

“Where the Fires are Not Quenched”:
Biblical, Theological & Pastoral Perspectives on Hell

Jonathan Gibson

Contents

I: Is the Church Still Serious About Hell?	3
II: The Agonies of Hell: Biblical Reflections	9
III: A God of Perfect Justice and Love: Theological Reflections	17
IV: The Weight of Hell: Pastoral Reflections	25
V: A Time For Everything Under the Sun: Keeping Hell in Perspective	35

I

Is the Church Still Serious About Hell?

The 'evangelical' shift on hell

For over 2000 years the mainstream Christian church has affirmed the biblical teaching of eternal punishment in hell. In the last fifty years, however, a significant shift in belief has occurred among Christians, even among some evangelicals. The influence has come both from within and without. Outside the church, philosophers such as Bertrand Russell claimed that any profoundly humane person could not believe in everlasting punishment. For Russell, it “is a doctrine of cruelty”, responsible for producing generations of “cruel torture”.¹ Our postmodern society’s love of ‘tolerance’ and ‘each-to-his-own truth’ means that the concept of a God punishing people in hell forever is not only intolerable, it’s laughable. Inside the church, well-known evangelicals have brought the subject under increasing scrutiny. Some have demoted the topic of hell to a ‘secondary issue’, encouraging the tolerance of both traditionalist and conditionalist interpretations.² John Stott, who describes himself as “agnostic” on the issue,³ has said that “[t]he ultimate annihilation of the wicked should at least be accepted as a legitimate, biblically founded alternative to their eternal conscious torment.”⁴ Brian McLaren, an advocate for the emerging church, also opts for a form of ‘agnosticism’, downplaying the issue and wishing to focus on the positives rather than deal with the hard texts on hell.⁵ More recently, he has attempted “to deconstruct our conventional concepts of hell in the sincere hope that a better vision of the gospel of Jesus Christ will appear”.⁶

In short, the latter part of the twentieth century has seen such a shift in thinking on hell that there is no longer a clear evangelical consensus on the doctrine, nor the accompanying

¹ B Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1967), p. 47.

² For example, *The Nature of Hell: A Report by the Evangelical Alliance Commission of Unity and Truth Among Evangelicals* (Carlisle: ACUTE/Paternoster Press, 2000).

³ See Stott’s latest biography by R Steer, *Inside Story: The Life of John Stott* (Nottingham: IVP, 2009), p. 228.

⁴ DL Edwards and JRW Stott, *Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), p. 320.

⁵ See for example, BD McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), pp. 177-92; *The Story We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), pp. 167-68.

⁶ BD McLaren, *The Last Word and the Word After That* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), p. xvii.

conviction to actually still believe in it. This shift has led some to conclude that hell has all but ‘disappeared’ from modern theology.⁷

Three main alternative positions to the historic orthodox doctrine on hell currently exist and are gaining popularity within the evangelical church. I will briefly outline them.

Universalism

The belief that every person will ultimately be saved is common to all universalists, but among universalists there exists a variety of opinions on the theological content of the position.⁸ At the risk of oversimplification, forms of universalism may be divided into two broad categories: pluralistic universalism (the belief that Christ is one of many ways for the salvation of all people) and Christian universalism (the belief that Christ alone is the way of salvation and every person will experience that personally, either in this life or the next). In some universalist frameworks hell is not eradicated; rather, it serves only a temporary measure. Moreover, for some universalists it is not rational or moral considerations, nor even an optimistic anthropology, that drives them to their position but rather “the work of God in Christ,”⁹ which has been “one decisive act of God, once and for all, embracing every creature”.¹⁰

Annihilationism or conditionalism

Although important distinctions exist between these two positions, for our purposes here they are viewed together, since they essentially amount to the same conclusion: people who die outside of Christ eventually cease to exist at some point.¹¹ The most common ‘evangelical’ expression of annihilationism is the view that people without Christ are

⁷ R Albert Mohler Jr, ‘Modern Theology: The Disappearance of Hell’, in *Hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment* (eds. CW Morgan; RA Peterson; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), pp. 15-41.

⁸ For a helpful overview, see T Hart, “Universalism: Two Distinct Types”, in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), pp. 1-34.

⁹ JAT Robinson, *In the End God* (London: Clarke, 1950), p. 108.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

¹¹ As with universalism, there is a spectrum of thought within these two positions. For example, KS Harmon, “The Case Against Conditionalism: A Response to Edward William Fudge”, in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, pp. 191-224, observes three kinds of conditionalism: (1) ‘conditionalist uniresurrectionism’ (all people are annihilated and only those in Christ are raised to everlasting life on the last day—Jehovah Witnesses and Socinians believe this); (2) ‘conditionalist eventual extinctionism’ (all human beings are raised on the last day, either to everlasting bliss and so obtain immortality, or are annihilated—held by Seventh Day Adventists); (3) ‘immortalist eventual extinctionism’ (though all human beings were created immortal, those outside of Christ will be annihilated after a period of time in hell). For a defence of conditionalism, see J Wenham, “The Case for Conditional Immortality”, in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, pp. 196-99.

banished from God's presence in hell, punished there for a time, and then finally annihilated, ceasing to exist. They are cast "without hope into the abyss of obliteration".¹²

Since annihilationism is becoming the most popular alternative for evangelicals, it is worth looking at its principal arguments. First, a number of biblical passages speak of the *destruction* of the wicked (e.g. Phil 3:19; 1 Thess 5:3; 2 Thess 1:9–10; 2 Pet 3:7). Annihilation seems to at least be suggested by this word, given that "destroy" implies a cessation of existence. Edward Fudge argues that this is the uniform meaning of the word in both testaments.¹³ Second, the biblical imagery of fire supports this meaning of destruction, since fire destroys what it burns. To speak of the final judgment being like chaff thrown into the fire (Matt 3:12) implies that the chaff is consumed to the point of not existing anymore. Third, in the eschatological texts of the NT the word "eternal" is ambiguous. The word may be used to refer to the temporal experience of those in heaven (Matt 25:46), but it may also denote the unending *result* or *consequence* of God's punishment, not the ongoing experience of that punishment. The eternity of the punishment may simply be that the cessation of existence lasts forever.

There are also some theological arguments for annihilationism. First, the doctrine of eternal punishment is incompatible with love of God. Clark Pinnock vehemently argues that "the concept of hell as endless torment in body and mind [is] an outrageous doctrine, a theological and moral enormity, a bad doctrine of the tradition which needs to be changed". It projects a deity of "cruelty and vindictiveness"; such a God "is more nearly like Satan than like God", . . . "a blood thirsty monster who maintains an everlasting Auschwitz for victims whom he does not even allow to die".¹⁴ For others, eternal punishment is a "doctrine of such savagery".¹⁵ John Stott is less heated in his condemnation. The concept, for him, is emotionally "intolerable", but he concludes that the final question must be "not what does my heart tell me, but what does God's word say?"¹⁶ Second, *eternal* punishment does not compute with crimes committed by a finite creature in this life. It seems terribly unjust for a finite sin to be punished with infinite consequences. Finally, the doctrine of hell spoils the biblical picture of the new heavens and new earth, of eternal bliss and happiness. Philip

¹² P Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 407.

