

Hell, the Goodness of God, and Orthodoxy: Review of David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall be Saved*

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In the introductory remarks to his latest book, David Bentley Hart admits that his arguments will convince few who were not already predisposed to accept the central thesis contained in the title of the book. Yet he persists. Hart was already known for his universalist understanding of Christian eschatology, yet for him, the significance of the question necessitated reworking and expansion of his previous contributions.

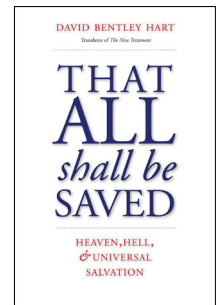
The book's somewhat haphazard organization betrays its previous incarnation as the content of several lectures, expanded here as the book's middle section, entitled "Apokatastasis: Four Meditations", and the section entitled "Part I: The Question of an Eternal Hell." Hart himself notes the incorporation of this previous material. While the new introduction and conclusion bring the whole together, some awkward repetition remains from the use of these earlier source materials.

So why the new book? Hart himself states the reason for pulling out all the stops and offering a definitive version of his strongest arguments. While the "infernalists" (those who believe in an eternal hell of endless torture for the damned) are his real target, Hart's ire is also aimed at a class of theologian that most would consider a natural ally of universalism. These are the "hopeful

universalists", as opposed to the universalists of absolute conviction (such as Hart himself). The hopeful crowd believe in the legitimacy of "hoping all will be saved," while retaining the possibility that some will lock themselves away in a hell of their own making for all eternity.

The position I want to attempt to argue, therefore, to see how well it holds together, is far more extreme: to wit, that, if Christianity is in any way true, Christians dare not doubt the salvation of all, and that any understanding of what God accomplished in Christ that does not include the assurance of a final *apokatastasis* in which all things created are redeemed and joined to God is ultimately entirely incoherent and unworthy of rational faith. (66)

It is Hart's self-assured confidence in his own conclusions that has most irked a rather diverse crowd of critics. Most recently, Giacomo Sanfilippo, founding editor of *Orthodoxy in Dialogue*, published a very negative assessment of Hart's book based largely on Sanfilippo's attachment to a very traditional piety of self-abnegation. Other reviewers have expressed skepticism that Hart's rigorous philosophical categories and relentless logic are appropriate tools for interpreting the New Testament's eschatological passages. It is worth admitting



David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

(as most all critics do) that Hart's penchant for rare and archaic latinisms and hellenisms — what would be so wrong, for example, with writing "laid aside" rather than "praetermitted"? — frequently detract from his point. His polemical skills and biting rhetoric may not always serve his best intentions.

Still, if this book's singular value lay in its rigorous argument in favor of a universal restoration of humankind and the entire cosmos, then Hart's peculiar verbal flair might be less objectionable. I believe, however, that Hart's greatest moments come not in his arguments for *apokatastasis*—admirable though these may be—but in his summarizing the Orthodox Church's vision of the gospel. In other words, the title of Hart's book may not reveal the most important point he has to make. With that caveat in mind, Hart does not disappoint when he focuses with real precision on the Church's fundamental message.

Hart is aware that this larger vision of the Gospel must inform eschatological teaching. He also seems aware that this part of his message is most relevant for the contemporary Christian.

I would not say, however, that the gradual hardening of the church's teachings on hell into the infernalist orthodoxy, over half a millennium, was merely an accident of history. It may have been much more a necessity of culture, or of politics, or even of psychology. At least, if I allow myself to take the cynical view of the matter, I cannot help but believe that the infernalist view was fated to prevail simply as an institutional imperative (or, at any rate, an institutional convenience). The more the church took shape as an administrative hierarchy, and especially as it became an organ of and support for imperial unity and power, the

more naturally it tended to command submission from the faithful by whatever permissible methods of persuasion lay near at hand. (206)

These are not merely academic musings. It might seem that the question of whether the torments of hell are eternal or temporary has no immediate bearing on the status of the Church's mission in the contemporary world. But the prestige of the infernalist argument can be shown to proceed from an age when the Church's message was becoming a fixed feature of society. It follows the rising curve of a *coercive* role for the Church in determining society's moral order. It may well be that formally abdicating such moral hegemony is part of the Church's only hope for relevance in the coming age.

In addition to wielding all the power of his relentless logic, Hart spends a fair amount of time describing his youthful encounter with the Christian faith in the context of his family's High Church Anglican roots. He discovered in the Eastern Church tradition the antidote to so much of what passed for Christian teaching in the contemporary world. The wrath of God, the vicarious atonement of Christ to appease the Father, the eternal torture of the damned, and other distortions of the economy of our salvation in Christ come in for trenchant criticism:

Happily, all of that is degrading nonsense—an absolute midden of misconceptions, fragments of scriptural language wrenched out of context, errors of translation, logical contradictions, and (I suspect) one or two emotional pathologies. It came as a great consolation to me when I was still very young to discover that, in the first three or four centuries of the Christian era, none of these notions had yet taken root, in either the East or the West, and that for the most part the Eastern

