

Raising
(Questions
About) Hell

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10 QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BIBLICAL
VIEW OF HELL'S REALITY

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Introduction



Until the nineteenth century almost all Christian theologians taught the reality of eternal torment in hell. Here and there, outside the theological mainstream, were some who believed that the wicked would be finally annihilated. . . . Even fewer were the advocates of universal salvation, though these few included some major theologians of the early church. Eternal punishment was firmly asserted in official creeds and confessions of the churches. It must have seemed as indispensable a part of universal Christian belief as the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation. Since 1800 this situation has entirely changed, and no traditional Christian doctrine has been so widely abandoned as that of eternal punishment.¹

Unfortunately, Richard Bauckham's words still ring true. The thirty years since he wrote them have seen little to overturn the verdict that there has been a wide abandonment of the traditional Christian doctrine of Hell. And yet there has been a startling new development. Following the Enlightenment, many people embraced universalism, the view that everyone will be saved. And since that view and its denial of Hell blatantly contradict biblical teaching, others opted not to deny the doctrine of Hell but to modify it and to espouse annihilationism. This view holds that the lost in Hell would be exterminated and cease to exist. But it is also difficult to reconcile this view with the teaching of Scripture.

So, what is the startling new development? The new development is not that forms of universalism and annihilationism are taught. It is that they are now taught within

¹ Richard J. Bauckham, "Universalism: A Historical Survey," *Themelios* 4/2 (January 1979): p. 48.

the church. Attacks that used to come from outside the ranks of the professing Christian church now come from within its doors. Two examples will suffice. In 1998, a year after his death, pastor Jan Bonda's book defending universalism was published: *The One Purpose of God: An Answer to the Doctrine of Eternal Punishment*.² In the same year, two years after his death, British New Testament scholar John Wenham's book was released, titled *Facing Hell: An Autobiography 1913–1996*. Toward the end of this book he shared his reasons for advocating annihilationism.³ Bonda and Wenham are not critics of Scripture attacking the church's teaching from without. They are evangelical Christians writing from within the church.

Such a development calls for a biblical response. It is our hope that the following interview will begin to address these problems and will point those in search of more answers in helpful directions.

2 It was published in Grand Rapids, MI, by Eerdmans.

3 It was published in Carlisle, UK, by Paternoster.

Foundations



1. How did you arrive at your convictions on the doctrine of Hell and why has this become a doctrine that you have sought to defend and teach?

In order to answer this question it is necessary first to define some key terms concerning the eternal destiny of human beings.

Universalism is the view that eventually everyone will be saved. For good biblical and theological reasons, this view has been held by few believers in the history of the church. Jesus' words in Matthew 18:6–9; 25:31–46; Mark 9:42–48; and his apostles' teaching in 2 Thessalonians 1:5–10; Jude 7, 13; and Revelation 14:9–11; 20:10, 14–15 have caused those with a high view of Scripture to reject universalism.

Postmortem evangelism, also called eschatological evangelism, is the view that at least some human beings will be given an opportunity after death to believe the gospel and be saved. Although a small number of evangelical scholars of various traditions espouse this view today, John 8:21, 24; and Hebrews 9:27 contradict it.

Annihilationism, as held by some evangelicals, is to be distinguished from mortalism, the view that at death the dead cease to exist. Mortalism is contradicted by Scripture's clear teaching in both testaments that the dead will be raised (Daniel 12:2; John 5:28–29; Acts 24:15; Revelation 20:11–15). Evangelical annihilationists agree

with the historic view of the church up to a point: Christ will return, the dead will be raised, the Last Judgment will occur, and the unsaved will be cast into Hell, where they will pay the penalty for their sins. Unlike orthodoxy, however, annihilationism maintains that the unsaved will pay that penalty over a shorter or longer time, and then they will suffer the last stroke — the extinction of their being, which is said to be the worst possible fate. The more popular term for this view today is conditional immortality, or **conditionalism** for short, which holds that God, who alone possesses immortality inherently (which is correct; see I Timothy 6:16), does not give immortality to all human beings (which is incorrect in light of Matthew 25:34, 41, 46, to cite one passage), but only to those whom he regenerates. Those who die unsaved, and therefore lack immortality, will eventually cease to exist.

