

Focus on the Kingdom

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Anthony Buzzard, editor

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The Greatest Speech

by Terry Anderson, Minnesota

Presidents and potentates throughout history have given speeches that have stood the test of time and critical analysis. From George Washington and Thomas Jefferson to Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and Ronald Reagan, all have given speeches that we would recognize today. In most of these speeches reference was made to peace and prosperity. After all, if you can't promise those two paradigms then what kind of politician would you be? Few of these leaders, past and present, have been able to fulfill their promises.

There is one leader who will promise, and fulfill, all that he will tell the people of the world. Jesus gave many speeches while on earth. Some are living by those words and many are not. Even if you were to live by his simple command (the second greatest commandment) to do to others as you would have them do to you, you may very well reap the blessings which that principle will bring. Jesus will instruct us upon his return to earth. Here is what he *might* say in that greatest speech of all:

Congratulations and welcome to you all, my brothers and sisters in whom I am well pleased, as is the Father. The Father and I have been waiting and anticipating this moment for 2000 years. The Father has been at this for 6000 years (of course not counting the time prior to man). We have been diligently planning, organizing, preparing for this most wonderful moment in the history of the world. It is finally here and I want you all to know that it is my deepest pleasure to welcome you all into the Kingdom of my Father, the God of all creation.

The Father and I have been observing, analyzing and choosing those who will rule with me. You all have been put through tests that you may not even have recognized were tests. The greatest test was what Abraham was challenged with — belief. You may think that was easy, but I'm telling you it was not. When Abraham was called, it was a test to see if he would follow, if he would believe the words spoken over many centuries concerning the one GOD and His purpose for mankind. Others were offered the same chance but only Abraham accepted. You have not been asked to offer up your only child, but you have all believed the Gospel message about the Kingdom and

the pathway to that Kingdom which came through me. For that and your exemplary attention to the New Covenant law, summed up in the second greatest commandment, you will be assigned positions of authority ruling over cities, states and countries. Since we are all of one mind, as I am with the Father, this process of governing, teaching and converting the world will not be onerous. It will be a work of joy seeing the millions who have come out of war, famine and disease begin to enjoy life as God intended it to be in the beginning with Adam and Eve.

After we celebrate the ushering in of the Kingdom with the finest wine and food you have ever eaten, I will begin to explain and authorize your responsibilities. Please understand that the world will not accept my teachings and our rulership without some resistance. But with my authority to rule with a "rod of iron," the nations, over time, will accept the inevitable rule of love, recognizing that it is for the good of them and the good of their children.

You might ask, if Satan and his demons are now incarcerated in the Abyss, then why would anyone want to rebel against a system that will bring true peace and prosperity? My friends, remember that God created in us free moral agency. In doing so, He knew that, with or without Satan, we could choose right or wrong. Indeed, Satan accelerated that process in many, but also, there were many who chose to walk a path of righteousness. It all begins with believing, as Abraham did, that God knows best, and with that knowledge, anyone who yields his spirit to that concept will find the path that leads to life. There are a relative few — all of you — who have found life in this new age, but many will follow. And I guarantee that Satan will not have won the majority of all those who have lived and died. The Father will defeat Satan and his desire to destroy the creation, especially mankind. With mercy, patience and empathy we will bring about harmony and salvation for the many.

Now, to give you a preview of your responsibilities, I will give you an example of how your commission will proceed. Even as a ruler over a city or a few cities you will also be working with a patriarch or an Apostle. For instance, if you have been living in the United States then you might have authority over cities which in turn may be ruled by a patriarch like Daniel or Job. The 12 Apostles, sitting with me here at the head table, will be ruling over the 12 tribes of Israel, and some of you will be assisting them in ruling over

your cities. Abraham, David, Noah, Isaiah, Elijah, and all of the righteous patriarchs who are with us today, not to forget John the Baptist and many others who committed themselves to God in the past, will have great commissions to assist me and all of you in governing the masses that made it through the Great Tribulation.

I will be sending you out to serve, not to be served. As I said to my disciples, "I came not to be served, but to serve mankind," even to the point of death. Let's keep this in mind in everything we do while working with the humans who transitioned into this new age. You will have great authority and power to rule over your subjects, but it is with love, mercy, patience and forgiveness that we will win over the masses. There may come a time when discipline and punishment need to be used, but that should be a last resort. If we are good leaders and teachers, I believe that will not be a common occurrence.

