

Eternal Punishment: Eternal or Temporal

by Fred Chay

I. The Theological Options

A. Life After Death Is Unlikely

"Immortality removes the terror from death. People who believe that when they die they will inherit eternal bliss may be expected to view death without horror...I believe that when I die I shall rot, and nothing of my ego will survive. I am not young, and I love life. But I should scorn to shiver with terror at the thought of annihilation. Happiness is none the less true happiness because it must come to an end, nor do though and love lose their value because they are not everlasting." Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian*, p. 47

"There is one very serious defect to my mind in Christ's moral character, and that is that He believed in hell. I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment. Christ certainly as depicted in the Gospels did believe in everlasting punishment, and one does find repeatedly a vindictive fury against those people who would not listen to His preaching-an attitude which is not uncommon with preachers, but which does somewhat detract from superlative excellence...I really do not think that a person with a proper degree of kindness in his nature would have put fears and terrors of that sort into the world...I must say that I think all this doctrine, that hell-fire is a punishment for sin, is a doctrine of cruelty. It is a doctrine that put cruelty into the world and gave the world generations of cruel torture; and the Christ of the Gospels, if you take Him as His chroniclers represent Him, would certainly have to be considered partly responsible for that." Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian*, pp. 22-23

B. Everyone Goes to Heaven: Universalism

"I underwent a spiritual conversion in which the whole world of Christian belief and experience came vividly to life, and I became a Christian of a strongly evangelical and indeed fundamentalist kind... I entered with great joy into the world of Christian faith. At this stage I accepted as a whole and without question the entire evangelical package of theology-the verbal inspiration of the Bible; creation and fall; Jesus as God the Son incarnate, born of a virgin, conscious of his divine nature and performing miracles of divine power; redemption by his blood from sin and guilt; his bodily resurrection and ascension and future return in glory; heaven and hell." John Hick, *God Has Many Names*, p. 2

"Occasionally attending worship in mosque and synagogue, temple and gurdwara, it was evident that essentially the same kind of thing is taking

place in them as in a Christian church—namely, human beings opening their minds to a higher divine Reality, known as personal and good and as demanding righteousness and love between man and man.” John Hick, *God Has Many Names*, p. 5

C. Unbelievers Get a Chance After Death: Postmortem Evangelism

“...the semiofficial position of the church since approximately the sixth century has been that hell lasts forever and that human beings thrown into it are tormented endlessly. To some, this has conveyed the picture of unceasing physical burning, while to other in recent times the torment has been re-imaged in terms of mental and psychological suffering. Whatever the image, the traditional understanding of hell is unspeakably horrible. How can one imagine for a moment that the God who gave his Son to die for sinners because of his great love for them would install a torture chamber somewhere in the new creation in order to subject those who reject him to everlasting pain?” Clark Pinnock, “Fire, Then Nothing,” *Christianity Today*, 20 March 1987, p. 40

“A fundamental point in this theology of religions is the conviction that God’s redemptive work in Jesus Christ was intended to benefit the whole world. Hence the title—A Wideness in God’s Mercy. The dimensions are deep and wide. God’s grace is not niggardly or partial. To use a phrase of political columnist Ben Wattenberg’s: ‘The good news is that the bad news is not true.’ For according to the Gospel of Christ, the outcome of salvation will be large and generous.” Clark Pinnock, “Fire, Then Nothing,” *Christianity Today*, 20 March 1987, pp. 19-20

“There is also a theological reason why we have felt uncomfortable with people of other faiths—a lack of confidence in God’s generosity toward them. Dark thoughts have clouded our minds. For centuries, thanks largely to the Augustinian tradition that has so influenced evangelicals, we have been taught that God chooses a few who will be saved and has decided not to save the vast majority of mankind. God is planning (in his sovereign freedom) to send most of those outside the church to hell, and he is perfectly in his rights to do so. If as a result large numbers perish, theologians have assured us that God would feel no remorse and certainly deserve no blame. The result of such instruction is that many read the Bible with a pessimistic control belief and find it hard to relate humanly to other people. This is hardly surprising. We have to answer the question, Does God love sinners at large or not?” Clark Pinnock, “Fire, Then Nothing,” *Christianity Today*, 20 March 1987, p. 19

“The first move theologically is to establish an optimism of salvation, to make it perfectly clear that God is committed to a full racial salvation... I want evangelicals to move away from the attitude of pessimism based

upon bad news to the attitude of hopefulness based upon Good News, from restrictivism to openness, from exclusivism to generosity. If we could but recover the scope of God's love, our lives and not just our theology of religions could be transformed. Clark Pinnock, *Fire, Then Nothing*, *Christianity Today*, 20 March 1987, pp. 19-20

