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Prolepsis and the Abolition of Hell

Why Hell Is Not Like Heaven

Kristin Johnston Largen

The Concept of Prolepsis

Anyone who has read Ted Peters' theology knows that the concept of prolepsis is a fundamental organizing principle, a central axis around which the doctrine of God, understanding of creation, and interpretation of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ revolve. The ramifications of his use and interpretation of this concept are far-reaching, and they often take the reader in surprising, exciting directions. One example of this can be found in Peters' treatment of "our final destinies"—specifically in his discussion of hell. The conclusions he reaches in *GOD—The World's Future*, including though not limited to his version of the ancient doctrine of *apokatastasis*, the ultimate restoration of all things to God, are, in my view, both powerful and compelling.

In Chapter 11 of *GOD—The World's Future*, Peters discusses the doctrine of hell in the context of a debate between two mutually exclusive options he calls "double destiny" and "universal salvation." In the course of his argument, he notes the diversity and ambiguity in the New Testament witness on this question, but nonetheless goes on to argue for an "evangelical explication" that leads him to argue the following two hypotheses: "First, salvation will be universal—that is, it has been given in Christ and will be applied to all human beings regardless of their sinful behavior on earth. Second, hell, if it does exist now, cannot last forever. Only God's kingdom is everlasting."[1] In what follows, then, I would like to pick up on Peters' insights in this area, focusing specifically on the doctrine of hell.

1 Ted Peters, *GOD—The World's Future*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 368.

In particular, what I propose is to use Peters' concept of prolepsis as a lens and to draw out more fully and in more detail the consequences such a perspective entails regarding a Christian understanding of hell. Specifically, I want to endorse and emphasize Peters' conclusion that "hell, if it does exist now, cannot last forever" by making the argument that the concept of hell is fundamentally and inherently different from the concept of heaven; that is, they are not best understood as simply parallel, though opposing, destinations. There are three primary reasons for this, all of which follow from the doctrine of prolepsis: first, heaven is governed by the future while hell is governed by the past; second, heaven is of God's creation, while hell is created by humanity itself; and finally, heaven is eternal—it belongs to *kairos* time, while hell remains bound to *chronos*, chronological time, and will thus ultimately come to an end.

Before I begin my analysis, let me offer one qualification. While I am arguing for the abolition of hell, I am not arguing for the doctrine of universal salvation, even though one might assume that the first logically implies the second. This is not because I believe in the eternal damnation of some, but rather because I believe in the possibility of a variety of religious ends, not all of which necessarily can be subsumed under the Christian understanding of salvation. While as a Christian, I hope for eternal life in communion with God in Jesus Christ, I also know that my Buddhist friends do not hope for such an end, and it seems both narrow-minded and overbearing to demand for them an end that they do not aspire to for themselves—indeed, an end that does not even make sense in the context of their own religious beliefs and practices. Mark Heim's work in this area, particularly his two books, *Salvations* and *the Depth of the Riches*, articulates this possibility eloquently and persuasively.[2]

Futurum, Adventus, Venturum

As early as 1977, in his book, *Futures Human and Divine*, Peters wrote, "*Futurum* is human, *adventus* divine."[3] This statement must be interpreted within the larger context of the definitions Peters gives for each word. He argues that *futurum* points to "the future actualization of potential-

2 S. Mark Heim, *Salvations* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), and *The Depth of the Riches* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000).

3 Ted Peters, *Futures Human and Divine* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), 70.

ities already existing within things,"[4] like an oak tree growing from an acorn. By contrast, he argues that *adventus* describes "the appearance of something new. . . . It is a future that can be anticipated or hoped for, but its arrival is not dependent only upon present potentialities. It cannot be understood through projections based upon present trends."[5] In *GOD—The World's Future*, Peters builds upon these two understandings of the future by adding a third, *venturum*, which, he argues, "gives us the sense of prolepsis, the invasion of the present by the power of what is yet to come."[6]

In the section that follows, I want to draw out the ramifications of the distinction between the first two ways of understanding the future: *futurum*, and *adventus*. This distinction points to an important difference in the way in which heaven and hell relate to the present, and it also gives some insight into how they are radically different.