¹³ E Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: The Biblical Case for Conditional Immortality* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994).

¹⁴ C Pinnock, "The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent", *Criswell Theological Review* 4 (1990): pp. 246-47, 253. Edwards and Stott, *Essentials*, pp. 314-15, expresses similar views, though not as strongly.

¹⁵ M Green, *Evangelism Through the Local Church* (Nashville: Nelson, 1992), p. 73.

¹⁶ Edwards and Stott, *Essentials*, p. 315.

Edgcumbe Hughes believes that the restoration of all things (Col 1.19–20) necessarily entails the removal of such a place called hell: “[w]hen Christ fills all in all . . . how is it conceivable that there can be a section or realm of creation that does not belong to the fullness and by its very presence contradicts it?”¹⁷

Definitive self-exclusion from the presence of God

This third view has no ‘official’ label, and, as with the others, may take various forms. It is not an ‘established’ position on hell, articulated by a particular group within evangelicalism; rather, it is best described as pertaining to certain emphases on hell at the neglect or expense of others. In other words, it is not so much what the position affirms that is the problem, but what it fails to mention. Here, I point out two such examples, and begin to offer a brief critique.

CS Lewis’ writings serve as a good illustration of this position. He states: “[a] man can’t be *taken* to hell or *sent* to hell: you can only get there on your own steam”;¹⁸ “the doors of hell are locked from the *inside*”;¹⁹ “[t]here are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘*Thy* will be done.’”²⁰ Tim Keller writes similarly: “hell is simply one’s freely chosen identity apart from God on a trajectory into infinity”.²¹

At one level, what CS Lewis and Tim Keller say here must be affirmed: hell *is* a person’s choice. “All that are in hell, choose it.”²² This is true. The life we live is the life *we* choose, and if we’ve chosen to live without reference to God, then we have chosen hell. But to *only* preach that hell is our choice, suggests God is completely passive in letting people go there, and that he has no active role in hell. The question arises, then, how to interpret texts that speak of *God* ‘destroying’ people in hell (Matt 10:28), or ‘throwing’ them there (Mark 9:45).

Associated with this position is the increasingly popular view that God is not present in hell. Hell is complete exclusion from his presence; heaven is his presence. “If we were to lose

¹⁷ Hughes, *The True Image*, p. 406.

¹⁸ CS Lewis, *The Dark Tower & Other Stories* (ed. Walter Hooper; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), p. 49.

¹⁹ CS Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: MacMillan, 1962), p. 127.

²⁰ CS Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: MacMillan, 1963), pp. 72-73.

²¹ T Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York: Dutton, 2008), p. 78.

²² CS Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, p. 73.

[God's] presence totally, that would be hell".²³ Again, as with the other aspect above, there is truth here to be acknowledged and affirmed: hell *is* the absence of God in his good and lovely and joyful presence; it is the absence of any mercy or grace or kindness; it is divorce from any relationship or even potential for such. In this sense, hell is 'separation from God'. To choose hell is to choose all that God is not.²⁴ At the final judgment, God will say to sinners, "Depart from *me!*" (Matt 7:23). But is this is all there is to say about God's relationship to hell and those present there? How do we reconcile God's 'absence' in hell with his omnipresence? Moreover, what do we make of texts that say that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of *the living God* (Heb 10:31), that *he* is a "consuming fire" (Heb 12:28), that God has "prepared" the fires of hell (Matt 25:41), and that sinners are tormented "in the presence of the Lamb" (Rev 14:10)?

The questions I have asked of both these examples betray a pejorative edge to them, and I will deal more fully with them in the next part of this booklet.

Conclusion

In the light of the above, as the evangelical church enters a new decade of the third millennium, we are left asking the question: Is the church still serious about hell? These alternative positions present serious challenges to the traditional evangelical doctrine of hell. One response has even suggested that, "The doctrine of eternal punishment is the watershed between evangelical and non-evangelical thought."²⁵ If this is so, then the task of articulating the biblical doctrine of hell for a new decade in the evangelical church cannot be underestimated, since the ramifications are both cosmic and eternal in scope.

As always, when any Christian doctrine is under attack or just gradually slipping from view, the answer is to be found in returning to the Bible, and allowing God's Word to be the final authority. Such a point may appear simplistic, of course, since every side in the debate claims to be using the Bible to argue for their position, especially those attracted to annihilationism or the view that hell is merely self-exclusion from the presence of God. In the next section, however, I will provide exegesis of a number of relevant biblical texts in order to argue that the traditional evangelical position on hell is the most sensible and faithful reading of the

²³ Keller, *The Reason for God*, p. 76.

²⁴ Cf. T Keller, "The Importance of Hell". Accessed: March 2010. Online.

²⁵ J Ankerberg with J Weldon, "Response to JI Packer", in *Evangelical Affirmations* (eds. KS Kantzer and CFH Henry; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), p. 140.

biblical texts, and that, theologically, it comports best with the gospel of God's love and justice, a gospel which promises a new creation that really will be 'paradise'.

II

The Agonies of Hell: Biblical Reflections

In the first part of this booklet I outlined three alternatives on the doctrine of hell that are gaining popularity among evangelicals: universalism, annihilationism, and hell as definitive self-exclusion from the presence of God. This part will now present exegesis of the relevant biblical passages, engaging with the latter two positions on hell. The next two sections will provide theological and pastoral reflections about hell, before a concluding note on keeping hell in perspective.

We start with Jesus' comments in Mark 9:42-48 where we glean a number of biblical truths about hell.

A place

In Mark 9:43 Jesus speaks of people being thrown into 'hell' (cf. Matt 5:22, 29-30; 10:28; 18:9). The Greek word here is *Gebenna*, which comes from the Hebrew "Ge-hinnom", meaning "valley of Hinnom". The word "Hinnom" may refer to a furnace or fireplace. It was a place just outside Jerusalem, where the Israelites had burned their children in sacrifice to the Ammonite god Molech (2 Kgs 23:10; 2 Chron 28:3; 3:6). The location echoed a place of devilment and heart-wrenching grief, and came to symbolise the place of eschatological punishment (cf. 1 Enoch 54:12; 2 Bar 85:13; cf. Matt 10:28; 23:15, 33). Jesus used *Gebenna* as a metaphor for hell to convey a place of despicable, disgusting, and harrowing suffering. The metaphor certainly communicates a 'hellish' experience but it also implies that hell is a place. After all, Jesus states that people are 'thrown into' somewhere. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:28) the rich man speaks of "this place (*topos*) of torment". We are told in Acts 1:25 that Judas Iscariot went to "his own place" (*topos*). In John 5:29 Jesus states that there will be a resurrection for believers and unbelievers, which suggests that, like heaven, hell will be a real place inhabited by physical people. As with the exact location of where the risen Christ is enthroned, the precise location of hell is unknown to us. The only indication we do have is that it is remote, away from God's life and light, being described as 'outside' or "outer darkness" (Matt 8:12).

