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## Focus

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*This article is the first in an important series entitled 'Focus' in which we intend to draw attention to major biblical doctrines. The purpose of the series, first of all, will be to uphold and elucidate foundational scriptural truths then, secondly, to report and comment on the way in which these doctrines are regarded in our contemporary situation. Prompted by a rationalist/existentialist philosophy and encouraged by a 'new mood of Christian humility' involving a 'flexible', open attitude towards the truth, many church leaders and theologians in our generation have seriously modified or rejected all the foundational orthodox doctrines of Scripture. Sadly, an increasing number of evangelicals, too, are abandoning an orthodox position on a number of important doctrines. In Focus, therefore, we intend to provide an over-all view of these developments and alert readers to the wind of change blowing strongly at present through the churches.*

*Thirdly, we want to challenge Christians to think more biblically and theologically in relation to these doctrines. For example, do we understand and appreciate the teaching and implications of these truths ourselves? Our final purpose in this series will be to encourage and help preachers teach and contend for these truths in their churches.*

*This present article focuses on the much neglected and disputed doctrine of Eternal Punishment and in our next issue the Rev. Hywel Jones, an associate editor, will focus on the Doctrine of Scripture.*

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## Focus : 1 Eternal Punishment

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The member churches of the BEC assent to the biblical truth that unbelievers will be condemned by God to hell where they will be punished eternally for their sins under the righteous judgement of God.<sup>1</sup> Although, in the words of J.W. Wenham,<sup>2</sup> this is "the ultimate horror of God's universe" yet the church today, observes Peter Hamilton with a degree of satisfaction, "seldom mentions hell".<sup>3</sup> One reason for this silence, of course, is that Christendom in general rejects the notion of a literal and eternal hell. Throughout the twentieth century a growing number of theologians and church ministers have rejected and ridiculed this

doctrine. Barth's universalism, Tillich's existentialism and William Barclay's liberalism are all too familiar to us. "The doctrine of an absolutely opposite eternal destiny of individuals," wrote Paul Tillich, "cannot be defended",<sup>4</sup> whereas D.M. Baillie could confidently write in 1936 that hell is "open to serious objection ... it can hardly be held adequate to the truth of Christianity."<sup>5</sup> Writing in 1980, Hendrikus Berkhof (not to be confused with Louis Berkhof!) is representative of contemporary theologians in his candid rejection of the orthodox doctrine of hell. "The ease," he writes, "with which many orthodox Christians used to and still designate at least 95% of the human race as lost betrays much thoughtlessness and harshness. Fortunately, secularism and the intense contact with non-Christian worlds compel us to a deeper and more careful consideration of this matter."<sup>6</sup> Possibly the most pernicious and popular condemnation of the doctrine of hell recently is by Robert Short (the author of **The Gospel According to Peanuts**, a book, incidentally, which is read by many Christian students in the colleges) in a book published in 1983 with the title, **The Gospel From Outer Space**. Written against the background of the film **ET** and with the effective employment of cartoons, the author devotes at least one chapter to denouncing the orthodox doctrine of hell, claiming that "the threat of eternal damnation prevents a proper understanding of the goodness of 'the good news' of Christ ..."<sup>7</sup>

## Objections

Such examples could be multiplied but it will be more useful to notice, briefly, some of the reasons given by these people for rejecting this biblical doctrine. The major reasons can be classified in a fourfold way, namely — philosophical, theological, hermeneutical and ethical.

In addition to the total depravity of human nature blinding the mind and making it averse to God and His self-revelation, **philosophical** reasons and presuppositions are also basic in determining the theological and hermeneutical approach to the subject of hell. I do not intend to refer to the more technical arguments of philosophers which are frequently expressed by means of analytical philosophy. It will be adequate for our purpose here to confine ourselves briefly by way of illustration to two contemporary philosophers. The first is John Hick, a trained philosopher who is now the H.G. Wood Professor of Theology in the University of Birmingham. His books, especially **EVIL AND THE GOD OF LOVE**<sup>8</sup> and also **DEATH AND ETERNAL LIFE** include numerous arguments against the doctrine of eternal punishment. He writes, for example, of the "evident incongruity, if not self-contradiction, in the very notion of perpetual torment."<sup>9</sup> In an orderly manner he also marshals all the objections and arguments against this orthodox position: "for a conscious creature to undergo physical and mental

torture through unending time (if this is indeed conceivable) is horrible and disturbing beyond words; and the thought of such torment being deliberately inflicted by divine decree is totally incompatible with the idea of God as infinite love; the absolute contrast of heaven and hell, entered immediately after death, does not correspond to the innumerable gradations of human good and evil; justice could never demand for finite human sins the infinite penalty of eternal pain; such unending torment could never serve any positive or reformatory purpose precisely because it never ends; and it renders any coherent Christian theodicy impossible by giving the evils of sin and suffering an eternal lodgment within God's creation."<sup>10</sup>

