius until he repented of ordering a massacre and passed a law preventing it in the future. Ambrose 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)

Cyril of Jerusalem (c.315 – 386 AD) was archbishop of Jerusalem, an outstanding theologian and leader, exiled multiple times for his resistance to Arianism. He was present at the second ecumenical council at Constantinople in 381 AD, when he endorsed the term *homoousion* for the Father-Son relation. Preserved among his writings are lectures in Greek for training new Christians. In them, he writes, ‘The sun also blinds those whose sight is dim: and they whose eyes are diseased are hurt by the light and blinded. Not that the sun’s nature is to blind, but that the substance of the eyes is incapable of seeing. In like manner unbelievers being diseased in their heart cannot look upon the radiance of the Godhead.’ (*Lecture VI: On the Unity of God*, paragraph 29) He continues, ‘And again of the second coming he says, ‘And the Messenger of the covenant whom ye delight in. Behold, He cometh, saith the Lord Almighty. But who shall abide the day of His coming? or who shall stand when He appeareth? Because He cometh in like a refiner’s fire, and like fullers’ herb; and He shall sit as a refiner and purifier.’ And immediately after the Saviour Himself says, ‘And I will draw near to you in judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulteresses, and against those who swear falsely in My Name’ [Malachi 3:1 – 5], and the rest. For this cause Paul warning us beforehand says, ‘If any man buildeth on the foundation gold, and silver, and precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; every man’s work shall be made manifest; for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed in fire [1 Corinthians 3:12].’ (*Lecture XII: On the Clause, And Shall Come in Glory to Judge the*

Quick and the Dead; Of Whose Kingdom Shall Be No End, paragraph 2) ‘But He came down to clothe the Apostles with power, and to baptize them; for the Lord says, ‘ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence’ [Acts 1:5]. This grace was not in part, but His power was in full perfection; for as he who plunges into the waters and is baptized is encompassed on all sides by the waters, so were they also baptized completely by the Holy Ghost. The water however flows round the outside only, but the Spirit baptizes also the soul within, and that completely. And wherefore wonderest thou? Take an example from matter; poor indeed and common, yet useful for the simpler sort. If the fire passing in through the mass of the iron makes the whole of it fire, so that what was cold becomes burning and what was black is made bright,—if fire which is a body thus penetrates and works without hindrance in iron which is also a body, why wonder that the Holy Ghost enters into the very inmost recesses of the soul? And lest men should be ignorant of the greatness of the mighty gift coming down to them, there sounded as it were a heavenly trumpet, ‘For suddenly there came from heaven a sound as of the rushing of a mighty wind’ [Acts 2:2], signifying the presence of Him who was to grant power unto men to seize with violence the kingdom of God; that both their eyes might see the fiery tongues, and their ears hear the sound. And it filled all the house where they were sitting; for the house became the vessel of the spiritual water; as the disciples sat within, the whole house was filled. Thus they were entirely baptized according to the promise, and invested soul and body with a divine garment of salvation. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost. They partook of fire, not of burning but of saving fire; of fire which consumes the thorns of sins, but gives lustre to the soul. This is now coming upon you also, and that to strip away and consume your sins which are like thorns, and to brighten yet more that precious possession of your souls, and to give you grace; for He gave it then to the Apostles. And He sat upon them in the form of fiery tongues, that they might crown themselves with new and spiritual diadems by fiery tongues upon their heads. A fiery sword barred of old the gates of Paradise [Genesis 3:24]; a fiery tongue which brought salvation restored the gift.’ (*Lecture XVII: Continuation of the Discourse on the Holy Spirit*, paragraph 15)

