

Timothy Keller on Hell: A Response to *The Reason for God*

A Review of *The Reason for God*, chapter 5: 'How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?'

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Dr. Keller introduces this topic by telling of an interview. Rick Warren, megachurch pastor in Saddleback, CA was asked by journalists whether it was a contradiction that a loving God would send people to hell eternally, and whether Christians can make the argument to extend full human dignity to each person in the present while some people are bound for hell, suggesting that they are not equal in dignity to those who are bound for heaven. Pastor Rick said there was no contradiction, but the journalists were not convinced.

One objection Keller considers is emotional: Our culture feels that a God whose objective morality and higher judgment that trumps ours just cannot exist. C.S. Lewis observed that the spirit of modernity gave us the responsibility to determine right or wrong for ourselves. 'Our new confidence that we can control the physical environment has spilled over so we now think we can reshape the metaphysical realm as well.' So in Western culture, because of our individualism and desire for control and self-determination, we have a hard time believing in a God who has an objective view of good and evil, and who judges us for our actions. Thus, Dr. Keller responded to a questioner by saying, "I respectfully urge you to consider your cultural location when you find the Christian teaching about hell offensive." In some traditional societies, there is a sense that hell makes absolute sense, since people are obviously not rewarded or punished for their actions in this life. He asks whether Western culture is superior to non-Western ones. Since it is politically incorrect to say yes to that, we have to ask, "Why should your culture's objections to Christianity trump theirs?"

A second objection Keller considers is that a God of judgment can't be a God of love. If God is loving, He should forgive and accept everyone, perhaps without getting angry. But loving people are often wrathful precisely because of their love, like when loved ones get hurt or hurt themselves. Similarly, God gets angry at human evil. Some say that a God of vengeance serves as a justification for us to take vengeance on our enemies. But Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf, who saw the violence of the Balkans, argues that if we did not have confidence that a God of justice will finally punish people for evil, then we will take retribution into our own hands. Czeslaw Milosz, a Nobel-winning Polish poet, wrote that the idea of no accountability after death leads to more evil, as he saw in Nazism and Communism.

A third objection is that a loving God would not allow hell. The objection is that hell is God-enforced, like a prison, where someone is held against their will despite a desire to be with God. Keller replies that hell is self-enforced. Once we are separated from God, we start to lose the love, wisdom, and capacity for joy and life. Fire, a common image, describes disintegration. Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16 describes how a rich man in fire still wants the poor man, Lazarus, to be his servant; the rich man has no personal identity apart from his riches, which he has lost. Hence, hell is like succumbing to an addiction more and more, like C.S. Lewis describes in *The Great Divorce*.

Therefore, Keller argues as he turns the skeptic's argument around on them, Christians are not more narrow-minded than those who believe that Christians are wrong. Both are equally narrow-minded, but the non-Christian usually doesn't admit it. Keller provides helpful examples of conversations he has with others. Finally, Keller makes an argument about how we know anything about God. He argues that no other religious text, and certainly not the world or human history, which have lots of evil and suffering, asserts that God is Love. That idea comes from the Bible, which also asserts that God is a judge. So if we are to believe that God is Love on the basis of the Bible, then we must be willing to accept that this same God is a judge who will put all things right in the end.

My evaluation: I felt like some of Keller's treatment of hell was necessary but not sufficient. I like how he questioned the emotionalism of Western culture since the Enlightenment. He goes decently far in saying that love requires anger when the beloved is harmed or harm-inflicting, because love has expectations for the growth and goodness of the beloved. But I think that Keller doesn't clearly answer the deeper question of what is going on in hell, relationally and punitively, because he only answers that in chapter 12 about the cross. Instead, he relies on a logical-rhetorical strategy of placing the other person's argument into a catch-22 where they are guilty of the very narrow-mindedness they accuse Christians of being. As a result, I don't think he fully answers the critics and

skeptics; he merely puts their opinions on an equal footing with Christians' opinions. But I think we can go farther than this.

