

The Nature of Hell – Everlasting Punishment or?

(1) Introduction

'There is no doctrine I would more willingly remove from Christianity than hell, if it lay in my power..... I would pay any price to be able to say truthfully 'All will be saved.'

C S Lewis

Recently, among evangelicals, there has been a renewed interest in the doctrine of hell. and one of the central questions being asked concerns whether hell is eternal conscious torment, or whether the wicked are annihilated after judgement.

(2) Definitions

(1) Conditional immortality is the name given to the doctrine that states that human beings are not inherently immortal, but rather have immortality conferred upon them as part of the experience of salvation. Therefore, all the redeemed will be immortal, and life in the new heaven and earth will be everlasting and consist of a perfect and glorious existence. It is often said that this life in the new earth will be eternal both quantitatively and qualitatively, the former referring to duration, the latter to the type of eternal existence – joy, happiness, fulfilment, satisfaction etc.

(2) Annihilationism, which is usually associated with conditional immortality, states that the wicked will not suffer conscious torment forever, but that after death and judgment they will be destroyed, ceasing to exist. Annihilationism is virtually a corollary of conditional immortality, for if immortality were inherent, then it follows annihilation could not be a satisfactory explanation of hell.

(3) The traditional view is commonly interpreted to be that punishment for the wicked is everlasting and that it is punitive not redemptive. The punishment is interpreted as being both physical and mental.

3) A Short History of the Views that have been held in the past

(a) The Early Church

(i) Origen – Universalism

(ii) Irenaeus – Conditional Immortality

(iii) Gregory of Nyssa – Universal Restorationism

(iv) Augustine of Hippo – Unending retribution

(b) 19th Century
Conditional immortality view received great attention and support.

(c) 20th Century
Conditional Immortality view attracted the attention of many evangelical scholars through the publication of two important works by leading evangelicals John Wenham and John Stott.
The Evangelical Alliance published a study in 2000 entitled "The Nature of Hell", in which the writers concluded 'that the interpretation of hell in terms of conditional immortality is a significant minority evangelical view'.

4) The Biblical Case

1) Language- what does the biblical word 'destroy' mean?
a) it means destroy – cease to exist.
b) it means perishing – continuing to exist but ruined.

2) Imagery of fire – is the main purpose of this imagery to show destruction or the infliction of sensory pain? One of the main questions on this point is: from what source are the biblical writers drawing their imagery? Is it the Old Testament (ie Isaiah 66v 24) which indicates destruction or intertestamental book Judith 16 v17 where fire is concerned with pain rather than destruction.

3) The question of preconceptions – we bring to the text our preconceptions. For instance, our understanding of 'eternal' being about time and not quality.

5) The Theological Case

1) Immortality – do human beings have an immortal soul which cannot be destroyed? Followers of Conditional Immortality argue that biblical teaching has been, in the past, illegitimately interpreted in the light of platonic philosophy.
2) Love and Justice – What useful purpose does eternal suffering provide? Where is the love and justice in eternal conscious torment?

Traditionalists respond in a number of ways:

- Make a distinction between sins committed against God (who is infinite) and sins committed against finite beings.
- God (not us) must be allowed to determine what punishments are appropriate and what are not.
- Eternal conscious punishment does glorify God as a righteous judge.
- Those in hell are continually impenitent.
- There are degrees of punishment in hell.

3) Victory – Conditional immortality supporters argue that 'eternal torment involves an eternal cosmological dualism, which is impossible to reconcile with the conviction that ultimately God will 'be all in all'.'

Traditionalists argue that actually hell's eternal presence is a confirmation of God's justice – a permanent reminder of his Lordship over all.

4) The Blessedness of the Redeemed

How can those who have been saved live in perfect joy, knowing of the torment which would be going on in hell?

Traditionalists argue that throughout the Old Testament and New Testament the people of God rejoice over the judgement of the wicked. (ie Psalm 149 vv 6-9 Rev 18v20, 15vv2-3, 14v 10).

6) Hell as an Impetus for Evangelism and morality.

a) The criticism is sometimes made by traditionalists that the conditional immortality view is less fearful than the traditional view. Therefore for Christians to accept the conditional immortality view would inevitably weaken evangelistic zeal!

Nigel Wright addresses the use of hell as an impetus for evangelism with these words: "The motives for mission are greater and richer than this. We engage in mission because the Christian gospel is true, it enables human beings to find liberation and fulfil their destiny; because through it people receive the spirit of the messianic age, and come themselves to participate in his mission of redemption; and because through the gospel, people learn how to give glory to God, Father, Son and Spirit. This seems to be enough motivation to be going on with".

b) Conditional Immortality fails to act as a moral deterrent.

Conclusion

John Stott writes that the late Professor F. F. Bruce, (a world renowned evangelical scholar) wrote to him in 1989 saying 'annihilation is certainly an acceptable interpretation of the New Testament passages'. Professor Bruce added 'For myself, I remain agnostic'.

D Powys quote ; 'It is an appreciation of the magnitude of the gain made by those who are Christ's and the corresponding loss of those who are not, that a fully biblical motivation for evangelism is to be found Biblical evangelism will be motivated by a loving enthusiasm that all might have life, and have it abundantly. In its future aspect, this motivation is that no person shall forgo the superb prospect of life after death in its one and only form: to be raised by the Lord Jesus, to share in his eternal kingdom. Evangelism that is grounded in biblical themes will always be primarily concerned with 'salvation to', rather than 'salvation from'. Its orientation will be a positive concern that people may enter under the saving reign of God in Jesus, rather than a negative preoccupation with deliverance from 'hell'.