Gregory of Nazianzus (c.325 – 390 AD), bishop of Constantinople and then Nazianzus, was called the ‘theologian of the Trinity’ for his contribution to his explanation of the Trinity as three *hypostases* in one *ousia*, along with Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa. He explains the etymological background of the name of God with reference to a fire consuming evil: ‘For the Name *theos* (God), even if, as those who are skilful in these matters say, it were derived from *thein* (to run) or from *aithein* (to blaze), from continual motion, and because He consumes evil conditions of things (from which fact He is also called A Consuming Fire)’ (*Fourth Theological Oration*, paragraph 18; Philip Schaff (editor), Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, add the footnote on p.636: ‘The derivation of Θεός from Θέειν (to run) is given by Plato (Crat., 397c). That from Αἴθειν (to blaze) is found also in S. John Damascene (De Fide Orth., I., 12), who however may have borrowed it from S. Gregory, or from the source whence the latter took it. S. Athanasius also admits it (De Defin., 11’). He also explains the incarnation of the Son into corrupted human nature by using the image of fire burning away something: ‘But, in the character of the Form of a Servant, He condescends to His fellow servants, nay, to His servants, and takes upon Him a strange form, bearing all me and mine in Himself, that in Himself He may exhaust the bad, as fire does wax, or as the sun does the mists of earth; and that I may partake of His nature by the blending.’ (*Fourth Theological Oration*, paragraph 6). He also engages in a thought exercise using the metaphor of peering into the holy of holies and seeing God’s presence: ‘Shall we look into the Holy Place... The Angel then is called spirit and fire; Spirit, as being a creature of the intellectual sphere; Fire, as being of a purifying nature.’ (*Second Theological Oration*, paragraph 31). ‘You are called Fire not as perceptible to sense, but because You purge light and worthless matter; a Sword, because You sever the worse from the better’ (*Oration 37*, paragraph 4). ‘And what is the Fan? The Purification. And what is the Fire? The consuming of the chaff, and the heat of the Spirit... And what the Sword? The cutting of the Word, which separates the worse from the better...’ (*Oration 39*, paragraph 15). ‘For I know a cleansing fire which Christ came to send upon the earth, [Luke 12:49] and He Himself is anagogically called a Fire. This Fire takes away whatsoever is material and of evil habit; and this He desires to kindle with all speed, for He longs for speed in doing us good, since He gives us even coals of fire to help us. I know also a fire which is not cleansing, but avenging; either that fire of Sodom [Genesis 19:24] which He pours down on all sinners, mingled with brimstone and storms, or that which is prepared for the Devil and his Angels [Matthew 25:41] or that which proceeds from the face of the Lord [2 Thessalonians 1:9], and shall burn up his enemies round about; and one even more fearful still than these, the unquenchable fire which is ranged with the worm that dies not but is eternal for the wicked [Isaiah 66:24; Mark 9:48]. For all these belong to the destroying power; though some may prefer even in this place to take a more merciful view of this fire, worthily of Him That chastises.’ (*Oration 40*, paragraph 36). ‘And they were of Fire, perhaps because of His purifying Power (for our Scripture knows of a purifying fire, as any one who wishes can find out), or else because of His Substance. For our God is a consuming Fire, and a Fire [Hebrews

12:20] burning up the ungodly.’ (*Oration 41*, paragraph 12). ‘And let us be aided by the good coals, [Isaiah 6:6] kindling and purifying our minds from Him That comes to send fire on the earth, [Luke 12:49] that shall destroy all evil habits, and to hasten its kindling. Whatsoever then there be, of solid and nourishing in the Word, shall be eaten with the inward parts and hidden things of the mind, and shall be consumed and given up to spiritual digestion; aye, from head to foot, that is, from the first contemplations of Godhead to the very last thoughts about the Incarnation.’ (*Oration 45*, paragraph 16)

Basil of Caesarea (c.329 – 379 AD) was bishop of Caesarea and seen as successor of Athanasius in church leadership and theology. Basil, his younger brother Gregory of Nyssa, and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus helped define the theological terminology used for the Trinity, especially in the Council of Constantinople of 381 AD. They are known as the three Cappadocian Fathers. Basil writes, ‘You cannot, moreover, separate the brightness of fire from the virtue of burning which it possesses; but God, who wished to attract His servant by a wonderful sight, set a fire in the burning bush, which displayed all the brilliancy of flame while its devouring property was dormant. It is that which the Psalmist affirms in saying “The voice of the Lord divideth the flames of fire.” [Psalm 29:7] Thus, in the requital which awaits us after this life, a mysterious voice seems to tell us that the double nature of fire will be divided; the just will enjoy its light, and the torment of its heat will be the torture of the wicked.’ (*Hexaemeron*, Homily 6, chapter 3) ‘Where then shall that soul hide which in the sight of all these spectators shall suddenly be revealed in its fulness of shame? With what kind of body shall it sustain those endless and unbearable pangs in the place of fire unquenched, and of the worm that perishes and never dies, and of depth of Hades, dark and horrible; bitter wailings, loud lamenting, weeping and gnashing of teeth and anguish without end? From all these woes there is no release after death; no device, no means of coming forth from the chastisement of pain. We can escape now. *While we can, let us lift ourselves from the fall*: let us never despair of ourselves, if only we depart from evil. Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. “O come, let us worship and fall down; let us weep before Him.” [Psalm 95:6] The Word Who invited us to repentance calls aloud, “Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” [Matthew 11:28] There is, then, a way of salvation, if we will. “Death in his might has swallowed up, but again the Lord hath wiped away tears from off all faces” [Isaiah 25:8] of them that repent. The Lord is faithful in all His words. [Psalm 145:13] He does not lie when He says, “Though your sins be scarlet they shall be as white as snow. Though they be red like crimson they shall be as wool.” [Isaiah 1:18] *The great Physician of souls, Who is the ready liberator, not of you alone, but of all who are enslaved by sin, is ready to heal your sickness.* From Him come the words, it was His sweet and saving lips that said, “They that be whole need not a physician but they that are sick....I am not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.” [Luke 5:31 – 32] What excuse have you, what excuse has any one, when He speaks thus? *The Lord wishes to cleanse you from the trouble of your sickness* and to show you light after darkness. The good Shepherd, Who left them that had not wandered away, is seeking after you. If you give yourself to Him He will not hold back. He, in His love, will not disdain even to *carry you on His own shoulders*, rejoicing that He has found His sheep which was lost. The Father stands and awaits your return from your wandering.’ (*Letter 46*, To a Fallen Virgin, paragraph 5 – 6, emphasis mine)