A second example is Brian Hebblethwaite who argues "metaphysically ... that the final state of created being will be good without qualification, and the existence of hell would undoubtedly introduce a major permanent qualification."<sup>11</sup> Hebblethwaite then concludes that "religious agnosticism about God's eternal plans for the created universe is an inevitable stance for the reflective theist."<sup>12</sup> These writers do not make any appeal to the Bible as their supreme authority but rather human reasoning is the criterion for deciding what is 'true' or acceptable.

The **theological** objection centres around the alleged incompatibility of the divine wrath and love. "Guided by the universal scope of divine love," remarks Peter C. Hodgson, "Christian hope will rebel against every doctrinal restriction which sets limits to the vision of hope." Another theologian suggests that the reason why the church today seldom mentions hell is "because we have at last learned the truth that God is love and that the divine love predominates over the divine justice. I do not myself see how one can possibly combine God's love with the idea of eternal punishment ..."<sup>14</sup> Critics refuse to accept the harmony of the biblical approach that the divine love is also a holy, righteous love exercised consistently by God. Modern theology has created its own perverted image of God.

**Hermeneutically**, the doctrine of eternal punishment is more often dismissed as mythological and figurative or symbolic. The late John Robinson, for example, wrote: "... life can be hell ... for that is really what hell is about — the dark side, the shadow side, of life ..."<sup>15</sup> He then describes three kinds of experiences which can be described as 'hell': "1. Experiences of suffering, frightfulness and torture — physical or mental ... 2. Experiences of madness — when reality, or the loss of reality, becomes unendurable. Many representations of hell have in fact been psychotic — descriptions of a nightmare world. 3. Experiences of alienation — of being up against it in a relationship from which one cannot get away ..."<sup>16</sup> Along similar lines Robert Short affirms: "when we see through the outward, parabolic form in which the New Testament

mentions 'hell', we can see that it's talking about the reality of a 'judgment' that occurs in the present, in **this** lifetime, **inside** our hearts ... Even if the wicked never end up in hell, that doesn't mean that in the meantime hell won't be in them."<sup>17</sup> Hebblethwaite also supports the view "that hell and eternal punishment are also figurative and symbolic notions, and do not literally describe permanent aspects of reality in the final consummation of the divine purpose."<sup>18</sup> Paul Tillich sees 'heaven' and 'hell' as "symbols of ultimate meaning and unconditional significance. But no such threat or promise is made about other than human life."<sup>19</sup> Tillich goes on to describe heaven and hell as "symbols and not descriptions of localities" which "point to the objective basis of blessedness and despair, i.e. the amount of fulfilment or non-fulfilment which goes into the individual's essentialization. The symbols must be taken seriously ... and can be used as metaphors for the polar ultimates in the experience of the divine."<sup>20</sup> This hermeneutical approach is governed by a strongly existentialist philosophy which is hostile to the revealed truth of scripture.

The **ethical** objection to the orthodox doctrine of hell is more well-known. "If God sends sinners to hell," people claim, "then He is cruel and immoral." A writer, representative of many contemporary scholars, insists that "morally speaking, the idea of eternal punishment has to be rejected by the sensitive moral conscience quite independently of religion."<sup>21</sup>

We need to note all these contemporary objections carefully and counter them in our churches if we are to communicate the whole counsel of God in a relevant and meaningful way. A great deal of work still needs to be done in this area if we are to teach the truth effectively today.<sup>22</sup>

## **Universalism**

What then are the popular alternatives today to the doctrine of eternal punishment? An increasingly popular alternative is universalism and it is now probable that Hebblethwaite's description of universalism as a "minority view" is no longer accurate.<sup>23</sup> Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King also report that in the past "a minority of theologians have taught a doctrine of universal salvation ... The majority of churches and theologians have resisted the teaching of universal salvation. Why? It seems," he replies, "that Christians have done what comes naturally — to hope chiefly for themselves, their own family and friends, and let the rest go to hell."<sup>24</sup> Professor Hick describes the belief in universal salvation as "a small underground stream"<sup>25</sup> since the time of Origen which, I suggest, has now surfaced as a fast-moving river. Certainly universalism has a wide general appeal today, both within and outside Christendom. According to this theory all people will be saved,

eventually if not immediately. This theory is obviously unbiblical but we need to note some of the biblical texts which universalists are misusing to support their position, such as 1 Corinthians 15:51, Philippians 2:10 and 1 Timothy 2:4. Universalism must be rejected as an unbiblical teaching for it requires us, in the words of Bruce Milne, “not only to revise our view of judgement but also change our view of the Judge.”<sup>26</sup>

