

## Larry Dixon and “The Other Side”

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In the foreword of Larry Dixon’s book *The Other Side of the Good News*,<sup>1</sup> J.I. Packer states that “Dr. Dixon . . . has mounted an argument that, however disconcerting, must be reckoned with in any future discussion of Bible teaching on human destiny.”<sup>2</sup> Dixon’s argument is that the traditional view of hell, which entails the eternal conscious torment of the impenitent, must be maintained at all costs.

Dixon paints a grave picture of an evangelicalism in danger of losing its traditional teaching on hell. The “cults” have long denied it,<sup>3</sup> and now, tragically, even some evangelicals have questioned it. Defenders of the traditional view, however, “fighters for the faith,”<sup>4</sup> “must *not* throw in the towel.”<sup>5</sup> The traditional view is a necessary, nonnegotiable, essential element of evangelical Christianity.<sup>6</sup> In fact, annihilationists are worse than liberals.<sup>7</sup>

The presumptuousness which characterizes much of the book is evident even before it is opened. The cover boldly declares its purpose as “confronting the contemporary challenges to Jesus’ teaching on hell.” Of course few of the contemporary critics discussed in the book (and certainly none of the annihilationists) seek to challenge *Jesus’* teaching on hell any more than does Dixon; rather, we seek to elucidate *Jesus’* teaching. Unfortunately, this blurb is not the only example of Dixon’s dogmatism.

<sup>1</sup> Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 10, 149, 175.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 181-187.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

Though at times he exhibits restraint, Dixon can be caustic in dealing with his opponents. He ridicules other viewpoints and frequently resorts to sarcasm. “Rather than understanding Hebrews 10:31 correctly (‘It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of a living God’),” he writes, “some seem to have paraphrased it to say: ‘It is a (yawn) boring thing to fall into the hands of a harmless God!’”<sup>8</sup>

Dixon defends the traditional view against universalism (chapter two) and annihilationism (chapter three) and criticizes “universal explicit opportunity” (the view that everyone will hear the gospel message, even if in a post-mortem setting) in chapter four. In chapter five he argues from the Gospel of Matthew that Jesus taught the traditional view of hell.

Although Karl Barth was not strictly a universalist, Dixon’s criticism of his universalist tendencies, as well as his criticism of universalism generally, is satisfactory (if acrimonious). Annihilationists, however, will be most interested in chapters three and five.

The annihilationist arguments of evangelicals John R.W. Stott and Clark H. Pinnock are given special attention.<sup>9</sup> Dixon capitalizes on Pinnock’s admission of moral revulsion at the thought of eternal torment, writing that exegesis, not our personal feelings, should dictate our theology.<sup>10</sup> Of course we would agree.<sup>11</sup>

Dixon first argues that conditionalists have misunderstood the “orthodox” doctrine of the immortality of the soul. “Orthodoxy” does not teach that man has absolute immortality; that is, the soul is not indestructible. God could destroy souls if He so wished. Dixon thus attempts to place some distance between the traditional Christian view of the soul and the Greek philosophical view.<sup>12</sup> To this we would respond, of course, that we do not necessarily believe that Greek philosophical anthropology (or

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>9</sup> It is disappointing to see that Dixon scarcely deals with Edward Fudge’s monumental book, *The Fire That Consumes* (Houston, TX: Providential Press, 1982), which is considered the definitive work on hell by many annihilationists.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 74, 75, 156ff.

<sup>11</sup> I am not sure that Dixon has grasped Pinnock’s point, however (cf. Pinnock, “The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent,” *A Journal from the Radical Reformation*, Fall 1992, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 7, 8). The issue is an emotional one for all involved, and the fact is that no one gets their theology “straight from the Bible.” What one reads from the Bible is filtered through his religious tradition (even if that is “Protestantism” or “Fundamentalism”), cultural bias, education, and personal feelings before it is formed into his theology. Of course we strive to overcome these obstacles as best we can, but those most hindered by them are often those who deny them.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 75-77.

theology, for that matter) was directly imported into Christianity; rather, it influenced Christianity. Naturally those Christians who were influenced by Platonism filtered it through their own religious tradition.

### I. EXEGESIS

Dixon then challenges the annihilationist interpretation of verses (such as Matthew 10:28) which speak of the destruction of the soul by noting that terms such as *apoleia* (“destruction”) can also mean “lostness.”<sup>13</sup> But alternate lexical meanings alone are insufficient to undermine an exegetical argument; contextual considerations must also be addressed. In Luke 13:2, 3, for example, Jesus describes the deaths of Galilean martyrs and then states that “I tell you . . . unless you repent, you will all in like manner be destroyed [*apoleisthe*].” Clearly the destruction here is not “lostness” or even “ruin”; it is the cessation of life, or annihilation (cf. also vv. 4, 5).

