

Did God Create Hell?

What follows is a quotation from a book by the late French theologian, Jacques Ellul, *What I Believe* (Eerdmans, 1989, pp.188-192).

I am taking up here a basic theme that I have dealt with elsewhere but which is so essential that I have no hesitation in repeating myself. It is the recognition that all people from the beginning of time are saved by God in Jesus Christ, that they have all been recipients of his grace no matter what they have done.

This is a scandalous proposition. It shocks our spontaneous sense of justice. The guilty ought to be punished. How can Hitler and Stalin be among the saved? The just ought to be recognized as such and the wicked condemned. But in my view this is purely human logic which simply shows that there is no understanding of salvation by grace or of the meaning of the death of Jesus Christ. The proposition also runs counter to the almost unanimous view of theology. Some early theologians proclaimed universal salvation but almost all the rest finally rejected it. Great debates have taken place about foreknowledge and predestination, but in all of them it has been taken for granted that reprobation is normal.

A third and the most serious objection to the thesis is posed by the biblical texts themselves. Many of these talk about condemnation, hell, banishment into outer darkness, and the punishment of robbers, fornicators, idolaters, etc. As we proceed we must overcome these obstacles and examine the theological reasons which lead me to believe in universal salvation, the texts that seem to be against it, and a possible solution.

But I want to stress that I am speaking about belief in universal salvation. This is for me a matter of faith. I am not making a dogma or a principle of it. I can say only what I believe, not pretending to teach it doctrinally as the truth.

1. God Is love

My first simple thesis is that if God is God, the Almighty, the Creator of all things, the Omnipresent, then we can think of no place or being whatever outside him. If there were a place outside him, God would not be all in all, the Creator of all things. How can we think of him creating a place or being where he is not present? What, then, about hell? Either it is in God, in which case he is not universally good, or it is outside him, hell having often been defined as the place where God is not. But the latter is completely unthinkable.

One might simply say that hell is merely nothingness. The damned are those who are annihilated. But there is a difficulty here too. Nothingness does not exist in the Bible. It is a philosophical and mathematical concept. We can represent it only by a mathematical sign. God did not create *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. Genesis 1:2 speaks of *tohu wabohu* ("desert and wasteland" RSV "formless and void") or of *tehom* ("the deep"). This is not nothing.

Furthermore, the closest thing to nothingness seems to be death. But the Bible speaks about enemies, that is, the great serpent, death, and the abyss, which are aggressors against God's creation and are seeking to destroy it. These are enemies against which God protects his creation. He cannot allow that which he has created and called good to be destroyed, disorganized, swallowed up, and slain. This creation of God cannot revert to nothing. Death cannot issue in nothingness. This would be a negation of God himself, and this is why the first aspect seems to me to be decisive. Creation is under constant threat and is constantly upheld.

How could God himself surrender to nothingness and to the enemy that which he upholds in face and in spite of everything? How could he allow a power of destruction and annihilation in his creation? If he cannot withstand the force of nothingness, then we have to resort to dualism (a good God and a bad God in conflict and equal), to Zoroastrianism. Many are tempted to dualism today. But if God is unique, if he alone has life in himself, he cannot permit this threat to the object of his love.

But it is necessary that "the times be accomplished," the times when we are driven into a corner and have to serve either the impotence of the God of love or the power

of the forces of destruction and annihilation. We have to wait until humanity has completed its history and creation, and every possibility has been explored. This does not merely imply, however, that at the end of time the powers of destruction, death, the great serpent, Satan, the devil, will be annihilated, but much more. How can we talk about nothingness when we receive the revelation of this God who will be all in all? ***When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself also will be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be all in all*** (1 Cor. 15:28).

If God is, he is all in all. There is no more place for nothingness. The word is an empty one. For Christians it is just as empty as what it is supposed to denote. Philosophers speak in vain about something that they can only imagine or use as a building block, but which has no reality of any kind.

The second and equally essential factor is that after Jesus Christ we know that God is love. This is the central revelation. How can we conceive of him who is love ceasing to love one of his creatures? How can we think that God can cease to love the creation that he has made in his own image? This would be a contradiction in terms. God cannot cease to be love.

If we combine the two theses we see at once that nothing can exist outside God's love, for God is all in all. It is unthinkable that there should exist a place of suffering, of torment, of the domination of evil, of beings that merely hate since their only function is to torture. It is astounding that Christian theology should not have seen at a glance how impossible this idea is. Being love, God cannot send to hell the creation which he so loved that he gave his only Son for it. He cannot reject it because it is his creation. This would be to cut off himself.

