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An Eschatology of Hope

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Looking at these two passages from the New Testament, one wonders how—if at all—they can be reconciled. In Paul's letter to Timothy, we read that God "desires everyone to be saved," whereas in the Gospel of Matthew we hear the words of Jesus Himself condemning "those at his left" to eternal suffering in Hell. These passages are only a selection of readings from the New Testament which describe the contrasting destinies of humankind; they pose the question as to whether "all," will be saved, or only "some." This is indeed a problem; one which countless Christians have articulated—and attempted to solve—throughout Christianity's history. In far more recent years, Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar has surveyed much of the intellectual history of the Church and has suggested that the judgment of whether "some" or "all" are saved is entirely beyond the reach of theological inquiry. Balthasar argues convincingly that—standing forever *under* God's judgment—we have no ability to predict, with certainty, the ultimate outcome of God's saving act in Jesus Christ. However, Balthasar contends that all Christians have a duty to *hope* for the salvation of all *humankind*, in the absence of such certain knowledge. In order to defend Balthasar's conviction, I will first attempt to articulate the views of the two main opposing schools of thought: those who believe that all will be saved (whom I have dubbed the *Universalists*) and those who believe that only some will be saved (whom Balthasar named the *Infernalists*). I will then briefly encapsulate Balthasar's own Christology and Soteriology in order to illustrate how Balthasar reaches his own *via media* between these schools. Finally, I will argue that Balthasar's own take on the "some or all" question avoids many of the pitfalls of the other two positions, and ought to find a welcoming home in contemporary Christian thought."



Gregory A. Rupik

An Eschatology of Hope

Hans Urs von Balthasar's Answer to the "Some or All" Question

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

1 Timothy 2:1-4

"Then [the king] will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels...'"

Matthew 25:41

Looking at these two passages from the New Testament, one wonders how—if at all—they can be reconciled. In Paul's letter to Timothy, we read that God "desires everyone to be saved," whereas in the Gospel of Matthew we hear the words of Jesus Himself condemning "those at his left" to eternal suffering in Hell. These passages are only a selection of readings from the New Testament which describe the contrasting destinies of humankind; they pose the question as to whether "all," will be saved, or only "some." This is indeed a problem; one which countless Christians have articulated—and attempted to solve—throughout Christianity's history. In far more recent years, Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar has surveyed much of the intellectual history of the Church and has suggested that the judgment of whether "some" or "all" are saved is entirely beyond the reach of theological inquiry. Balthasar argues convincingly that—

standing forever *under* God's judgment—we have no ability to predict, with certainty, the ultimate outcome of God's saving act in Jesus Christ. However, Balthasar contends that all Christians have a duty to *hope* for the salvation of *all humankind*, in the absence of such certain knowledge. In order to defend Balthasar's conviction, I will first attempt to articulate the views of the two main opposing schools of thought: those who believe that all will be saved (whom I have dubbed the *Universalists*) and those who believe that only some will be saved (whom Balthasar named the *Infernalists*). I will then briefly encapsulate Balthasar's own Christology and Soteriology in order to illustrate how Balthasar reaches his own *via media* between these schools. Finally, I will argue that Balthasar's own take on the "some or all" question avoids many of the pitfalls of the other two positions, and ought to find a welcoming home in contemporary Christian thought.

New Testament passages like the verse of 1 Timothy quoted earlier can often lead theologians to postulate that, since God wills all to be saved, God will eventually bring all souls to Heaven through Jesus' redemptive work. This view, called *apokatastasis* (universal restoration or fulfillment),¹ can be held in a variety of degrees. For our purposes, the term *apokatastasis* will refer to God's restoration of all moral agents to Himself (including the fallen angels and Satan), and the term *universalism* will refer, more specifically, to God's restoration of all *human beings* to Himself. Early formulations of a theory of *apokatastasis* grew largely out of traditions steeped in Greek thought. Many of the Early Church Fathers, notably Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor, held to some notion of *apokatastasis*. In Greek thought, cyclical

¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope "That All Men Be Saved"?* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 225.

patterns of “eternal return” saturated the metaphysical tradition and the Greek understanding of the Cosmos.² When introduced into this system of thought, Jesus Christ, revealed as both the *Alpha* and the *Omega*, would ultimately bring everything in creation back to God. Espousing *apokatastasis* as official Church teaching, however, was condemned by emperor Justinian and an ecumenical synod at Constantinople,³ thus making discussion of this theory *as an eschatological possibility* much more difficult. Far later, thinkers such as Karl Barth would feel less “allegiance” to such decisions, and would arrive at positions very close to *apokatastasis*, but this is fundamentally due to changing models of soteriology. Those Christians who hold to the belief in a final *apokatastasis* or universal reconciliation generally attribute this to the radical nature of the love of God, revealed in Jesus Christ’s death, and to man’s inability to frustrate God’s Providential plan.