Heaven Is Governed by the Future

I want to acknowledge at the beginning of this section the passages in Scripture that seem to indicate that heaven, like hell, is governed by the past, and is a reward for what one has done cumulatively in the span of one's lifetime. Let me give what are perhaps the two most well-known examples of this interpretation. First, the sheep and the goats passage from Matthew 25: after judging the nations based on what they have or have not done to the last and the least, the Son of Man says to the sheep at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world . . ." and then he says to the goats at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. . . ." Second, the Dives and Lazarus passage in Luke 16: Jesus tells the Pharisees, "who were lovers of money," the parable of the rich man and Lazarus—"The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. . . ."

While there are many problematic aspects of this parallelism, as I hope to show, there is one important feature of this supposition of con-

4 Ibid., 20.

5 Ibid., 21.

6 Peters, *GOD—The World's Future*, 320–21.

trasting destinations, each based on one's deeds and beliefs in this life, and that is the connection it upholds between one's past and one's future. While there are many uncertain aspects about the kingdom of God and life after death, one thing the Christian tradition has always maintained is that who we are here and now—the life that we lead and the choices we make—matters; the way in which we live our lives makes a difference. It is not irrelevant or unimportant how we treat our families, our neighbors, indeed, the whole of creation, and the idea that, in fact, our present lives have ultimate significance, reinforces that.

However, the main problem with such an interpretation is that it makes the past normative for determining the future; that is, it makes both heaven and hell *futurum*, the logical result of the consequences of past actions. The difficulty with this assumption, as it relates to heaven, is that heaven is in no way governed by our "logical" interpretation of how things should be—this is what Jesus was getting at in his parable of the laborers in the vineyard who all received the same wage, even though some worked only an hour and some worked all day. Instead, heaven, rightly understood, is the expression of something totally new from God's hand, breaking in upon us from the future, to great surprise and rejoicing. That is, while it is certainly true that neither Scripture nor Christian tradition are univocal on this point, there is a dominant strand of interpretation in both those sources of wisdom that affirms that heaven is, and will be, in the end, something heretofore unforeseen, something that is not the result of past actions or efforts, but something that comes to us unexpected, unearned, and unanticipated. This is what Peters is pointing to in his idea of *adventus*. Let me offer just one example.

While there are different places one finds this idea in Scripture, perhaps the most obvious example comes in Paul's description of "spiritual bodies" in 1 Corinthians 15. There he writes, "So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. . . . For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality." Here, Paul is pointing to the reality that in the resurrection, we will be radically different from who we are today, and that the body we will be given by God is like nothing that we have seen or experienced before. Thus, Paul must create a new image—"spiritual body," which literally doesn't make sense, in order to convey the reality that awaits us in the future.

Thus, while many theologians over the course of the last 21 centuries have speculated on the nature of heaven, with visions of varying degrees of continuity and discontinuity from their contemporary societies, a degree of mystery to the whole thing always remained. It has always been clear that, when speaking of these sorts of "last things," humans can only speculate. It is God and God alone who knows the details of what awaits us, and while we can trust in the goodness and joy of that future, because of who God has revealed Godself to be in Jesus Christ, we must admit, in the end, that all our well-crafted theories and persuasive images will fade in the face of the great reality that only God can properly see or imagine.

There are two important corollaries of this interpretation of heaven: first, the affirmation that it is the future that determines the past, not vice-versa, and second, the affirmation that our past does not define us. Let me say more about each of these.

First, when we say that the future determines the past, we are affirming the truth that a life can only be evaluated at the end: it is from the resurrection that we judge the crucifixion; it is from the perspective of the new Adam that we judge the old; it is from the rainbow that we make sense of the flood.

Even in our own lives, often it is impossible to know whether or not a specific choice was the right one until we live into it—sometimes for days, sometimes for months, sometimes for years. We only find the true meaning of our lives by looking back on our past from the vantage point of the future; only from there are we truly able to judge the good from the bad, the right from the wrong. This is because it is only in the future that the whole finally is complete, and the parts can be seen in their larger, proper context. Only in the future do we see where all the roads were leading all along; only in the future can we connect all the dots. Until that time, we never know which parts of our past will prove central and which will prove peripheral.