## **Annihilation**

What about those contemporary theologians who do not accept the doctrine of universal salvation or the doctrine of eternal punishment? John Hick is correct in observing that “they usually speak of the finally lost as passing out of existence”<sup>27</sup> (annihilation). What is disturbing, however, is the growing number of evangelical writers and preachers who espouse the theory of annihilation (conditional immortality). One such example is Stephen Travis in a book which is widely read in churches and popular in Christian Unions.<sup>28</sup> “In the last hundred years,” he writes, “considerable ground has been gained by an alternative view to eternal punishment, known as ‘conditional immortality’ or ‘annihilationism’ ... In my view the New Testament does not express itself clearly for one or the other of these options ... If pressed, I must myself opt for the latter (annihilationism).”<sup>29</sup> John W. Wenham sympathises with Travis when he declares: “we shall consider ourselves under no obligation to defend the notion of unending torment until the arguments of the conditionalists have been refuted.”<sup>30</sup> Reviewing Murray Harris’s recent book **RAISED IMMORTAL**,<sup>31</sup> John Wenham observes that “the searing question of the immortality of the damned — do they continue for ever in opposition to God or are they literally destroyed after suffering their just punishment?” is not dealt with by Dr. Harris at the depth it deserves.<sup>32</sup> It is almost unbelievable that Dr. Skevington Wood in his review of Travis’ book should make no reference at all to his support of annihilation.<sup>33</sup> This may be due partly at least to the fact that in England now a significant number of UCCF students and speakers, Evangelical Anglicans and others generally accept and even advocate the theory of conditional immortality. Donald Guthrie in his valuable **NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY**<sup>34</sup> leaves the question open-ended as does the **LION HANDBOOK OF CHRISTIAN BELIEF**.<sup>35</sup>

It is refreshing to find other evangelical writers who declare themselves uncompromisingly in support of the orthodox position. William Hendriksen, for example, maintains that “the passages in which this doctrine of everlasting punishment for both body and soul is taught are so numerous that one actually stands aghast that in spite of all this there are people today who affirm that they accept Scripture and who, nevertheless, reject the idea of never-ending torment ... One hears the objection, ‘But does not Scripture teach the destruction of the wicked?’

Yes, indeed, but this destruction is not an instantaneous annihilation, so that there would be nothing left of the wicked; so that, in other words, they would cease to exist. The **destruction** of which Scripture speaks is an **everlasting destruction** (2 Thessalonians 1:9) ...”<sup>36</sup> Another American, Millard J. Erickson, comes out clearly in his first volume in favour of eternal punishment but we will have to await his fuller treatment until the projected third volume appears.<sup>37</sup>

Let us now look at ourselves and ascertain the way in which we should approach this important and frightening doctrine. We must consider three basic aspects of this doctrine, namely, the definition of hell, the nature of hell and the duration of hell.

### **Hell: Its definition**

The fact that there are four words translated ‘hell’ in the Authorised Version of the Bible and also the insistence of Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses that we have misunderstood the correct significance of these words makes it essential for us to define these words carefully and correctly.

*Tartarus* is a Greek name for the underworld, especially for the abode of the damned and the only appearance of the word in the New Testament is in 2 Peter 2:4. This word clearly refers to hell but the real controversy centres around the other three words — *SHE’OL*, *Hades* and *Gehenna*. *SHE’OL* is a common Hebrew word describing the location of the dead, meaning ‘the depths’ or ‘the unseen state’ and occurs 65 times in the Old Testament. *SHE’OL* can have the restricted meaning of ‘the grave’ (e.g. Job 7:9, Genesis 37:35) or the state of death into which believers and unbelievers are brought (e.g. 1 Samuel 2:6, Job 14:13-14, Psalm 89:48) and sometimes as in Psalm 9:17 and Deuteronomy 32:22 ‘hell’ is clearly in view. *Hades* appears ten times in the New Testament and like *SHE’OL* is used in more than once sense, a fact which is crucial to a correct understanding of the words. *Hades*, too, sometimes means the state of death (e.g. Acts 2:27, Revelation 6:8) and in six out of the ten references in the New Testament it refers to hell (e.g. Luke 16:23). Louis Berkhof surveys the meaning and use of the words *SHE’OL* and *Hades* in a most helpful way: “In the Old Testament the word *SHE’OL* is used more often for ‘grave’ and less often for ‘hell’, while in the corresponding use of *Hades* in the New Testament the contrary holds.”<sup>38</sup> *Gehenna* is used twelve times in the New Testament and refers to ‘hell’ but the use of the word also includes the idea of the punishment of body and soul which will occur immediately after the final judgement (e.g. Matthew 10:28, Mark 9:43-47) and this is unique to the word *Gehenna*.

