

## Permit Me to Hope: The Deconstruction of an Eternal Torment with Love

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“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (NIV Holy Bible, Genesis 1:1). These are the first words of the Bible, the beginning of the Christian narrative. The words between the Genesis narrative and John’s Revelation form the foundation for the Christian religion. From these words, Christians over the centuries constructed the doctrines that make up the belief system of the faith. These doctrines include commands for daily life, the inner workings of the church, and conceptualizations about the character of God.

Though some of the most fundamental, the doctrines concerning the afterlife are highly contested among Christians, and especially so in recent years. For most Christians, it is believed that there are two options, heaven or hell. Each is an “essentially deserved compensation for the kind of earthly lives we live” (Talbot). Traditionally, heaven is the reward for those who believe in Jesus Christ, the son of God, and hell is a place of eternal punishment for traditionally defined non-believers. In his sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, Jonathan Edwards described hell as “a great Furnace of Wrath, a wide and bottomless Pit, full of the Fire of Wrath, that [those damned] are held over in the Hand of that God, whose Wrath is provoked and incensed [...] [Sinners] hang by a slender Thread, with the Flames of divine Wrath flashing about it, and ready every Moment to singe it, and burn it asunder; [there is] nothing that [sinners] can do, to induce God to spare [them] one Moment” (Edwards). Many Christians believe in the same hell as Edwards while simultaneously believing that “God is love” (NIV Holy Bible, 1 John 4: 8). Through the doctrines of widely acclaimed theologians, various verses in the Bible, and definitions of mercy and forgiveness, it can be presumed that the eternal damnation to hell, of traditionally defined non-Christians, is in contradiction with the notion of a loving God.

Many Christians argue that there are passages in the Bible that affirm the idea of a hell of fire, brimstone, and “eternal conscious torment” (Moberly). The original idea of hell developed in Israel during the Hellenistic Age, and it was deeply influenced by the Greek’s Hades and the Jewish idea of Sheol. However, the traditional view of hell, the fire and brimstone version, truly reared its head and around the time of Dante’s *Inferno*, who was also deeply influenced by the ancient Greek philosophers (Stanford). The existence of such a place is missing from the texts and conversations of the early church. Many church fathers like Gregory of Nyssa and Clement of Alexandria, who helped establish the Christian church, did not believe in the eternal suffering of sinners in hell (Donald). Similar to the “grey town” of C.S. Lewis’ *The Great Divorce*, the early church fathers imagined hell as dull, lonely, and for many, it served as a purgatory. As Lewis did, they viewed hell as a temporary place where souls dwell until they shed their sins and eventually migrate to heaven (Lewis).

While the fire and brimstone version of hell had existed since the fifth century, it was when the Roman Catholic Church and the government decided to hold hands during the Renaissance, that the doctrine of hell became a key part of the Christian religion. The Church and the government joined forces as a way to gain power over citizens. When the government

wanted people to behave a certain way, the church was easily able to influence their congregations. The Church started telling people that the only way to escape from the flames of hell was by doing acts of penance. Penance included good deeds like giving money to the poor, confessing their sins, or, the Church's favorite, buying indulgences. Indulgences were a sum of money paid to the church in exchange for a "reserved" spot in heaven; it was a way to get out of having to do acts of penance (Bauer). As the Church spread the idea of indulgences, the belief that there was a place in the afterlife of eternal pain and suffering for non-believers began to grow. With the rise of indulgences, came the belief that hell was a place of eternal pain and suffering from God. While indulgences eventually faded, perceptions of hell as eternal anguish did not.

When summarizing the traditional view of hell, widely renowned author, pastor, and theologian, Rob Bell proposes a question, "God is loving and kind and full of grace and mercy - unless there isn't confession and repentance and salvation in this lifetime, at which point God punishes forever. That's the Christian story, right?" (Bell 64). This question is so important and so striking because it really forces Christians to see the flaws of the doctrine of hell; it shows how contradicting a hell of eternal punishment can be *enforced* by a loving God. Hell is mentioned a grand total of twenty times throughout the entire narrative of the Bible, but words like love, forgiveness, and mercy are used nearly a thousand times. However, Christians seem more obsessed with those who have not confessed going to hell and being punished eternally, than loving their neighbors and dealing "with the hells on earth right now" (Bell 79).