When the people see the abundance that will soon be manifest, and the peace amongst all people of all nations, our jobs will be increasingly easier and fulfilling. And never forget that we will be teaching and promoting one language (Zeph. 3:9). Remember, the Father confused the languages during the Tower of Babel so that technological advancement would not take place too soon. But now, as the world becomes one, that edict will be reversed. Good communication is the bedrock of understanding and cooperation. Removing the barrier of hundreds of languages will help immensely.

Let me address one last thing before we eat. You might be wondering about your new bodies. Inasmuch as you will not need to sleep, you will be able to accomplish a great deal more than if you were restricted by your old physical bodies. After my resurrection I was able to transcend the material world. I walked through walls and could travel back and forth to heaven in an instant. Psalm 115:16 says that "the heavens belong to the LORD, but He has given the earth to all humanity." The time will come when you will have the opportunity to travel through the universe. You will be astonished and filled with wonder.

So now, my brothers and sisters, let us eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we begin the long journey of a thousand years to remake this world and prepare for the great awakening of the billions who will be raised in the second resurrection. Glory to the Father on High for making this all possible and bringing it to pass.

¹D.E.H. Whiteley, *The Theology of St. Paul*, 1980, p. 106.

²Don Cupitt, *The Debate About Christ*, p. 138.

I am Jesus, your brother, Son of God, Son of Man, and High Priest after the order of Melchizedek. ✧

A Future for Monotheism

by Anthony Buzzard

"For a Jew the word God could mean One Person only...The use of the word God [for Jesus] would have seemed to be an infringement of monotheism, whereas by calling Jesus Lord they confessed that He was associated with His Father in the exercise of authority...Christ is Lord because He is God's vice-gerent, exercising a power that belongs to God."¹

"In my view Christianity should be much more tightly focused upon Jesus' words than it has usually been in the past...The real Jesus is a much more interesting and religiously relevant figure than the **divine Christ** of later faith, and he has the advantage of having actually lived."²

"In the teaching of Jesus Christ, God is preeminently the Father."³

"Forget the pseudo-orthodox attempts to make Jesus of Nazareth conscious of being the second Person of the Trinity...Jesus believed he was Israel's messiah, the one through whom YHWH would restore the fortunes of his people. The word 'messiah' had, of course, **nothing to do** with Trinitarian or incarnational theology."⁴

The Original Jesus

The original Jesus, the Jesus who actually existed, was a Jew who recited and affirmed as the center of true theology the unitarian creed of Israel. Attempts to expand that creed, *on the basis of the Bible*, into a Trinitarian one have failed, as historians and many Bible experts recognize. The creed of Jesus must on no account be modified. To do so is to risk compromise with paganism. It is a fatal mistake to alter in any way the **first and most important** of all the commandments. To do so is to flirt with idolatry, and this is a major theological crime. Idolatry is the greatest of all theological crimes, as bad as prostitution.

The original Jesus is not only a confirmed unitarian, underlining the creed of Israel. He himself is

³"God," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1983 ed., Vol. 2, p. 1261.

⁴N.T. Wright, "The Historical Jesus and Christian Theology," *Sewanee Theological Review* 39, 1996.

the one whose “genesis” or **origin** (Matt. 1:1, 18) is spelled out for us in the clearest terms in Matthew’s and Luke’s opening chapters. Jesus is the Son of God who is rooted in a miraculous **human history** (Luke 1:35) and specifically, by divine promise, in the history of Israel. He is the “Messiah Jesus” who came “in the flesh” (not “*into* the flesh,” as badly mistranslated by Luther⁵), that is to say, as an **originally human, historical person**, a member of the human race. This is also John’s yardstick for our grasp of the true spirit (1 John 4:1-6).

Paul warned that we must have “a love of the truth” “in order to be **saved**” (2 Thess. 2:10), not in order to be “clever” or intellectual!

The original Jesus is not a *pre*-historical, non-fully human person. That would not fit the profile of the son of David promised as Messiah by the Hebrew Bible. Once Jesus’ history is moved out of history and outside time and space, the faith loses its anchor in history, and in fact. We are then inevitably left adrift on the stormy seas of speculation and fantasy.