Ruled

Not only is hell a real place, it is also a ruled place. Those who sin are "thrown" into hell (Mark 9:45). Jesus says in Matt 10:28: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but

cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” Hell is not Satan’s realm; it is under God’s sovereign rule. This is why the proposal that hell is solely our choice, ‘locked from the inside’, is only half the truth. Yes, *we* do choose hell. Jesus says so: if we don’t deal radically with our sin, then hell is our fate (Mark 9:42-48). But he also says that *God* sentences us to hell, and because he is the judge of hell people remain there under *his* jurisdiction.

Real pain

The third thing we can see from Mark 9:42-48 is that hell is the experience of *real pain*. By ‘real’ I mean ‘conscious’ pain. Jesus uses a comparative argument to make his point (vv. 43-47). Think of the pain involved in cutting off a hand, or a foot, or plucking out an eye; better to have felt the pain of that, says Jesus, than to feel the pain of an unquenchable fire in hell. The images of hell also convey conscious pain and agony. Hell is described as worms boring into the body, fire, darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth—descriptions that fit the idea of real pain or anguish. The images are metaphorical, of course: worms and fire cannot literally exist together, neither can fire and darkness. However, it does not follow that since the images are symbolic they do not purport to reality. By their very nature, images and symbols are always less than their reality. A road sign with a picture of children crossing the road encourages slow and careful driving because it points to the greater reality of children in the vicinity. So it is with the biblical imagery of hell: the images should not lessen our view of hell, they should heighten it; they should not make hell less dreadful, if anything, they ought to make it even more terrifying, since the images are less than the reality. Just think about how painful the image of fire is: we wince at a small spark from a camp fire landing on our skin, or a drop of hot fat stinging our hand as we turn the meat on the barbie; but what must the unquenchable fires of hell be like? I am not arguing here that the fires of hell are literal, only that their imagery—imagery that we can all relate to—points to an awful reality of conscious pain.

Punishment

Mark 9:42-48 implies a simple cause and effect relationship between sin and hell. In other words, sin is punishable. Jesus speaks more explicitly of punishment in Matt 25:46: believers enter heaven for “eternal life” but unbelievers go away to “eternal punishment”. Paul affirms a similar truth in 2 Thess 1:6-10: “God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you . . . He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of

the Lord and from the majesty of his power . . .” Hell is God’s just punishment for sins committed by people who live in rebellion to their Maker and who refuse to obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is God’s just retribution. To be thrown into hell and punished by God, then, is no passive thing. In fact, God’s wrath is already ‘active’ through his ‘handing over’ of sinners to their own sin (Rom 1:18-32). This activity of God’s anger in the present, still restrained in some ways, is a precursor of the God’s future anger on the “day of wrath” (Rom 2:5) when it will be unrestrained and fully revealed.

Banishment

Jesus’ comment of being “thrown into hell” (Mark 9:45) also entails the idea of banishment. Instead of entering life and God’s kingdom, sinners are banished from God and his kingdom. 2 Thess 1:9-10 is most explicit: “They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power . . .”²⁶ In Matt 7:23, Jesus explains that on the day of judgment he will tell the wicked to “depart” from him. This is clearly an *active* banishment by God; it is the other side of the coin that CS Lewis failed to mention. Hell is self-exclusion from God, but it is also God’s active exclusion of us.

Does this mean, then, that God is absent in hell? Certainly, on the surface, texts such as 2 Thess 1:9-10 and Matt 7:23 would seem to support this. But what do we do with a text like Rev 14:10, then, where sinners are tormented “in the presence of the Lamb”? Two things need to be held together in tension when dealing with this difficult issue. First, at one level, God cannot be escaped spatially or relationally. For example, when Adam and Eve forfeited God’s presence in Eden through their rebellion and were cast out of the garden, it did not mean that God was absent outside Eden. 2 Kings 17:23 and 24:20 describe Israel and Judah being exiled from the land, as being ‘cast from God’s presence’. But God was present in Assyria and Babylon (e.g. Ezek 1:1-3). Spatially, it is impossible to escape God (cf. Ps 139:7-10). It is the same with God relationally. For example, God visited and talked to Cain outside Eden (Gen 4). Even though Cain was not elect and was not eventually saved, God still ‘related’ to him. Contrary to common evangelical cliché, no human being is ‘born outside a relationship with God’. What the doctrine of original sin affirms is that we are all born into a rebellious relationship with God where every act falls short of perfect obedience before a

²⁶ The preposition “from” (*apo*) may be translated a number of ways, but most often it is used in the NT with the sense of ‘separation from’. The intertextual allusion in v. 9 to Isaiah 2:10-21 suggests this is the best rendering here. Cf. D Moo, “Paul on Hell”, in *Hell Under Fire* (eds. CW Morgan and RA Peterson; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), pp. 106-108.

holy God. Every human being lives *Coram Deo*, “in the presence of God”, which means that every human act is either an act of obedience or disobedience *in relationship to God*. The very concept of sin entails a relationship with God, and depending on whether our sins have been forgiven, relationally, God is either our Judge or our Father. In short, at one level or another, it is not only impossible to escape God spatially, it is impossible to escape God relationally.

Second, ‘God’s presence’ needs carefully defined by each particular context. ‘God’s presence’, symbolised by Eden and the Promised Land, denoted a *loving, enjoyable* relationship with God, in which the wholeness of life was experienced. To be ‘cast from God’s presence’ was therefore to be shut off from his good and loving presence, to have his face “turned away” (Isa 59:2), to no longer have his favour (cf. Num 6:25), to no longer experience his good presence in a gracious relationship. Viewing God’s presence this way helps to understand a text like 2 Thess 1:9: sinners are shut out from God’s good and ‘comfortable presence’.²⁷ To be more specific: “Hell is eternity in the presence of God without a mediator. heaven is the presence of God with a mediator.”²⁸ This also helps to make sense of Rev 14:10, which states that sinners are “tormented in the presence of the Lamb”, where Christ is present, relating to sinners as their judge rather than as their mediator.

In sum: God cannot be escaped, either spatially or relationally. Texts that speak of being “shut out” from God’s presence (2 Thess 1:9) should be understood with ‘presence’ defined as all the benefits of God relating to humanity in his mercy and grace whereby sinners enjoy him and love him. Texts that speak of being “tormented in the presence of the Lamb” (Rev 14:10) should be understood with ‘presence’ defined as all the terrors of God relating to humanity in his justice and wrath whereby sinners experience judgment and punishment. “God, who is the heaven of one person, will be the hell of another”.²⁹ Or, to put it another way, there is no refuge from God there is only refuge in God.

Destruction

Proponents of annihilation argue that in the NT the verb “to destroy” (*apollumi*) and its cognate noun “destruction” (*apoleia*) refer to cessation of existence (cf. Matt. 2:13; 10:28). As Stott comments on Matt 10:28: “If to kill is to deprive the body of life, hell would seem to

²⁷ WFC, Larger Catechism, question 29.