"The logic behind a postmortem encounter with Christ is simple enough. It rests on the insight that God, since he loves humanity, would not send anyone to hell without first ascertaining what their response would have been to his grace. Since everyone eventually dies and comes fact to face with the risen Lord, that would seem to be the obvious time to discover their answer to God's call." Clark Pinnock, *Fire, Then Nothing*, *Christianity Today*, 20 March 1987, pp. 168-69

D. Unbelievers Are Ultimately Destroyed: Annihilationism

The main function of fire is not to cause pain, but to secure destruction, as all the world's incinerators bear witness; hence, the biblical expression "a consuming fire" and John the Baptist's picture of the Judge "burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matt. 3:12, cf. Luke 3:17). The fire itself is termed "eternal" and "unquenchable", but it would be very odd if what is thrown into it proves indestructible. Our expectation would be the opposite; it would be consumed forever, not tormented for ever. Hence it is the smoke (evidence that the fire has done its work) which "rises for ever and ever" (Rev. 14:11; cf. 19:3). David L. Edwards and John Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue*, pp. 316-18

"Would there not, then, be a serious disproportion between sins consciously committed in time and torment consciously experienced throughout eternity?... I question whether "eternal conscious torment" is compatible with the biblical revelation of divine justice, unless perhaps (as has been argued) the impenitence of the lost continues throughout eternity." David L. Edwards and John Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue*, pp. 318-19

"These texts do not lead me to universalism, because of the many others which speak of the terrible and eternal reality of hell. But they do lead me to ask how God can in any meaningful sense be called "everything to everybody" while an unspecified number of people still continue in rebellion against him and under his judgment. It would be easier to hold together the awful reality of hell and the universal reign of God if hell means destruction and the impenitent are no more." David L. Edwards and John Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue*, pp. 318-19

SDA- The punishment is eternal but not the punishing.
"The Reign of God: Theology of Seventh day Adventists"

E. Unbelievers Suffer Eternally in Hell: Orthodoxy

II. The Theology of the Old Testament

A. Primary Judgment Passages

1. The Flood, Genesis 6:5-6, 13, 17
 - a. God punishes sin
 - b. Punishment is death
 - c. The terminology includes: Perish, destroy, cut off, wipe out
2. The Destruction of Sodom & Gomorrah, Genesis 19:24-27
3. The Plagues of Egypt, Genesis 14:27-28

B. Passages concerning Sheol

C. Passages Suggesting Eternal Punishment

1. Isaiah 66:22-24
2. Daniel 12:1-2

III. The Theology of the Gospels and Eternal Hell

A. Hell is Real

1. Matthew 5:21-22
2. Matthew 5:27-30
3. Matthew 25:15, 23
4. Luke 16:19-31
5. John 3:16-17

6. John 3:36

B. Hell is Ruled by God

1. Matthew 7:23

2. Matthew 25:41, 46

C. Hell Involves Rejection

1. Matthew 7:23

2. Matthew 8:11-12

3. Matthew 25:30

D. Hell Involves Pain

1. Matthew 13:30, 40-43

2. Matthew 13:49-50

3. Matthew 18:6-9

4. Matthew 24:51

E. Hell and Eternity

Mark 9:42-48

IV. The Theology of the Apostles and Eternal Hell

"The strongest support of the doctrine of Endless Punishment is the teaching of Christ, the Redeemer of man... The Apostles enter far less into detailed description, and are far less emphatic upon this solemn

theme, than their divine Lord and Master. And well they might be. For as none but God has the right, and would dare, to sentence a soul to eternal misery, for sin; and as none but God has the right, and would dare, to execute the sentence; so none but God has the right, and should presume, to delineate the nature and consequences of the sentence." W. G. T. Shedd, *The Doctrine of Endless Punishment*, pp. 12-13

A. Paul

1. God's Wrath, Romans 2:5
2. God's Justice, 2 Thess. 1:5-10

B. Hebrews 6:1-3

C. Jude

1. Jude: 7
2. Jude: 13

D. Revelation

1. God's Wrath, Rev. 14:9-11
2. Second Death, Rev. 20:10, 14-15
 - a. Rev. 20:10
 - b. Rev. 20:14-15
 - c. Rev. 21:8
3. Banishment from God, Rev. 22:15

V. The Theology of Eternal Punishment in Church History

"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." Richard J. Bauckham, "Universalism: A Historical Survey," *Themelios* 4.2 (January 1979) p. 48

A. Augustine

1. "Now the reason why eternal punishment appears harsh and unjust to human sensibilities, is that in this feeble condition of those sensibilities under their condition of mortality man lacks the sensibility of the highest and purest wisdom, the sense which should enable him to feel the gravity of the wickedness in the first act of disobedience. Augustine, *The City of God*, ed. David Knowles, p. 988, (21.12)