The very same timelessness and spacelessness which in *later* theology was applied to Jesus’ origin has adversely and confusingly affected Jesus’ very Hebrew view of the future. Our destiny is not in Scripture to **disappear as souls to heaven**, but to govern and manage with Jesus a renewed society **on a renewed earth**, over which the returned Messiah will preside (Matt. 5:5; Rev. 5:10, Dan. 7, I Cor. 6:2, etc.).

The idea of the “end of the world” is not biblical, as if it were the end of space and time. It is (as properly translated from the Greek) “the end of the [present] age.” Jesus’ disciples asked him about this future end of the present era of history and the arrival of the future Kingdom of God in Matthew 24:3: “What will be the sign of your coming and end of the age?” Jesus announced that the age of the Kingdom of God would follow the end of this age. The new age of the Kingdom is positively not beyond space and time! It has to do with the future earth. Jesus *loved* this idea and spoke of it in the Lord’s prayer. “May Your Kingdom come” was his impassioned plea!

Both the beginning of God’s story of salvation in the historical Messiah born in Bethlehem and the end of God’s story promising a restored earth, have become confused in the churchgoer’s mind, and the Bible becomes a difficult book to read with pleasure, because the traditional story about “passing away” or “going to heaven” is not that of the Bible writers.

“Orthodoxy” not only disturbs the biblical picture of Jesus as the human Messiah. It defines the Gospel in

a way which excludes Jesus as the model evangelist whose job and task was, as he said, to preach the Gospel about the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:43). In the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20) the task of taking the very same Gospel of the Kingdom to the world was conferred by Jesus on the Church until his return (see also Matt. 24:14). The clear commission is to “**preach everything** I taught you,” not just certain doctrines to the exclusion of others!

Astonishingly, leading evangelicals, while claiming the Bible as their authority, set themselves *in direct opposition* to Jesus’ commission to announce the Kingdom of God as the Gospel. In *1001 Bible Questions Answered* William Pettingill and R.A. Torrey wrote:

“This [Matthew 28:18-20] we would call the ‘The Kingdom Commission.’ Of course, we are well aware that it is often spoken of as ‘the Great Commission’ of the Church, but we are convinced that this is an error [*What?!*]. It would be a strange thing to find the Church’s commission in the Kingdom Gospel.”⁶

You see here an amazing assault on Scripture. The Messiah’s teaching is cancelled by this confident assertion, reflected widely in evangelical literature. The author goes on:

“I have long been convinced, and have taught that the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19, 20 is primarily applicable to the Kingdom *rather than to the Church*. If this were kept in mind we should not fall into confusion regarding our marching orders, which are found in Acts 1:8, with details in the Epistles to the Churches. The Matthew commission [i.e. the command to preach the Kingdom of God Gospel as Jesus always did] will come into force for the Jewish Remnant after the Church is caught away.”⁷

Then comes this staggering rejection of the teaching of Jesus:

“Mark’s gospel, like Matthew’s and Luke’s, is primarily a kingdom book, and I am satisfied that none of them contains the Church’s marching orders — not even the so-called ‘Great Commission’ of Matthew 28:18-20... To be sure, we are to preach the gospel to every creature, **but what gospel? The only gospel known to the synoptics** was the gospel of the Kingdom. **Our gospel of the grace of**

⁵“In das Fleisch gekommen” (1 John 4:2; 2 John 7). Other German versions corrected the mistake by translating the Greek *en sarki* “im Fleisch.”

⁶Pettingill and Torrey, *1001 Bible Questions Answered*, p. 120.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 127.

God is found among the four evangelists **only in John.**⁸

This astonishing systematic error by leading evangelicals must be exposed and corrected! Note that for Paul the Gospel of grace is **precisely synonymous with the Gospel of the Kingdom (Acts 20:24-25)**, and the whole notion of *two* saving gospels is utterly foreign to the New Testament. The loss of the Gospel as the Jewish Jesus preached it (Heb. 2:3), the Gospel about the Kingdom, goes hand in hand with the Church's rejection of Jesus' unitarian creed.