²⁸ Ligon Duncan, *Fear Not: Death and the Afterlife from a Christian Perspective* (with J Nicholas Reid; Ross-Shire: Christian Focus, 2010), p. 94.

²⁹ E Donnelly, *Biblical Teaching on the Doctrines of Heaven and Hell* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2001), p. 41.

be the deprivation of both physical and spiritual life, that is, an extinction of being.”³⁰ The same argument is applied to the use of the cognate noun “destruction” (e.g. Matt 7:13) or a similar word *olethros* (1 Thess 5:3; 2 Thess 1:9): “It would seem strange . . . if people who are said to suffer destruction are in fact not destroyed.”³¹ To support the point, annihilationists argue that the imagery of hell as fire depicts a destruction that leads to a cessation of being: “the main function of fire is not to cause pain, but to secure destruction, as all the world’s incinerators bear witness”.³² The argument is reasonable: fire does destroy.

There are, however, a number of problems with the annihilation position. First, the argument commits an unwarranted restriction of the semantic range of the *apoleia* word-group. The word is used of the “lost” coin or the “lost” son in Luke 15; in Matt 9:17 it describes the “ruined” wineskins—in neither of these cases is cessation of existence in view. Second, as DA Carson points out, Stott’s argument on destruction is tautologous: “*of course* those who suffer *destruction* are *destroyed*. But it does not follow that those who suffer destruction cease to exist.”³³ The exact meaning of the words used for “to destroy” or “destruction” must therefore be determined on other grounds, namely, context. For example, when the word is used in contrast to “life” (cf. John 3.16), Christ is doing more than simply contrasting non-existence and mere survival. It seems more reasonable to suggest that he is comparing two *qualitatively* different kinds of existence. Moreover, the word for “destruction” (*olethros*) in 2 Thess 1:9-10 does not automatically and without qualification imply cessation of existence, since the next clause says “and shut out from the presence of the Lord”, which at least hints at ongoing existence. Third, interpreting the imagery of fire as denoting a destruction that leads to cessation of being is unwarranted, not only because Jesus uses the imagery to convey the concept of conscious pain (cf. Mark 9:43-48), but also because some texts referring to hell fire imply ongoing existence. In Matt 13:42 Jesus speaks of sinners being weeded out and thrown into the “fiery furnace”. If the fiery furnace consumes, then one would expect Jesus’ next words to be, “and they are no more”, or something like that. But his next words are, “where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth”, which implies continued existence. An annihilationist may suggest that this describes the suffering prior to the destruction by fire, but in Mark 9:48 (quoting Isaiah 66:24), Jesus says that hell is a place where “their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched”. If the fire

³⁰ Edwards and Stott, *Essentials*, p. 315.

³¹ Edwards and Stott, *Essentials*, p. 316.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ DA Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), p. 522.

consumes and destroys what it burns, metaphorically speaking, how can it continue to burn?³⁴ Thus, any “destruction” meant by the imagery of fire must mean an eternal destruction of some kind.

What, then, is the exact meaning of “destruction” or “destroy”? The Greek word-groups for “destruction” (*olethros* and *apollumi/apoleia*) usually refer to people or objects that cease to be useful for their original, intended state. Thus, when used in relation to hell, it is best to understand these words in the sense of ‘ruin’ or ‘deterioration’. All that is good and wholesome of people will be utterly ruined. In hell a person deteriorates into all that is evil and despised in them—total depravity gone wild. “We must picture hell as a state where everyone is perpetually concerned about his own dignity and advancement, where everyone has a grievance, and where everyone lives in deadly serious passions of envy, self-importance, and resentment.”³⁵ CS Lewis describes people being reduced to a mere grumble, the monotonous, endless sound of a machine, just grumbling away.³⁶ It is a horrific picture of humanity dehumanised. People were made in God’s image and for his glory, to enjoy him and to live life to the full, to be creative and to grow into their full potential; but in hell all that is stripped away, as they disintegrate and deteriorate yet never become extinct.

Punishment, banishment and destruction: as dreadful and frightening as these three pictures of hell are, there is one more thing that the Bible has to say about hell.

Eternal

In some passages Jesus refers to the experience of hell as eternal (Matt 18:8; Matt 25:41; cf. Jude 7). The annihilation or conditional immortality response is that the adjective *aionios* refers to the *result* or *consequence* of the action and not the action itself: what lasts forever is not the experience of punishment but rather the state of annihilation.³⁷

A closer look at the texts concerning *aionios*, however, highlights that the evidence seems to point more to a temporal/eternal category rather than a qualitative one. For a start, the clear parallelism in Matt 25:46 (“Then [the goats] will go away to eternal *punishment*, but the

³⁴ The possessive pronoun “their” suggests the “worm” is perpetually bound up with those who are suffering.

³⁵ CS Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters: Preface* (New York: MacMillan, 1960), p. ix.

³⁶ CS Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, p. 75.

³⁷ See, for example, Basil FC Atkinson, *Life and Immortality* (Taunton: Goodman, 1962), p. 101; and esp. Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, pp. 37-50, 194-96. Pinnock, ‘The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent’, p. 256, argues for ‘irreversible destruction’.

righteous to eternal *life*”) points against the annihilationist reading. In addition, the annihilationist argument implies that the converse of extinction—salvation—is simply a ‘once-upon-a-time’ act with no ongoing enjoyment of the actual state. More significantly, a survey of the biblical use of *aiōnios* shows that the word commonly has temporal/eternal overtones, even when a qualitative force is intended (cf. Matt 12:32). Other texts support the view that the suffering is eternal: in Rev 14:10 it is the smoke of their torment that arises forever and ever, not the smoke of their ‘once-upon-a-time’ destruction.

In this light, the annihilation/conditional position appears to be of questionable exegetical strength. As DA Carson comments: “If Jesus had wanted to distance himself from that view [eternal punishment], and make his espousal of annihilationism abundantly clear, he certainly forfeited numerous opportunities to do so.”³⁸ Furthermore, attempts to systematise the categories of punishment, banishment and destruction, into a neat temporal serialisation in order to support annihilationism also contains weaknesses.³⁹ For example, Jesus uses all three pictures of hell in Matt 24:45–25:46. From the order Jesus provides in Matt 25:41 and 46, some may conclude that Jesus is teaching us that banishment leads to punishment. The problem with this is that Paul uses all three pictures in 2 Thess 1:5-10, but states that the punishment *is* the destruction and the banishment. In Rev 20:10–22:15 all three pictures are mentioned but never integrated. In other words, great caution should be given in trying to systematise the pictures of hell—as with all Christian doctrines, biblical texts need to be held together in tension.

If this reading of hell’s duration is correct, then, here is the most terrifying truth about hell: it never ends. This is what CH Spurgeon called “the hell of hells”.⁴⁰ After suffering the conscious pain of punishment, banishment and destruction by God for a billion ‘years’, those in hell will face the awful reality that those billion ‘years’ are but one point on an infinitely long line.

