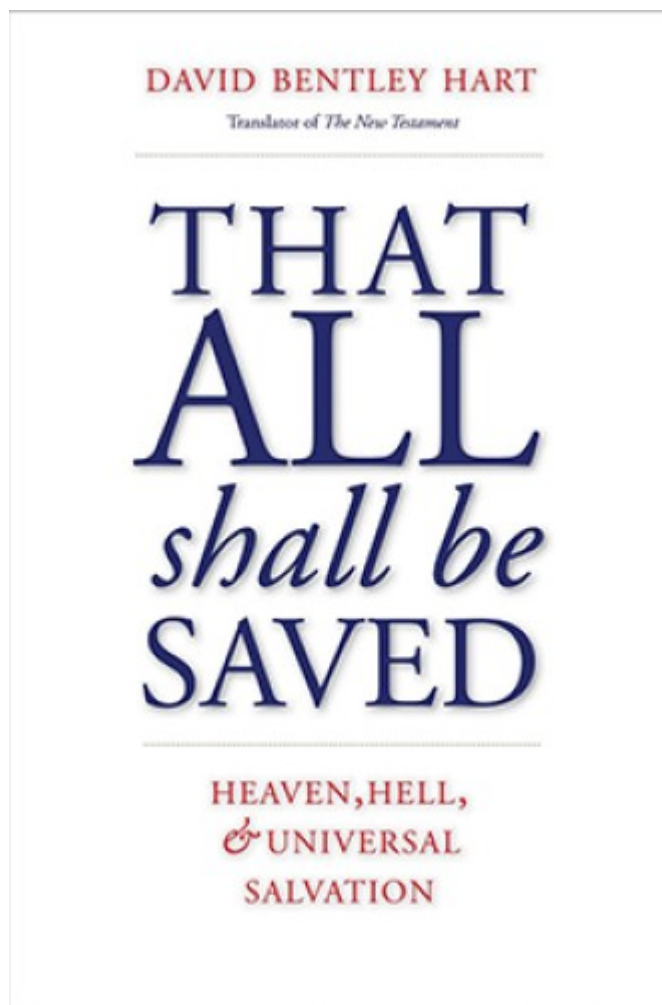


David Bentley Hart's polemic against the alleged doctrine of eternal hell

Hart thunders like Amos against cruel, incoherent religion.

by [Jason Micheli](#) in the [December 18, 2019](#) issue

In Review



That All Shall Be Saved

Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation

By David Bentley Hart
Yale University Press

Some years ago, I co-officiated at a burial in Arlington National Cemetery along with a megachurch pastor who was famous for his pithy radio spots aired in the Washington, D.C., area. A fundamentalist member of the immediate family had insisted on the participation of a pastor “from a Bible-believing church.” When parts for the brief liturgy were doled out, this pastor told me, “I’ll just say a few words.”

The deceased man had died too early and far too slowly of cancer. After I prayed and read from the First Letter of Peter about the promise of an imperishable inheritance, my co-officiant stepped to the head of the casket and, after acknowledging the deceased man’s bravery and accomplishments, informed us that he had nonetheless “failed his most important mission.”

“He’s lost forever to us—and to God—because he never accepted Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and savior,” the pastor said. Then he invited all of us gathered by the grave to “treat this tragedy as God’s way of giving you an opportunity.”

I wondered whether the horror on the widow’s face was directed at the pastor or at the God of whom he spoke. Only later did it occur to me that nothing this pastor had said to us about God and eternity had been biblical. It had sounded Christianish, sure, but none of it came from the Bible he’d waved in the air. By contrast, the ancient liturgy I’d celebrated was really nothing more than a pastiche of promises straight out of scripture, beginning with the very last of Christ’s words of grace: “I died and behold I am alive forever more, and I hold the keys of hell and death.”

In his little book *The Doors of the Sea*, David Bentley Hart recalls reading an article in the *New York Times* shortly after the tsunami in South Asia in 2005. The article highlighted a Sri Lankan father, who, in spite of his frantic efforts, which included swimming in the roiling sea with his wife and mother-in-law on his back, was unable to prevent his wife or any of his four children from being swept to their deaths. The father recounted the names of his four children and then, overcome with grief, sobbed to the reporter that “my wife and children must have thought, ‘Father is here . . . he will save us’ but I couldn’t do it.”