A recent book by Michael Vlach, *He will Reign Forever* (2020), is clear about the Kingdom of God, as a real theocracy of the future, but it then makes the typical, shocking error and blunder of so-called dispensationalism, i.e. Vlach does nothing with Acts 28:28 which expressly states the truth that **the very same Gospel of the Kingdom**, preached by Paul to Jews, **"this Gospel of the Kingdom"** (cp. Matt. 24:14), is to go equally to Jews *and Gentiles!* (Acts 28:28).

According to the prophets of Israel, one day, thankfully, the whole world will indeed recognize **the God of Israel** as the one true God: "And the Lord will be king over all the earth; in that day there will be one Lord and His name one" (Zech. 14:9). Jesus will be correctly acknowledged too, not as Almighty God (a Second God!), but as the unique servant and agent (*shaliach*) of that one God. Jesus will be recognized for who he truly is, "the Son of God, the Messiah" (Matt. 16:16, Luke 2:11) and "the man Messiah Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5), the mediator between the one God and mankind to whom all judgment has been delegated: "The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son" (John 5:22). Jesus, the Son, is the unique agent (Hebrew, *shaliach*: "someone sent"), **delegate** of the One God of the Bible. If Jesus is not that, then he cannot be the model man whom we are to imitate.

1 Timothy 2:5, defining the one God as the Father, distinct from *the man* Messiah Jesus, if believed, could in an instant revolutionize two thousand years of distorted theology, and enable us to return to our Jewish roots in the Jewish Jesus. No other testimony is really needed, when once the words of Paul's creed (and Jesus' creed) are grasped: "There is one God and one mediator between God and men, **the man Messiah Jesus.**" Could not this creed of Jesus and Paul provide a rallying point, at least a center of intense conversation, between millions of Jews and more than two billion Christians, and of course two billion Muslims?

⁸Ibid., p. 113. For a similar systematic departure from the Gospel as Jesus preached it, see the article "Gospel" in *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, and in scores of evangelical

Liberal Christians are very much aware of the early loss of the Jewish creed from the faith, but they do not regard this defection from the Bible as very serious, holding a low view of Scripture. Evangelicals however regard the Bible as authoritative, and have so far been unwilling to face the difference between their creed and that of the Jew Jesus. In fact, they are the ones who have shown a most tortured ingenuity in attempting the hopeless task of finding the Trinity in the Bible, even in the Old Testament. By cobbling together their case using a small number of verses, taken out of the overall biblical context, they try to turn the New Testament writers into Trinitarians, or at least struggling to become Trinitarians! It is Satan who promotes the Trinity, since he desires to be coequal with God!

Satan also loves the so-called "amillennial" idea — that the millennium is going on **now** and not in the future! The easy and obvious truth according to Revelation 20:1-4 is that in the *future* millennium the Devil is going to be removed entirely from the earth to the abyss and locked up there, **"so that he can no longer deceive people!"** The Devil tries to remove that stupendous truth, since he hates the idea of being no longer allowed to deceive! He hates the idea of his being locked away in the abyss.

In practice Trinitarian so-called proof texts are taken almost exclusively from John and Paul with some help from Hebrews. But the doctrine of God must be established across the whole range of Scripture, certainly not neglecting the Old Testament in which the New is rooted. The fact that Jesus' creed was **not a Trinitarian creed** does not seem to disturb or deter evangelicals. This is because of the enormous emphasis they place on the death of Jesus rather than on his teaching. Many evangelicals seem to view Paul as the founder of the faith they recognize as Christian (cp. "the Roman Road"), and forget that **Jesus was the original preacher of the saving Gospel.** The Apostles describe as the greatest peril of all, the failure to hear and heed the **words of Jesus** (Heb. 2:3; 1 Tim. 6:3; 2 John 7-9; 1 John 5:20). Being Christlike should surely include believing the same creed as Jesus! Did not Jesus say that was the most important commandment of all?

The problem requiring resolution is simply this: Jesus must be taken seriously in the matter of defining God. The sacred birth narratives of Matthew and Luke were designed as definitive and repeated accounts of the supernatural *origin* of Jesus as the human descendant of David and Son of God. That picture

tracts which *do not* invite the convert to obey Jesus' command in Mark 1:14-15 to repent and believe the Gospel of the Kingdom.

should have guaranteed that the **human Messiah** remain at the center of Christian faith.