I physically shudder as I write that last sentence. I find this subject extremely difficult to write about, especially when I have loved ones who are still outside of Christ. The thought of

³⁸ Carson, *Gagging of God*, p. 529.

³⁹ For example, Fudge suggests the order as being banishment from God’s presence, a temporal period of punishment and then destruction. See KS Harmon, in “The Case Against Conditionalism: A Response to Edward William Fudge”, p. 213.

⁴⁰ CH Spurgeon, “Heaven and Hell”, a sermon delivered 4 September 1855 in a field, King Edward’s Road, Hackney.

them going to hell fills me with dread; I find it deeply emotional at times. But as I have studied this topic again, I am reminded of the words of John Stott: the issue is “not what does my heart tell me, but what does God’s word say?”⁴¹ If what God’s word says is true—that hell really does exist—then I need to face it. Ignoring it, denying it, or even reinterpreting it, will not change the reality of hell. As difficult as the subject is, the issue of hell ultimately comes down to trusting Jesus: trusting that he’s telling us the truth, and that he’s telling it to us for our good. I believe with all my heart that he is worth trusting, for he too wept over Jerusalem, and more, vanquished hell so that Jerusalem, and all the ends of the earth, might enjoy his heaven—a new heavens and a new earth, the home of righteousness.

⁴¹ Edwards and Stott, *Essentials*, p. 315.

III

A God of Perfect Justice and Love: Theological Reflections

The Christian doctrine of hell may be summarised as *a real place, ruled by God, where all who are found outside of Christ at death or at his return, experience the eternal conscious pain of punishment, banishment, and destruction*. It is impossible to write such a frank and sober statement without a number of theological and pastoral issues coming to the fore. The aim of this part is to consider two of the main theological objections.

The justice of God

In Mark 9:42-48 Jesus states that those who do not deal radically with their own sin will be thrown into hell for eternity, “where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” (v. 48). A moment’s reflection on what Jesus says here raises the issue of God’s justice. How can sin, committed by a finite creature in time, be punished with infinite consequences for eternity? As Augustine commented on these verses: “Who would not tremble, hearing from divine lips such a repetition and so vigorous a declaration of that punishment.”⁴²

While we may not agree in substance perhaps we can at least empathise with those who struggle to reconcile how God can damn someone to hell for eternity for sins committed in this lifetime. The Christian response to such an objection is both complex and sensitive. It is complex because there is no one verse that provides a clear explanation as to why God in his infinite wisdom chose to create an eternal hell for sinners; it is sensitive because many of us will have loved ones who departed this world with no certain hope of their position before God.

Ongoing sin?

In addressing the issue of the justice of God, it has been proposed that one or two texts in the NT may hint of *ongoing sin* in hell. Revelation 16:9 describes the response of those who receive God’s “true and just judgments” (v. 7): “they cursed the name of God” and “did not repent or give him glory”. This may at least suggest why hell is eternal punishment.⁴³ However, the argument holds together only by logical deduction, since the text primarily concerns the time *before* the final judgment. Moreover, the issue raises the question of

⁴² Augustine, *Civitas Dei* XXI, ix (1), cited in Henri Blocher, “Everlasting Punishment and the Problem of Evil” in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, p. 287.

⁴³ DA Carson, *Gagging of God*, p. 533, argues similarly from Rev. 22:10-11.

whether sin can continue in hell, since, as some argue, Christ's death reconciles all things to himself (Col 1:20), which, for them, necessarily entails the cessation of sin.⁴⁴ It is not that the cosmic reconciliation involves 'salvation' per se, but rather 'pacification'⁴⁵ where all things are brought into harmony under God's rule, even unrepentant sinners (cf. Phil 2:10f). For Henri Blocher, for example, hell is empty of sin but full of remorse (cf. Luke 16:19-31).⁴⁶ This position, however, is not without its weaknesses either: for example, it perhaps fails to provide adequate room for the picture of 'destruction' in hell where people deteriorate in some sense.

Space forbids a thorough discussion of this exact issue, suffice to say that the possibility of 'ongoing sin' does not appear to be a strong basis for affirming eternal punishment.

Degrees of punishment

There are some texts in the NT that suggest *degrees of punishment* at the future judgment, conveying the idea that the punishments are duly measured according to the crime committed. See for example, Luke 12:47-48, where Jesus speaks of people being beaten with different degrees of severity. This correlates with Jesus' claim that the Day of Judgment will be more bearable for some than for others (Matt 11:20-24). "Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more" (Luke 12:48). In other words, those who have been given more knowledge have more responsibility in what they do with that knowledge. The Day of Judgment, and the subsequent experience of that sentence in hell, will be more bearable for the Amazonian Indian who has never heard of Jesus, than for the son reared in a Christian home who knew and heard the gospel but trampled the Son of God underfoot.

As difficult as such a truth is it at least suggests that God's future punishments are not random, disproportionate, or thoughtless—they are measured and appropriate. However, these preliminary thoughts do not bring us any closer to resolving the issue of how a finite sin can result in infinite punishment for an eternity in hell. As with all Christian doctrines, a

⁴⁴ For examples of this position, see H Blocher, "Everlasting Punishment and the Problem of Evil", pp. 283-312; A Saville, "Hell Without Sin—A Renewed View of a Disputed Doctrine", *Churchman* 119:3 (2005): pp. 243-61; P Helm, *The Last Things* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), p. 114.

⁴⁵ So FF Bruce, *The Epistle to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 76. Cf. PT O'Brien, "Col. 1:20 and the Reconciliation of All Things," *RTR* 35 (1974): pp. 45-53.

⁴⁶ H Blocher, "Everlasting Punishment and the Problem of Evil", pp. 304-307.

number of key biblical texts and theological truths need to be held together in order to have a framework in which to understand God's justice in hell.

God's sovereignty and love

Firstly, besides the fact that the Bible speaks of God as *utterly sovereign over all things*, deciding the end from the beginning, it also presents him as *deeply personal and infinitely loving*. The God of the Bible is “a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exod 34:6). He stands towards his rebellious world—a world that has given him the fingers more than once—and says, “Why will you die? . . . I have no pleasure in the death of anyone” (Ezek 18:31-32). Incarnate, he felt anguish over Jerusalem's stubborn rebellion (Luke 13:34).

Human responsibility

Secondly, the Bible is clear that *human beings are responsible for their own actions, and culpable for the consequences*. For example, Jesus longed to gather Jerusalem's children together, but *they* “would not” (Luke 13:34). “All day long” God holds out his hand of salvation to “disobedient and contrary Jews” who refuse to believe in his Messiah (Rom 10:21). The reason for their final lost estate, then, is not due to any lack of willing in God, but rather the stubborn rebellion of their own hearts. In other words, in the Bible when someone is saved it is all God's doing; when someone is lost it is his or her own doing.

The greatness of God and the heinousness of sin

Thirdly, Scripture presents us with such a view of God and such a God-centred view of sin, which, when held together, suggest that *it is not the length of our sin that determines the degree of God's just punishment, but the height of our sin*. “Degrees of blameworthiness come not from how long you offend dignity, but from how high the dignity is that you offend.”⁴⁷ Admittedly, there is no one biblical text from which we may prove this propositional statement, but then no single text exists to prove the doctrine of the Trinity or Christ's imputed righteousness. As mentioned above, holding together a number of biblical texts/truths in tension lead to these doctrines and the truth proposed above.