Hart wonders: If you had the chance to speak to this father in the moment of his deepest grief, what should you say? Hart argues that only a moral cretin would have approached that father with abstract theological explanation: “Sir, your children’s

deaths are a part of God's eternal but mysterious counsels" or "Your children's deaths, tragic as they may seem, in the larger sense serve God's complex design for creation" or "It's all part of God's plan." Most of us, Hart says, would have the good sense and empathy not to talk like that to the father. Hart then takes his point to the next level: "And this should tell us something. For if we think it shamefully foolish and cruel to say such things in the moment when another's sorrow is most real and irresistibly painful, then we ought never to say them."

His point is as prophetic as it is pastoral. If we mustn't say such things to a father in grief, we ought never to say them about God. Indeed, if we are able to utter such things about God, it's a sure sign that scripture has been conscripted into the service of a dogmatic tradition and thus religion has corrupted our conscience.

Beating at the heart of *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* is this same righteous indignation. As readers of his previous work will anticipate, the book displays the diverse range of Hart's intellectual gifts. It is at once a theological argument, an exegetical examination, a patristic study, a metaphysical inquiry, and an astringent and often playful polemic against the alleged doctrine of eternal hell. But behind the turns of logic and philosophical jargon, *That All Shall Be Saved* is primarily the work of a stirred and unyielding conscience.

Hart insists that the transcendent God of absolute love and infinite goodness would not bring into existence a world in which one or more human beings might be condemned to everlasting misery and suffering. If this key claim is true, then it surely follows that "the God in whom the majority of Christians throughout history have professed belief appears to be evil (at least judging by the dreadful things they say about him)."

The elegance and erudition of Hart's sometimes overwrought prose can prove misleading. Whereas Flannery O'Connor employed bizarre characters and grotesque plot turns to shock her readers awake, Hart deploys syllogisms and writings of the church fathers to the same end. Readers who would place Hart nearer to Plato than, say, Amos have not grasped the pathos behind the writing. As much as the prophets, Hart thunders against the corrosive effects of Christianities rendered cruel through their incoherence. In doing so, he alerts readers to a simple but often forgotten truth: if the behavior or character of the deity you describe would elicit moral revulsion when attributed to any other creature, then the god in question is but a creature. It is not the Creator.

His theological arguments and scriptural exegesis aside, it really is that simple for Hart—just as it was, he argues, for more of the ancient Christians than their posterity has permitted us to remember. The Father is not less merciful than the Son enjoins his disciples to be, nor does the Spirit sow fruit in us that is absent in or incongruent with the Father’s own attributes. God is good, as we teach our children. And we can teach our children that God is good because our conception of the good is analogous to the God who is Goodness itself and who has been disclosed to us in the self-giving of Christ. As Gregory of Nyssa taught, “the Word and he from whom he is do not differ in their nature.”

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Because the fullness of God dwelt in the Word made flesh, our words—words like *good*, *love*, and *justice*—are not empty. And if they are empty and correspond to nothing ultimately true, then Hart is right to conclude that there is no meaningful distinction between perfect faith and perfect nihilism. When our theological language has been so emptied of true corollaries in God, and when terms like *justice* and *eternal punishment* are paired together, “the boundaries of the rational have been violated.”

The brevity of *That All Shall Be Saved* is itself a feature of Hart’s argument for universal reconciliation. For Hart, the argument against infernalist and annihilationist understandings of hell and for the salvation of all is straightforward. It’s a simple matter because the gospel is really quite uncomplicated.

For the evangelists, the epistle writers, and the earliest of the church fathers—who, unlike Augustine, could read the original language of the New Testament texts—the unambiguous story of salvation is that of “a relentless tale of rescue, conducted by a God who requires no tribute to win his forgiveness or love.” The good news proclaimed by the earliest church fathers was a story not of God rescuing us from himself but of God delivering us from death, the consequence of a broken creation. The gospel for the first Christians, who were best positioned by time, place, and language to understand it, was 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 captives free, recall his prodigal children, and restore a broken creation.”

At the beginning, Hart frames *That All Shall Be Saved* as a postscript to his recent translation of the New Testament (*The New Testament: A Translation*, 2017). Understanding the connection between the two is necessary for understanding his book, for Hart believes that once the accretions of interpretative bias are peeled away from the biblical texts, the all-ness of God's saving will and work is obvious. Hart is unequivocal in his argument and unsparing in his polemic because he insists that belief in eternal hell relies upon assumptions which are foreign impositions—born of bad translations of the biblical texts—upon the original glad tidings of the church.