However, under the distorting influence of a post-biblical philosophical theology from the Greek world, John and Paul were made to support that later creed. They were found to be the most susceptible of “interpretation” in support of that later “revised,” twisted view of God and Jesus. Paul and Jesus have been made to say what Scripture did not intend. The post-biblical creeds have simply been read into them and not out of them. They have thus been made to disturb the cardinal unitarian creed of Jesus (Mark 12:29), something they never imagined or intended. John and Paul have been turned into servants of a creed they did not recognize. Paul and Jesus should be read in harmony with the Hebrew Bible and the synoptic and Acts accounts of Jesus which preserve, as **the primary data** about his person, his descent from King David and his supernatural status as Son of God, not God Himself. Only then will the One God of Jesus be honored as the single unrivaled God of the universe.

I Thessalonians 1:9-10 makes our point. We have turned from idols to “serve the living and **true God**, and to wait for **His Son** from heaven.” Paul could see how that central truth was threatened, and he sought to prevent this. Paul in his later writings spoke of Messiah Jesus or Christ Jesus, in that order. John, seeing the dangers of a false non-human Jesus, wrote and repeated in his epistle “**that which,**” not “**he who**” was from the beginning”! (1 John 1:1).

The Saga of Psalm 110:1

This is the most frequently cited Psalm from the OT. It is the 88th verse of the 5th book of the Psalms. It contains a staggeringly decisive definition of the one God in relation to the one man, Messiah Jesus. It has been the object of a subtle mistranslation, which prevents the public from understanding its superb truth.

The text gives us an inspired oracle from Yahweh, the one God, and the oracle is directed to “my lord.” Translations first confuse the truth here by capitalizing the second “lord. as “Lord.” This misleads the reader into thinking that God is speaking to *Adonai*, which means “the Lord God.” However, the second lord in Psalm 110:1 is the Hebrew word *adoni* giving us correctly “my lord.” **Adoni**, in the Hebrew, in all of its 195 appearances, *never* means God, but rather “my non-deity lord.” The false capital letter on the second lord was corrected by the Revised Version of 1881 to read, as it should, “my lord.”

⁹ Excerpted from *A Journal from the Radical Reformation*, 1992, focusonthe kingdom.org/JRAD.html

¹⁰ For an orientation see P. Toon, *Heaven and Hell, A Biblical and Theological Overview*, Nashville: Nelson,

Jesus, brilliant teacher that he was, had just finished saying that the most important command was the Shema defining God as “one” (*echad*) single Person. Who then, Jesus wanted his audience to learn, is that second lord, *adoni*? The correct and truthful answer is that it defines the Messiah as someone who is not God, not Deity! Jesus the Messiah is obviously not a second God (heaven forbid!) but the genuine, highly exalted human agent of the one God. Jesus perfectly succeeded, as the perfect man, where Adam had failed so dramatically.

All this is not complicated. My point is that the future of monotheism and the monotheism of Jesus will be secured when we make known widely these straightforward facts, which will make the Bible a lucidly clear revelation of truth and its brilliant monotheism (John 17:3). ✧

The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent

by Dr. Clark Pinnock⁹

The aspect of eschatology which we are studying here is the doctrine of divine judgment and hell.¹⁰ As in so many matters, for better or worse, it was Augustine who gave the church its standard way of thinking about hell, a way which would become dominant for the next millennium and a half. Specifically he taught us to view hell as a condition of endless torment of conscious persons in body and soul. In a major section of *The City of God* (book 21), he argues at length against all objections to this grim idea and defends his view vigorously that God plans to torture the wicked both mentally and physically forever.

To get a feeling for his orientation, one should consider his argument in answer to one objection: how could a resurrected person burn physically and suffer psychologically forever without being materially consumed or ever losing consciousness? How could they suffer the same kind of burns one would sustain on earth from contact with raging flames and not be consumed by them? To explain this marvel Augustine explains that God has the power to do such things which transcend ordinary nature. He will employ His power to perform miracles to keep them alive and conscious in the fire.

Unfortunately Augustine is not alone in thinking this way but rather speaks for orthodoxy. The

1986; R. Morey, *Death and the Afterlife*, Minneapolis: Bethany, 1984; and E. Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of Final Punishment*, Houston: Providential, 1982.

