

David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall be Saved: Heaven, Hell & Universal Salvation*. New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2019. (222 pp.) [ISBN 9780300246223]

Stanley S. Maclean

Daegu, Republic of Korea

The American Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart raises hell against hell in his book, *That All Shall be Saved: Heaven, Hell & Universal Salvation*, and makes a forceful—and even delightful—case for universalism, which is about the salvation of all, including those who consciously reject the Gospel of Christ. Many Christians are open to the possibility of universal salvation, but Hart sees it not as a possibility but as a given. “Without the least hesitation and qualification,” he declares that the “universalist understanding” of the Gospel is the “only one possible” (p. 3).

From whence comes this confidence? His own recent translation of the New Testament, which is meant to be a companion to this book, and the teachings of certain Greek Fathers, Origen, Isaac of Nineveh, and Gregory of Nyssa, who taught an *apokatastasis* (restoration) of all things. He makes his case under “Four Meditations” on this theme. The first is “The Moral Meaning of *Creatio ex Nihilo*.” The notion of universal salvation is pregnant in the meaning of God’s creation. “If God is the good creator of all, he must also be the savior of all, without fail, who brings to himself all he has made” (p. 91). The term “good” is loaded for Hart. If anything God makes can be lost eternally, God cannot be called good without qualification. For this reason, “the moral destiny of creation and the moral nature of God are absolutely inseparable” (p. 69). The clue to the End is in the Beginning, and only from the end of things can we understand the purpose of creation and the God of creation. “Protology and eschatology are a single science, a single revelation disclosed in the God-man” (p. 68).

Biblical eschatology is examined in the “Second Meditation.” Christians believe of course that the doctrine of eternal damnation for the reprobate is biblical, but Hart demurs. He is correct to point out that the traditional Christian concept of hell is an inflation of the meaning of the Greek New Testament terms underlying the concept. “Gehenna” is the closest in meaning to hell, but he thinks this term stands not for a place of eternal punishment but for either annihilation or purification, and he is disposed toward the latter. “The texts of the gospels simply make no obvious claim about a place or state of endless suffering” (p. 118). And he finds no such idea in Paul’s writings

The gist of the “Third Meditation,” which is on the “Divine Image” in us, is that salvation is necessarily corporate. This is certainly true, although Western individualism has obscured this fact. Israel represented the circumscription of this corporate salvation, while the church represents its openness to all. Membership in the church though is characterized by faith in Jesus Christ, but Hart insists that if one person is saved through Christ then all persons have to be saved, even those without faith. The anthropological reason is that humankind is a worldwide web of interpersonal relations, so that the exclusion of even one person from salvation would have a detrimental effect on people in heaven, detracting from their bliss. “If anyone is in hell, I too am partly in hell” (p. 157). The more fundamental reason is Christological. Each

person “is a body within the body of humanity, which exists in its proper nature as the body of Christ” (p. 153). Therefore, “all persons must be saved, or none can be” (p. 155).

The best-known argument against universalism is the one from free will, and Hart reckons with it in his final meditation. C.S. Lewis summed up this argument in *The Great Divorce*: “there are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’” In other words, God wants us, and has enabled us, to love him *freely*, but this entails that we have the option of not loving him as well. Hell would be our choice, not God’s choice for us. Hart, though, finds this argument fatally flawed. No rational will, he contends, with a clear knowledge of God would reject God, because God represents the *summum bonum* (the highest good), and everyone naturally is seeking the good even if they are sinning against God. People can only reject God out of ignorance or mental derangement, but this means God cannot justly send people to “hell” for rejecting him. To be truly free requires “true knowledge and true sanity of mind.” (p. 177).

Universalism has always been a minority view within the Church, yet Hart is certain that this is the New Testament view. This begs the question, “what went wrong?” Not surprisingly, Hart points the finger at Augustine, since much of Catholic and Protestant theology can be traced to him or through him. Starting with the Doctor of Grace, “grim distortions of the gospel” began to take shape, he writes, partly because he was dependent on a poor Latin translation of the Bible (p. 133). This argument would be persuasive, if universalism were a dogma in the Eastern Church, which was shaped by the Greek Fathers, and not Augustine. But it is not. The doctrine of *apokatastasis* was condemned at the Fifth Ecumenical Council in A.D.553. The fundamental flaw with *apokatastasis* back then was that this eschatology (the end of things) was predicated on protology (the origin of things). And this is the fundamental flaw in Hart’s treatise. Creation, as a consequence, is drained of contingency and forced to yield to a metaphysical determinism. Indeed, in Hart’s book creation is docetic—not clearly distinct from the Creator, not clearly *ex nihilo*. “Between the creation *ex nihilo* and that of emanation,” he writes, “there really is no metaphysical difference worth noting” (p. 71).

*That All Shall be Saved* is a persuasive and challenging theological treatise, but one must be careful not to be seduced by the main argument within. One should be agnostic, not dogmatic, about the destiny of all free, rational creatures; and instead yearn, with God, for the salvation of all on the ground of Christ’s atonement for the sins of all.