Second, this understanding of heaven as belonging to *adventus* reminds us of a central piece of the gospel message that affirms the conviction that our past sins and mistakes do not define us—not now, and certainly not forever, and that we are called to see ourselves as God sees us, through Jesus Christ, as we will be when we are perfected in the kingdom. One of the key manifestations of human sinfulness is the way in which we refuse both to forgive and to be forgiven. We hold grudges,

we let wounds fester, and we continue to see people through the lens of their cruelty, callousness, indifference, and malice—even when they themselves have moved beyond such sinful behavior and regret it. We cease to see people as they are, and can only see them as they were, sometimes even until the very end of their lives. And this is not all. Even when we are on the other side, the ones in need of forgiveness, we are often too ashamed of who we were to either ask for forgiveness or to accept it. We become paralyzed and cannot live into a new reality for ourselves because we are stuck playing back frightful images of wrongs we committed, things done and left undone. In both of these cases, we allow the past to determine the future, and we carry it around on our backs until it shapes our entire being.

Contrary to this, however, is the gospel of forgiveness, grace, and mercy, which reminds us that in baptism our slate has been wiped clean, and the past has no more power over us. It is this freedom from past shame that Jesus grants when he says to the woman caught in adultery, "Go your way, and from now on do not sin again." It is this freedom from past disgrace that God bestows when Elizabeth conceives; it is this freedom from past sins that Saul receives when Jesus sends the Holy Spirit upon him to renew his sight and to change his life. Over and over again in the lives of our biblical foremothers and forefathers, we see God at work, forgiving their past mistakes, idolatries, and transgressions, and opening up to them a new future they never could have lived into on their own. So also is God at work in our lives; thus we, too, daily, experience the power of the future over the past, the power of heaven over earth. In *Playing God?* Peters writes, "It is not from nature that we seek liberation. What we seek liberation from is the past, and we do so on behalf of an openness toward the future."[7] It is this openness that the metaphor and destination of heaven represent.

Hell Is Governed by the Past

By contrast, in the Christian tradition, hell has always been thought of as the accumulation of one's past—the result of past deeds. Thus, the metaphor and destination of hell clearly belongs to the realm of *futurum:* it is wholly governed by the past. The clearest proof of this comes in the primary symbolism that has been used to describe it for centuries. Hell is a place of judgment for the wicked. It is a place where people are pun-

7 Ted Peters, *Playing God?* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 162.

ished in proportion to their misdeeds here on earth; it is a place where evildoers finally are paid-back for the wrongs they committed to others.

Alan Bernstein, in *The Formation of Hell*, notes that in the New Testament, there are three views about what happens to those who fall outside the parameters of the "saved." He argues that the possibility we see in Paul's letters and the Gospel of John is "'mere' death"—that is, those dying outside Christ's saving grace would simply "remain in their graves, decompose, and pass into nothingness. That would be natural or simple death, or what the New Testament calls destruction."[8] However, other biblical texts, particularly those in the Synoptic Gospels, advocate a different possibility. Bernstein writes, "A second view holds that simple death does not suffice: justice demands retribution. Those who reject the Christian message will also be resurrected, but then they will be sent to a fate separate from, and worse than, that of the blessed. The damned will suffer 'wrath' or 'evil,' either temporally or unendingly in eternal damnation."[9] Finally, the third possibility follows from the idea that punishment will not be eternal, and argues that, even if there is a time of punishment, ultimately, God will draw all things to God's self in a final, universal restoration.

In all possibilities, however, what is noteworthy is the way it is assumed that hell is the logical end of a continuum that proceeds from start to finish along a person's life. This interpretation fits perfectly with our traditional understanding of the way time works. Peters describes it this way: "Our commonly accepted idea of temporality is that time consists of a linear one-way passage from the past, through the present, toward the future. And, when it comes to causality, we are *archonic*. We assume that the power of being comes from the past. We assume that everything that exists is due to a past cause and a present effect. The power of being, it is commonly assumed, comes in the form of a push from the past."[10]

Regarding hell, one of the most well-known depictions of this understanding of eternal cause and effect is found in Dante's *Inferno*. As is well known, the *Inferno* details an elaborate system of circular hells, spiraling downward, peopled with sinners who are being punished according to their deeds, beginning with the mildest and culminating with the most se-