Many Christians use verses concerning hell to limit how God can love and who he loves. The doctrine of hell is a pillar in the Christian religion, but it overshadows verses concerning the extension of God's love in the afterlife.

Throughout the Bible, God's plan to save all people, regardless of their religious affiliation, is made known through many verses. Most Christians believe that the only way to make it into heaven is to become a Christians; in order to go to heaven, people must "trust God, accept Jesus, confess, repent" (Bell 64). Despite this core belief, there are numerous verses in the Bible, including the following, which suggest an inclusive plan for the after life.

Within the first few chapters of the Bible, God gives Abraham the great prophecy, "And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (NIV Holy Bible, Genesis 12: 3). Moments after the birth of Jesus, an angel appears to the shepherds and says, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people" (NIV Holy Bible, Luke 2:10). In the following chapter of Luke, John the Baptist preaches from a text in Isaiah which states, "And all people will see God's salvation" (NIV Holy Bible, Luke 3:6). When Jesus predicts his own death in the Gospel of John, He says, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (NIV Holy Bible, John 12:32). In the book of Ephesians, it is written, "With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ" (NIV Holy Bible, Ephesians 1:8-10). In his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote, "Consequently, just as one trespass

resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people” (NIV Holy Bible, Romans 5:18). Repeatedly, Jesus and His followers said every person will receive God’s salvation.

There is actually a verse that blatantly says Jesus is the savior for all. This verse comes from John’s letter to the Church in Ephesus, “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (NIV Holy Bible, 1 John 2: 1-2). Despite this verse, and all the other verses that refer to *all* people, the Church has decided that an afterlife of eternal torment in hell is the only option for those who did not profess their loyalty to the Christian God.

Many people discredit these verses saying that “all” does not mean “all;” they would say that “all” means “the elect.” They would say that these verses only apply to a very select few, God’s chosen people. The problem with this belief is it allows Christians to be very selective and inconsistent in their interpretations. For example, in passages like Genesis 3:20, “Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living,” and Romans 3:23, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” those who hold to eternal torment are willing to attribute the actual meaning; they would say that “all” means “all.” However, in texts like 1 Timothy 4:10, “That is why we labor and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe,” and Romans 3:24, “and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus,” it seems they want to project a different meaning. In these verses, they would say that all only refers to the “elect;” they would believe that the word “all” is simply an exaggeration in this context. It would be similar to saying “all of the people are at the mall;” when one says that, they don’t mean “all,” they just mean a lot. This inconsistency simply shows bias, because the text never alludes to those beliefs of “all”. This is a bias toward eternal torture; it would seem that eternal torture must be part of the equation of God’s goodness. However, if Christians allow the word to simply mean “all,” then we are only left with one of two conclusions. Either, the original authors were wrong, or “all” has to mean what it says. If one is to hold to the eternal torment of many, then we have to do more than project a bias on these words if we are to hold to any sort of intellectual integrity.

Throughout the Bible, readers are told that God is merciful and forgiving. Yet, most Christians believe that God will eternally punish those who don’t claim allegiance to Him. Some have even claimed that God wants people to go to hell to be punished. Today, Christians are only “one third (31%) of Earth’s 7.3 billion people” (Hackett). Which means, according to this doctrine, if the world ended today, about 5,037,000,000 people would end up in hell. That’s not including the billions of people before us.

If the traditional doctrine of hell were true, then God would lose billions of people, souls, His children, to eternal torment. While 31% of God’s creation will enter into heaven, the other five billion will scream in pain for eternity. The other five billion will burn because they sinned for a mere eighty years on earth. Eighty isn’t even a fraction of eternity; humans can’t fully

compute or understand how long eternity is. Every Christian identifies their God as a merciful and just, and the God of the traditional doctrine of hell is incongruent with the character of the Christian God.