The reason I find Keller's counterarguments about hell not as compelling as they could be is because Keller himself is not consistent. He is actually blending two different (and, I believe, mutually incompatible) understandings of what Jesus' death was for. In chapter 12, he states that believes that Jesus took the penalty for our sinful actions at the cross, absorbing the cost of God's retributive justice, so that God could still be a moral lawgiver. This belief is called the 'penal substitution' theory of the atonement because Jesus is said to have taken the penalty for our law-breaking as our legal substitute. As Keller says, 'Why did Jesus have to die in order to forgive us? There was a debt to be paid – God himself paid it.' (p.193) This belief, although common among Protestants today, originated with John Calvin in the 1500's and was not taught before. But if Jesus' death on the cross must really be understood this way, then we would have to conclude that (1) Jesus' resurrection is not really part of our salvation; it is 'proof' that God accepted Jesus' self-sacrifice, that death could not hold him, and that Christian faith is grounded in an historical event, but it really does not accomplish our salvation because Jesus' death did all that, leaving nothing leftover for the resurrection (and Keller treats the resurrection of Jesus as a historical event in ch.13, but not a saving event). (2) In hell, God must pay out a retributive punishment to people who did not believe in Jesus because for them, Jesus did not absorb their debt-punishment. In other words, according to the penal substitution theory of atonement, hell must be God-inflicted. (3) If God offers forgiveness now but deals out retribution in hell for eternity, then this does raise a significant question about the character of God. Namely, why won't God forgive people's sins later, after a certain point? Why won't He apply 'the blood of Jesus' to those who want to get out of hell? Why will He keep them in there? On this logic, some kind of 'purgatory' would make more sense, where Adolf Hitler might be the last person getting punished, but at some point even he would serve his sentence and pay his debt, so to speak. In order to make hell sound self-inflicted rather than God-inflicted, Keller switches gears. He draws on C.S. Lewis, who did not like John Calvin or his 'penal substitution' theory of God's retributive justice (*Mere Christianity*, book 1, chapter 4, 'The Perfect Penitent'), who insisted that hell is self-inflicted and not God-inflicted. Lewis was drawing on the earliest theology of the church, the Eastern Orthodox tradition, and the beliefs of some Catholics – and this view I will explain as briefly as I can (thanks for your patience).

Immediately after the New Testament books were written, among people mentored within 1 – 2 generations of the apostles and continuing in the undivided church for over a thousand years, the understanding of Jesus was called the 'medical-ontological' theory of the atonement. In this theory, Jesus shared in our diseased human nature so that we might share in his healed human nature. It was a medical paradigm, not a legal paradigm. God in the person of Jesus attacked the source of human evil and self-centeredness so he might also attack that problem lovingly in everyone who came to him. He took human nature in his conception to inherit a corrupted, diseased, sin-scarred human nature. Yes, you read me right: Jesus didn't take a sinless, already-purified human nature. Instead, he took a fallen, sinful human nature. Now, let me be quick to add that Jesus never sinned in action, thought, or even inward emotion, though in all things he was tempted. But here's the evidence from Scripture: Jesus took to himself *flesh* (*sarx*, Jn.1:14), which is the corruption in human nature, as when Paul said, 'I know that no good dwells in me, that is, in my *flesh*' (Rom.7:21). Then, as Jesus grew up, he increased in stature (Lk.2:52). But the word for 'increased' is *proeopten*, which is the Greek word that means 'to hammer out with blows.' He was reshaping his flesh like a blacksmith reshapes a piece of metal. Just as metal resists a blacksmith, so Jesus' flesh resisted him. Did he struggle? Yes, his whole life long. Jesus' life was a life of struggle to manifest the pure love of the Father. The letter to the Hebrews refers to the 'loud cryings and tears' of Jesus (Heb.5:7). In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the two episodes that bracket Jesus' public ministry – the wilderness temptation (Mt.4:1 – 11) and the Garden of Gethsemane (Mt.26:36 – 46) – show that Jesus' massive struggle was costly in ways we barely understand; they not only bracket Jesus' entire career but characterize it. Jesus fought the moral vulnerability to sin. He resisted the temptation to indulge self-centered emotions. Most importantly, he put down the desire to rebel against and resist the Father – a desire that comes from the personal resistance to God that had set into human nature from Adam and Eve. Jesus forced his flesh to surrender throughout his life, until he killed the physical corruption on the cross (Rom.8:3) and raised his physical body without it in his resurrection. He then offers back to us his new, God-purified, God-soaked, God-drenched new humanity, by his Spirit, so we, too, might struggle well, aided by Jesus' Spirit, against our own sin and selfishness. The incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and giving of the Spirit are all saving events connected to the one saving person, Jesus.