Hart's rhetoric is unbending because belief in the infinite torment of a finite soul, or even the permanent loss of that soul through annihilation, is only possible once you've confused the kerygma which inaugurated the church. None of the earliest expositors of the faith, Hart points out, incorporated into the gospel "the discordant claim that innocent blood had to be spilled to assuage God's indignation." Instead the God who is the creator of all is determined to be the savior of all. Death, not sin, is his enemy, and the aim of his incursion in Christ is not the appeasement of his wrath but the healing of all that he had formerly declared very good.

But what about the verses about "the gnashing of teeth" and about the sheep being separated from the goats? Hart anticipates the question, playfully noting that "if Paul really believed that the alternative to life in Christ is eternal torment, it seems fairly careless of him to have omitted any mention of the fact," and that Jesus "in the gospels simply makes no obvious claim about a place or state of endless suffering."

These rejoinders come between Hart's painstaking excursus, verse by verse, through the Greek of the texts in question. Along the way, Hart notes how the term *hell* itself is not present in any of the scriptural texts; it's an Anglo-Saxon word that translators attach to the specific, geographic, time-bound places used in the texts. In those few texts, Hart also notes, it's always deployed in passages that are narrative, pictorial, and hyperbolic and thus meant to be received as metaphor. In contrast, whenever the New Testament speaks of the universality of God's salvation in Christ (47 times by Hart's count) it does so in bald theological assertions (as in 1 Corinthians 15:22: "For just as in Adam all die, so also in the Anointed all will be given life") which can be taken in no other way but literally.

Hart's stroll through the relevant texts comes in the second of the four meditations that comprise *That All Shall Be Saved*. In the first meditation, "Who Is God? The Moral Meaning of *Creatio ex Nihilo*," Hart argues that the doctrine of creation is not merely an explanation of origins but is an eschatological claim, every bit as concerned with our whither as our whence. Precisely because that whence is sheer gift, the whither—if God is indeed good—can only lead to one end, himself. Belief in an eternal hell relies upon a literal, which is to say static, reading of Genesis. To preach fire and brimstone one must first conjugate the triune God's deliberation ("Let us make humankind in our image") into the past tense. Creation from nothing, as church fathers like Gregory of Nyssa saw clearly, does not refer to God's primordial act but to an eschatological one which witnesses to God's ultimate—as in teleological—relation to creation.

From the dreadful things some Christians say about him, God appears to be evil.

Creation from nothing isn't so much a statement about what God did or what God does but a statement about who God is. To say that God creates *ex nihilo* is to assert that God did not need creation. God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is already and eternally sufficient unto himself, a perfect community of fullness and love, without deficit or need and with no potentiality. Creation from nothing confesses our belief that the world is not nature but creation; that is, it is sheer gift because the Giver is without any lack. Creation is not necessary to God. It is not the terrain on which God needs to realize any part of an incomplete identity. Precisely because God did not need to create, because creation is sheer gift, God "needs" for creation to reveal his goodness. Morally speaking, God is now bound to creation's end because its beginning was not bound to him. In other words, for creation to be gift and the Giver to be good, then God "must" bring to fruition his purpose in creation.

"In the end of all things is their beginning," Hart argues, "and only from the perspective of the end can one know what they are, why they have been made, and who the God is who has called them forth." What Christians mean by the *imago Dei* is not immediate, Hart claims, borrowing from Gregory. Creation is, in fact, inseparable from what we call sanctification. God's "Let us . . ." does not refer to the events of day six of creation but names the plot of the entire salvation story. As Gregory saw it, we can only truly say that God created when all of creation finally has reached its consummation in the union of all things with the First Good. Belief in an eternal hell, in which some portion or multitude of humanity is forever lost, forsaken, or annihilated, contradicts belief in creation from nothing, for if God's

promised aim is that in the fullness of time all of humanity will bear his image, the promise can never be consummated without all of humanity included in it.

“What Is Judgment? A Reflection on Biblical Eschatology” is Hart’s second mediation, in which he recovers the hell he believes the first Christians and church fathers anticipated, a fire of God’s judgment that is neither retributive nor eternal but is, as Malachi prophesies, a refining fire. Purgation is not damnation. A finite creature could never justly merit an infinite punishment. The gospel is that God in his love and justice is “dragging all of sinful creation unto himself,” and this means that prior to the consummation of all things every sinful soul will come before “the healing assault of unyielding divine love upon obdurate souls, one that will save even those who in this life prove unworthy of heaven by burning away every last vestige of their wicked deeds.”