Christian world had remained innocent of the worst of them up until the present day, and furthermore that the New Testament, read in light of the proper tradition, turned out to contain nothing remotely like them. It is true, of course, that for Paul the cross of Christ revealed the law's wrath upon sin, in that it was an eminently legal murder; but it certainly revealed nothing about the will of God toward his creatures enslaved to death, and was in no sense a ransom paid to the Father to avert his wrath against us. For the earliest Christians, the story of salvation was entirely one of rescue, all the way through: the epic of God descending into the depths of human estrangement to release his creatures from bondage to death, penetrating even into the heart of hades to set the captives free and recall his prodigal children and restore a broken creation. (25)

The relative merits of a philosophically informed line of moral reasoning may seem impenetrable to the vast majority of human minds. However, the gospel is for all. There is no ignoring the overwhelming power of the Church's proclamation of Good News, not a tragic tale with a twist ending, but unalloyed Good News, full stop.

Few of Hart's reviewers have mentioned his arguments from literary sources. Most significantly, he refers on more than one occasion to the character of Ivan from Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. In Hart's telling, Ivan represents the legitimate voice of objection to the compromise of the Grand Inquisitor, institutional Christianity's effort to tame the free Christ of the Gospels and to replace him with the levers of social control and moralism. The death of a single infant is too great a price to pay for a grand moral order. Only an utter rejec-

tion of infernalism allows the Church to answer Ivan's challenge, and to convince him that his objections to the Church are, in fact, ontologically present in the Orthodox faith.

Furthermore, Hart's arguments are intent on restoring a *communal* understanding of salvation in Christ. The "infernalist" idea, on the other hand, is obsessed with the *individual* destination of each human being.

I am not I in myself alone, but only in all others. If, then, anyone is in hell, I too am partly in hell. Happily, however, if the Christian story is true, that love cannot now end in failure or tragedy. The descent into those depths—where we seek out and find those who are lost, and find our own salvation in so doing—is not a lonely act of spiritual heroism, or a futile rebellion of our finite wills against a merciless eternity. For the whole substance of Christian faith is the conviction that another has already and decisively gone down into that abyss for us, to set all the prisoners free, even from the chains of their own hatred and despair; and hence the love that has made all of us who we are, and that will continue throughout eternity to do so, cannot ultimately be rejected by anyone. Thus all shall have their share in—as Gregory [of Nyssa] says in his great mystical commentary *On the Song of Songs*—"the redeemed unity of all, united one with another by their convergence upon the One Good." Only thus will humanity "according to the divine image" come into being, and only thus will God be truly all in all. (157–8)

Wherein lies the value and the true power of the Church's proclamation of the gospel? Has God discovered an elegant stratagem, a sure way to *divide* humanity into sheep and goats, or rather does the power of the gospel lie in the assurance

of an ultimate *unity* of humanity when Christ will be all in all?

Hart is very clear on who his spiritual heroes are. First and foremost is Gregory of Nyssa. Origen, Isaac the Syrian, Maximus the Confessor, and the nineteenth-century Scotsman George MacDonald round out the list. In contrast especially to Augustine of Hippo, Hart lays out the theological framework that undergirds his perspective:

For myself, I prefer a much older, more expansive, perhaps overly systematic approach to the seemingly contrary eschatological expectations unfolded in the New Testament—an approach, that is, like Gregory of Nyssa’s or Origen’s, according to which the two sides of the New Testament’s eschatological language represent not two antithetical possibilities tantalizingly or menacingly dangled before us, posed one against the other as challenges to faith and discernment, but rather two different moments within a seamless narrative, two distinct eschatological horizons, one enclosed within the other. In this way of seeing the matter, one set of images marks the furthest limit of the immanent course of history, and the division therein—right at the threshold between this age and the “Age to come” (*’olam ha-ba*, in Hebrew)—between those who have surrendered to God’s love and those who have not; and the other set refers to that final horizon of all horizons, “beyond all ages,” where even those who have traveled as far from God as it is possible to go, through

every possible self-imposed hell, will at the last find themselves in the home to which they are called from everlasting, their hearts purged of every last residue of hatred and pride. (103–4)

By way of defending the patristic *apokatastasis*, Hart makes some ample contributions to Orthodox Christian anthropology. In order to bring into focus the untenable nature of infernalism, the true nature of human freedom and personhood is addressed with stringent clarity. Hart’s familiarity with the languages of the biblical literature and early church thinkers allows him to make extensive arguments based on the ancient texts and early Christian authors. He makes it very clear that his perspective is not some merely modern innovation.

I, for one, found Hart’s arguments in favor of universal restoration very compelling. His rigorous arguments render the idea that eternal torment is the will of a loving God incoherent nonsense. Whether or not one agrees with Hart’s eschatological observations, though, along the way he articulates at least three essential components of the Orthodox Christian message that we ignore at our peril. First, that the Church’s narrative of the divine rescue accomplished in Christ must never be replaced by merely moral categories and social conformity. Second, that the gospel is not proclaimed so that *individuals* might find personal salvation. And finally, that the Christian message is one of unswerving and ultimate optimism that allows no shadow of residual evil. If we learn these lessons from his book, Hart’s efforts will surely not have been in vain. ✱



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