Protestant Jonathan Edwards is every bit as rigorous in his doctrine of hell, as is well known. His sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” is (in)famous for the picture of God dangling sinners over the flames like a loathsome spider. J. Gerstner, an Edwards scholar, summarizes Edwards’ view in this way:

“Hell is a spiritual and material furnace of fire where its victims are exquisitely tortured in their minds and in their bodies eternally, according to their various capacities, by God, the devils, and damned humans including themselves, in their memories and consciences as well as in their raging, unsatisfied lusts, from which place of death God’s saving grace, mercy, and pity are gone forever, never for a moment to return.”¹¹

Not only is it God’s pleasure so to torture the wicked everlastingly, but it will be the happiness of the saints to see and know this is being faithfully done. It would not be unfair to picture the traditional doctrine in this way: just as one can imagine certain people watching a cat trapped in a microwave oven squirming in agony and taking delight in it, so the saints in heaven will, according to Edwards, experience the torments of the damned with pleasure and satisfaction.

I do not intend to consider what one might call “revisionist” versions of the traditional doctrine which in effect take the hell out of hell: for example, views which remove physical suffering from it, or make it into a timeless state, or put it down to the sinner’s free choice to live separately from God rather than its being God’s will to torment them. Augustine and Edwards too would certainly have rejected these softening concessions. I want to address the traditional view of the matter as it has actually been held, namely, the everlasting, conscious torment of the finally impenitent in body and soul. I want to do that first because such is the traditional view of hell and second because that view, like my own, takes the Bible’s actual imagery of burning fire seriously.

Augustine hardly pauses over the well-known objections that plague the modern mind on the subject. We wonder how this doctrine can possibly be reconciled with the revelation of God in the face of Jesus Christ, a problem made so much worse by the fact that according to Augustine the people God tortures are also the non-elect to whom He has sovereignly/arbitrarily declined to extend His grace or assist in any way to be saved from hell. Thus Augustine

cannot even resort to the explanation one hears often today: if hell is what the wicked have asked for, what can God do about it?¹²

Edwards, on the other hand, is aware of the problems. Unfortunately, as Gerstner acknowledges, he just ducks the questions and does not really answer them. Edwards seems to grasp the questions we moderns want to ask but does not in the end face them. Gerstner surmises in response to this strange situation that Edwards must have been blinded by the very fire he defended so vigorously.¹³ I find this explanation bizarre. More likely, he just could not bring himself to wrap his tongue around the words which his system demanded be said.

For there really is little doubt what Edwards would have said to the objections since he says similar things elsewhere. Our problem, he would say, is that we think God is more loving and merciful than He actually is... Torturing the wicked eternally presents no problem to God, as Edwards understands Him...

How should I begin? Shall I treat the subject in the calm way one would when dealing with another issue? Would it be right to pretend to be calm when I am not? To begin calmly would not really communicate a full account of my response. I do not feel calm about the traditional doctrine of hell, and so I will not pretend. Indeed, how can anyone with the milk of human kindness in him remain calm contemplating such an idea as this? Now I realize that in admitting this I am playing into the hands of the critics, when I admit how disturbed the doctrine makes me. They will be able to say that I have adopted arguments on the basis of sentimentality and a subjective sense of moral outrage. In a recent paper, J.I. Packer has said that he dislikes the idea which critics of everlasting conscious punishment seem to have of their moral superiority, when it is not spiritual sensitivity, he says, but secular sentimentalism which motivates them (referring in the context to none other than his esteemed evangelical and Anglican colleague J. Stott).¹⁴ Nonetheless, I will take the risk of beginning at the point of my outrage and hope people will hear me and not put it down to sentimentality. To such a charge I would reply: if it is sentimentality which drives me, what drives my opponent? Is it hard-heartedness and the desire for eternal retribution? Such recriminations will get us nowhere fast.

Let me say at the outset that I consider the concept of hell as endless torment in body and mind an

¹¹ J. Gerstner, *Jonathan Edwards on Heaven and Hell*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980, p. 53.

¹² H. Silvester, *Arguing with God: A Christian Examination of the Problem of Evil*, London: InterVarsity, 1971, chap. 7.

¹³ Gerstner, p. 87-90.