Hart turns to Gregory of Nyssa’s conception of the *imago Dei* in his third section, “What Is a Person? A Reflection on the Divine Image.” Quite simply, we are not persons in isolation. The person I am is literally inconceivable apart from the people in my life. We are who we’ve loved. From this incontrovertible axiom follows an equally incontestable assertion: hell for some would be hell for all. If who I am is constituted by the memories given to me by those I’ve loved, then what would it mean for me to be in heaven when they are in hell? Heaven would be a torment to me. Or if memory of them was blotted out from me to spare me the pain of knowing of their suffering, then the part of me they constituted would likewise be erased. To believe in an eternal hell for some is to believe that the host of heaven have been, in decisive ways, hollowed out, made shadows of their former selves, as C. S. Lewis famously sketched the souls in hell. Such a hell would require that the heavenly host be eternally lobotomized.

Finally, in “What Is Freedom? A Reflection on the Rational Will,” Hart directs his ire against the most popular and admittedly compassionate defense of eternal hell. Many fire and brimstone apologists appeal to human freedom and God’s respect for its dignity. God does not consign creatures to hell, the thinking goes, God merely consents to hell. God accepts the risk, inherent in any loving relationship, that some creatures will reject his love and choose hell over him.

Despite the tempered, rational appearance of this approach, to Hart’s mind it is perhaps the worst argument of all in favor of an eternal hell. Rather than esteeming our creaturely freedom or God’s respect for it, the argument sacralizes the very

condition from which we're redeemed by Christ: bondage to sin and death. The fatal deficiency in the free will defense of the fire and brimstone folks, Hart argues, is that it employs an understanding of freedom that is incoherent to a properly tuned Christian ear.

The breadth of the Christian tradition would not recognize such a construal of the word *freedom*. For the church fathers, indeed for St. Paul, our ability to choose something other than the good that is God is not a sign of freedom but of a lack of freedom. It's a symptom of our bondage to sin, not our liberty from it.

For Christians, freedom is not the absence of any constraint upon our will, and it is not the ability to choose whatever you will; it is to choose well. We are most free when our will more nearly corresponds to God's will. And just in case readers can't connect this point to the issue of perdition, Hart continues: "It makes no more sense to say that God allows creatures to damn themselves out of his love for them or his respect for their freedom than to say a father might reasonably allow his deranged child to thrust her face into a fire out of a tender regard for her moral autonomy."

A finite creature could never justly merit an infinite measure of punishment.

If it's true that we can choose hell rather than God, and forever so, then for those who do, Christ is not their redeemer. And if Christ is not their redeemer, then he was not. And if he was not for them, then he was not for any of us, and the god who purportedly took flesh for the redemption of all captives is a liar and maybe a monster. In either case, he's neither good nor the Good.

During that burial at Arlington National Cemetery, to my shame I kept my mouth shut as the megachurch pastor speculated about the eternal torments that were now the deceased man's just reaping. I maintained a respectful silence. I was cowed by the prejudice that his was an acceptable, coherent rendition of Christianity's happy tidings. Though I suspect most do not actually believe in it (or else we too would be on street corners with bullhorns, trying to save souls), eternal hell remains the default doctrine among Christians, who believe that the Bible and the theology which emerges from it require them to believe it.

Having done something like 500 funerals, I know that most people's moral intuition tells them that, in the fullness of time, even the elder brother will join the father's feast for the prodigal. Most of the time this moral intuition gets expressed in sentimentality. Just yesterday I was told, "Mom now has her wings with glitter all

over them, soaring around with Dad.” We resort to kitsch to express what our gut tells us to be true because the church too often has been reticent to assert what scripture and tradition give them permission to profess.

Though at the beginning of the book Hart declares that he has no expectations of convincing readers, his is an argument that, frankly, I find irrefutable. But it will be sufficient to the church’s work and witness in the world if readers merely find Hart’s arguments plausible, and theologically and scripturally sound. If Hart can clear this meager bar, I’m confident that *That All Shall Be Saved* will send readers scurrying back not only to the Bible but to the ancient church fathers in the hopes of meeting Christians who unabashedly believed what they quietly confess. In the end, Hart’s book is a work of practical theology, equipping Christians to trust in the God of love in whom most—if only furtively—already believe.

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