

The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment

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The fact that human beings were made in the very image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26-27) should suggest, to those who contemplate issues seriously, that we are more than mere temporal creatures passing through time toward oblivion. The concept of an eternal future, which involves punishment for those who choose not to serve God, is one that strikes a note of terror in the heart. Given the arrogant disposition of mankind in general, the idea of "eternal punishment" has met with considerable resistance, even though it is plainly taught in the Scriptures.

Skepticism and Eternal Punishment

Naturally the world of skepticism has repudiated the idea of everlasting punishment. Although Albert Einstein believed in some sort of a "God" who revealed himself "in the orderly harmony" of the Universe (Jastrow, p. 28) he did not believe in the God of the Bible, for, said he, "I cannot imagine a God who rewards and punishes the objects of his creation..." (Free Inquiry, p. 31).

Bertrand Russell, Britain's celebrated agnostic, suggested that one of the reasons he could not be a Christian was because Jesus Christ "believed in hell." (At least he knew what the Lord believed!) Russell charged that no person "who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment" (p. 17). In other words, the concept of eternal punishment was not consistent with his sense of justice. Though he acknowledged that some punishment was justified in the case of criminals, he opined that "eternal" punishment was unjust. Of course no one complains that "eternal" happiness is unjust in the case of those who have served God only briefly on this earth.

Religious Materialism

One aspect of "materialism" is the theory that man is wholly mortal. He thus does not possess a "soul" (or "spirit") that will inhabit eternity. Companion to this, of course, is the belief that there is no eternal punishment for those who reject God. Even

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some religionists, who profess a reverence for the Bible, repudiate the proposition that there is a part of man that survives death, hence, may be subject to God's punishment forever.

For example, the "Jehovah's Witnesses" allege that the concept of everlasting punishment is an "unreasonable doctrine" that "contradicts the Bible" (Make Sure Of All Things, 154-55). To these misguided folks, "hell" is merely "a place of rest in hope" (Let God Be True, p.68). Does it not seem strange that Christ would speak of the "danger" of hell (Mt. 5:22), if this state were merely "a place of rest in hope"?

Similarly, Seventh-day Adventists argue that the idea of eternal anguish in hell is not Biblical; rather, they surmise that the wicked simply will be annihilated after an appropriate punishment (Seventh-day Adventists Believe... pp. 369-72).

Materialism and the Restoration Movement

Churches of Christ have not been without their own problems when it comes to a denial of the doctrine of eternal punishment. In 1844 Dr. John Thomas, a physician from England, broke with the restoration movement. He organized a group that eventually became known as the Christadelphians. One of the major doctrines of this apostate faction was the belief that unbelievers will remain eternally dead.

Jesse B. Ferguson came to work with the church in Nashville, Tennessee in the winter of 1846. H. Leo Boles described him as a "meteor that flashe[d] across the

horizon...leaving nothing but darkness in its wake" (Boles, p. 186). Ferguson taught, among other errors, that there is no punishment for evil men after death (West, pp. 261-65). His influence devastated the churches in Nashville.

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In 1982, Edward Fudge, who now serves as an elder for the Bering Drive church in Houston, produced his book, *The Fire That Consumes*. In this volume Fudge denies what he calls the "traditionalist view" of eternal punishment. He asserts that unrighteous people will be raised to judgment, punished for a while, and then banished to "total, everlasting extinction" (pp. 435-36). Though Fudge's position has been thoroughly discredited, by writers both in and out of the church (Workman, pp. 492-508; Morey, pp. 102; 124-25; 206), some, nevertheless, have been charmed by it.

Pepperdine University invited Fudge to present his "conditionalist" doctrine at the 1991 spring lectureship. John Clayton, a popular speaker among churches, gave Fudge's book an enthusiastic recommendation, while himself confessing: "I have never been able to be comfortable with the position that a person who rejected God should suffer forever and ever and ever" (p. 20). Others also have toyed with this ideology.

During the April, 1988 Pepperdine University Lectureship, F. LaGard Smith argued that God "will destroy [the soul]. Not punish it. Not dangle it. Not torture it. Destroy it." ("A Christian Response to the New Age Movement," Transcription from Tape 3.)

Biblical Evidence for Eternal Punishment

The Biblical doctrine of eternal punishment is as clear as a teaching can be; it is naught but human emotionalism that obscures the issue for some. Let us pursue this study under several categories.

1. The Incorruptible Spirit—Some allege that the idea of man possessing a "soul" (or "spirit") that survives the body in a conscious state, is a relic of paganism. That is not true. Consider the following.

a. Though an enemy may terminate one's bodily existence, he cannot destroy his soul (Mt. 10:28). This could not have been said if human beings were entirely mortal.

b. Peter spoke of the need to clothe one's "spirit" with "incorruptible";

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apparel (1 Pet. 3:4). This imagery would hardly be appropriate if the human spirit itself were corruptible.

c. In Revelation 6, John saw a vision of martyrs underneath the altar of God. The text specifically affirms that John saw “the souls of them that had been slain” (9). “Soul” cannot be a figure of speech for the entire person, because John saw the “souls of them” that were slain. Moreover, these souls were under the altar of God, but their dead bodies were still on earth. The resurrection had not transpired. Additionally, these souls were conscious, as evinced by the fact that they: spoke (crying out to the Lord); wondered (How long, O God?); remembered (their fellow saints still on earth); reasoned (concluding that the punishment of evil men is just); and, received a preliminary reward (white robes) in anticipation of the final victory (10-11).