This third point needs unpacked. The supremacy of God and the seriousness of sinning against him are seen throughout Scripture. The first commandment makes it plain that God

⁴⁷ J Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Leicester: IVP, 2003), p. 122.

alone is to be worshipped (Exod 20:3). God is described as thrice holy, whose glory fills the whole earth (Isa 6:3)—no other attribute of God is emphasised as much in the Bible. Nowhere in Scripture do we read that God is “love, love, love” or “just, just, just”. But in both OT and NT he is described as “holy, holy, holy” (Rev 4:8). God’s holiness is his golden attribute that colours all his other attributes: his love is holy love, his justice is holy justice. God’s holiness, his utter “otherness”, his “*godness*”, is so real, so intense, that even the cherubim fly before him covering their faces and their feet because he is so unapproachable (Isa 6:2), for he dwells in “unapproachable light” (1 Tim 6:16); his eyes are too pure to look upon evil (Hab 1:13). As fallen human beings we would have more chance of coming within an inch of the sun in our solar system, and surviving, than we would of coming within a million miles of the light of this holy God, and living to tell of it. An old hymn by Thomas Binney captures the truth well:

Eternal Light! eternal Light!
How pure the soul must be
When, placed within Thy searching sight,
It shrinks not, but with calm delight
Can live, and look on Thee!

O how shall I, whose native sphere
Is dark, whose mind is dim,
Before the Ineffable appear,
And on my naked spirit bear
That uncreated beam?

The intensity of God’s holiness is highlighted in the story of Nadab and Abihu, Aaron’s sons (Lev 10:1-3; cf. 2 Sam 6). When they offered ‘unauthorised’ fire to God they were struck down immediately by fire. Why such extreme punishment for one simple transgression? God’s answer: “Among those who are near me I will be sanctified [seen as holy], and before all the people I will be glorified” (Lev 10:3). In short: God cannot be stroked. “He’s wild, you know. Not like a *tame* lion”.⁴⁸

Is this an aspect of God that we have lost in our modern evangelical churches? Do our Christian gatherings convey the weightiness of this holy God? Until they do, we will not appreciate the justice of God in hell, because in Scripture when people sin the issue is the dignity of the God whom they have sinned against. After committing adultery with Bathsheba (cf. 2 Sam 11), David cries out “Against you, *you only*, have I sinned” (Ps 51:4).

⁴⁸ CS Lewis, *The Lion Witch and the Wardrobe* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 197.

David had sinned against Bathsheba, her husband Uriah, the child in Bathsheba's womb, his commander Joab, and his nation. But for David, God was the *only* person he had sinned against. Sin is first and foremost a Godward thing. It is not “negation” (as Augustine proposed) or “nothingness” (as Karl Barth suggested): sin is an act of defiance against a holy God, and to sin against him is to incur the most severe punishment.

In summary, when it comes to punishment for sin, the Bible seems to be saying something rather simple yet profound: a great and glorious God of infinite worth made us, and therefore we *owe* him great and glorious and infinite worship. If we do not worship him, then the consequences are of infinite magnitude. God is the most infinitely lovely and beautiful and excellent and glorious and majestic and winsome and delightful and wonderful being in the whole universe, and as our Creator we are under infinite obligation to love, obey, honour, glorify, and enjoy him forever—it is our chief end, our ultimate *telos*. But if we choose to turn away from that infinite obligation, then our sin is infinitely heinous and so deserving of infinite punishment. Do we really think that a teenage boy who punches his brother in the face should receive the exact same punishment for punching the Queen in the face? And when it comes to God, he does not just differ from the Queen in degree, but in kind. Surely this is what Jesus presupposes when he correlates sin by finite creatures to an infinite punishment in hell in Mark 9: the severity of the punishment for sin is directly proportional to the importance of the relationship and the height of the dignity of the one we have offended.

God's justice in the gospel

Fourthly, *the issue of God's justice in hell is inseparably tied up with his justice in the gospel*. In Rom 3:21-26, Paul states something that is rarely heard in churches today: God's setting forth Christ as a propitiation—a God appeasing sacrifice—was first and foremost to vindicate his own reputation. Paul explains the double dilemma that God faced: his seeming negligence for sins committed by OT saints in the past and his justification of sinners in the present (Rom 3:25a)—both brought God's justice into question. Throughout the OT God had reiterated again and again and again his just punishment for sin, and his absolute unwillingness to acquit the wicked (Exod 23:7). Yet throughout the OT believers appear to get off scot free for their actions. Abraham's misdemeanours in Egypt, and with Hagar, go unpunished. David's affair with Bathsheba is conspicuously covered over, as if his repentance alone was a sufficient payment (Ps 51:16). But was it? In the NT the problem remains: How can a holy God declare a sinner to be righteous in his sight, when the sinner is

just that, a sinner? Thus, the issue for Paul, and God, is not how can God forgive a guilty sinner, but rather, how can God forgive a guilty sinner *and remain just at the same time*? That is the dilemma that the cross of Christ answers: in Christ's death God punishes the sins of all his people, past and present and future, to prove to the world that he is both just and the justifier of those who believe in Jesus (Rom 3:25-26). In that one death, God accomplishes both the vindication of his own name and the justification of sinners who believe in his name. God's desire to vindicate himself from any accusation of injustice is of utmost importance to him.

Assurance and the justice of hell

All well and good, but what does this have to do with God's justice in hell? Everything, actually, because, fifthly, further reflection reveals that *our personal assurance of salvation on the last day is dependent on God's justice in the gospel*. The joy of sins forgiven and the assurance that we really will be saved on the last day are based on the assumption of the illegitimacy of a double payment for sin. That is the argument of the Apostle Paul in Rom 5:6-10. In vv. 9-10, Paul employs a from-the-greater-to-the-lesser argument to demonstrate that Christ's atoning work on the cross is the basis for the believer's absolute certainty of escaping God's final judgment: if we have been justified by Christ's death in the present, how much more will be justified in the future, since the payment has already been paid? The argument only holds together on the assumption that God cannot punish sin twice. As Augustus Toplady put it:

If Thou hast my discharge procured,
And freely in my room endured
The whole of wrath divine:
Payment God cannot twice demand,
First at my wounded Surety's hand,
And then again at mine.⁴⁹

In sum, if the gospel itself demonstrates God's commitment to his own justice, then why would we not also affirm God's justice in hell, since Christ's death is the payment made to rescue believers *from* hell? Christ's wrath-appeasing death and the punishment of hell equate to the same thing. Since God is so just that he will not punish the same sin twice, the issue becomes a case of either-or: either a person is willing to accept Jesus' just payment for their

⁴⁹ *From Whence This Fear and Unbelief*.

sins, or they choose to justly pay for their sins in hell themselves.⁵⁰ It is God's justice in the gospel that should enable us to affirm his justice with hell.