8 Alan Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 206–07.
9 Ibid., 207.
10 Ted Peters, *Science, Theology, and Ethics* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), 85.

vere. Thus, the first circle of hell is "Limbo," where the unbaptized and the "virtuous pagans" suffer the relatively mild punishment of eternal longing for the divine, as they recognize their separation from God, but cannot do anything to correct it. The succeeding circles punish the lustful, the gluttonous, the greedy, the wrathful, and the violent, ending with those whom Dante believes deserve the most severe punishment, the treacherous and the traitors. There, in the very center of the cold pit of hell, Dante places Satan, whom he depicts as having three different faces—yellow, red, and black—and great wings whose flapping fills the pit with icy winds. With each different mouth, Satan gnaws on a prominent sinner: Cassius and Brutus, traitors to Julius Caesar; and of course, Judas Iscariot, who bears the greatest punishment of any sinner in hell, as his head is entirely in Satan's mouth, and his back is eternally skinned by Satan's claws.[11]

A great body of literature has been written about how Dante's depictions reflect his own biases against certain individuals, and how they enabled him to, metaphorically at least, punish those whom he believed were responsible for his downfall and exile from Florence. *The Inferno* is an extreme example, to be sure, but it serves well as an illustration of how, in some ways, hell is always a projection of our past onto the future, an imposition of our concepts of payment, penalty, and retribution onto God's future. This fact alone should stand as a caution to us to be more circumspect and modest in our predictions not only of our own, but especially of another's future. In light of what has already been said about the power of God that resides in the future, it is theologically questionable how far we can or should go in making one's past normative for one's entire existence, and how strongly we can or should assert that the past will have the last word over the future.

By Whose Hand?

Heaven Has Its Origin in the Creative Work and Being of God

Many times in Scripture, Jesus begins a parable with the words, "The kingdom of heaven is like. . . ." In Matthew 13 alone, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a prodigal sower, a mustard seed, a measure of yeast, a hidden treasure, a merchant searching for a fine pearl, and a net that catches every kind of fish. In one place, Jesus says that all must become like little children to enter the kingdom; in another, that everyone must

11 Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander, trans. (New York: Random House, 2000), 629–31.

be born of water and the Spirit to enter it. Further, he proclaims that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom, and he shocks the chief priests and elders by telling them that the prostitutes and tax collectors will enter into the kingdom before they will. What's more, in Luke 17, Jesus tells the confused Pharisees that the kingdom of God is within them. What conclusions are we to draw about heaven from this vast and varied treasury of images?

First, heaven will surprise us. One of the main functions of Jesus' various kingdom of heaven parables is to throw his hearers off guard and to unsettle their preconceived notions about what heaven will be like. It is clear from many of Jesus' examples that the kingdom will not be anything like they imagine it will be; in fact, in many ways, it will come as a prophetic reality that stands over and against all of their expectations. Second, heaven will be like nothing we can imagine. Jesus chooses the strangest images to embody heaven, surely none of which his hearers would have suggested as suitable representations. It is clear, then, that the kingdom of heaven is, at least to some degree, discontinuous with what has come before; instead of confirming human probabilities, it will inaugurate some wonderful new work of God. Finally, heaven will not follow the patterns of social intercourse established by human society. Jesus is insistent that there will be a dramatic reversal of fortunes in heaven, with the children leading the way, and the prostitutes and tax collectors following at their heels. Those who imagine themselves righteous and deserving are given a rude awakening in Jesus' many parables, and it is clear that the heavenly banqueting table will be comprised of quite a motley assortment of diners—not at all like the exclusive supper club some of the Pharisees seem to be anticipating.

All of this serves as an important reminder about who the composer of heaven is—whose hands shaped it, whose love generated it, and whose word brought it into being. Regardless of how much we might enjoy speculating about heaven, we are entirely on the receiving end of this work of God: we cannot and do not mold it according to our wishes or transform it according to our labors. God and God alone is the author of heaven, and as humans, our task is to receive it gratefully as a gift when God determines the time is right to grant it.

