

## Introduction

Where does one begin when addressing the doctrine of hell? It is a doctrine which polarizes us; some wanting to remove all language of it from our scriptures and speech while others insist it must be held up in its most traditional terms as a warning to all those who are refusing salvation that comes from Christ alone. As hard as it is to believe it has been six years since Rob Bell wrote his controversial book, *Love Wins*<sup>1</sup>. A work which succeeded more at causing people to declare their side than dialogue about the topic. That seems to be the way with this issue, we prefer, when we speak of it at all, to speak *at* each other rather than *with* each other. We prefer to assert and protect our position rather than hear the other in ways which might open up new theological possibilities.

Within our own denomination, the Free Methodist Church in Canada, we have had questions raised over our article of religion ¶130 “Final Destiny” which reads:

Our eternal destiny is determined by God’s grace and our response, not by arbitrary decrees of God. For those who trust Him and obediently follow Jesus as Saviour and Lord, there is a heaven of eternal glory and the blessedness of Christ’s presence. But for the finally impenitent there is a hell of eternal suffering and of separation from God.

These questions range from “should we continue to endorse a concept of hell when prominent scholars have spoken out against it?” to “must we understand the suffering of hell as an eternal state?” This short paper is not a recommendation to change our article, which would be a much bigger event involving the World Conference. Nor is it an attempt to defend a purely traditional articulation of the doctrine of hell. Rather, this paper is an attempt to outline some options for reading scripture on this topic which, by God’s grace, could help those in our body who hold

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<sup>1</sup> Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2011).

different readings affirm our article, practice charity with each other — a distinctive of Wesley's — and pay attention to the real heart of the article.

### **Affirming Hell**

We need to understand that for those who are committed to a traditional understanding of hell, any conversation that seems to move from that position is deeply upsetting and the root of that is a fear that we are abandoning orthodoxy. We need to also understand that for those who are ready to give up a traditional understanding of the doctrine, simply reasserting the traditional position is upsetting because it fails to take seriously the deep wrestling which has been, and is being, done around this topic. To both these groups, the introduction by Preston M. Sprinkle is helpful, “The question they [the contributors of the book] are raising is not “Is there a hell?” but “What is hell like?” Every view espoused in this book is built on the fact that the Bible clearly talks about hell.”<sup>2</sup> We agree with this author, we cannot deny that the Bible speaks about hell, therefore our overarching task is to talk about what hell might be like rather than if it exists.

### **Scripture and Hell**

Our English word ‘hell’ renders the Greek word ‘gehenna’ which comes from the Hebrew: *gê ben hinnōm*, the Valley of Ben Hinnom<sup>3</sup>. This valley was “a deep narrow gorge southeast of Jerusalem [...] in which idolatrous Israelites offered up child sacrifices to the gods

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<sup>2</sup> Preston Sprinkle, ed., *Four Views on Hell*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 11. It may be helpful to also note that he says “Theologians and writers such as Karl Barth, C.S. Lewis, John Stott, and N.T. Wright all believe in hell, but their depictions don’t match what many Christians believe.” pg. 9

<sup>3</sup> D.K. Innes, “Hell” in *New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd Ed. ed. J.D. Douglas, et al., (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1962, 1993), 472.

Molech and Baal.”<sup>4</sup> (2 Kings 23:10; 2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:6; Jeremiah 7:31-32; 19:2-6; 32:35)

As an unholy place it was used as a garbage dump<sup>5</sup> and became associated as a place for punishment for sinners<sup>6</sup>. As well, it was understood to be a “place to deposit the bodies of those slain in battle by God’s judgement.”<sup>7</sup> This is the imagery used in Jeremiah 7:30-34:

“The people of Judah have done evil in my eyes, declares the Lord. They have set up their detestable idols in the house that bears my Name and have defiled it. They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire—something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind. So beware, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when people will no longer call it Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter, for they will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room. Then the carcasses of this people will become food for the birds and the wild animals, and there will be no one to frighten them away. I will bring an end to the sounds of joy and gladness and to the voices of bride and bridegroom in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem, for the land will become desolate.” (NIV)