Eternal punishment of this sort is the opposite of the mercy that is characteristic of a loving and forgiving God. By Jesus' definition, that isn't mercy at all. Matthew 5 consists of Jesus' teachings on murder, adultery, divorce, the Beatitudes, and, along with these, a passage named "Eye for an Eye." In this passage, Jesus expressed how Christians are expected to forgive others. He said, "If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles" (NIV Holy Bible, Matthew 5:39-40). When somebody wrongs us, we are supposed to immediately forgive. God's mercy is so much greater than anyone's on earth, and the purpose, for that mercy, is to redeem all from their mistakes. God can call himself so loving because he loves his creation so much that He won't let a problem of allegiance get between Him and His children.

C.S. Lewis best depicts this with a conversation between the main character of his book *The Last Battle*, Emeth, and the God-like character, Aslan. After Emeth confesses to Aslan that he served Tash, the Satan of the story, Aslan replies, "Child, all the service thou hast done to Tash, I account as service done to me [...] For I and he are of such different kinds that no service which is vile can be done to me, and none which is not vile can be done to him. Therefore if any man swear by Tash and keep his oath for the oath's sake, it is by me that he has truly sworn, though he know it not, and it is I who reward him" (Lewis 205). According to Lewis, God does not allow the human-construct of religion to get in the way of Him loving His children.

From Genesis to Revelations, the idea that Jesus will conquer Satan is interwoven into every verse. In verses like Genesis 3:15, "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel," and Romans 16:20, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you," Christians are told that God is going to crush the skull of the serpent. God is supposed to win this spiritual battle that was initiated in the Garden, and one day, Satan, will be no more, and all sin will be gone. If there is to be a day where all evil and everything under Satan's domain is destroyed, then it is impossible for hell to last eternally. Whether Christians believe that the nature of hell is that of C.S. Lewis' "grey town" or Dante's *Inferno*, if we are to believe that God will win and annihilate the serpent, then an eternal hell can never exist.

The only plausible way to explain how God can get His way, while also being as merciful and forgiving as He claims to be, is through the doctrine of inclusivism. The doctrine of inclusivism states that it is only through Jesus Christ and the Christian God that there is salvation; however, salvation is not "restricted to only those who hear the gospel and consciously put their faith in Christ" (Wax). The majority of Christians restrict salvation to those who have heard the Word, consciously worship Jesus, and repent of their sins. Inclusivism allows people of every faith to be saved; whereas, traditionally, Christians believe only Christians will be saved from hell. The doctrines agree on the "how," but these doctrines differentiate on the "who."

C.S. Lewis is one of the key figures of this doctrine of inclusivism. Besides the conversation between Emeth and Aslan, Lewis reveals his beliefs on the afterlife in many of his books. *The Great Divorce* revealed how he struggled with the traditional view of hell, and it revitalized the idea of a post-mortem conversion. Inclusivists believe in a post-mortem salvation. A post-mortem salvation is the idea that people who want to be saved will have the opportunity. In other words, God's love is not limited by our time and space.

A quote from *Mere Christianity* summarizes Lewis' Inclusivist beliefs on the afterlife, "There are people in other religions who are being led by God's secret influence to concentrate on those parts of their religion which are in agreement with Christianity, and who thus belong to Christ without knowing it" (Lewis 65). Unlike the traditional doctrine of hell, Inclusivism is a chance for people to be saved through Jesus based on the life they lived, regardless if they followed the name of Jesus.

The doctrine of inclusivism answers many questions in the Christian religion. It ceases the need for a debate on predestination and free will; it allows Christians to prioritize loving their neighbor over converting them; it answers the question, "What about those who never heard the Gospel?" If Christians focused on God's love, and then projected God's love through themselves, then Christians would actually be accomplishing what God wanted for the world. Not only does the doctrine of inclusivity settle the problem of a merciful God eternally punishing people, but it also allows Christians to love people as Jesus called them to do.