Heaven, then, is in some ways both the culmination of and the justification for the creation of the cosmos as a whole; the very existence of heaven is intimately bound up with the existence of the world. Both

are interrelated pieces of one whole divine, creative work, which occurs both at the beginning of the world, and also on a continual, day-to-day basis sustaining all life. God's creative activity, to be fully revealed at the end of time, in the coming of the kingdom of heaven, is the same creative activity out of which all life springs; thus, it is only in heaven that the relationship between all the divergent parts, the meaning of all existence, will be fulfilled.

Hell Has Its Origin in Human Sinfulness and Estrangement from God

Contrast this understanding of heaven's divine agency with the origin of hell. Alice Turner, in her book, *The History of Hell*, notes that some form of what Christians call "hell" can be found all the way back on baked clay tablets from Sumer societies, who lived almost 4,000 years ago in what is now Iraq.[12] In fact, in cultures all over the world, perhaps in all times and all places, evidence for some doctrine of "hell" can be found, whether it be in the context of dying-god vegetation myths, the stories of great heroes on a quest, such as Gilgamesh or Orpheus, or passing through a hall of justice to enter some form of life after death, as in Egypt. As most Christians are aware, the Jews also had a concept of a place of the dead; in Scripture, this is typically called Sheol, a shadowy pit of death, or Gehenna, a waste dump that, according to Turner, "served as a metaphor for an unpleasant place and also as a curse, for death in such a place would have indicated a life far removed from the laws of Yahweh."[13] It is fair to say, then, that many, if not most human societies have operated with some concept of a place after death where at least the possibility of suffering is present. Why is this so?

Obviously, such a broad question goes far beyond the limits of this chapter; however, certainly the question can be asked specifically with regard to Christianity. Turner notes that "it is on the Gospel of Matthew that much of the Christian proof of Hell's existence and purpose depends."[14] Certainly, there are more direct references and more explicit descriptions of hell in that particular Gospel than any other single book in the New Testament. Matthew seems to have two purposes in mind in his writings on hell: first, to hammer home the point that salvation comes only through Jesus Christ; and second, bad things will happen to you if you are not saved. In essence, Matthew is emphasizing that hu-

12 Alice K. Turner, *The History of Hell* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1993), 5.
13 Ibid., 41.
14 Ibid., 53.

manity needs saving, and in his descriptions of hell, he provides strong incentive to procure that salvation through belief in Jesus Christ. So, looking only at Matthew, then, we might conclude that hell exists to punish those who do not believe; it is the consequence of refusing to become a disciple of Jesus.

Augustine, however, takes this idea in a slightly different direction, in some ways, increasing the stakes for everyone involved. It is well known that Augustine's view of sin—particularly original sin—was extraordinarily influential in the succeeding development of Christian theology; indeed, the weight of his authority still can be felt today. For Augustine, the roots of sin are deep and strong, and no human being can possibly escape their tangle of evil. In fact, Augustine believed that all humans deserved punishment for their sins; it was only by the grace of God—and more than we rightly could expect—that God would chose to save even a few sinners. In Augustine's eyes, the condemnation of many only made God's deliverance of some more merciful. For Augustine, then, the fires of hell were entirely fitting to humanity's rebelliousness and deceit; the existence of hell was clearly warranted by original sin.

Much more could be said, of course, but I hope this is enough to suggest that for Christians, the reason hell exists is human sinfulness and evil. Hell was not created by God, and it certainly was not part of God's original plan for creation. Hell is the result of humanity's fundamental turn away from God; it comes from our choice to serve ourselves rather than God, and to poison all our relationships with hatred, greed, anger, and lust. Hans Urs Von Balthasar writes, "[I]t is clear, for one thing, that we cannot say that God has 'created hell'; no one but man [sic] can be blamed for its existence."[15]

There are, I think, two important manifestations of this connection between hell and human sinfulness, two ways in which we can see clearly that hell is indeed impossible without human sin and draws its power from it. First is the fact that throughout Christian history people have taken great and perverse delight in describing in vivid, excruciating detail the torments of hell. This ghoulish pleasure is perhaps most obvious in the visual arts: Hieronymus Bosch's "Garden of Earthly Delights," for example, in which more sheer physical tortures and abasements are depicted than can possibly be described; Fra Angelico's "Last Judgment,"