### **Hell: its nature**

Concerning the nature of hell, the biblical descriptions of hell can be

classified under the headings of separation and punishment. Passages like 2 Thessalonians 1:9, Matthew 7:23 and 25:41 underline the fact that separation from Christ is an essential feature of hell. In Matthew 25:46 our Lord speaks of hell also as “everlasting punishment”. The Greek word *kolasis*, translated ‘punishment’ is important, for Jehovah’s Witnesses translate this Greek word as ‘cutting-off’ in order to support their doctrine of annihilation. A quick look at the way in which the word is used in its verbal form in Acts 4:21 and 2 Peter 2:9 will show the absurdity of the Watchtower translation. There is need for more careful thought as to what constitutes the punishment of hell (e.g. Matthew 10:28, Mark 9:43-45, 2 Thessalonians 1:8, Jude 7, Revelation 14:11, 19:3, 20:10, etc.). How literal, for example, is the fire of hell? John Owen<sup>39</sup> and Jonathan Edwards emphasised that God Himself is a consuming fire to the ungodly but while figurative language may or may not be used, the warning of Hendriksen concerning the phrase “in flaming fire” (2 Thessalonians 1:7) is a salutary one: “To speak about a ‘mere’ symbol in such a connection is never right. The reality which answers to the symbol is always far more terrible (or far more glorious) than the symbol itself. Human language is stretched almost to breaking-point in order to convey the terrible character of the coming of the Lord in relation to the wicked.”<sup>40</sup>

## Hell: its duration

A great deal of controversy at present focuses on the eternity of hell’s punishment. In this context the meaning of the Greek word *aiōnios* in the phrase “**everlasting punishment**” (Matthew 25:46) is important. The word and its cognates are used seventy-one times in the New Testament. While it sometimes denotes an ‘age’ or an indefinite period of time, it is used in the majority of cases in the New Testament in the sense of ‘everlasting’. For example, the word expresses the eternity of God (Romans 16:26, 1 Timothy 1:17), the eternal Spirit (Hebrews 9:14), the endless reign of Christ (Revelation 1:18) and, on fifty-one occasions, it describes the unending bliss of the redeemed in heaven. It is well known that this same word is used twice in Matthew 25:46 both to describe the duration of ‘everlasting life’ and to describe the duration of hell so that one cannot escape the conclusion that when descriptive of hell it has the sense of ‘everlasting’.

In reply, the advocates of conditional immortality argue that eternal punishment is eternal in its effects but not in its suffering. They appeal to 1 Timothy 6:16 to try and deny the immortality of the soul (Hendriksen<sup>41</sup> has an excellent exposition here and answer to the annihilationists) and argue that descriptive terms like ‘death’, ‘destruction’, ‘perishing’ and ‘fire’ suggest an end. Here another important Greek word to watch in the New Testament is the verb *apollumi*, translated ‘destroy’ in Matthew

10:28. The word occurs eighty-five times in the New Testament and is variously translated as 'lose', 'perish' or 'destroy' in the AV but nowhere does it mean annihilation. To translate the word as 'annihilate' in 2 Peter 3:6 and Hebrews 1:11-12 or Luke 19:10, for example, would make nonsense of those verses. Furthermore, the Bible speaks of suffering and loss rather than annihilation for unbelievers, then the fact that there are degrees of punishment in hell (e.g. Matthew 10:14, 11:22-24; Luke 12:47-48) is also incompatible with the theory of annihilation.<sup>42</sup> While being extremely unhappy with the biblical doctrine of eternal punishment, Hendrikus Berkhof is honest enough to acknowledge that "a few biblical passages state" the doctrine clearly and that there has been "a reluctance to engage in a deeper probing of this frightening conviction." He then expresses his unease with the notion of annihilation for several reasons. First, he feels it "does not do justice to man's decision and is a defeat of God's love although hidden by an act of force" and exegetically he is persuaded that biblical terms like 'perdition', 'lost', 'destroy', 'death' used to support annihilation actually "presuppose a continuing existence."<sup>43</sup> He goes on to describe the idea of a second chance as a "pious fantasy" although he acknowledges it to be "psychologically appealing".