Gregory of Nyssa (c.335 – c.395 AD), was bishop of Nyssa in Asia Minor, brother of Basil of Caesarea, and one of the three great Cappadocian fathers. ‘Will it receive the just recompense by being purged, according to the Gospel utterances, in fire, or refreshed with the dew of blessing? But I do not see how we can imagine that, in the case of such a soul. The word retribution implies that something must have been previously given; but he who has not lived at all has been deprived of the material from which to give anything. There being, then, no retribution, there is neither good nor evil left to expect.’ (*On Infants Early Deaths*). ‘But suppose, on the other hand, that it [the soul] has been transfixed with the nails of propension so as to be held down to a habit connected with material things — a case like that of those in the ruins caused by earthquakes, whose bodies are crushed by the mounds of rubbish; and let us imagine by way of illustration that these are not only pressed down by the weight of the ruins, but have been pierced as well with some spikes and splinters discovered with them in the rubbish. What then, would naturally be the plight of those bodies, when they were being dragged by relatives from the ruins to receive the holy rites of burial, mangled and torn entirely, disfigured in the most direful manner conceivable, with the nails beneath the heap harrowing them by the very violence necessary to pull them out?— Such I think is the plight of the soul as well when the Divine force, for God’s very love of man, drags that which belongs to Him from the ruins of the irrational and material. Not in hatred or revenge for a wicked life, to my thinking, does God bring upon sinners those painful dispensations; He is only claiming and drawing to Himself whatever, to please Him, came into existence. But while He for a noble end is attracting the soul to Himself, the Fountain of all Blessedness, it is the occasion necessarily to the being so attracted of a state of torture. Just as those who refine gold from the dross which it contains not only get this base alloy to melt in the fire, but are obliged to melt the pure gold along with the alloy, and then while this last

is being consumed the gold remains, so, while evil is being consumed in the purgatorial fire, the soul that is welded to this evil must inevitably be in the fire too, until the spurious material alloy is consumed and annihilated by this fire... Then it seems, I said, that it is not punishment chiefly and principally that the Deity, as Judge, afflicts sinners with; but He operates, as your argument has shown, only to get the good separated from the evil and to attract it into the communion of blessedness.' (*On the Soul and Resurrection*)

Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430 AD), became bishop of Hippo in Roman North Africa during the 4th and 5th centuries, after living in Milan and being baptized by Ambrose. He was a literary giant and was the foremost influence on the Latin-speaking church for centuries afterwards. Augustine 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 (580 – 662 AD) was a scholar and monk at Constantinople who was the leading theologian of his generation, who lost his tongue for resisting the Byzantine emperor's heretical view of Christ. Maximus 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 (676 – 749 AD), was a Syrian priest who was among the first generation of Christians to live under the Arab Islamic conquest. He debated Muslims, and wrote what is widely respected as a very good summary of Christian teaching from the patristic period, closing the patristic chapter and opening the Byzantine. He 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 (613 – 700 AD), a leading bishop outside of the Byzantine Empire, valuable as a representative of the church in the Persian Empire, 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.'

Let me also cite early Christian sources that demonstrate their focus on human nature, and how our own choices shape our human nature. These citations provide evidence that: (1) 'good works' were seen through a biblical, Judeo-Christian understanding as being *intrinsically necessary for our human being and becoming*, not through a Greco-Roman understanding as 'meriting points' extrinsically to us, somewhere on God's score sheet; (2) Jesus' return would reveal what we have done *within ourselves and to ourselves*, in relationship with him.

- Ignatius of Antioch (c.35/50 – 108/117 AD) was bishop of Antioch, the most important city in the Eastern Roman Empire at the time, and the place where followers of Jesus were first called 'Christians' (Acts

11:26), where Peter, Barnabas, Paul ministered. After being arrested by Roman soldiers and sometime during the long march to Rome to be martyred there, Ignatius authored seven letters, which circulated in both short and long forms. His death can be dated to sometime within the reign of Trajan (98 AD to 117 AD), and most historians place the date in the range of 108 – 117 AD. He wrote in one how our choices shape our natures, and thus our experience of eternity: ‘Seeing, then, all things have an end, and there is set before us life upon our observance [of God’s precepts], but death as the result of disobedience, and every one, according to the choice he makes, shall go to his own place, let us flee from death, and make choice of life. For I remark, that two different characters are found among men--the one true coin, the other spurious. The truly devout man is the right kind of coin, stamped by God Himself. The ungodly man, again, is false coin, unlawful, spurious, counterfeit, wrought not by God, but by the devil. I do not mean to say that there are two different human natures, but that there is one humanity, sometimes belonging to God, and sometimes to the devil. If any one is truly religious, he is a man of God; but if he is irreligious, he is a man of the devil, made such, not by nature, but by his own choice. The unbelieving bear the image of the prince of wickedness. The believing possess the image of their Prince, God the Father, and Jesus Christ, through whom, if we are not in readiness to die for the truth into His passion, His life is not in us.’ (*Epistle to the Magnesians*, longer version, ch.5)³