15 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope 'That All Men Be Saved?* David Kipp, trans. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 53–54.

depicting a ravenous Satan in the middle of boiling cauldron [being stirred by devils], devouring bodies as fast as he can shove them into his mouth; and Jan Van Eyck's "Last Judgment," portraying hell as a gaping pit, over which Death stretches his skeletal arms, and into which the damned fall headlong, where they are eaten alive by a motley assortment of demons. These are not isolated examples. It is a sign of how pervasive human sinfulness really is when we take such pains to envision and describe such agonizing tortures for our neighbors, whom, as we know, Christ commands us to love. One might well argue that the very existence of such descriptions is a sign that we ourselves already are closer to hell than we may imagine.

The second manifestation of the connection between hell and human sinfulness is the persistence of speculation that God and the saints in heaven enjoy the suffering of the damned. This is both theologically and ethically troubling, to say the least. This sort of speculation is nothing more than a projection that attempts to justify our worst and basest impulses by attributing them to the divine. Philip Almond, in his study of the ideas of both heaven and hell during the period of the English Enlightenment, notes that in the seventeenth century, the physical, sensual torments of hell were often vividly described. However, as a part of the explicit description of these horrors, the writers also included the merciless laughter by God and the saints as they were rejoicing over the suffering in hell. Almond writes, "The inaptly named Puritan Christopher Love similarly rejoiced in the prospect of the laughter of God at the sufferings of the damned: 'when thou art scorching in thy flames, when thou art howling in thy torments, then shall God laugh at thy destruction, and then the Saints of God shall sing and rejoyce [sic], that thou art a vessel of his justice, and so his power and wrath are made known in thee.'"[16] Almond notes how this "abominable fancy" can also be found in Augustine, Tertullian, Aquinas, and Peter of Lombard.[17]

It is one thing to admit that we ourselves secretly, or not so secretly, enjoy the prospect of others' suffering. It is another thing entirely, I argue, to assume that God enjoys such suffering. In light of everything Christians believe about Jesus Christ—his care for the outcast and the excluded, his ministry of healing and forgiveness, the love of God incar-

16 Philip C. Almond, *Heaven and Hell in Enlightenment England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 83.

17 Ibid., 97. Almond argues that this interpretation—that is, the rejoicing of the saved over the condemned—had ended roughly by the nineteenth century.

nated in his very flesh, and the death he died to conquer the power of death forever—make it impossible to justify the idea that God somehow rejoices in the face of suffering. The same God that sought out the one lost sheep, the one lost coin, and the one lost son would certainly not celebrate the permanent loss of any part of God's beloved creation. The construction of hell and its prominent place in Christian theology has been at the hands of humanity, not God, and as we will see in the final section of this chapter, something that has mere human origin is not and can never be eternal.

Temporary or Permanent?

Hell Is Temporal

In *GOD—The World's Future*, Peters argues that "If hell were to remain forever, it would also remain as a constant reminder that God's will is not completely done, that God's power is less than complete. Unless God's kingdom is universal and all-inclusive, God is not all-powerful. Therefore, hell, if it exists, must be temporary, and once it passes out of existence all will be taken into the consummate kingdom of God."[18] Peters here is relying on one of the classic arguments, used by different theologians through the centuries, to explain the final abolition of hell—that is, the scriptural witness that promises in the end, God will be all and all. It is this argument I want to focus on here.

Hans Küng notes that the doctrine of "eternal punishment with the devil" was established definitively by the Catholic Church first at the Synod of Constantinople in 543, and then later at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215.[19] However, this fact has not kept theologians both before and after these dates from speculating on the ultimate abolition of hell. There are two primary places in Scripture that have been used to defend this argument: In Philippians 2:1–11, we read ". . . at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father"; likewise, from 1 Corinthians 15:

> . . . for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he

18 Peters, *GOD—The World's Future*, 368.

19 Hans Küng, *Eternal Life?* Edwards Quinn, trans. (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 130.

> has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For 'God has put all things in subjection under his feet.' But when it says, 'All things are put in subjection,' it is plain that this does not include the one who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all (vv. 22–28).

Certainly, these are not the only texts that can be marshaled in defense of the final annihilation of hell—the number varies depending on how literally one interprets the "all" in such passages—but these two have been used most consistently in the tradition over time.