Jeremiah is representative of the way in which the Hebrew scriptures, particularly the prophets, use this imagery as a place of divine punishment (Isaiah 66:14-16; 22-24; Ezekiel 38-39; Joel 3:12-13; Zechariah 14:12-15). In short, the image of this place is a sight of:

mutilated corpses, human bones, maggots, flies, animals and birds ripping strips of flesh off dead bodies as well as the smell of rotting and burning flesh convey a sense of horror and revulsion to which those who have viewed the aftermath of modern atrocities and warfare can fully attest.<sup>8</sup>

This, of course, is a grizzly image but it is not yet complete. Added to it is that of fire and burning in Isaiah 66:22-24:

“As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me,” declares the Lord, “so will your name and descendants endure. From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me,” says

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<sup>4</sup>*Dictionary of Biblical Imagery: An Encyclopedic Exploration of the Images, Symbols, Motifs, Metaphors, Figures of Speech and Literary Patterns of the Bible*, s.v. “Hell,” (Downers Grove: IL: IVP, 1998), 376.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> *NBD*, 473.

<sup>7</sup> *DBI*, 376.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 377.

the Lord. “And they will go out and look on the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; the worms that eat them will not die, the fire that burns them will not be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.”

This is the source of hell being a place of fiery judgment on God’s part and it is what Jesus picks up on in the New Testament.

There can be little doubt that Jesus adopts this imagery for the final destination of those who reject his offer of the kingdom. Stanley Grenz says, “Proponents claim that the reality of two eternal conditions is the explicit teaching of the New Testament. Jesus spoke repeatedly about the two destinies and warned his listeners to avoid hell.”<sup>9</sup> Two references which stand out in the gospels which go beyond simply the word hell and give imagery is Matthew 18:9, “And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.” and Mark 9:43, “If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out.” These two references underscore the reality that Jesus understood hell to be a place with unquenchable fire. Again, this paper is not meant to be exhaustive but to demonstrate a source for the traditional reading of hell as a fiery eschatological final destination for those who reject God’s kingdom.

It should also be noted that there are other descriptors used for hell other than, and in addition to, fire. In Matthew 25:30 and 2 Peter 2:17 hell is described as darkness. In Revelation 2:11 it is described as death. In 2 Thessalonians 1:9 and Matthew 7:21-23 it is described as destruction and exclusion from God. Finally, in Matthew 5:25-26 it is described as a debt to pay.<sup>10</sup> All of these images describe hell in ways that reinforce its existence and the impetus to

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<sup>9</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 641.

<sup>10</sup> *NBD*, *ibid.*

avoid it. The source of these descriptions also highlight that the breadth of the whole of the New Testament does speak on the reality of hell.

### **Traditional Argument**

The first position about hell, which we have termed the traditional argument, is also known as the view for eternal conscious torment. In this view the underlying logic or reason for hell is a just punishment for the wicked. This has less to do with the nature of the sin itself, but due to the “*value and worth of the one being sinned against.*”<sup>11</sup> In our own human justice we have no laws and punishments for harming insects, we have some laws and punishments for harming animals, and have great laws and punishments for harming people especially babies. This principal of increased punishment for the worth of the one being sinned against carries into our doctrine of God — he is greater than us in every way, thus sin against him deserves the greatest of punishment to produce justice.<sup>12</sup> Burk summarizes his position well:

[T]he Bible teaches eternal conscious torment in a place called *hell* as the lot of every person who dies in an unrepentant state. All those who fail to experience saving faith in Jesus while they are alive in this age will be resurrected and condemned when Christ returns. They will then be cast into hell where they will suffer never-ending punishment. This view of God’s judgment is not a cause for embarrassment for Christians, but will ultimately become a source of joy and praise for the saints as they witness the infinite goodness and justice of God (Rev. 18:20; 19:3).<sup>13</sup>

This view definitely highlights God’s justice of prime importance, while recognizing that such a position might bring difficulty for the Christian. However, Christians are encouraged to cast off any such embarrassment through an eschatological picture of joining in the chorus praising God for his goodness and justice.

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<sup>11</sup> Four Views, 19. (italics original)

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, 20.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*.