For others, New Testament passages such as Matthew’s final judgment announce an unavoidable reality: God’s judgment. Balthasar identifies Augustine as the first to popularize a view that indeed some souls, if not *many*, would certainly be lost due to sin. Combining humankind’s concupiscence, free will and the broad, easy road to destruction described in the Gospels, Augustine postulated that humanity was for the most part a *massa damnata*: a people destined for damnation.⁴ Thus, Hell is a reality—and a populated one at that. Augustine’s incredibly large influence on later Christian thought, most especially in the Middle Ages, made this “infernalist” view of general salvation the norm. Later thinkers who would subscribe to Augustine’s perspective included such influential figures as Anselm and Thomas Aquinas. For these thinkers, there is a

² *Ibid.*, 226.

³ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁴ Balthasar, *Dare We Hope*, 65.

significant concern to protect and elevate God's justice. For Anselm especially, God must be "merciful because [He] is most just."⁵ In other words, if sinners are deserving of such punishment, God's punishment of the guilty is merely a function of His mercy. This leads to some teachings which Balthasar finds problematic, such as the Blessed celebrating God's justice in Heaven by delighting in the torments of the damned. Balthasar manages, however, to avoid both this extreme and that of universalism.

For Balthasar, the two sets of passages from the New Testament—both those that speak of a populated, eternal hell and those which suggest universal salvation—cannot merely be synthesized by a theologian, and are mutually irreconcilable with one another.⁶ This stems, ultimately, from his argument and conviction that all Christians stand *under* judgment:

All of us who practice the Christian Faith and, to the extent that its nature as mystery permits, would also like to understand it are under judgment. By no means are we above it so that we might know its outcome in advance and could proceed from that knowledge to further speculation. The apostle, who is conscious of having no guilt, does not therefore regard himself as already acquitted: "It is the Lord who judges me" (1 Cor 4:4).⁷

We cannot know, ahead of time, the results of God's final judgment. Both the Universalists and the "Infernalists" take it upon themselves to judge, ahead of time, that "some" or "all" will be saved, when they also know that this decision is ultimately God's. Balthasar's own Christology and Soteriology leaves room for both possible outcomes,

⁵ Anselm of Canterbury, quoted in Balthasar, *Dare We Hope*, 150.

⁶ Geoffrey Wainwright, "Eschatology," *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Cambridge:Cambridge, 2006), 122.

⁷ Balthasar, *Dare We Hope*, 13.

while simultaneously strongly emphasizing the reality and eternity of Hell on one hand, and the possibility of universal salvation on the other.

In his *Theo-Drama*, Balthasar uses the analogy of drama in order to capture the essence of human-divine interrelation. God the Father is the author, the Son is the chief actor, and the Holy Spirit is the director.⁸ “Who we are” as individual persons is defined by our “role” in the drama, which, when applied to one’s whole life, is one’s *mission*.⁹ Though this is a *very* simplified version of Balthasar’s entire scheme, his Christology fits into this basic mold. The Son of God becomes incarnate to take on “the role he was born to play” in Jesus of Nazareth. Mirroring the soteriologies of Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor, to name a few, Balthasar depicts Jesus’ incarnation as radically oriented towards His climactic death. Jesus was born to die. God thus lives a life amongst us so as to save us from within. The hypostatic union between Jesus’ humanity and His divinity is mainly an absolute harmony in action: Jesus stands in a relationship of radical obedience to the Father, perfectly living out, on a human scale, the Eternal Son’s perpetual kenosis to the Father. Thus, Jesus’s entire life is led within this obedience, culminating, ultimately, in His own death on a cross. Jesus willingly takes on the sinful condition of a fallen world, and bears it “to the end” (John 13:1).¹⁰ Balthasar here “deliberately eschews any facile reduction of Christ’s saving work to one explanatory theory or metaphoric image” in order to incorporate aspects of both substitutionary and participatory atonement.¹¹ Ultimately, however, The Cross, in Jesus’ complete gift of

⁸ Gerard O’Hanlon, S.J., “Theological Dramatics,” *The Beauty of Christ* (Edinburgh:T&T Clark, 1994), 95.