2. The Consciousness of the Wicked— While it may be granted that the faithful survive the death of the body, does that premise hold true for the lost? Are they conscious in their estrangement from the Creator?

a. The Psalmist once described a particularly distressing time in his life as being like “Sheol,” which, in this context, represents the state of punishment for lost people immediately following death. He noted that it was an existence of “pain” where he “found trouble and sorrow” (Psa. 116:3). Each of these terms suggests consciousness.

b. Similarly, Jonah characterized his tormenting hours in the great fish's belly as like being in “Sheol”;...it was an environment of “affliction” (John 2:2).

c. Daniel wrote concerning the condemned who are raised from the dust to a state of “shame and everlasting contempt” (Dan. 12:2).

d. Jesus declared that those who die unprepared will be subjected to “eternal

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punishment" (Mt. 25:46). "Punishment" clearly implies awareness; this is why the New World Translation (Watch Tower Society) changes "punishment" to "cutting off." Observe also that the punishment of the unbeliever is as enduring as the "life" (fellowship with God) of the believer.

e. Paul does not hesitate to affirm that those who "know not God," and those who "obey not the gospel," will "suffer punishment, even eternal destruction from the face of the Lord and from the glory of his might" (2 Thes. 1:9). The term "destruction" does not connote annihilation. Rather, it is "the loss of a life of blessedness after death, future misery" (Thayer, p. 443).

f. The book of Revelation describes the anguished fate of those who experience the "wrath of God." They are tormented forever and ever (14:10-11).

3. Biblical Descriptives—There are numerous figures of speech in the New Testament that are designed to stress both the conscious nature of hell's punishment, and its abiding duration. The ultimate fate of the wicked will be like an "eternal fire" (Mt. 25:41); indeed, their "worm dies not [i.e., the gnawing anguish continues on and on] and the fire is not quenched" (Mk. 9:48). Hell is a place of outer darkness where there is weeping and the gnashing of teeth (Mt. 25:30), as God treads the winepress of his holy wrath (Rev. 19:15).

Surely it should be obvious that these are symbols intended to convey the horrors of eternal rectitude. The actual punishment will be greater than any figure of speech can portray. A recent writer observes:

A summary of all Scripture that speaks of hell indicates that there is the loss and absence of all good, and the misery and torment of an evil conscience. The most terrifying aspect is the complete and deserved separation from God and from all that is pure, holy, and beautiful. In addition there is the awareness of being under the wrath of God and of enduring the curse of a righteous sentence because of one's sins that were consciously and voluntarily committed" (Powell, p. 953).

Eternal Punishment And Divine Justice

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Many have a difficult time reconciling the doctrine of eternal punishment with the character of a benevolent God. Over against this emotional reaction is the sobering testimony of the Bible. Moreover, when all factors are taken into consideration, the problem is not insurmountable. Reflect upon the following points.

1. No one will be in hell who does not deserve to be there. God is loving (1 Jn. 4:8), good (Psa. 145:9), and merciful (Eph. 2:4). He will only do that which is right (Gen. 18:25). The Lord does not desire that a single soul should perish (2 Pet. 3:9), but when men choose to live alienated from him, and cast their eternal welfare toward hell, he will honor their decision. Paul wrote concerning those who are "vessels of wrath fitted unto destruction" (Rom. 9:22). Arndt & Gingrich, viewing the verb as a middle voice form, suggest that these "prepared themselves for destruction" (p. 419). When folks thrust from them the Word of God, they judge themselves unworthy of eternal life (Acts 13:46). Atheists somehow feel that the Lord is obligated to force rebels into his eternal, holy presence, even when they have despised Him their entire lives!

2. Because Jehovah is holy, he cannot simply overlook sin as if it does not exist

(Hab. 1:13); and so, because the Lord is just (Psa. 89:14), evil must be punished (cf. Rev. 16:5). That is why the Father gave his Son as a sacrifice for sin that he might remain just, and yet be a justifier of those who obey Christ (cf. Rom. 3:24-26; Heb. 5:8-9). No man can complain about the injustice of hell in the face of the cross!

3. Even in hell the judgment will be fair. The Scriptures teach that punishment will be proportionate to the degree of one's guilt (Cf. Mt. 10:15; 11:20-24; Lk. 12:47-48; Heb. 10:29; Rev. 20:12-13). One will be judged according to his knowledge, ability, and opportunity. God will be equitable!

Conclusion

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The doctrine of eternal punishment was taught by Jesus Christ (who said more about hell than heaven), it was acknowledged by the early church, it was endorsed by the "church fathers" (Buis, pp. 53-67), and it was defended by the theologians of the Middle Ages and the Reformation period. However, beginning with the eighteenth century a new wave of "clergymen" within the ranks of "Christendom" began to deny this fundamental tenant of Biblical doctrine, and today a significant segment of American society (almost half) no longer believes in hell.

Further, the evidence is mounting that there is a weakening posture on this theme within the church. It is time that faithful gospel preachers give more diligence to teaching the truth of God's retribution. Ig-noring the truth changes nothing.—Selected