Traditionalism is the historic view of the Christian church, having been held by Tertullian, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and Edwards, as well as twentieth-century evangelicals who wrote standard systematic theologies for various traditions: Francis Pieper (Lutheran), Louis Berkhof (Reformed), Lewis Sperry Chafer (dispensationalist), and Millard Erickson (Baptist). The historic view holds that the wicked will suffer eternal conscious punishment at the hands of the living God.

Although I received the doctrine of Hell as a part of my seminary education, I did not begin to examine it critically until I came into contact with writers espousing the aberrant views expressed above. I took those views very seriously and found them lacking as I taught on the topic of eternal destinies and wrote *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment* in 1995. I became increasingly aware that whereas in the history of the church attacks on the doctrine of Hell largely came from outside the church,

in recent times that situation has been changing. From within the church, Christians, including numbers of evangelicals, have been rejecting traditionalism for conditionalism, with a few inclined toward postmortem evangelism, and a very few even teaching universalism.

Out of a concern for the truth, I wrote rejecting these views and in defense of the orthodox historic position. I debated conditionalist (annihilationist) Edward Fudge in *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical and Theological Dialogue*.⁴ In 2004 I co-edited with Christopher Morgan *Hell under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment*.⁵ Here Albert Mohler sounds the alarm concerning false views of Hell today, J. I. Packer opposes universalism, and Chris Morgan refutes annihilationism.

2. Could you state briefly the essential outlines of the doctrine of Hell and some of the key texts where it is taught?

The main outlines of the Bible's teaching on the Last Judgment, which issues in the eternal destinies of Heaven (more precisely eternal life with God and all of the resurrected saints on the new earth) and Hell, include its timing, purposes, and circumstances.

The timing of the Last Judgment. It will occur at the end of the age (Matthew 13:40–43), after Christ's second coming (Matthew 25:31–32, 34, 41, 46), after the resurrection of the dead (Revelation 20:12–13), and before the new heavens and the new earth (2 Peter 3:7–13).

The purposes of the Last Judgment are three. The first and foremost of these is to display the glory of God in the salvation of his people and damnation of the wicked. That day will reveal his sovereignty, righteousness, power, truth, and holiness (Romans 2:5; Revelation 11:17–18;

4 InterVarsity Press, 2000.

5 Zondervan Publishing House, 2004.

15:3-4; 16:5-6). Second, the Judgment will not *determine* eternal destinies; they are determined before death by people's relation to Christ (John 3:16-18). Rather, the Judgment will *assign* those destinies (John 5:27-29). Third, the Judgment will reveal degrees of reward and punishment (Matthew 11:22-24; Luke 12:47-48; 19:16-19; Romans 2:5; 1 Cor. 3:12-15).

The circumstances of the Last Judgment are three. First, God will be the Judge. Sometimes, Scripture attributes the work of the final judgment to the Father (e.g., Romans 14:10; 1 Peter 1:17), sometimes to the Son (e.g., Matthew 16:27; John 5:22), and never to the Holy Spirit. But because God is the holy Trinity and the three persons are inseparable, it is best to say that the final Judgment will be performed by the Trinity, especially the Father and the Son.

Second, angels and all human beings will be judged. Scripture teaches the judgment of angels (1 Corinthians 6:2-3; 2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6). It also teaches the judgment of all human beings (Romans 2:5-6; 3:6; Revelation 20:12-13).

Third, contrary to what many assume, the Last Judgment will not be based on faith or lack of faith, but on what people have done, which reveals their faith or lack of faith. Judgment is based on thoughts (1 Corinthians 4:5), words (Matthew 12:36), and deeds (2 Corinthians 5:10; Revelation 20:12-13). It is not difficult to understand that it is just for God to deal with the lost in this way. He does not condemn them because they have not heard of Jesus.⁶ Instead, they are condemned for their sins and have no protest as to the justice of their condemnation.

The problem, of course, is the judgment of the righteous based on deeds. It is important to see how clear this is in Scripture (Psalm 62:12; Matthew 16:27;

6 Although Jesus is the only way to salvation: John 14:6; Acts 4:31.

John 5:28–29; Romans 2:6–11), and to see that even these deeds are a part of the salvation by grace given to God’s people. These deeds are the work of the Father (Philippians 2:12–13), done by abiding in the Son, apart from whom we can do nothing pleasing to God (John 15:5), and they are the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23).

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