¹⁴ See Packer’s essay in *Evangelical Affirmations*, ed. K. S. Kantzer and C.F.H. Henry, Zondervan, 1990.

outrageous doctrine, a theological and moral enormity, a bad doctrine of the tradition which needs to be changed. How can Christians possibly project a Deity of such cruelty and vindictiveness whose ways include inflicting everlasting torture upon His creatures, however sinful they may have been? Surely a God who would do such a thing is more nearly like Satan than like God, at least by any ordinary moral standards, and by the gospel itself. How can we possibly preach that God has so arranged things that a number of His creatures (perhaps a large number predestined to that fate) will undergo (in a state of complete consciousness) physical and mental agony through unending time? Is this not a most disturbing concept which needs some second thoughts? Surely the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is no fiend; torturing people without end is not what our God does. Does the one who told us to love our enemies intend to wreak vengeance on His own enemies for all eternity?

In a recent book ably defending the traditional view of hell, R. Morey complains that in every generation people keep questioning the belief in everlasting, conscious torment even though the basis of it, as far as he can tell, has been laid out in books like his time and again. Well, I would offer him an explanation for this. Is it a surprise, given the cruelty which the doctrine attributes to God's action, that Christians would repeatedly wonder if this were true? It is no wonder to me why they would gravitate to the kind of view I am defending, that the finally impenitent wicked, rather than suffering torture forever, pass out of existence. Their moral sensibilities demand it of them...

As I intimated earlier, everlasting torment is intolerable from a moral point of view because it makes God into a bloodthirsty monster who maintains an everlasting Auschwitz for victims whom He does not even allow to die. How is one to worship or imitate such a cruel and merciless God? The idea of everlasting torment (especially if it is linked to soteriological predestination) raises the problem of evil to impossible dimensions. Anthony Flew was quite right (I think) to say that, if Christians want to hold that God created some people to be tortured in hell forever, then the apologetic task...is just hopeless. John Stott seems to agree: "I find the concept intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterizing their feelings or cracking under the strain."¹⁵ I even wonder what atrocities have been committed by those who have believed in a God who tortures His enemies?

Naturally, various attempts have been made by the traditionalists to hide the gruesome problem. C. Hodge

and B.B. Warfield, for example, make use of postmillennial eschatology to argue that very few persons (relatively speaking) will go to hell anyway. Presumably we do not need to worry much if only a negligible number is tormented while a numerical majority is saved. Such a calculus, however, achieves little: first, because few today would accept the postmillennial premise to begin with, and second, because the tens of millions still suffering everlasting torture even under their scenario are tens of millions too many.

Alternatively it is common to try to hide the moral problem by redefining hell. C.S. Lewis tries this when he pictures hell in *The Great Divorce* as almost pleasant, if a little gray, being the kind of place from which one can take day trips on the bus into heaven and return again to meet with the theological society which meets regularly in hell...In these terms, hell is nasty and inconvenient, but certainly no lake of fire. Thus by sheer speculation the biblical warnings are emasculated and the moral problem dealt with by fancy footwork devoid of exegesis. The fact is that the biblical warnings spell a terrible destruction awaiting the impenitent wicked, and if hell is everlasting there is no way to make it other than endless torture. I understand why traditionalists want to take the hell out of hell, but it should not be permitted, because it breaks the concentration and prevents people from seeing the need for theological renewal on this point. ✧

Comments

- "I loved Alane Rozelle's article 'When the End Will Come: The Signs You Must See First!' (March). So true and very well said. I was amazed when reading Barbara's article 'Eden: The Link Between Faith and Stewardship' (March) because I was not aware of the important fact that God will not destroy the earth, and that the verse most Christians use (2 Pet. 3:10) is yet again another false translation. As Barbara has wonderfully pointed out, it does not say that the earth and everything that has been done on it will be 'burned up,' but instead 'laid bare.'" — *Pakistan*

- "I am a great admirer of your work on the Kingdom of God. Your biblical understanding of Jesus has had a big personal impact on me. I am very eager to study these subjects more deeply and learn from your many years of study and teaching." — *Poland*

- "I read your book *The Doctrine of the Trinity: Christianity's Self-inflicted Wound*. I want to thank you because this book helped me so much." — *Italy*

¹⁵ John Stott and D.L. Edwards, *Essentials: A Liberal/Evangelical Dialogue*, 1988, p. 314.