Burk goes on to build a foundation for this position working through 10 passages of scripture: Isaiah 66:22-24; Daniel 12:2-3; Matthew 18:6-9; 25:31-46; Mark 9:42-48, 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10; Jude 7, 13; Revelation 14:9-11; 20:10, 14-15. He concludes that through these passages hell has a least three consistent characteristics. First, hell is a final separation from God's mercy and the unrighteous from the righteous. Second, hell is an unending experience which does not end in annihilation or salvation. Third, hell is a just retribution meant to be a punishment for evil rather than a means of redemption.<sup>14</sup>

Burk's final conclusion is that humanity is meant to glorify God and that this is accomplished through both his justice and mercy. Those who receive Christ display God's mercy but those who do not display God's justice. Therefore, hell shows out God's justice through his judgment on sin which shows out his glory.<sup>15</sup> He also describes two functions of the doctrine for the church. First, it reminds us to fear God; that is, to take God seriously. Second, it highlights the urgency of evangelism. If we took seriously the horrors of hell we would find sufficient motivation to warn and rescue.<sup>16</sup>

### **Annihilation**

The second view on hell is called annihilation and at its heart claims that those who do not come to a saving faith in Jesus will ultimately be destroyed. While there are those who hold this destruction occurs at death, most evangelicals hold that destruction will come after a time of

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, 21.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, 42.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*, 43.

punishment in hell.<sup>17</sup> This position was given credibility in evangelical circles when John Stott wrote in favour of it saying:

Well, emotionally I find the concept [i.e., the historic view of an endless hell] intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterizing their feelings or cracking under the strain.... We need to survey the biblical material afresh and to open our minds (not just our hearts) to the possibility that Scripture points in the direction of annihilations, and that “eternal conscious torment” is a tradition which has to yield to the supreme authority of Scripture.<sup>18</sup>

This is a powerful call because Stott has such a respect for scripture that this is not simply a shift based on sentimentality but a real wrestling with the whole witness of scripture.

John Stackhouse Jr. in his chapter entitled, “Terminal Punishment,” places the doctrine of hell between two aspects of God; his holiness and his benevolence.<sup>19</sup> He goes on to say:

[H]ell is the situation in which those who do not avail themselves of the atonement made by Jesus in his suffering and death must make their own atonement by suffering and then death, separated from the sustaining life of God and thus disappearing from the cosmos.<sup>20</sup>

This shows that those who hold this position do not deny that there is an element of justice to the doctrine of hell, they simply set different limits on it.

In short, the tension between these two doctrines is the around the concept of hell being a limited punishment rather than an eternal one. Those who hold the annihilist position argue that the biblical words and concept which the Bible uses for eternal does not always mean forever. For example, the Bible describes both God and mountains as eternal, but obviously mountains are not eternal to the same degree as is God.<sup>21</sup> More than this argument is the question of what is

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<sup>17</sup> Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson eds., *Hell Under Fire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 196.

<sup>18</sup> David L. Edwards and John R.W. Stott quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Four Views*, 61.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, 61-62.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, 66.

eternal. Annihilists would argue that it is the result which is eternal not the action<sup>22</sup>. This means that while those consigned to hell are destroyed — the action of hell is limited — the result is eternal — there is no return of that person. This group also emphasizes the Bible's speech about hell as destruction or death as termination.<sup>23</sup>

Like those who uphold eternal conscious punishment, annihilists also understand the doctrine of hell as good or reflecting the goodness of God. Hell demonstrates that humans are indeed free and therefore can accept or reject God. In the same sense this shows that God keeps his word about giving us a choice. Hell also affirms that God is putting the world right — all that is not of God is to be purged.

### **Two More Views**

In addition to these two views, which we might describe as main views, are two more: universalism and purgatory. Both of these hold much less of a place in our evangelical circles so will receive less treatment here.

The main idea behind universalism, is not to skip hell and go straight to heaven. Rather, hell, follows the pattern set out in the relationship between God and the people of Israel: there is judgment and then restoration.<sup>24</sup> Two areas of difficulty, which are addressed, are a theology that embraces the ability to repent after death<sup>25</sup> and an effacing of free will which is particularly difficult for us as Wesleyans.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, 67.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*, 114.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, 116.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*, 124-125.



A purgatory view of hell is in some way misnamed because purgatory is actually attached only to heaven and never hell, “Purgatory is not a place of probation, from which the soul may go either to Heaven or to Hell. All souls admitted to Purgatory are bound for Heaven sooner or later, and are forever beyond the reach of sin.”<sup>27</sup> In short, this view is really a separate doctrine and need not be considered here since it deals with those in Christ not the unrepentant.