If penal substitution is true, then the legal analogy for Christian faith is fundamental, meaning that God must be seen as the offended lawgiver and judge who sentences us to punishment in hell, but then steps in as Jesus as the penal

substitute to absorb His own retributive justice instead of us, at least for some people. But Scripture is clear that the cross of Jesus without the resurrection would in fact accomplish nothing (e.g. 1 Cor.15:17; Rom.4:25; cf. Rom.6:1 – 11; Col.2:20 – 3:4; Eph.1:15 – 2:10), because Jesus was not dealing with the consequences of our sin, but the *source* of it in every person. As the physical theory of the atonement says, Jesus had to physically redeem human nature in himself in order to redeem human nature in others. He was creating in himself the antibodies to our disease, and in that sense, he died for us. In the medical analogy, he was the doctor who became the patient in order to become the antidote to our disease. And the medical analogy is more apt, because God clearly still desires to judge and put to death the corruption in each one of us, with our willing participation. Therefore, Scripture says that we must die and rise with Christ (Rom.6:1 – 11; Col.2:20 – 3:4; 2 Cor.4 – 5), before we so turn against God's purposes that God's magnificent love becomes our own self-inflicted hell. Jesus did not die instead of us, but ahead of us.

What does this mean for understanding hell? If the medical theory is true, then hell is not a place of retributive punishment (e.g. prison cell, torture chamber) for the people who didn't believe in Jesus. Instead, hell is like an addiction treatment center for people who don't want to give up their addiction. It is medical, not legal-penal. It is a state of being in which Jesus keeps reaching out to people because he loves them and wants them to receive his 'new humanity.' This drives them mad. But God keeps trying to refine them by offering Jesus to them, and this leads us to the image of divine fire. Hell is described as fiery because fire in Scripture is not disintegrative, as Keller suggests (p.76); it is refining, like when precious metals are melted down so that impure metals can rise to the surface and be scooped away (e.g. Mal.3:2 – 3; Ps.66:10, 12; cf. Ex.19:13; Dt.5:5; Isa.6:6; Ezk.1:4, 13, 27; 8:2; 1 Cor.3:12 – 15). Every time God offers Himself to His people in covenant love, He presents Himself in fire: Sinai was where God became present in a unique way, inviting Israel to pass through a kind of divine fire and smoke (Ex.19; Dt.4 – 5) to meet with him face to face. The people of Israel were to be like the burning bush (Ex.3:2), containing the presence of God in their midst, to be purified and refined. Israel refused to meet God face to face, and sent Moses instead. But they did receive the physical pattern of the tabernacle so they could remember how Moses went through the fire (Dt.9:15) and received the covenant on their behalf at the top of Mount Sinai. Just as Moses went to the top of Sinai to receive the covenant, in the tabernacle, the high priest would pass through the fire and smoke of sacrifices to uniquely enter God's presence (Lev.16). When Israel built the temple on Mount Zion, they took that original Sinai pattern, built it with stone and gold, and for centuries approached God through fire and smoke, and remembered Moses entering the divine fire atop Mount Sinai for them because the high priest who represented Moses did that in the most holy place. Isaiah, however, envisioned that God's renewal of the covenant and of Mount Zion would burst those temple boundaries and give Israel and the nations another chance at meeting with God face to face, albeit still through the purification of divine fire (Isa.4:3 – 5; 5:24 – 25). Isaiah, after all, had angels touch his unclean lips with a burning, fiery coal to purify him (Isa.6:1 – 8). Indeed, 'our God is a consuming fire' (Mal.3:2 – 3; Heb.12:29, quoting Dt.4:24; 5:25; 9:3). So when John the Baptist and Jesus spoke of that renewal, they used fire in its double sense (Mt.3:10 – 12; Lk.3:7 – 10): joyful and painful purification by the Holy Spirit for those who receive it, represented by the tongues of fire at Pentecost (Acts 2:1 – 13), fearful torment for those who do not. Although I will not examine Paul and Peter here, both of them referred to the return of Jesus as having the effect of a purifying fire that reveals the true quality of each person (1 Cor.3:12 – 15; 2 Pet.3:10 – 16). Accompanying this theme must be a corresponding biblical understanding of human nature: God made us partners with Him in the formation of our own human nature (Eph.4:17 – 24; Rom.2:28 – 29; Gen.2:4 – 4:26); we are not just human beings, but human beings (1 Cor.6:12 – 20; Col.3:1 – 4; 1 Jn.3:2 – 3); and our choices shape our natures and our desires (Pr.2:1 – 10; Rom.12:1 – 2; Phil.2:12 – 13). Indeed, the purified people of God are compared to 'pure gold, transparent glass' (Rev.21:18, 21) which is clearly metaphorical because gold is not transparent; the metaphor speaks of gold and glass that are *purified*.