I greatly appreciate the warning issued by John Wenham to all those attracted by the now popular theory of annihilation. "Beware," he warns, "of the immense natural appeal of any way out that evades the idea of everlasting sin and suffering. The temptation to twist what may be quite plain statements of Scripture is intense." Secondly, he reminds us that "the modern world and the modern church have little use for a disciplined submission of the mind to the revelation of God ..." He also reminds us that the modern revival of conditionalism was pioneered mainly by Socinians and Arians (e.g. Jehovah's Witnesses and Christadelphians, etc.) who rejected other fundamental doctrines of the Bible. Wenham warns us to "be wary of such bed-fellows."<sup>44</sup> This is a useful point to make for it really "is a dangerous thing to meddle with the theology of the Bible; because all its doctrines ... are yet so wonderfully coherent that to touch one is to imperil the rest," adds E.M. Goulbourn.<sup>45</sup> Wenham also points out that the adoption of conditionalism does not solve all the difficulties but can be positively harmful in weakening our zeal for the gospel.

## **Preaching**

A final word to those of us responsible for preaching the Word. There is a pressing need for us to undertake a careful and fresh study of the doctrine of eternal punishment. Are we convinced ourselves that this doctrine is biblical? Do we grapple with the biblical data and teach it adequately? Preachers, do not neglect your study!



Although we may give assent to the orthodox doctrine of hell, we must ask ourselves whether we preach it and do so regularly. “The hearers are led to deny the truth which the preacher leaves out of his sermon,” was the sober warning of John Elias, to which he added, “Omitting any truth intentionally in a sermon leads to the denial of it.”<sup>46</sup> We need to examine our preaching in the light of this warning for we may believe the right things about hell and yet fail to preach it as an integral part of the gospel message. The late Professor John Murray underlines Elias’ warning: “A conspicuous defect ... is the absence of warning and of condemnation in evangelistic effort. The naturalistic temper of our age, united with its callousness, makes the doctrine of hell peculiarly uncongenial ... But hell is an unspeakable reality and, if evangelism is to march on its way, it must by God’s grace produce that sense of condemnation complexed by the apprehension of perdition as the due reward of sin.”<sup>47</sup> Do we proclaim faithfully this divinely given message?

But then **how** do we preach this doctrine of eternal punishment? Simplicity and directness are important. Jonathan Edwards and Charles Spurgeon, for example, made a telling use of illustrations to warn and enforce the doctrine with a sustained application at a level and in a language the people understood. This doctrine must also be preached with compassion. There can be no excuse for indifference or cold professionalism on the part of preachers. Our hearts must throb with the love of God if we are to be the faithful messengers of the Lord Jesus Christ. Remember, too, that we care for souls “as they that must give account” (Hebrews 13:17). Such is our responsibility that David Dickson described the ministry as “the most dangerous of all charges, because the account of lost souls within the church shall be craved at their hands, whether they have done all that which became them to do.”<sup>48</sup> Let us then contend for this doctrine of eternal punishment and preach it to our people fearlessly and compassionately.

## References

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14. PETER HAMILTON, p.296, op.cit.
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19. SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY, volume 3, p.326.
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21. Brian Hebblethwaite, p.102, op.cit.
22. The author is researching this subject in detail with a view to publication.
23. op.cit.
24. op.cit.
25. DEATH AND ETERNAL LIFE, p.200.
26. I WANT TO KNOW WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT THE END OF THE WORLD, p.117, Kingsway Publications, 1979.
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28. I BELIEVE IN THE SECOND COMING OF JESUS, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1982. The book is generally helpful but it seriously undermines the doctrine of eternal punishment.
29. idem., pp.196-198.
30. op.cit., p.41.
31. Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1983.
32. Evangelical Quarterly, October 1983.
33. idem. Another review of Travis' book is included in THEMELIOS, September 1983, p.34ff.
34. IVP, 1981. Guthrie insists that "there is no way of avoiding the conclusion that Jesus firmly accepted that there was a counterpart to heaven for those who were condemned before God" (p.888). He adds that the major idea of hell in the New Testament is "one of separation from God ... Another undeniable fact is that judgment is eternal. It is this latter fact which has led some, who consider eternal punishment to be unethical, to propound a theory of annihilation. The doctrine of eternal punishment is not an attractive doctrine and the desire to substitute for it the view that, at judgment, the souls of the wicked cease to exist, is understandable" (p.892).
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"Many Christians are undecided about the exact nature of this final state of judgment. Some believe ... eternally conscious of their banishment. Others hold that eternal punishment means complete annihilation."
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