- The *Epistle to Diognetus* is an evangelistic open letter, once thought to be authored by Justin Martyr of Rome (c.110 – c.165 AD). It does not describe hell, nor interpret how divine fire and judgment work. But it does do the opposite: Echoing Psalm 1, James 1:14 – 18, Romans 5:3 – 5, and 2 Peter 1:4 – 11, it describes salvation as the cultivation and reception of virtuous qualities, which come from Jesus, into our human nature. ‘This is He who, being from everlasting, is to-day called the Son; through whom the Church is enriched, and grace, widely spread, increases in the saints, furnishing understanding, revealing mysteries, announcing times, rejoicing over the faithful, giving to those that seek, by whom the limits of faith are not broken through, nor the boundaries set by the fathers passed over. Then the fear of the law is chanted, and the grace of the prophets is known, and the faith of the gospels is established, and the tradition of the Apostles is preserved, and the grace of the Church exults; which grace if you grieve not, you shall know those things which the Word teaches, by whom He wills, and when He pleases. For whatever things we are moved to utter by the will of the Word commanding us, we communicate to you with pains, and from a love of the things that have been revealed to us. When you have read and carefully listened to these things, you shall know what God bestows on such as rightly love Him, being made a paradise of delight, presenting in yourselves a tree bearing all kinds of produce and flourishing well, being adorned with various fruits... Let your heart be your wisdom; and let your life be true knowledge inwardly received. Bearing this tree and displaying its fruit, thou shalt always gather in those things which are desired by God, which the Serpent cannot reach, and to which deception does not approach; nor is Eve then corrupted, but is trusted as a virgin; and salvation is manifested, and the Apostles are filled with understanding, and the Passover of the Lord advances, and the choirs are gathered together, and are arranged in proper order, and the Word rejoices in teaching the saints, by whom the Father is glorified: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.’ (*Epistle to Diognetus*, ch.11 – 12)
- The *Epistle of Barnabas* is a piece of Christian literature from the 2nd century, named for Barnabas but not really authored by him. It describes the impact of sin on human nature: ‘Let us then utterly flee from all the works of iniquity, lest these should take hold of us; and let us hate the error of the present time, that we may set our love on the world to come: let us not give loose reins to our soul, that it should have power to run with sinners and the wicked, lest we become like them.’ (*Epistle of Barnabas*, ch.4) ‘But the way of darkness is crooked, and full of cursing; for it is the way of eternal death with punishment, in which way are the things that destroy the soul, viz., idolatry, over-confidence, the arrogance of power, hypocrisy, double-heartedness, adultery, murder, rapine, haughtiness, transgression, deceit, malice, self-sufficiency, poisoning, magic, avarice, want of the fear of God.’ (*Epistle of Barnabas*, ch.20)
- Ambrose of Milan (c.337 – c.394 AD) writes of angels, ‘Even in their nature there is a capacity of sin, though not one of improvement by discipline’ as with us, ‘for every reasonable creature is exposed to influences from without itself, and liable to judgment. It is on the influences which work upon us that the award of judgment, and corruption, or advance to perfection, do depend, and therefore Ecclesiastes says: For God shall bring all His work to judgment.’ (*On Christian Faith*, 3.20)

³ The shorter version reads: ‘Seeing, then, all things have an end, these two things are simultaneously set before us--death and life; and every one shall go unto his own place. For as there are two kinds of coins, the one of God, the other of the world, and each of these has its special character stamped upon it, [so is it also here.] The unbelieving are of this world; but the believing have, in love, the character of God the Father by Jesus Christ, by whom, if we are not in readiness to die into His passion, His life is not in us.’

