
My Maker Was the Primal Love

B Y D O U G L A S V . H E N R Y

Dante depicts Hades as a creation of “the primal love,” or the Holy Spirit. Yet those who doubt the justice of everlasting punishment are all the less inclined to regard it as a measure of God’s love. Two thoughts can help us to unravel this apparent incongruity between God’s loving character and the existence of hell.

A mischievous friend of mine once visited the classroom of a notoriously difficult professor just before the final exam. His contribution to the nervous students soon arriving was to scrawl on the board, “Abandon every hope, who enter here.” Most students chuckled at the notice, while some really did lose further hope.

Perhaps a few recognized it as the final phrase of the inscription above the gates of hell so vividly described in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Thus the poet conveys the total and irrevocable despair accompanying any soul so unfortunate as to cross Hades’ threshold, a despair that all who speak of hell surely recognize.

Yet in the full inscription Dante envisions important themes not as widely appreciated:

Through me the way into the suffering city,
through me the way to the eternal pain,
through me the way that runs among the lost.

Justice urged on my high artificer;
my maker was divine authority,
the highest wisdom, and the primal love.

Before me nothing but eternal things
were made, and I endure eternally.
Abandon every hope, who enter here.¹

The thought that *justice* prompts God to fashion hell, taken for granted among Dante's thirteenth century readers, is controversial today. Bertrand Russell, who waggishly remarked that "Hell is neither so certain nor as hot as it used to be," thought belief in hell was a defect in "Christ's moral character" because no "person

Divine punishment in this life, the proverb says, does not negate or preclude love. And if love prompts God's punishment of humans in general, love also prompts the punishment of humans in hell.

who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment."² Many people squirm at a doctrine of hell that they regard as morally indefensible. For many, observes Jerry Walls, "hell is arguably the most severe aspect of the problem [of evil]."³

Sentiments like this call into question the notion of hell as an instrument of divine justice, and they render even more puzzling Dante's depiction of hell as a creation of "the primal love," by which he alludes to the Holy Spirit. Those who doubt the justice of everlasting punishment are all the less inclined to regard it as a measure of God's love. For "How is the existence of a benevolent and almighty God to be reconciled with even the possibility of someone's going to hell (whether this is thought to involve simple annihilation or the pain of everlasting separation from God)?"⁴

Can hell truly express God's love and righteousness? For how could God, who lovingly creates us in his image, fashion an apparent monstrosity like hell? Why would the One who, in Jesus Christ, died to bring about our reconciliation, allow for some people the destruction of "both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28)? Two thoughts can help us to unravel this apparent incongruity between God's loving character and the existence of hell.

First of all, we must never separate God's justice and love, for they are two aspects of a single divine character. God is not just, or righteous, in one moment and loving in another. Rather, each divine action is loving and just, whether God is commending creatures' righteousness or condemning their evil, for in this way "the LORD reproves the one he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights" (Proverbs 3:12). Divine punishment in this life, the proverb says, does not negate or preclude love. Though punishment and love are often pulled asunder in human relationships, never is God's punishment vindictive. And if love prompts God's punishment of humans in general, love also prompts the punishment of humans in hell.

But is this notion that justice and love together consign people to hell merely the counsel of a naive Pollyanna? At the very least, it suggests more puzzles. For instance, one purpose of love-prompted punishment is correction, but hell seemingly involves no hope of correction. And punishment, when it is just, is meted out in proportion to the offence, but *everlasting* punishment seems out of proportion to the finite though horrifying offences that creatures commit. Such puzzles make us question, yet again, whether justice and love built the gates of hell and all contained therein.

The second thought clarifies how God's love extends even to those consigned to hell. God's love always invites a free response of reciprocal, even if unequal, love from us. Freedom is an essential feature of love, for a loving response cannot be compelled, but only invited. For this reason, God allows us freely to love or fail to love in response to his initiative, and doggedly refrains from overriding our choices. Though our decisions often grieve God, to co-opt our free choices, even (or especially) when they run amuck, would be to forfeit the divine scheme. "Merely to override a human will . . . would be for [God] useless," C. S. Lewis has the devilish Screwtape acknowledge. "He cannot ravish. He can only woo. For His ignoble idea is to eat the cake and have it; the creatures are to be one with Him, but yet themselves; merely to cancel them, or assimilate them, will not serve."⁵

Our creaturely autonomy, which invests our lives with meaningfulness and moral significance, leaves the door of our hearts ajar to great evil, including our willful separation from God—for days, decades, or eternity. But in God's perfect understanding, the good of a universe in which we can lovingly and freely respond to "divine authority, the highest

Our creaturely autonomy leaves the door of our hearts ajar to great evil, including our willful separation from God. But in God's perfect understanding, the good of a universe in which we can lovingly and freely respond to "the primal love" outweighs the evil wreaked by human sin.

wisdom, and the primal love" outweighs the evil wreaked by human sin.

So, even if hell offers no hope of correction, nonetheless it is love that makes hell possible. If we finally and everlastingly refuse God, he finally and everlastingly recognizes that refusal, and thereby justly condemns.

Much mystery remains. How does God nurture our creaturely freedom to respond to him, and then amply protect it from the distortions of culture and the devices of our own hearts? With Job, we risk reflection

about things that we do not understand. We should acknowledge humbly the limits of our efforts to fathom God's reasons for creating a world in which hell has its role. Nevertheless, like Job, we may affirm confidently, "no purpose of [the LORD's] can be thwarted" (Job 42:1-3). As God's creation, hell marks no limit upon God's sovereignty and expresses, rather than thwarts, divine authority, highest wisdom, and primal love. The Lord whose justice, understanding, and love invite our worshipful commitment is the same One who founded hell. Whatever else may come, "the mystery of God will be fulfilled, as he announced to his servants the prophets" (Revelation 10:7).

NOTES

1 Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Inferno*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam, 1980), III, 1-9.

2 Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957), 195 and 17.

3 Jerry L. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 4.

4 Alfred J. Freddoso, ed., *The Existence and Nature of God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 3; quoted in Walls, 4.

5 C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 46.



DOUGLAS V. HENRY

is Associate Director of the Institute for Faith and Learning at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.