It is believed that Clement of Alexandria was the first Christian writer to suggest, albeit hesitantly, that the fires of hell would, eventually, be extinguished. Clement used the Philippians passage quoted above, among others, to argue that in Christ, God has saved the whole world, and ultimately, the whole world will come to serve God and worship God. This includes, of course, those in hell. Thus, for Clement, the whole purpose of hell was for purification, and once that function was complete, hell would come to an end. He used medical imagery, and compared the "discerning fire" of eschatological punishment with various types of curative surgery performed on a diseased arm or leg, such as amputation, and the removal of diseased tissue by a surgeon. Further, Clement argued for five specific characteristics of the punishment that occurred in hell, all of which supported his conclusion that hell itself finally would come to an end: punishment after death is redemptive in nature and limited in duration; punishment is pedagogical; punishment is medicinal; punishment is discerning—that is, it is appropriate to the person, not identical for each individual; and punishment is consistent with the character of God.

Certainly Clement was not the only one to make this argument. Most famously, perhaps, it is found in the writings of Origen, who focused on the 1 Corinthians text cited above, and reasoned from those verses that ultimately, all God's enemies would be subjected to God and would worship God. For Origen, evil—and consequently hell—ultimately would be excluded from God's harmonious universe. Gregory of Nyssa should also be mentioned here, as he, too, argued for the final destruction of hell, but using a different logic. For Gregory, evil did not have true existence;

only what comes from God's hand has permanent, genuine existence—evil lives only as a parasite on the good. Thus, God had no part in either creating or willing the existence of evil [and, by extension, hell]. Gregory, too, believed in the purification process inherent in punishment; he argued that once the evil was burned off, the individual would be left with a purely good will, and would, then, freely choose to be with God. Over time, everyone who needed it would go through this process, and thus hell would cease to exist.

Another line of argumentation for the ultimate demise of hell comes not from God's lordship, but rather from God's love. Romans 8:38–39 reads, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, or anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Many theologians do not interpret the "anything else in all creation" as including hell or Satan, or both, but again, from what Scripture tells us about who God is in Jesus Christ, there does seem to be warrant for at least considering the possibility that Paul did, in fact, mean to be genuinely all-inclusive. Read this way, this passage (and others like it), points to the reality that separation from God is never permanent; because God is eternal, and because it is in God's nature to reach out to humanity, so also is God's hand eternally extended in love and grace. Continually and everlastingly God reaches out across every gap that would separate humanity from God; ultimately, God's loving desire for all creation will be accomplished.

One final line of argumentation for this position is based on a particular theological analysis of Christ's descent into hell. This event was not for one moment only; rather, it has eternal and everlasting significance. It is a key part of the crucifixion/resurrection event that forever defines God's relationship with humanity and the world. While certainly not everyone has interpreted the "harrowing of hell" as comprehensive—perhaps it is meant only to point to those Dante put in Limbo, the righteous patriarchs, matriarchs, and prophets from the Old Testament, for example—certainly it is possible to see this act of love by Jesus Christ as filling the most god-forsaken place one could ever imagine or inhabit, thereby destroying it forever. After all, what is hell except the complete and utter absence of God? If Christ has gone even there, to the deepest pit of existence, what of "hell" is left?

Let me close this section with a quote from Hans Küng, who in his analysis of purgatory and hell, returns in many ways to the arguments of the church fathers mentioned above. In *Eternal Life?* he writes, "But however the scriptural texts are interpreted in detail, the 'eternity' of the punishment of hell may never be regarded as absolute. It remains subject to God, to his will and his grace. And individual texts suggest—in contrast to others—a reconciliation of all, an act of universal mercy."[20] In both Scripture and the tradition we see variations of this theme over and over: while God is eternal, hell is not; somehow, in some way, God's gracious will and God's love for creation will have the last and final word.