- Cyril of Jerusalem (c.315 – 386 AD) writes, ‘A fearful thing is sin, and the sorest disease of the soul is transgression, secretly cutting its sinews, and becoming also the cause of eternal fire; an evil of a man’s own choosing, an offspring of the will. For that we sin of our own free will the Prophet says plainly in a certain place: Yet I planted thee a fruitful vine, wholly true: how art thou turned to bitterness, (and become) the strange vine [Jeremiah 2:21]? The planting was good, the fruit coming from the will is evil; and therefore the planter is blameless, but the vine shall be burnt with fire since it was planted for good, and bore fruit unto evil of its own will. For God, according to the Preacher, made man upright, and they have themselves sought out many inventions [Ecclesiastes 7:29]. For we are His workmanship, says the Apostle, created unto good works, which God afore prepared, that we should walk in them [Ephesians 2:10]. So then the Creator, being good, created for good works; but the creature turned of its own free will to wickedness. Sin then is, as we have said, a fearful evil, but not incurable; fearful for him who clings to it, but easy of cure for him who by repentance puts it from him. For suppose that a man is holding fire in his hand; as long as he holds fast the live coal he is sure to be burned, but should he put away the coal, he would have cast away the flame also with it. If however any one thinks that he is not being burned when sinning, to him the Scripture saith, Shall a man wrap up fire in his bosom, and not burn his clothes [Proverbs 6:27]? For sin burns the sinews of the soul, [and breaks the spiritual bones of the mind, and darkens the light of the heart].’ (*Lecture II, On Repentance and Remission of Sins*, paragraph 1) He also says, ‘We shall be raised therefore, all with our bodies eternal, but not all with bodies alike: for if a man is righteous, he will receive a heavenly body, that he may be able worthily to hold converse with Angels; but if a man is a sinner, he shall receive an eternal body, fitted to endure the penalties of sins, that he may burn eternally in fire, nor ever be consumed... Therefore, brethren, let us be careful of our bodies, nor misuse them as though not our own. Let us not say like the heretics, that this vesture of the body belongs not to us, but let us be careful of it as our own; for we must give account to the Lord of all things done through the body. Say not, none seeth me; think not, that there is no witness of the deed. Human witness oftentimes there is not; but He who fashioned us, an unerring witness, abides faithful in heaven [Psalm 139:7], and beholds what thou doest. *And the stains of sin also remain in the body; for as when a wound has gone deep into the body, even if there has been a healing, the scar remains, so sin wounds soul and body, and the marks of its scars remain in all;* and they are removed only from those who receive the washing of Baptism. The past wounds therefore of soul and body God heals by Baptism; against future ones let us one and all jointly guard ourselves, that we may keep this vestment of the body pure, and may not for practising fornication and sensual indulgence or any other sin for a short season, lose the salvation of heaven, but may inherit the eternal kingdom of God; of which may God, of His own grace, deem all of you worthy.’ (*Lecture XVIII: On the Words, And in One Holy Catholic Church, and in the Resurrection of the Flesh, and the Life Everlasting*, paragraph 19 - 20)

So who believes this?

- The united church for a thousand years+
- The entire Eastern Orthodox Church
- The Oriental Orthodox Churches: Syrian, Ethiopian, Eritrean, Armenian, Indian Malabar
- The Roman Catholic Church (on paper)
- Michael Himes, S.J. (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)
- J.R.R. Tolkien (Catholic), *The Lord of the Rings*
- C.S. Lewis (Anglican), *The Great Divorce*
- Roberta Bondi (Methodist), *Out of the Green Tiled Bathroom*
- Karl Barth (Reformed), *Church Dogmatics*
- T.F. Torrance (Reformed), *Atonement*
- Donald Bloesch (Reformed), *The Last Things*

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 look explicitly at the motif of fire.

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. Critical to this motif is the teaching of the Pentateuch about *human nature*. The early church had a very strong understanding of *human nature*, as it shows in the quotations above. Adam and Eve damaged and cursed human nature by taking in the power and desire to define good and evil for themselves (Gen.3: 1 – 7), shown by the fact that their son Cain did not need an external voice to make him jealous; the voice was already internal to him; sin was crouching at his door *within him*. Cain damaged his human nature even further, explicitly cursing it so the land would not be fruitful for him (Gen.4:11). But God called for our human partnership to burn and/or cut something away our human nature – with each person, because God in His love made us with the capacity to shape our human nature with Him.

The theme of the sword-circumcision complements the theme of fire. God instituted circumcision (Gen.17) with Abraham and Sarah, as a new kind of Adam and Eve in a new garden land, after they learned to 'cut away' certain attitudes of male privilege and power which were culturally but not spiritually acceptable; God wanted them to have a child like Adam and Eve would have had a child, with hope and trust in Him; Abraham could not discard Eve and monopolize the promise for himself (Gen.12); Abraham could not name a non-biological heir (Gen.15); Abraham and Sarah could not use a surrogate mother (Gen.16). God used circumcision as a symbol that He and they had 'cut away' something unclean from their attitudes about marriage and parenting. Circumcision was institutionalized with all male children of Israel to show how the covenant 'cut away' something unclean from humans (Lev.12), and later was used as a outward symbol of an inward surgery where God and humans in partnership would 'cut away' something unclean from the human heart by the Law being written on the heart (Dt.10:16; 30:6).

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: '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 and darkness' come from Israel's refusal to come up Mount Sinai to meet with God. Moses, by contrast, went up to see and meet with God, and his face shone (Ex.34). 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 beautiful and massive prophecy of Isaiah. Isaiah says that God's purpose is to purify Israel like a fire (Isa.1:24 – 31). 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.