A whole theological trend advances the convenient solution that God is love but also justice. He saves the elect to manifest his love and condemns the reprobate to manifest his justice. My immediate fear is that this solution does not even correspond to our idea of justice and that we are merely satisfying our desire that people we regard as terrible should be punished in the next world. This view is part of the mistaken theology which declares that the good are unhappy on earth but will be

happy in heaven, whereas the wicked are successful on earth but will be punished in the next world. Unbelievers have every reason to denounce this explanation as a subterfuge designed to make people accept what happens on earth. The kingdom of God is not compensation for this world.

Another difficulty is that we are asked to see God with two faces as though he were a kind of Janus facing two ways. Such a God could not be the God of Jesus Christ, who has only one face. Crucial texts strongly condemn two-faced people who go two different ways. These are the ones that Jesus Christ calls hypocrites. If God is double-minded, there is duplicity in him. He is a hypocrite. We have to choose: He is either love or he is justice. He is not both. If he is the just judge, the pitiless Justiciar, he is not the God that Jesus Christ has taught us to love.

Furthermore, this conception is a pure and simple denial of Jesus Christ. For the doctrine is firm that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died and was willing to die for human sin to redeem us all: *I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself* (John 12:32), satisfying divine justice. All the evil done on earth from Adam's break with God undoubtedly has to be judged and punished. But all our teaching about Jesus is there to remind us that the wrath of God fell entirely on him, on God in the person of the Son. God directs his justice upon himself; he has taken upon himself the condemnation of our wickedness.

What would be the point, then, of a second condemnation of individuals?

Was the judgment passed on Jesus insufficient? Was the price that was paid—the punishment of the Son of God—too low to meet the demands of God's justice? This justice is satisfied in God and by God for us. From this point on, then, we know only the face of the love of God.

This love is not sentimental acquiescence. *It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God* (Heb. 10:31). God's love is demanding, "jealous," total, and indivisible. Love has a stern face, not a soft one. Nevertheless, it is love. And in any case this love excludes double predestination, some to salvation and others to perdition. It is inconceivable that the God of Jesus Christ, who gives himself in his Son to save us, should have created some people ordained to evil and damnation.

There is indeed a predestination, but it can be only the one predestination to salvation. In and through Jesus Christ all people are predestined to be saved. Our free choice is ruled out in this regard. We have often said that God wants free people. He undoubtedly does, except in relation to this last and definitive decision. We are not free to decide and choose to be damned. To say that God presents us with the good news of the gospel and then leaves the final issue to our free choice either to accept it and be saved or to reject it and be lost is foolish. To take this point of view is to make us arbiters of the situation. In this case it is we who finally decide our own salvation.

This view reverses a well-known thesis and would have it that God proposes and man disposes. Without question we all know of innumerable cases in which people reject revelation. Swarms are doing so today. But have they any real knowledge of revelation? If I look at countless presentations of the Word of God by the churches, I can say that the churches have presented many ideas and commandments that have nothing whatever to do with God's revelation. Rejecting these things, human commandments, is not the same as rejecting the truth. And even if the declaration or proclamation of the gospel is faithful, it does not itself force a choice upon us.

If people are to recognize the truth, they must also have the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. These two things are indispensable, the faithful declaration of the gospel, the good news, by a human being and the inner witness in the hearer of the Holy Spirit, who conveys the assurance that it is the truth of God. The one does not suffice without the other. Thus when those who hear refuse our message, we can never say that they have chosen to disobey God.

The human and divine acts are one and the same only in the Word of Jesus. When he told his hearers not to be unbelieving but to believe, if they refused then they were rejected. In our case, however, we cannot say that there is an act of the Holy Spirit simultaneously with our proclamation. This may well be the point of the well-known text about the one sin that cannot be pardoned, the sin against the Holy Spirit (cf. Matt. 12:31-32). But we can never know whether anyone has committed it. However that may be, it is certain that being saved or lost does not depend on our own free decision.

I believe that all people are included in the grace of God. I believe that all the theologies that have made a large place for damnation and hell are unfaithful to a theology of grace. For if there is predestination to perdition, there is no salvation by grace. Salvation by grace is granted precisely to those who without grace would have been lost. Jesus did not come to seek the righteous and the saints, but sinners. He came to seek those who in strict justice ought to have been condemned.

A theology of grace implies universal salvation. What could grace mean if it were granted only to some sinners and not to others according to an arbitrary decree that is totally contrary to the nature of our God? If grace is granted according to the greater or lesser number of sins, it is no longer grace-it is just the opposite because of this accountancy. Paul is the very one who reminds us that the enormity of the sin is no obstacle to grace: ***Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more*** (Rom. 5:20).

This is the key statement. The greater the sin, the more God's love reveals itself to be far beyond any judgment or evaluation of ours. This grace covers all things. It is thus effectively universal.

I do not think that in regard to this grace we can make the Scholastic distinctions between prevenient grace, expectant grace, conditional grace, etc. Such adjectives weaken the thrust of the free grace of the absolute sovereign, and they result only from our great difficulty in believing that God has done everything.

But this means that nothing in his creation is excluded or lost.