Summary of God's justice in hell

Hell exists to display God's good and perfect justice. The question is whether we have a God-centred enough view of God to accept this. John Piper has said that as evangelicals "We are willing to be God-centered, it seems, as long as God is man-centered."⁵¹ The point is perceptive, and hell is a good test for just how God-centred we are.

While these points above may not lessen the emotional weight of hell, it may begin to lessen the dilemma for us. "God is perfect. Justice and mercy are not abstractions; they originate in Him. They are adjectives."⁵² They are *his* adjectives. Beyond this truth we must live by faith. As Henri Blocher comments:

justice and love are one in God, the same fire of holy passion. We cannot yet *see* that truth. We do not know how to reconcile the perfection of divine mercy, the bliss of the redeemed, and the torment of the lost. But we do not presume to teach our Lord lessons on love. But we do know *him*. Our disarmed faith knows God, and it suffices.⁵³

Affirming the justice of God in the doctrine of hell is also essential when proclaiming the greatness of God's love in the gospel, which brings us to the second theological reflection.

The love of God

It is only when we have grasped God's justice in Christ's death (Rom 3:21-26) that we can then fully appreciate God's love displayed in the same death (Rom 5:1-10). One can only speak of God's love (his gracious, unmerited favour towards us), if we first understand what he had to give in order to save us: God himself gave himself in order to save us from *himself*.⁵⁴ What necessitated this giving was God's justice, a justice integrally bound up with

⁵⁰ This raises the question "For whom did Christ die?", which unfortunately is a topic for another occasion. Suffice to say that, our discussion has at least shown that the issue arises, in the first place, from texts like Rom 5:9-10 and 8:32-34, and not from 'logical reasoning' imposed on biblical texts, as is sometimes alleged.

⁵¹ J Piper, *God is the Gospel* (Chicago: Crossway, 2005), pp. 12-13.

⁵² ND Wilson, *Notes From the Tilt-a-Whirl*, p. 181.

⁵³ H Blocher, "Everlasting Punishment and the Problem of Evil", p. 298.

⁵⁴ JRW Stott, *The Message of Romans* (The Bible Speaks Today; Leicester: IVP, 1994), p. 115.

his own nature—sin must be punished; what motivated this giving was God’s love, a sovereign free love arising from his own nature—not from any attraction in us. And why did God choose to act in such a way? Because that’s the kind of God he is, a just and loving God. More specifically, this giving involved Christ enduring on the cross the Father’s unrestrained wrath against sinners. Pains and agonies of hell that would take the world an eternity to endure were poured upon Jesus in one horrific moment.⁵⁵ And *this* is the love of God, for the God who is angry at us, and from whom we deserve an eternal hell, is the same God who loved us and sent his Son to endure the whole of wrath divine. What is echoed in hell is not only the justice of God on those who are present, but also the infinite, amazing, love of God lavished on those who are absent. Out of the darkness on the cross, Jesus cried the cry of desolation so that we would never have to cry the cry of desolation in hell. He took our hell so that we could have his heaven. If we take hell out of Christianity then we divest Christ’s death of everything, and destroy the brilliance of God’s amazing love. The ‘dilemma’ of God’s love and the doctrine of hell is not, therefore, How can a loving God send people to hell?; rather, it is, Why would a just God ever rescue rebels from punishment in hell? The answer is left to mystery, a mystery that should lead to worship—where all proper theological reflection ends:

And can it be that I should gain
an interest in the Savior’s blood!
Died he for me? who caused his pain!
For me? who him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be
that thou, my God, shouldst die for *me?*

⁵⁵ D Macleod, *The Work of Christ* (Leicester: IVP, 1998), p. 176.

IV

The Weight of Hell: Pastoral Reflections

More than most theological subjects the doctrine of hell raises a high number of pastoral concerns. If hell is *a real place, ruled by God, where all who are found outside of Christ at death or at his return, experience the eternal conscious pain of punishment, banishment, and destruction*, then a number of issues immediately present themselves to us. They are discussed here in no particular order.

How we speak about hell

Firstly, *hell should change the way we speak about hell*. In our culture “hell” is a swear word, other people’s music (according to *Wired*), or, as Jean-Paul Satre once said, hell is “other people”.⁵⁶ For some, hell is an experience in this life: the Victoria bushfires of 2009 were described as “hell’s fury!”⁵⁷ Without wishing to diminish for a moment such horrific events that some people experience in this life, our study of the reality of hell and all that it entails should at least provide pause for thought on how we use the word “hell”. If what has been said about hell in this booklet is true and accurate, then how we speak about hell ought to radically change. Is it really appropriate for a Christian to use hell as a swear word—“Oh hell!”, “What the hell?”—or even as part of an idiom—“She’s been through hell!”? I know that those who speak like this are not consciously referring to the actual place or the state of eternal punishment; nevertheless, as Christians our language should be above the world’s sloppy speech. I believe that, in the light of our study, the only time “hell” should ever appear on a Christian’s lips is in apologetic discussions about it or when we are pleading with someone not to go there.

There is also a reverse side to how we speak about hell. Sadly, there have been abusive descriptions of hell by some evangelicals, going far beyond the sober truthfulness of the Scriptures.⁵⁸ At times, some of these portray an appalling insensitivity, even a malicious joy or gloating over those who suffer in hell. Such abuses must be avoided at all costs. There is no place for talking harshly about hell or in exaggerated ways that go beyond scriptural limits. It is a subject that demands careful and sensitive treatment.

⁵⁶ Cited in Donnelly, *Heaven and Hell*, p. 17.

⁵⁷ *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Accessed: May 2010. Online.

⁵⁸ Donnelly, *Heaven and Hell*, pp. 32-33, provides some sad examples.

Clarity about end-time judgment

Secondly, the issue of how we speak about hell is appropriate for Christian preachers in particular. Given the specific scriptural descriptions of hell, Christian preachers ought to *speak with clarity on the end-time judgement and not in vague and general terms*. One is reminded of the (true?) story of a preacher who warned his hearers that they would face “eschatological ramifications”.⁵⁹ But conditional immortality and annihilation are “eschatological ramifications”. So what should it mean for the preacher? And what ought it to mean for our listeners *after* the sermon? Will they come away any clearer on what lies ahead?