Now, let’s look at 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	
Fire as Purifying, Light	Fire as Destroying, Darkness
<p>^{3:10} 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. ¹¹ 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. ¹² 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.</p>	
<p>^{3:16} After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on him, ¹⁷ and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.’</p> <p>^{4:16} ‘The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great light, and those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, upon them a light dawned.’</p> <p>^{5:14} You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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.</p> <p>^{6:22} The eye is the lamp of the body; so then if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. ²³ 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>^{5:22} Whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.</p> <p>^{8:12} But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.</p> <p>^{13:40} So just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ 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, ⁴² and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.</p> <p>^{13:49} So it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous, ⁵⁰ and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.</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. ² And he was transfigured before them; and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became as white as light...⁵ While he was still speaking, a bright cloud 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 lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were prudent. ³ For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, ⁴ but the prudent took oil in flasks along with their lamps. ⁵ Now while the bridegroom was delaying, they all got drowsy and began to sleep. ⁶ But at midnight there was a shout, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' ⁷ Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish said to the prudent, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' ⁹ 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.' ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ Later the other virgins also came, saying, 'Lord, lord, open up for us.' ¹² 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. ² 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. ³ And his appearance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow.</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 eternal fire. ⁹ 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 fiery hell.</p> <p>^{22:13} Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' ¹⁴ 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, ⁵¹ and will cut him in pieces 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 outer darkness; 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 eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels...' ⁴⁶ These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'</p>
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So is fire positive or negative for us? If we want to be cleansed by Jesus' Holy Spirit, fire is 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). Which meant Jesus was baptized by the Holy Spirit to purify his human nature. He then said that his presence was giving forth 'light' in darkness as Isaiah prophesied (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), because they would participate in Jesus' own purification of his human nature. In each of us, our spiritual eye's focus serves as a lamp, which lights us *within* (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 *inward preparation* to contribute to a kingdom celebration much bigger than ourselves (25:1 – 13; more on this below). If not, fire is negative, destructive. But it depends on us. The same is true in Jesus' use of 'fire and darkness' as a conjoined motif throughout the Gospels. He was reminding people of Israel's refusal to go up the mountain and be purified by God. God then appeared to them, from the outside, as 'fire and darkness.'

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 Mount Sinai, since Pentecost commemorates

God giving the Sinai Law to Israel on Mount Sinai, the day when Israel did not go up onto the mountain and experience God in His fiery presence. This reinforces the connection between covenant and fire in a positive way. The Israelites at Mount Sinai failed to go up onto the mountain (Ex.19:13; Dt.5:5). But Jesus has ascended to the Father, after purifying his own human nature, and sent his Spirit upon his disciples to represent his own ascension and their participation in it by his Spirit. Luke uses these two episodes about divine fire symmetrically, as this is one of the ways he builds similarities into his Gospel and Acts. Jesus' baptism and Spirit-anointing prepared him to purify his human nature during his public ministry, when incredible public pressures arose for him. But the baptism in the Jordan prepared him for his 'baptism' into death which he still needed 'to undergo' (Lk.12:50), after successfully resisting all the temptations in store (Lk.22:39 – 46 especially, leading up to his death). The connection between the Spirit and fire at Pentecost links the disciples to Jesus in terms of participating in his victory over temptation, fear, greed, etc. They proceed with 'power' (Lk.24:49; Acts 1:8), which is portrayed by Luke as the power Jesus perfected in his own human nature.

Paul also uses fire as 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). By saying this, Peter coordinates the believers with 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 divine 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, and revealed for what God truly meant it to be.

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). But the followers of Jesus are purified as 'pure gold, like clear glass' (Rev.21:18, 21). Pure gold is not like clear glass in terms of *transparency*. But pure gold is like clear glass in terms of *being purified of any impurity*. So when God is described *as* fire, the Bible pairs that description with the *effect* of fire: either purified people, or tormented people.

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 a passage in Revelation before the 'lake of fire' passage.

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],² 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.³ 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;⁴ they will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads.⁵ 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 Rev.22:4 *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). Significantly, those practices were designed to help Israel internalize the commands into their human nature. 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. He will have written himself into our hearts, our human nature.

Now that we've established those things, now for the 'lake of fire' passage (Rev.20:14 – 15). First, what are the *literary* connections? 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 is reasonable to say that hell is experienced in a physical place, since people will be physical and will need to go *somewhere*, but *hell itself* is a condition of *human nature*, of our *being*. 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. It is poetic that Revelation's last mention of fire is not the lake of fire in Revelation 20, but the fire implicit in the purification of God's people who are as 'pure gold, like transparent glass' in Revelation 21.

METHODOLOGY: In other words, fire is a literary theme in each book. You cannot draw conclusions about fire from only the passages where fire is experienced as torment. 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) Or, 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)?