⁹ Ben Quash, “The theo-drama,” *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Cambridge:Cambridge, 2006), 148.

¹⁰ All biblical quotes taken from the NRSV translation.

¹¹ Quash, “The theo-drama,” *Cambridge*, 154.

Himself to His Father, reveals the depths of God's Trinitarian love. It is Jesus' unfailing kenotic obedience to the Father's will which leads Him into the depths of the tomb; and it is in this descent to the dead where Balthasar finds the key to his own model of salvation.

Balthasar's meditations on Holy Saturday are arguably some of his most insightful—and most controversial¹²—contributions to modern theology. Having spent Himself fully on the cross and given up His spirit, Jesus experiences death. In Balthasar's account—and in a significant departure from Western artistic depictions—Jesus does not march triumphantly into Hades, breaking down the gates, but rather enters into radical solidarity with the dead precisely in their *deadness*. Jesus does not *stride* to the underworld, he passively *sinks*, carried by the phenomenal momentum of his already-expressed obedience.¹³ Jesus thus descends into the previously unreachable depths of death, to the utter darkness, the “edge” of creation itself, and experiences what Nicolas of Cusa termed the *visio mortis*, or the vision of Death and Sin themselves (the “second death”).¹⁴ But it is Jesus, God Incarnate, who sinks to these depths and suffers these pains. Jesus thereby fulfils Psalm 139, for even “if I make my bed in *Sheol*,” He is there. As C.S. Lewis put it in *The Great Divorce*: ““Only the Greatest of all can make Himself small enough to enter Hell...Only One has descended into Hell.””¹⁵ By thus traversing to the utter end of death, Jesus sets the limit of human suffering—and of Hell—since, as Gregory the Great pointed out, God englobes, “by his own ever greater depth, all the deep

¹² See the discussion of Balthasar's orthodoxy over using the term “Hell” for his theology of Holy Saturday in the journal *First Things* (December 2006) entitled “Balthasar, Hell, and Heresy: An Exchange” by Alyssa Lyra Pitstick and Edward T. Oakes, S.J. For the sake of consistency, I, too, will use the term “Hell” when identifying the terminus of Jesus' descent.

¹³ Quash, “The theo-drama,” *Cambridge*, 153.

¹⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 170, 172.

¹⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), 139.

places of the underworld”.¹⁶ It is from these abyssal depths that the Father raises the Son on Easter Sunday, glorifying Him and giving meaning to Jesus’ death and descent.¹⁷

Balthasar’s theology of Holy Saturday has many implications for the “some” or “all” question. Most importantly is Christ’s “conquest” of Hell. By traveling to its limits, Jesus is raised having somehow incorporated Hell into the divine life. He Himself owns it and has dominion over it.¹⁸ Hell, as we understand it, is not *destroyed* by Christ’s descent, but is mysteriously a product of it: Jesus’ own experience of death is revealed as the definitive option awaiting those who, when faced with the Truth, reject it.¹⁹ Thus, Hell is a real possibility and cannot be ignored. However, Jesus’ appropriation of Hell and dominion over it signifies a radical overcoming of Hell and its “power,” thus opening the door to the *possibility* of universal salvation.²⁰ Jesus stands as judge, holding the keys of “Death and of Hades” (Revelation 1:18). Clearly, it is *we* who stand under *His* judgment.

Standing under this judgment, however, it seems natural to assume that some human beings, endowed with free will, will indeed use their freedom wrongly, and thus ought to suffer the appropriate consequences. Surely some people go to Hell? Balthasar would first note that the Church has never authoritatively declared that any one human

¹⁶ Balthasar, *Mysterium*, 167.

¹⁷ Hell is still triumphantly “harrowed,” but its gates are besieged from within, not from without. First, Jesus is hungrily swallowed up by death, and only then is death itself “swallowed up in victory” (Isa 25:8). This is somewhat similar to Gregory of Nyssa’s soteriology. Cf. “An Address in Religious Instruction” §24 in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R Hardy (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1977), 300, 301.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 176. Cf. Revelation 1:18.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 171.