Similarly, Dixon argues that the Old Testament term *carath* (“cut off”) cannot mean annihilation:

The wicked are sometimes described in Scripture as those who will be “cut off.” Both Fudge and Pinnock cite passages such as Psalm 37:22, 28, 34 and 38 as proving the annihilation of the wicked. The word which is used in those verses is *carath*, the same word which is used of the Messiah being “cut off” in Daniel 9:26! Certainly *carath* in that Messianic prophecy does not indicate that the Messiah would be annihilated.<sup>14</sup>

But we *do* believe that the Messiah was destroyed in death; he ceased to exist as a living person in those three days between his death and resurrection.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 78, 79.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>15</sup> Dixon believes that Christ spent those three days in Paradise, even denying that he descended into *hades* (for him, “hell”; for us, “the grave”). Cf. 111-119, 185.

Dixon goes on to argue against a literal interpretation of Psalm 104:35 (“Let the sinners be *consumed* out of the earth, and let the wicked *be no more*,” KJV, emphasis ours) by invoking similar expressions in Psalm 69:9 (“zeal for Your house *consumes* me,” emphasis ours) and Genesis 5:24 (“Enoch walked with God, then *he was no more*,” emphasis ours), and qualifies Malachi 4:1-3 (which describes the wicked as being “burned up”) with Job 30:30 and Revelation 14:10-11. But again, certain applications of terms and concepts do not necessarily invalidate others. We could also note that the tormenting of Revelation 14 does not necessarily rule out the eventual annihilation of the wicked, a point we will address shortly.

This type of eisegesis abounds in Dixon’s book, as when he explains away Philippians 2:11 and Colossians 1:20 (which clearly teach that all creation will be reconciled to God, implying the extinction of the wicked),<sup>16</sup> interprets “death” as “exclusion from God’s presence,”<sup>17</sup> and cites Hebrews 9:27 to prove the immortality of the soul.<sup>18</sup>

One of Dixon’s most important arguments against annihilationism involves Matthew 25:46.<sup>19</sup> If the destiny of the righteous is to enjoy “eternal life,” then surely the “eternal punishment” of the wicked is of equal duration. Furthermore, if the devil and his angels will burn in hell forever (Rev. 20:10) then surely those who share their fate (Matt. 25:41; Rev. 20:15) will likewise burn forever.

What is most disappointing is that Dixon does not explore the ongoing debate about the nuances of the term “eternal.” Does it bear a quantitative meaning, a qualitative meaning, or both? Naturally the term “eternal” sometimes bears the meaning “everlasting” or “unending.” However, the Old Testament frequently describes as “eternal” (*olam*) things which have certainly come to an end,<sup>20</sup> implying a qualitative rather than a quantitative meaning.

Many scholars have suggested that the Greek term *aionios* sometimes more properly describes the quality of the eschatological Age to Come.<sup>21</sup> This is apparent from the fact that the term *aion* often means “age,” and that “the present age” (*ho aion outos*) is often contrasted in Scripture with

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-63.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 76, 77. It should be noted that these popular arguments are by no means peculiar to Dixon. The point is, rather, that such arguments require radical reinterpretation of the biblical data. Of course it may be pointed out that one’s theology (or, perhaps better, one’s understanding of the majority of the biblical data) often requires one to interpret a verse in a manner not necessarily suggested by its context (for example, Dixon argues for hyperbole when addressing the scriptural term “destruction” [78, 79] and against it when addressing Mark 9:48 [80, 81], whereas many of us would argue against hyperbole in the first case and for it in the second). But the traditional view seems to require much more “explaining” and “interpreting” than ours.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 88ff; 128.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Oxford University Press, seventh printing, 1980, 761ff.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Anthony Buzzard, “The Life of the Age to Come,” *Wisdom & Power*, September 1992, Vol. 6, No. 6, 9-11. Dixon admits this meaning but dismisses it as an explanation of the “punishment” in Matthew 25:46 on the assumption that no one would apply it to the life of the redeemed (91, 128).

"the age to come" (*ho aion mellon*).<sup>22</sup> It is also significant that the New Testament term "eternal life" (*zoe aionios*) is derived from the LXX translation of Daniel 12:2, where the righteous are promised *haye olam*, "life in the [messianic] age." Thus the term "eternal life" may more properly mean "life in the age [to come]."

If the "eternal life" of Matthew 25:46 is more properly "life in the age," then the "eternal punishment" may also be "punishment in the age [to come]," i.e., the eschatological punishment of the future age. The term *aionios* or "eternal" need not mean "everlasting" in either instance.<sup>23</sup> It describes the eschatological nature of the reward and the punishment without necessarily defining the duration.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the term *eis tous aionas ton aionon*, "into the ages of the ages" (cf. Rev. 20:10; cp. 14:11), although depicting multiple (undefined) units of time, need not mean "forever."

