

Is God in Hell? A Theological Response

•Written by ITL Administrator•

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The Divine Presence in Hades

Kevin Lewis

Several students have asked the question, “How can God be in Hell?”

Here are a few thoughts on God’s Omnipresence and Hell.

First, does one mean by “Hell,” the intermediate state or final state of reprobate human beings? For the former will address the condition of the disembodied spirit of man (as an “incomplete, defective spirit”), while the latter will address the post-resurrection state of the reprobate.

Second, the discussion of the nature of Hades will be divided into, minimally, two distinct *loci* of theology. The first

locus

will address the question of the type of presence and “whereness” of God and created things, while the second

locus

will address ontological issues with respect to the constitution of man, substantive theological psychology, and the effects of sin.

Third, with respect to presence, God is an immeasurable (immense) spirit Being who fills the created universe, but is not contained by it. This is the doctrine of Repletive Presence. Human spirits do not have a local or circumscriptive presence (i.e. physical, spatial extension) as limited, contingent rational substances. They, human spirits, do have an illocal or definitive presence, which, as substances with causal powers, are defined by their limited powers of operation, not by the quantity of their physical, spatial extension.

The entire created universe, physical and non-physical, exists as distinct substances from the divine substance. Yet the entire created universe exists necessarily within a divine ontic (read “substance” or “ontological”) space or the “being space” of God. In short, these distinct kinds of substances exist in the same place, but not in the same manner. Thus, the entire universe

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exists within the Being of God, but it is a separate and distinct substance from the divine substance.

Fourth, regarding the relationship of sin and punishment, privation or deprivation is generally defined by the loss of original righteousness in the first sinful willing of Adam. However, the subsequent absence of original righteousness resulted not in a passive state of mankind, but in an active resistance or rebellion against God, grounded in the defective nature. Some Augustinian theologians ground the defect in human nature in the heart of man and describe it as the heart “being curved in on itself.” Thus the privation of original righteousness results in an active or positive problem, sinful desire or concupiscence. The result is, as the Protestant Scholastics termed it, an “actualized” or “active” privation. It is not a “mere” privation (i.e. passive).

This privation is further distinguished as complete and incomplete privation. Complete privation is ontological annihilation or privation of existence, that is, absolute privation. Incomplete privation describes the partial privation or loss (of original righteousness) that results from sin. The Fall resulted in a damaged human nature, a privation of original righteousness, which results in a defective willing of the good.

Since God created all things *ex nihilo*, and they were all good, evil is not substance, but a defect in an existing substance. Moreover, since evil is not a substance, it cannot be an efficient cause, but must be considered a “deficient cause.” So in the Augustinian system, evil occurs when a rational being, made in the image of God, with innate capacities for knowing what is good, turns from the highest good to a lower good. The Fall, then, was the turning from God as the highest good toward one’s self as the highest good. The result is the heart and will directed to self. And the will turned toward self, rather than God, is considered deficient, rather than efficient, as it represents an incomplete actualization of the will. Since the will is a faculty of human beings, designed by God to be fully content and actualized in Him, this deficient willing is a privation of the highest good, inclining to God, knowing and enjoying Him.

Fifth, the primary issue with divine punishment is the lack of fellowship with God. It is not merely an issue of the presence of God. God is repletively present in His universe. The key issues relate to the “hidden-ness” (occlusion) of God and the need for God to manifest His repletive presence in meaningful ways. God manifests His presence in Christians, through the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, when He removes the sinful impediments (judicial, *et alii*), because of the merits of Christ. The result is spiritual life (i.e. activity of fellowship as a result of the union with Christ through the manifest presence of the Holy Spirit). Upon the death of the believer, the partial manifestation of God, becomes full as the believer, absent from the

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pre-glorified body, no longer sees dimly, but sees God face-to-Face. There is a full manifestation of divine presence in the third heaven.

During this life, the unregenerate experience common grace and the blessings of the goodness of God's people who faithfully follow Him, even though they do not experience a salvific manifestation of God's presence.

Finally, Hell is the intermediate state, pre resurrection. The Lake of Fire is the final state, post resurrection. Here, the defective nature of humanity is unrestrained by external causes and conditions. It is a perfected defect. There is no manifest common grace or believers to do good. And God does not manifest His presence in Hell. Thus, Hell is the pre-resurrection assembly of perfectly defective, selfish evil human spirits. God does not positively manifest His repletive presence. And there is no common grace.

So there is a privation or deprivation of the highest good in Hell, both in the defective nature of human beings and in the absence of the Highest Good, God.

For further reading on this subject, see:

Augustine, *Enchiridion*

Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*.

Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Dogmatics*.

Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*.

W.G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*.

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Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*.

Soli Deo Gloria -KAL