2. "'Eternal' in the first passage is expressed in the second by 'for ever and ever', and those words have only one meaning in scriptural usage: the exclusion of any temporal end. And this is why there cannot conceivably be found any reason better founded or more evident for the fixed and immutable conviction of true religion that the Devil and his angels will never attain to justification and to the life of the saints. There can be, I say, no stronger reason than this: that the Scriptures, which never deceive, say that God has not spared them." Augustine, *The City of God*, ed. David Knowles, p. 1001, (21.23)

3. "If both are 'eternal', it follows necessarily that either both are to be taken as long-lasting but finite, or both as endless and perpetual. The phrases 'eternal punishment' and 'eternal life' are parallel and it would be absurd to use them in one and the same sentence to mean: 'Eternal life will be infinite, while eternal punishment will have an end.' Hence, because the eternal life of the saints will be endless, the eternal punishment also, for those condemned to it, will assuredly have no end." Augustine, *The City of God*, ed. David Knowles, p. 988, (21.23)

B. Thomas Aquinas

1. "We set aside the error of those who say that the punishments of the wicked are to be ended at some time. In fact, this view seems to have originated from the theory of certain philosophers who said that all punishments are for purposes of purification and so are to terminate at some time." Thomas Aquinas, *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith, Summa Contra Gentiles*, Bk 3, Pt 2, p. 216 (144.8)

2. "The magnitude of the punishment matches the magnitude of the sin.... Now a sin that is against God is infinite; the higher the person against whom it is committed, the graver the sin-it is more criminal to strike a head of state than a private citizen-and God is of infinite greatness. Therefore an infinite punishment is deserved for a sin committed against him." *Summa Theologiae*, Blackfriars, Ia, 2ae.25

C. Luther

"The fiery oven is ignited merely by the unbearable appearance of God and endures eternally. For the Day of Judgment will not last for a moment only but will stand throughout eternity and will thereafter never come to an end. Constantly the damned will be judged, constantly they will suffer pain, and constantly they will be a fiery oven, that is, they will be tortured within by supreme distress and tribulation." Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says*, 3 vols., 2:627

D. Calvin

1. "Now, because no description can deal adequately with the gravity of God's vengeance against the wicked, their torments and tortures are figuratively expressed to us by physical things, that is, by darkness, weeping, and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 8:12, 22:13), unquenchable fire (Matt. 3:12; Mark 9:43; Isa. 66:24), an undying worm gnawing at the heart (Isa. 66:24). By such expressions the Holy Spirit certainly intended to confound all our senses with dread." John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, The Library of Christian Classics, vols 20-21, 20: 1007 (3.25.12)

2. "As by such details we should be enabled in some degree to conceive the lot of the wicked, so ought we especially to fix our thoughts upon this: how wretched it is to be cut off from all fellowship with God. And not that only but so to feel his sovereign power against you that you cannot escape being pressed by it." John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, The Library of Christian Classics, vols 20-21, 20: 1007-8 (3.25.12)

E. Jonathan Edwards

1. "Eternity is the sting of the doctrine of hell torments whereby chiefly it is that it stings the consciences of wicked men and there is no other way to avoid the torment of it but to deny it. Edwards plainly defined hell's eternity: 'It is that duration that has no end'." John Gerstner, *Jonathan Edwards on Heaven and Hell*, p. 57

2. "When you look forward, you shall see a long forever, a boundless duration before you, which will swallow up your thoughts, and amaze your soul; and you will absolutely despair of ever having any deliverance, any end, any mitigation, any rest at all; you will know certainly that you must wear out long ages, millions of millions of ages, in wrestling and conflicting with this almighty merciless vengeance; and then when you have done so, when so many ages have actually been spent by you in this manner, you will know that all is but a point to what remains. So that your punishment will indeed be infinite. Oh who can express what the state of a soul in such circumstances is! All that we can possibly say about it, gives but a very feeble, faint representation of it; 'tis inexpressible and inconceivable'. For, 'who knows the power of God's anger'." John Gerstner, *Jonathan Edwards on Heaven and Hell*, p. 77-78

VI. The Theology of Temporal Punishment

A. Lexical: Vocabulary of Destruction

B. Hermeneutical: "Hell-Fire" Imagery

C. Theological: God's Justice

D. Theological: God's Goodness (universalism)

E. Theological: Immortality

Sources

Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment*

Larry Dixon, *The Other Side of the Good News: Confronting the Contemporary Challenges to Jesus' Teaching on Hell*

Ajith Fernando, *Crucial Questions About Hell*