ILLUSTRATION: The early Christians made a connection between Isaiah's fiery coal and *Jesus' practice of communion!* They saw communion as purifying, because Jesus is purifying.⁴ And they wove this into the orders of Christian prayers and worship in service (liturgies). John of Damascus (676 – 749 AD) says, 'Let us draw near to Him with burning desire and... let us take hold of the divine coal, so that the fire of our longing, fed by the flame of the coal, may purge away our sins and enlighten our hearts. Let us be enkindled by touching this great divine fire, and so come forth as gods.' (John of Damascus, *The Orthodox Faith* 4.13). *The Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* has the priest pronounce, 'Lo, this has touched your lips and has taken away your iniquity.' This liturgy was written by John Chrysostom (349 – 407 AD), archbishop of Constantinople from 397 – 407 AD, and has been used ever since in Eastern Orthodox Churches. In fact, it is the most celebrated Liturgy in the Byzantine Rite, a group of liturgies used by Eastern Orthodox, Eastern Catholics, Anglican, and Lutheran communities. It is second only to the Roman Rite used in Catholic Churches. *The Divine Liturgy of St. James* refers to 'receiving the fiery coal' of communion. Some believe this Liturgy is the oldest complete form of Eastern liturgies. It comes from the early Christian church in Jerusalem, and is ascribed to James the brother of Jesus, who was the leader, or one of the leaders, of the Jerusalem Christian community. Probably, though, the Liturgy was refined and organized by Cyril of Jerusalem (313 – 386 AD), bishop of Jerusalem from 350 AD. Cyril was working with liturgies that he simply passed on, even if he did modify it. In any case, the early Christians associated Isaiah's burning coal with the communion bread, and via the communion bread, Jesus himself in his substance. They established this association at least by the fourth century, but it is reasonable to assume it came much earlier than that.

ILLUSTRATION: 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)

⁴ Patrick Henry Reardon, *Reclaiming the Atonement: An Orthodox Theology of Redemption, Volume One: The Incarnation* (Chesterton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2015), p.51 – 55

ILLUSTRATION: 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)

ILLUSTRATION: 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: What about the motif of separation from Jesus, by his pushing? 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 passages sit on opposite, matching sides of a giant chiasm running through all of the Gospel of Matthew. So they parallel each other and are related, if not basically identical. In both cases, they want a reward from Jesus, but not Jesus himself. The false prophets are inwardly ravenous wolves because they reject the heart-level teaching of Jesus (Mt.7:15 – 23). They do not want his heart transformation for themselves, which requires their willingness, effort, and discipline. 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. 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*.

Similarly, the five foolish virgins try to light and trim their lamps, but their lamps cannot stay lit. But they never successfully get oil and never confess their laziness to begin with (Mt.25:8). They had not wanted to carry oil with them, presumably because the lamps were rather large bowls and carrying oil was cumbersome and required work. Oil represents the Holy Spirit and the internalized word of Jesus, which parallels the heart-level teaching of the

Sermon on the Mount. The five foolish virgins don't care about contributing to the wedding celebration itself because their role was to have lamps lit for the celebration. They assume they can take oil from the wise virgins, but this would cut the overall time for the light in half, which is an impossibility in the story (Mt.25:8 – 9). The foolish virgins go away to purchase more, but we are not told whether they are successful *in the middle of night*, which seems unlikely and is probably a point of humor as far as the story goes, a point where the story's purpose as an analogy to spiritual truth has no analogue. In effect, they come back in the middle of the night without having oil and presumably still wanting to take from the oil of others. But this is not possible; each person must have the oil of the Spirit for themselves, and this required that the oil be acquired during 'the day' because the Spirit requires human participation, as shown in Jesus' human self-purification and faithful obedience to the Father leading to transfiguration and resurrection, to be mirrored in the disciples' willing participation by the Spirit in Jesus' self-purification, faithful obedience, and now transfiguration and resurrection.

The element of separation in both sections ('depart from me... I do not know you') refers to some refusal on Jesus' part to give in to their demands. It surely does indicate a physical separation between believers and unbelievers in hell, since everyone including Jesus will be embodied and require physical space. But Jesus also has his pre-incarnate role as the Word of God in whom all creation holds together (Acts 17:28; Col.1:17), and he must still uphold their existence. So there is another sense in which their very existence is still 'in him.' And this means that 'separation' in hell between the embodied Jesus and the embodied non-follower of Jesus is still not the ultimate reality on the sheer molecular level. Thus, before we take Jesus' warning to refer to the separation of space between followers and non-followers, we must take it as referring to the separation between their two different *experiences* which have their foundation in earlier choices people made *about Jesus, that now determine their human natures*. He comes personally (Mt.7:15 – 23) and the false prophets are revealed as false because their hearts and natures were not transformed, and even their demand for acceptance on their own terms shows their refusal to live in the reality of what Jesus demanded for our healing. They have their own demand, and are deeply disappointed. Along with Jesus' command to depart comes his counter-demand to put in the effort, work, and choices to be healed, on his terms. But this, they will not, and cannot do. Similarly, he comes to celebrate his wedding as a bridegroom (Mt.25:1 – 12) and the foolish virgins are revealed as foolish because they did not use the time given them to learn to celebrate the bridegroom's occasion of joy more than their own convenience. They claim they can still meaningfully contribute, but they have no idea how contributing in the kingdom celebration required preparation. Like the false prophets, the foolish virgins demand admission on their own terms. The time given to them to unlearn their posture of parasitic laziness has passed. Pairing the parable of the foolish virgins with Jesus' teaching on the false prophets, which is required in Matthew's literary parallelism, provides us with added information about those represented by the five foolish virgins. Jesus continues to require what he has always required: a human process of Spirit-led obedience like his, participating in his own process to heal the very roots of human nature. This is the task the non-follower refuses to do.