Fire reflects God's purifying and refining work. Whether we welcome Him or fear Him depends on us. To people in hell who receive this refining love of God as torment, God has become like an unwanted lover who is absolutely demanding and repulsive, a stalker who refuses to give up and go away, a counselor who insists on treating an addiction that they believe is as vital as breathing, a surgeon who wants to remove the heart and spinal cord, a doctor who insists on treating a disease in their bodies they do not believe exists, a lord who loudly offers forgiveness to them for treason against his authority which they refuse to accept, and so on. That is why hell is eternal – people cannot emotionally get past themselves and the lies they've believed about themselves. They have conditioned themselves to be addicted to something else: alcohol, money, 'freedom,' individuality, sex, etc. God is a refining fire whom they have conditioned themselves to refuse but cannot, in the end, escape. It is therefore perfectly appropriate to describe hell as the refining love of God. Yes, hell is 'the wrath of God' in the sense that God is personally against the corruption at the heart of their being, and He stands ready to consume and burn away and cut

off the thing in each person that should die. But the wrath of God serves the love of God, which is the greater and larger category in God. 'Hell is the love of God' in the sense that God upholds their physical existence because of His love for them and His partnership with their parents in the bringing forth of every new human life, never gives up on the person, and still calls out to them in love for their best, which is Himself.

So to the skeptics and critics that Keller addresses, my own answers would be as follows: (Point 3, a loving God would not allow hell) You're mistaken about what hell is. I understand why you think hell is a prison system that is God-inflicted. But it's not. Hell is self-inflicted, through and through, like an addiction center for people who don't want to give up their addiction. That's because God is only doing one thing: He is trying to heal our human nature, while respecting our free will, and heal us of our addictions.

(Point 2, a God of judgment can't be a God of love) Actually, a God of love must by definition try to judge the disease in each and every person, otherwise He would not be loving, and He wouldn't be equally valuing everyone. You're under the majority Protestant impression that He is doing two *different* things: forgiving people now, and judging people later, both in a legal-penal sense. But drop the legal paradigm and shift to a medical paradigm. God is judging the cancer in our body like a surgeon who loves us, and He's forgiving us of our resistance to His diagnosis and care. That's why He came in Jesus, to acquire a human body with a diseased human nature like the one you and I both have, so that he might heal human nature in himself by killing the disease of sin that he had, so that he can give his healed, new humanity by his Spirit to everyone who asks. Hell doesn't change that. It's just that people have fed their addictions so much that they won't change. They trained themselves to love something other than Jesus. So when Jesus says, "I love you; you were made for me; I can heal you of your love for other things and for yourself," they will say, "What!?! You call that love?? Get away from me! Leave me alone!" He will say, "No. I cannot leave you alone. It is not in my nature. I love you; you were made for me..." Hell is self-imposed, not God-imposed.

(Point 1, Western culture knows good and evil better than Christianity) Look, you seem to believe in your heart of hearts that there is good and evil, yet you also want to be the one to define it. Even though it's really just your opinion. The biblical story explains your conundrum perfectly well, and tells your story better than you tell it yourself. That's exactly the meaning of the story where humanity ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen.2:8 – 17). The tree represented God – someone older than us, bigger than us, more firmly rooted than us, and most importantly, outside of us. We were to let God define good and evil for us, and learn all things that way. But we took into ourselves the desire to define good and evil for ourselves. So each of us wants to do just that. We are objective subjectivists and subjective objectivists. That's exactly the problem in Western culture, and every culture, and every person. That's the problem Jesus came to solve – the problem in you and me. That's why Jesus has the most accurate diagnosis of human nature, and a cure for us, by a God who is 100% good and radically loving, with no contradictions. Do you have any other way of explaining why we do evil? Even though we're not even sure what exactly is good and what is evil, we know we are called to *be* good but we know we are infected by evil? Would you like to talk more about that?

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