Another important passage for Dixon is Luke 16:19-31, the parable of Lazarus and the rich man.<sup>25</sup> Dixon questions whether it is a parable but remains open.<sup>26</sup> He is unwilling, however, to let go of its parabolic details, insisting on finding an accurate individual eschatology therein. This is hardly surprising, for if literal the story would provide a wealth of information about "hell" not disclosed elsewhere. Obviously he must be selective about the details; he would like these verses to "teach that it [hell] is a place of *disembodied*, conscious spirits."<sup>27</sup> This in spite of the fact that these departed "souls" have eyes, fingers, and tongues (cf. vv. 23, 24).

## II. ETERNAL TORMENT AND GOD'S JUSTICE

Dixon makes some valid points, as when he responds to the annihilationists' charge that an infinite punishment for finite sin is unjust. He

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, University of Chicago Press, fourth edition, 1952, 27.

<sup>23</sup> Of course we do not deny that the resurrected saints will live forever. However, this fact need not be deduced strictly from such terms as "eternal life"; it may be established by other New Testament terms such as "immortality."

<sup>24</sup> It should be noted that the "eternal fire" with which Sodom and Gomorrah were punished (Jude 7) is not still burning, and that this reduction "to ashes" is a type of the destruction of the wicked (cf. 2 Pet. 2:4-9).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 130-144.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 130, 131.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 131, emphasis ours.

quotes Alan Gomes as writing that the heinousness of a crime is not directly related to the time it takes to commit it: "Some crimes, such as murder, may take only a moment to commit, whereas it may take a thief hours to load up a moving van with someone's possessions. Yet, murder is a far more serious crime than theft."<sup>28</sup>

His contention that only eternal torment adequately declares the justice and glory of God, however, is unconvincing. Although he writes that "we don't agree with the wag who said, 'Christianity ain't important unless somebody around here can get damned!'"<sup>29</sup>, his treatment of God's justice suggests otherwise.<sup>30</sup> Without hesitation he concurs with Jonathan Edwards that the suffering of the wicked "will be an occasion of their [the saints'] rejoicing, as the glory of God will appear in it. . . . God glorifies Himself in the eternal damnation of the ungodly men."<sup>31</sup>

Dixon believes that annihilationism lets the wicked off "too easily," that the prospect of nonexistence should be of great comfort to the impenitent.<sup>32</sup> Yet the annihilationist certainly agrees that the prospect of "going to hell" (specifically, being "thrown into the lake of fire," Rev. 20:15) is a terrifying one; being burned alive is excruciating enough. Elsewhere, Dixon quotes annihilationist John Wenham as writing that "Christ taught the existence of hell with a wealth of terrifying images."<sup>33</sup> Similarly, he quotes annihilationist Stephen Travis as writing that "to underplay [divine judgment] is to diminish human significance and to dismantle the gospel."<sup>34</sup>

The Achilles heel of annihilationism, Dixon contends, is that it is unable to account for the varying degrees of punishment reserved for the impenitent.<sup>35</sup> He writes:

The doctrine of annihilation posits a final, undifferentiated nonexistence for all the wicked. Those who hold this view might grant that

<sup>28</sup> Alan W. Gomes, "Evangelicals and the Annihilation of Hell, Part Two," *Christian Research Journal*, Spring 1991, 9, quoted in Dixon, *ibid.*, 82. This point is hardly new, however; Augustine also observed this principle (cf. Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 446).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-85.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>33</sup> John Wenham, *The Enigma of Evil*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1985, 27, quoted in Dixon, *ibid.*, 147.

<sup>34</sup> Stephen H. Travis, "The Problem of Judgement," *Themelios* 11, January 1986, 56, quoted in Dixon, *ibid.*, 177.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 95, 177.

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a temporary punishment of hellfire, its duration commensurate with the wicked person's just deserts, will occur, yet the final result is the same for every member of that class: they are all, equally, *no more*.<sup>36</sup>

Yet the fact that the *final* fate of all the wicked will be the same need not diminish our contention that the wicked will indeed experience varying degrees of punishment prior to their annihilation. This should not be a difficult point. If we say we believe in varying degrees of punishment, then we do.

### III. CONCLUSION

Dixon is a skilled writer and he has done his homework. His dogmatism, however, has prevented him from being entirely fair. I must disagree with J.I. Packer's statement quoted at the beginning of this article. *The Other Side of the Good News* presents no new arguments against annihilationism. It may strengthen the convictions of young seminarians who have begun to doubt their traditional view, but annihilationists, if they can get past Dixon's scathing portrayals, will probably remain unimpressed.

We do actually find some encouraging "good news" in Dixon's "bad news," however. The very publication of this book bears witness to the fact that the traditional view of hell is diminishing in popularity, and that more evangelicals are considering views like annihilationism. May this trend continue unabated, Dixon's protests notwithstanding.

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<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 95.