Heaven Is Eternal

The permanence of heaven is hardly ever questioned and, thus, needs only a few sentences of elaboration. Both Scripture and Christian tradition have consistently witnessed to the fact that while human life here is marked with suffering, sin, impermanence, and loss, it will not always be that way. God has prepared a future for us where we will be restored, and our reconciliation with God will be perfect and permanent. There will be no more crying, no more death, no more mourning; God will dwell eternally with God's people in perfect peace. This is the meaning of the symbol "Alpha and Omega" used for Jesus Christ—he was there at the beginning of creation and will be there at its consummation; when he comes again in glory he will reign eternally without end. This also is the meaning of the symbol in Isaiah of the lion lying down with the lamb. In the kingdom of heaven, there will be no more predation and no more enemies; all will share in sisterly love and friendship.

This reality is also witnessed to in the Christian sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. In baptism, Christians die a death like Christ in order to share in his resurrection and eternal life. In communion, Christians experience a "foretaste of the feast to come," a small appetizer to the great meal that awaits at the heavenly banqueting table. Thus, sometimes in the church, the language of one's "heavenly birthday" is used at a funeral, to indicate that the day of one's mortal death on earth is also the first day of her eternal life in heaven. When it is said that one has "joined the church triumphant," this language, too, points to this same reality.

One of the main functions of the doctrine of eschatology, then, is to elaborate a Christian vision for the end time that is grounded in God's great love and mercy for the world, and proleptically glimpsed in the

20 Ibid., 140.

life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In this vision, Christians see the culmination of God's act of creation; in Jesus Christ, we get to jump ahead and read the last few pages of the book so we know how it all turns out. In *God as Trinity*, Peters writes, "The Christian notion of eschatology points to a future event initiated by God that will not simply put an end to temporal history; it will unify it and fulfill it. The theological vision seems to warrant a principle of cosmic holism."[21]

In light of this principle of holism, then, heaven promises the permanent righting of all wrongs, the permanent uniting of all that is divided, and the permanent healing of all that is broken; creation will be perfected and live eternally in perfect harmony with God. Thus, heaven is a symbol of cosmic redemption, and in some ways, encompasses the whole of the Christian message in its imagery. For this reason, Wolfhart Pannenberg can write, "eschatology is not just the subject of a single chapter in dogmatics; it determines the perspective of Christian doctrine as a whole."[22] This holistic vision of the coming of God's final, perfect kingdom, in which the glory of God fills creation, and every eye is dried, every heart mended, is the eschatological promise foreshadowed in Jesus Christ, and hell has no part in it.

Conclusion

I recognize that some, if not many, will disagree with me at many points in the above argument. The existence and nature of hell has been heatedly debated (no pun intended) for thousands of years, and that debate certainly shows no sign of cooling down. However, I would like to give the final word in this chapter to Hans Urs von Balthasar who writes that it is, in the end, impossible to state definitively whether or not all people will be reconciled to God and hell finally will be abolished. It is only God who judges, and only God who knows.

Nonetheless, von Balthasar argues that Christians should not be indifferent about this matter, and that it is actually incumbent upon us to desire a certain outcome. He writes, "But love *hopes all things* (1 Corinthians 13:7). It cannot do otherwise than to hope for the reconciliation of all men [sic] in Christ. Such unlimited hope is, from the Christian standpoint,

21 Ted Peters, *God as Trinity* (Louisville: Westminister/John Knox Press, 1993), 173.

22 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology, vol. 3*, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, trans. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 531.

not only permitted, but *commanded.*"[23] He goes on to quote Catherine of Sienna, who wrote, "How could I ever reconcile myself, Lord, to the prospect that a single one of those whom, like me, you have created in your image and likeness should become lost and slip from your hands? No, in absolutely no case do I want to see a single one of my brethren [sic] meet with ruin, not a single one of those, who, through their like birth, are one with me by nature and by grace. I want them all to be wrested from the grasp of the ancient enemy, so that they all become yours to the honor and great glorification of your name."[24]

Maybe hell will be abolished, and maybe it will not. Until we experience that final reality for ourselves, only God knows for sure. However, and this is no small thing, in the meantime, can we not hope and pray that it is so? Would it not be a cause for rejoicing if it were true? And, if for whatever reason we cannot or will not hope and pray for such a thing, I am afraid we are already perilously close to the edge of the pit, and in grave danger of toppling in ourselves.

23 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope 'That All Men Be Saved'?* David Kipp, trans. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 213. Author's emphasis.

24 Ibid., 214–15.