There are several arguments that counter the proposals of this paper; for instance, the overarching questions "Is there a hell at all?" Yes, there absolutely is a hell. After all, Jesus did mention a place separate from God. However, it is not the existence of hell that is being interrogated; it's the nature of hell that is being challenged. The traditional doctrine of hell gives "a depiction of endless tormenting punishment by God" (Bowles 23). A better image of hell could be depicted by Dante's *Purgatory*. People on Mount Purgatory are working through and struggling with the sins they committed on earth. In typical Dante style, each sin and each action had a symbolic meaning. For example, sinners who were prideful on earth were forced to carry heavy rocks on their shoulders; this forced the sinners to hold their heads low. The point is the sinners have to be purged of their sins before they can be purified and, thus, enter the kingdom of heaven.

Another great example of what hell could be like is in C.S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce*. In this book, hell is referred to as the "grey town." The grey town is described as a dismal place. It is a place where no one gets along; citizens are unhappy, self-centered, and live in a state of oblivion. The narrator then travels to a place outside of the grey town by taking a "vehicle, blazing with golden light, heraldically coloured" (Lewis 3). He isn't in heaven quite yet; this in-between place serves as an area where souls can confess their sins and work their way to heaven. However, many of the passengers of the bus refuse to repent and return to the grey town.

In both of these books, souls of people who have already died are given another chance to acknowledge the wrong they have committed and turn to Christ. Neither Lewis or Dante wrote these books intending people to take these as concrete truths. However, they used these stories as

a way to communicate their ideas on the afterlife. For those who do not initially make it to heaven, hell is supposed to serve as a purgatory, not as eternal torment.

As it happens in *The Great Divorce*, there are souls who do not want to be in the presence of the Lord; this is where the idea of conditional immortality comes in. The idea behind conditional immortality can be summarized as so, “Man in himself is mortal and doomed to die” (Genesis 3:19). God alone is immortal (1 Timothy 6:16), yet he is able to give immortality to mortal beings by raising them from death (1 Corinthians 15: 51-54). This gift is given in Christ (2 Timothy 1:10). Insofar as anyone makes a genuine response to God through Christ, then that person receives the gift (2 Corinthians 5:17). The person who makes no response to God and who will not lose his life so as to find it, will have no life beyond that on this earth. He will be excluded from the joy of heaven for he will have ceased to exist” (Moberly 64). The doctrines of inclusivism and conditional immortality truly allow all people to interact with the love of God firsthand, and they, themselves, get to decide whether they want to be a part of that love or not. So yes, there is a hell, but it is not the hell of the traditional doctrine.

Another question that counters the proposals of this paper: “Why should anyone focus on God’s love? If God will forgive all of my sins, why shouldn’t I revel in debauchery?” All Christians, traditionalists or inclusivists, believe that if we confess our sins, God will forgive us, and we will go to heaven. As the person who asked me is a Christian, my follow up question to the one proposed is “What’s stopping you now? You already believe God will forgive all your sins.” What’s stopping this person is they already know the love of God and how great it is. If they were to turn away from God now, that would imply that they either did not truly know the love of God or they would become one of the souls who would cease to exist after death.

Along with this, traditionalists and inclusivists agree that there is a major difference between deliberately turning away from God and non-believers living away from God’s love. A good response to this question would be, “If you turn away from God’s love, that must mean you don’t want it, and if you don’t want it, then you don’t have to have it.”

The afterlife is a highly disputed topic of the Christian faith. Like most controversial topics, both sides have viable arguments. For every point an inclusivist will make, a traditionalist will be able to counteract, and the reverse is also true. A phrase commonly said among the inclusivism community is “permit me to hope.” It is through faith that Christians believe Jesus has come to die for our sin; it is through that same faith that inclusivists hope that all people will enter into the presence of God. It is through that same faith that inclusivists hope that billions will not be punished eternally. It is through that same faith that inclusivists hope that Jesus came and saved all. Inclusivists should not be labeled as heathens, unorthodox, or heretics, because they hope that the same grace God granted on them, God will grant to others. Therefore, as John closed Revelations, may “the grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all” (NIV Holy Bible, Revelations 22:21).

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