²⁰ Interestingly, despite the radical nature of Christ’s descent and victory, Balthasar claims that the redemption of Satan lies beyond the sphere of Christian hope, since the Son became *man* to redeem *mankind*, and there is insufficient attention paid to the demons in the Gospels to create a coherent demonology. Another question is whether or not the “satanic being” can even be granted the quality of personhood, seeing as personhood seems to require—at the very least—a positive relationship to a fellow person, which Satan clearly lacks. Balthasar, *Dare We Hope*, 144, 145.

person is in Hell.²¹ Next, employing some imagery from his *Theo-Drama*, Balthasar would remind us that our human freedom is relative to God's freedom. Our freedom as "actors" is mysteriously bound by the script which God has already written. However, Balthasar lovingly quotes Edith Stein: "Human freedom can be neither broken nor neutralized by divine freedom, but it may well be, so to speak, outwitted."²² As such, there is still the possibility that—even in sin—exercising one's freedom may not necessarily lead to perdition. But Balthasar has a far more pastoral argument against the "Infernalists." If we assume—as Christians—that others have gone to Hell before us, and that some others around us may end up there, in speaking about it we (almost subconsciously) tend to remove ourselves from that *massa damnata*. All of a sudden, it is only about how many (of *those*) people will be lost (...but not me).²³ The eternal reality of Hell, for Balthasar, should first and foremost be a *real possibility for myself* of which I am mindful. Granted, all of humankind deserves Hell by virtue of its sinfulness, but this "curse" falls upon *me first and foremost*. As reflected in the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises*, I must confront the startling reality that, through my own sinfulness, I can indeed be lost for eternity. This helps foster a healthy 'fear of the Lord': He who can destroy "both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28).

Despite Balthasar's attempt to stand in the middle—between the Universalists and the Infernalists—some might argue that he tends too far onto the side of Universalism to have completed his mission successfully. After all, it is well known that he has always gravitated towards thinkers who have themselves tended towards universalism such as

²¹ Balthasar, *Dare We Hope*.

²² Edith Stein, *World and Person: A Contribution to Christian Truth Seeking*, ed. L. Gelber and Romaeus Lueven (Freiburg: 1962) quoted in Balthasar, *Dare We Hope*, 221.

²³ Balthasar, *Dare We Hope*, 190.

Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor and Karl Barth. This may indeed be true, but Balthasar consciously seeks to avoid espousing anything like a normative doctrine of *apokatastasis* or universalism precisely because of the problems he (and the Church) perceives them to cause when adopted as such. Rather, it is his encouragement of a Christian *hope* for universal salvation which differentiates himself from these other thinkers. Such a hope encourages and inspires Christians, committed to living lives of love and service, to hope and work for their neighbor's salvation.

Interestingly, while we do constantly stand under judgment, Christians are encouraged to intercede on behalf of "everyone," including "kings and those in high positions" (1 Tim 2:1). Though Hell stands as a real and possible fate for all of us, we are encouraged to hope for the salvation of all humankind. As Pope Benedict XVI says in his most recent encyclical *Spe Salvi*, "Hope in a Christian sense is always a hope for others as well. It is an active hope, in which we struggle to prevent things moving towards their 'perverse end.'"²⁴ It is because of Christ's descent into Hell that suffering, no matter the magnitude, has ceased being a lonesome abyss, but rather a path to sanctity.²⁵ The experiences of some modern saints, such as St. Thérèse of Lisieux or Mother Theresa of Calcutta, attest to the powerful salvific nature of the Dark Night of "God-forsakenness" which they experienced. Overall, by avoiding the extremes of the Universalists and the "Infernalists," it seems that Balthasar finds a middle-ground which maintains the best elements of each aforementioned position while refusing to artificially synthesize them. Whereas watching Balthasar delve deeply into the mysteries of Holy Saturday and human

²⁴ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, Nov. 30, 2007.
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi_en.html, #34.

²⁵ Balthasar, *Dare We Hope*, 112. See also Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, #37.

salvation is a sight to behold, perhaps equally as impressive is his ability to draw the line and realize where theology can go no further. The Spirit of George McDonald wraps this up beautifully in the words of C. S. Lewis:

‘Ye can know nothing of the end of all things, or nothing expressible in those terms. It may be as the Lord said to Lady Julian, that all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well. But it’s ill taking of such questions...For every attempt to see the shape of eternity except through the lens of Time destroys your knowledge of Freedom. Witness the doctrine of Predestination which shows (truly enough) that eternal reality is not waiting for a future in which to be real; but at the price of removing Freedom which is the deeper truth of the two. And wouldn’t Universalism do the same? Ye *cannot* know eternal reality by a definition. Time itself, and all acts and events that fill Time, are the definition, and it must be lived.’²⁶

²⁶ Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, 140, 141.

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