METHODOLOGY/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 our human nature?' 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.

METHODOLOGY/EXPOSITION: In the book of Genesis, the same thing happens. Sin is self-negation because it's a misuse and abuse of our human nature. 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, *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 says that the wrath of God is revealed against the unrighteousness and ungodliness of people, but not against people per se. We are saved from the wrath of God, that is, our own waywardness and alienation from God, by the life of Jesus (Rom.5:10); that verse does *not* teach that we are saved from the retributive punishment of God by the death of Jesus. The *condemnation* of God is against our sinfulness, specifically the internal corruption which Paul calls 'the flesh' in Romans 7:14 – 8:11. God's solution for the rebellious flesh is Jesus' perfect faithfulness. 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*. This is why the New Testament fundamentally regards sin as *self-harm*: Sin harms our human nature (Mt.15:18 – 20; Mk.7:21 – 23; Lk.15:11 – 32; Jn.4:15 – 18; 8:30 – 37; 15:6; Rom.1:21 – 32; 2:1 – 16; 2:25 – 29; 3:9 – 20; 6:20 – 23; 1 Cor.6:18; Gal.6:1 – 3; Eph.4:17 – 19; 1 Tim.6:9 – 10; Heb.6:4 – 8; Jas.1:13 – 15, 23 – 24; 5:1 – 6; 2 Pet.1:9; 2:1 – 22; 1 Jn.2:15; 3:5 – 10).

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. (<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)

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.

EXPOSITION: Later in Romans, Paul gives instructions to Christians on how to love their enemies. This passage is important.

¹⁷ Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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.

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 <i>against</i> your desires	Hell <i>is</i> your desires; they’re messed up
Hell is God’s infinite wrath and retributive justice	Hell is God’s infinite love and restorative justice
‘Original sin’ = inherited guilt	‘Ancestral sin’ = inherited corruption
Fire symbolizes retribution, punishment	Fire symbolizes God’s insistence on surrender and cleansing
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)
Scriptures emphasized: What it’s like	Scriptures emphasized: Why it’s like that

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 retributive 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, and in our human nature, 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.

Third, Jesus is the only way human nature can be healed and saturated with God, so our desires can be reshaped. 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!

Fourth, if you think that you can *plan* to just 'choose Jesus right before you die,' there is a dangerous 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. You are addicting yourself to other things. You will have a harder and harder time choosing out. 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, even in eternity?* In eternity, you will say to Jesus, 'Why can't you give me a hundred more years to myself? You have all eternity! What's your rush!' And then you'll sink down to the floor in a pouting mess. After all, you're in danger of doing that today. You are conditioning your human nature to reject Jesus, and be immature.

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 do you really want? What's in your heart? Is it Jesus? Is it more of him in the world? Or do you really want something else?

Fifth, you need to share Jesus with others as God saving us from evil, not from Himself. 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! Does God have wrath? Yes! But it's the wrath of a surgeon against the cancer in your body, who loves you. The wrath of God is an activity of the love of God, just directed at the thing in you that is killing you and against His love.

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.

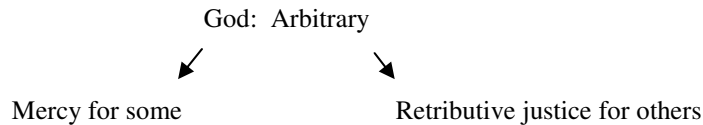
By saying that human beings in hell no longer bear the image of God, Wright suggests that human beings no longer bear resemblance to the inner relation between the Father and the Son in the Spirit. Just as the Son is the Image of God within the Godhead, humans bear the image of God outside of the Godhead.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

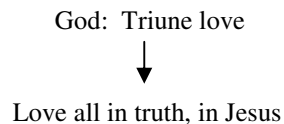
Not only that, then we would have to explain the existence of ex-humans based on some characteristic of God other than His love. But what would that be? What attribute of God holds them in that state? And so, Wright inadvertently implies that people’s ongoing existence in hell is maintained by some attribute 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:

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!

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.