### **Where Do We Go From Here?**

Perhaps the first thing to say is that each position is born out of a heart for God, humanity and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, each position works sincerely to arrive at their position from biblical and theological reflection. No one is attempting to get rid of a doctrine of hell and, in fact, each position recognizes the importance and goodness of hell in God’s plan of salvation. That being the case, we can conclude that there is a diversity around how we think about hell because there is a diversity about how we think about God. Therefore, our wisest course is to listen to each other, or in this case, reflect on the different pictures of hell and see the God of scripture in different lights.

While some denominations may be uncomfortable with not choosing a single view of hell thus drawing a line in the sand, we can do just that — we are Free Methodists so we know how to live with godly tension. Our founder, John Wesley, spoke about the importance of not letting doctrine that is not essential to salvation divide us. None of the positions listed above threaten a clear doctrine of sin, the holiness of God, the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, the unique atoning and necessary work of the cross of Jesus, the new life available only through the resurrection of Jesus, the reality of the resurrection of Jesus, the need for repentance for the life to come, or the importance of pursuing sanctification as proper response to justification. That

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<sup>27</sup> Dorothy Sayers quoted in *Four Views*, 147.

being the case our demeanour to those who differ from us in this area should be one of charity for the sake of unity and witness.

In addition, to hold this tension is to practice humility and trust in God. Language about hell is metaphorical; scripture is pointing to the fact of a reality rather than attempting a literal description of that reality. When we speak about hell we are not mentally pointing to that gorge in Jerusalem because that was only a metaphor — just like the bodies were left piled and decomposing as a picture of God’s judgment that same kind of thing is going to happen at the end when God punishes the guilty. The imagery is meant to — and succeeds to — bring horror so that we flee from it.<sup>28</sup> To insist that figurative language is describing a future reality in detail is to miss the forest for the trees. In the end though, we do not need to worry about it, hell will be what hell will be; if it is a never ending fire where people suffer for eternity, a means by which the wicked are ultimately destroyed, or a tool by which humanity is purified is up to God. Let us be humble and say we know something but we do not know everything. What we do know is that we can trust God to be good even in his judgment and punishment and if we do trust him then we do not need to shed each others blood in our rush to be right.

I have heard the argument that any softening of hell from the traditional erases the threat to the unrepentant and removing that threat will result in people not responding to the gospel. In short, God would be letting them off easy by winking them out of existence or repenting after death. The other side argues that holding to such a harsh view of hell as the traditional position does reflects poorly on God and undercuts the effectiveness of the gospel. To the former I say yes it does lessen the threat, however that argument shows a taking for granted of the gift of life

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<sup>28</sup> Wesley’s movement was first and foremost to those wishing to flee the wrath to come!

on the one hand and shows a callousness towards the joy of people being redeemed. To the latter I say we need more confidence that the gospel, indeed, is the power of God for salvation.

We also need to be careful when we read our article because it is not really about hell! What our article is actually emphasizing is the truth that God will not delay his judgment forever. His mercy is temporary and for the purpose of the gospel going out with the intention of the nations being gathered into his family. In the meantime, the whole cosmos is crying out, through the collective voice of humanity, for justice and God has promised to give us just that. We are emphasizing that when God finally does move to set all things right there will be a clear division between those who will move forward into the new age with God and those who will move to destruction without God. Our article is a cry of urgency to receive salvation and to flee the wrath to come now and without delay! This is because God's decision of life or destruction will not be repealed, it is an eternal reality.

### **Conclusion**

Each of us should feel heart-wrenched when we think about hell; we are talking about God's good creation choosing final and total separation from him. Hell is the ultimate rejection of God and God's putting away of that which is not his. On a more personal level we are talking about people: Mothers, Fathers, Sons, and Daughters. People like us, people who we love, people who love us. We cannot get into such an abstract discussion that we miss the heartache of hell. However, the Bible speaks of it and warns that it is coming, so we cannot just get rid of it. Yet, we are limited in our understanding of it. As we wrestle with scripture we do so in dialogue with the universal church and we hear a diversity of voices describing it in different terms. This diversity is a gift from God and gives us the gift of a bigger picture of God than we would have

from reading and thinking on our own. In the end we can trust God to do what is right so we can say with the church, "Even so, come Lord Jesus, come." Amen.

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