

Hey Professor Stefano,

I was catching up on a reading guide, and in looking at Balthasar's Ch. 6 "Love as Revelation" (from *Love Alone is Credible*) I was a little confused by what he is trying to say about hell, specifically the "hell of forsakenness."

I know he says we aren't required to "bring a systematically conceived hell into harmony with the love of God and make it credible, or indeed to justify it conceptually as love...We are required only not to let go of love, the love that believes and hopes..." (96). What exactly does he mean by this? So often we hear people ask about how the reality of God's love can coexist with Church teaching on hell, and we ultimately point to the power of free will. Could you help to clarify Balthasar's approach for me?

No rush on replying- whenever you get a chance!

Thanks,

[Student]

[Dear student],

These are great questions, and I appreciate you sending them to me. These questions are very deep and pastorally relevant, so let me offer you a "down payment" on a response, and then we can "fill-out" that down payment in a future conversation. I'm in the middle of grading, so this is what I was able to write up in a few minutes.

Based on your response, I presume that your typical line of argument with regard to Hell would be something like this: God offers everyone heaven through his love; we are free, and God wants a free response of love; if we freely reject God's love, Hell is simply our self-imposed loneliness, our self-imposed absence from God. --- Okay, I get it. *But here come the questions... But why would a God who is love create such a possibility? If God knew that some would reject him, then that means that by creating, he was willing to concede some to Hell in order to allow for a creation in which others would get to Heaven. How do we reconcile a God of Love with a God who was willing to concede such beings (even if they did so freely) to eternal punishment, so that others can be with him for eternal bliss? ... And that is, without the chance of conversion or repentance? And, does the above description do justice to the descriptions of Hell found in scripture? Also: how can people be liable to Hell if they don't have an explicit understanding of the gift of love that is being offered to them? Does anyone? And if someone commits a finite, temporal wrong (mortal sin), how can the consequence of that be an eternal, unending punishment? Doesn't that seem to be disproportionate? Can any temporal wrong justify an eternal punishment? On the other side of things, if we play up God as the nice guy, then does*

doing wrong really matter? Does God's mercy efface his justice? ... These kinds of questions put the question a bit further. They show us that pointing to our freedom only justifies the response of Hell so far. The question becomes, ultimately, how do we reconcile the reality of Hell and the God of Love.

Now, let's take a look at Balthasar's treatment:

(1) In the chapter, Balthasar is moving away from a (i) a cosmological conception of Hell and (ii) an anthropological conception of Hell.

(i) A cosmological conception of Hell is one in which you assimilate the Scriptural teaching on Hell to a cosmology, and thus, you imagine the created universe as a triple decker: heaven, earth, hell, and thus imagine that our eternal destiny falls into either the top deck or the lower one. This kind of method does not allow Revelation to re-organize 'reason,' but assimilates revelation to reason (i.e., by assimilating revelation to cosmology). This is what we see in Dante for example, or in medieval artwork. The way that such thinkers would typically 'justify' Hell is by saying that the 'beauty of the whole' (that is, of heaven and hell, looked at in its totality as a created universe) is sufficient to justify its reality. Balthasar argues that such an approach attempts to gain 'knowledge of the whole' prior to God's judgement, and no creature has a right to do that. Judgement is precisely what makes God *God*.

(ii) An anthropological conception of Hell is one where Hell is more of an existential threat to make people feel the gravity of what is being offered and the danger of rejecting it. But this reduction doesn't take into gravity the gift that God is offering, since Hell's gravity is an inverse reflection of the weight of God's own gift.

It's in rejecting these two approaches that Balthasar is saying that we do not need to 'bring a systematically conceived hell into harmony with the love of God and make it credible, or indeed to justify it conceptually as love.'

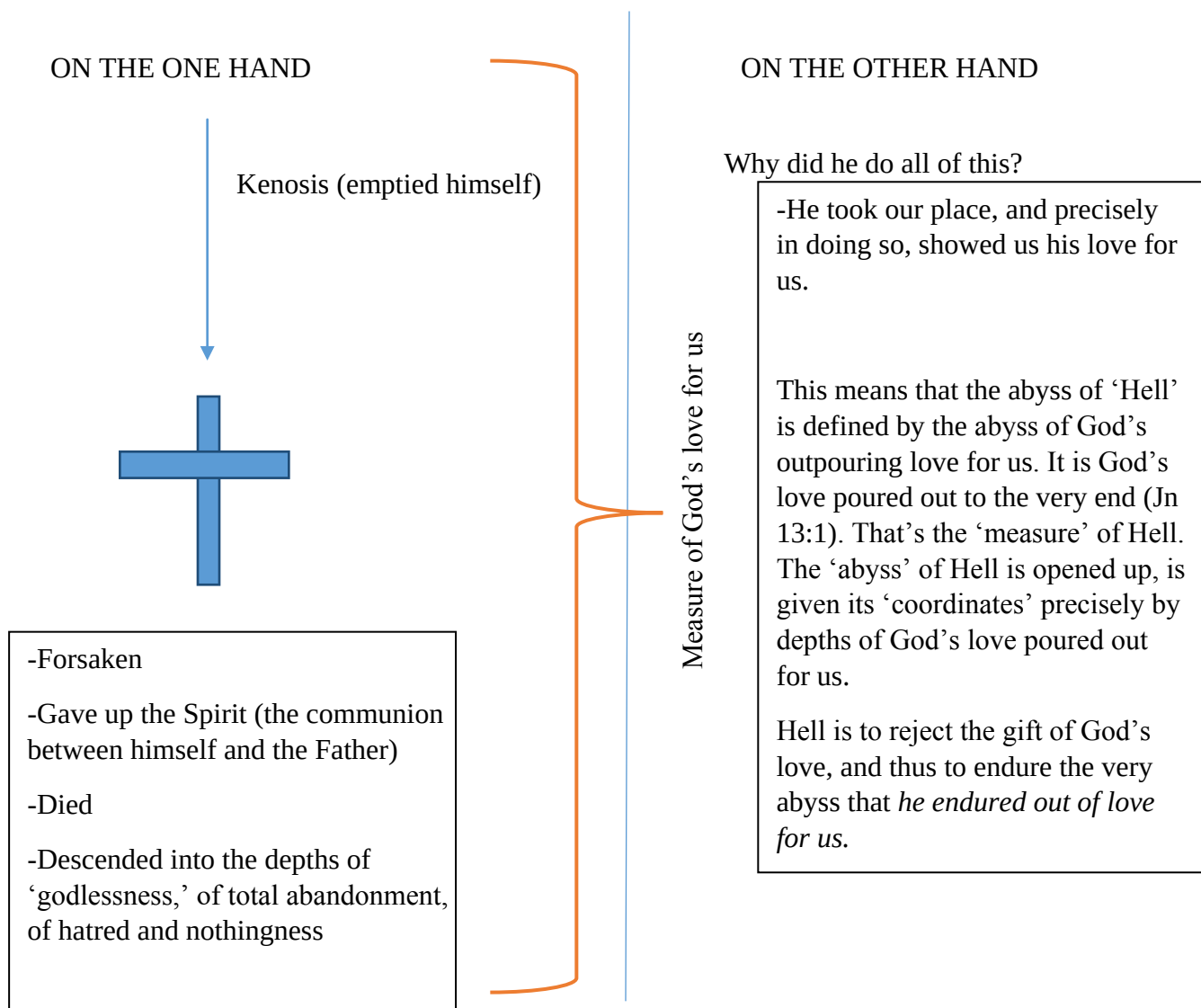
(2) So, then what is Hell, for Balthasar? I think the easiest way to answer this is with a series of short questions/responses:

2.1. In the beginning, did God create Hell? No, he created "the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1).

2.2. So, then, how did Hell come about? Well, we see a development of 'sheol' and 'hades' in the Old Testament, but ultimately, 'Hell' only becomes a reality in light of Christ. This is because rejection is correlated with the gift that's given. Let me give you an analogy: if someone rejects a lover they have never met, then it's only a small offense. If someone rejects a lover that has loved them for a few years, it's a big offense. If someone rejects a lover who gave their life

for them, that's an ultimate offense. That's just an example to point out how the idea of 'hell,' 'underworld,' etc., has a gradual development in the Bible as God gives himself more and more. But what's the point of all this?

2.3. In taking *our* place on the Cross, to the point of letting himself be abandoned by the Father, Christ reveals to us the punishment that is appropriately due to us for rejecting God and he also reveals his love, a love that takes our place, and in which he offers himself to us. What this means is that the Hell receives its coordinates by the very depths that the Son poured himself out to for us, in which He took our place. Hell is how far God's love was poured out for us, and thus, it becomes the measure of God's love but also the measure of its rejection:



2.4. This means that if we reject *this* love, that is poured out to *these* depths, then there is nothing more. There is no higher court of appeal. There is no *merciful God* sitting behind and apart from the God who poured himself out on the Cross, to which we could appeal if we reject God's love poured out to those depths. That's the reason that Hell is a reality. The point is that Hell is the depths to which God's love was poured out, and it is precisely the rejection of *that* love. And if we reject *that* love, then we reject God's love fully poured out for us. And if that's the case, then we can't expect or hope for some 'nice God' who is 'merciful' sitting apart from the Cross. We rejected the full depths of God's mercy poured out in love on the Cross. The point is that the Cross is the 'fiery abyss of God's love.'

2.5. What does this mean? Can we 'know,' then, how many people are in Hell? Our chances of ending up in Hell? If anyone is in Hell?

Balthasar argues that 'judgment' is God's prerogative, precisely because judgment is the key event in which God affirms his 'lordliness' (his Glory) over creation. As such, to answer any of those questions would be to 'pry' behind God's love, which is the criterion for judgment, and to attain some sort of 'knowledge' beyond love. And his claim is that we can't. In other words: he is not claiming that we don't have enough evidence to claim one way or another, or to guess one way or another. He is saying that as a matter of principle, we need to let God be God, and judgment, ultimate judgment, is God's prerogative alone, not ours. And our 'probabilities' are laughing stock before God's judgment. We cannot reckon anything about Hell based on our own guesses; we must fully entrust that question to God.

2.6. So then what? We just shrug our shoulders? – No. Definitely not. We have something better than pseudo-knowledge or inadequate probabilities, Balthasar says. We have *hope*. Christian hope---that beautiful thing, gift of gifts! We live by hope by trusting in God's love, and living out of that love.

So that's his final answer. He basically is saying that we can't make a 'system' out of God's love. It is truly poured out, and as love truly poured out, it is the criterion for our each person's judgment. There is no higher court of appeals (such as a 'nice God' with a long white beard). But, since it is *God's* love, we cannot make guesses beyond it; because then we would be trying to skip over it and make it into some sort of system of knowledge, in which probabilities and claims about numbers (how many people are in Hell, etc.) have relevance. The Christian answer regarding Hell is not to deflate its reality (anthropological conception), nor to turn it into a cosmological system (cosmological conception), but to see it as the 'fiery abyss of love,' a love that was truly poured out for us, and thus to have hope --- hope that all be saved. In fact, we are called to pray that all be saved, and to work for the salvation of all, precisely because that very love that was poured out, wasn't just poured out for few, but for all.

That's it in a nutshell. I'm also attaching a good article by Avery Dulles that landscapes the various positions on Hell in modern theology, and gives a good, balanced perspective on it.