In this regard, *preachers should not just talk about hell; they should preach hell*. Lesslie Newbigin once remarked that “It is one of the weaknesses of a great deal of contemporary Christianity that we do not speak of the last judgement and of the possibility of being finally lost.”⁶⁰ If I may take this one step further: it is one of the great weaknesses of modern evangelicalism that we do not actually preach hell with the clarity, precision, and boldness with which Jesus preached it. I remember a sermon series on hell in one church where the minister delivered a sermon on how so many people want to duck the thorny issue of hell, and how as evangelicals we can’t: hell exists and we must face it. That he at least flagged the issue was commendable; that in many respects he didn’t preach it himself was inadvertently ironic. It is one thing to talk often about how you and your church believe in hell—even putting it on the sermon programme on a yearly basis—it is quite another to actually *preach* hell on a regular basis; and more, to preach it like we really do believe it. For example, Jesus’ “weeping and gnashing of teeth” metaphor is not meant to serve as simply a diversion point in the sermon to justify the preaching of hell to the unbeliever; it is meant to stun and shock, to sting and startle, to fill the hearer with dread, not just relate to their head with an intellectually argued *apologia* for why it’s good and right to speak of hell. Hell should be preached in such a way that it is like cracking open smelling salts right beneath our listeners’ noses. Moreover, if we are prepared to tease out the picture of what a “feast” in the “kingdom of God” will be like (Luke 13:29), playing on the many delightful aspects that such an occasion brings with it (the sound of music and dancing, the smell and taste of great food and fine wine, the heart-filled joy of friendship and laughter and singing, the company of loved ones), and encouraging people not to miss out, is it not reasonable to expect a preacher to draw out the metaphor of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” in order to stir the

⁵⁹ Cited in Donnelly, *Heaven and Hell*, p. 8.

⁶⁰ L Newbigin, “Confessing Christ in a Multi-Religion Society”, *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 12 (1994): pp. 130-31.

sensibilities of people to flee from the wrath to come? A faithful preacher should aim for both: a passionate, winsome stirring of the desires of the unregenerate to come and join the biggest eschatological party that will ever be; and a sombre, clear, urgent pleading with the blind to escape the most dreadful, awful eschatological tragedy that will ever occur. Interestingly, Tim Keller reflects that, in his experience, simply pressing home the symbols of hell without actually explaining their referents has proved ineffective.⁶¹ He tells of how one person told him that the “fires of hell” didn’t scare him at all, but when Keller explained what ‘disintegration’ might look like in a person, being reduced to a monotonous grumbling sound of a machine going on forever, his friend went immediately quiet.

In short: once we have given the *apologia* for why it is reasonable to speak about hell—and the *apologia* is necessary in a postmodern world that has lost its bearings when it comes to justice and judgment—we should not stop short of actually preaching hell.

Hell's insufficiency

Thirdly, in preaching hell we ought to preach not only the stark reality of it, unpacking the variety of images and pictures, but *we should also speak of hell's insufficiency*. Hell itself is not able to save people from hell, only Christ is, a Christ testified to by the Scriptures. This is underlined in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man who ends up in hell (Luke 16:19-31). The rich man’s request for someone to go and tell his brothers of the torments of hell in order to warn them not to go there (vv. 27-28), is met with a surprising answer: “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead” (v. 31). In other words, fear of the reality of hell does not save people from hell, only the Scriptures pointing to Christ saves people. Hell must be proclaimed in conjunction with a Christ who saves people from hell, for only Christ can save.

People and Death

Fourthly, *hell should change the way we think about people and death*. Let me deal with each of these in turn.

⁶¹ T Keller, “The Importance of Hell”. Accessed: March 2010. Online.

a) *People*

In his essay, “The Weight of Glory”, CS Lewis writes of the amazing, potential, future glory that awaits a human being in the new creation. It is worth quoting the essay at length, with little comment needed in response.

It may be possible for each to think too much of his own potential glory hereafter; it is hardly possible for him to think too often or too deeply about that of his neighbour. The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbour’s glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken. It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilisations—these are mortal and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours. This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn. We must play. But our merriment must be of that kind (and it is, in fact, the merriest kind) which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously—no flippancy, no superiority, no presumption. And our charity must be a real and costly love, with deep feeling for the sins in spite of the sinner—no mere tolerance, or indulgence which parodies life as flippancy parodies merriment. Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses. If he is your Christian neighbour he is holy in almost the same way, for in him Christ *vere latitat*—glorifier and glorified, Glory Himself—is truly hidden.⁶²

⁶² CS Lewis, “The Weight of Glory”, in *CS Lewis Essay Collection: Faith, Christianity and the Church* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), pp. 105-106.

We may have a quibble over Lewis' sacramentalism, but besides that, this is one of the most profound and helpful statements written on relating to people in the light of heaven and hell. Lewis is correct: "There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal."

b) Death

While listening to the bells of St. Giles Church, Oxford, as he awaited an operation, Poet Laureate, John Betjeman, wrote:

Intolerably sad, profound
St. Giles' bells are ringing round . . .
Swing up! and give me hope and life,
Swing down! and plunge the surgeon's knife.
I, breathing for a moment, see
Death wing himself away from me
And think, as on this bed I lie,
Is it extinction when I die?⁶³

Bertrand Russell's answer was simple: "Yes". "When I die I shall rot."⁶⁴ For the Christian believer the answer is binary and far graver: when we die we either go to heaven or hell. CS Lewis said that "to a Christian the true tragedy of Nero must be not that he fiddled while the city was on fire but that he fiddled on the brink of hell."⁶⁵ The reality of hell, and the fact that millions of people pass from this life every year into a lost eternity, should lead us to gospel urgency in order to warn people that death is not the end, hell is—and it does not end. A moving illustration by John Blanchard helps to underline the need for urgency.

On 12 December 1984 dense fog shrouded the M25 near Godstone, in Surrey, a few miles south of London. The hazard warning lights were on, but were ignored by most drivers. At 6.15 a.m. a lorry carrying huge rolls of paper was involved in an accident, and within minutes the carriageway was engulfed in carnage. Dozens of cars were wrecked. Ten people were killed. A police patrol car was soon on the scene, and two policemen ran back up the motorway to stop oncoming traffic. They waved their arms and shouted as loud as they could, but most drivers took no notice and raced on towards the

⁶³ J Betjeman, "Before the Anaesthetic, or A Real Fright" cited in J Blanchard, *Whatever Happened to Hell?* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 1993), p. 60.

⁶⁴ B Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects* (New York: Touchstone, 1967), p. 111.

⁶⁵ CS Lewis, "Learning in War-time" in *C.S. Lewis Essay Collection: Literature, Philosophy and Short Stories* (London: Harper Collins, 2002), p. 171.

disaster that awaited them. The policemen then picked up traffic cones and flung them at the cars' windscreens in a desperate attempt to warn drivers of their danger; one told how tears streamed down his face as car after car went by and he waited for the sickening sound of impact as they hit the growing mass of wreckage farther down the road.

Blanchard concludes: "The plight of the lost is so terrible, the power of sin so great and the horror of hell so fearful—how can you possibly do nothing to warn people of their danger and to point them to the Saviour?"⁶⁶

Great God, what do I see and hear?
The end of things created!
The Judge of all mankind appears,
On clouds of glory seated.
The trumpet sounds, the graves restore,
The dead which they contained before!
Prepare, my soul, to meet Him.

But sinners, filled with guilty fears,
Behold His wrath prevailing.
In woe they rise, but all their tears
And sighs are unavailing.
The day of grace is past and gone;
Trembling they stand before His throne,
All unprepared to meet Him.⁶⁷

So maybe it is time to have that chat with our neighbour or our work colleague or our friend at university. If what I have said is true, if they are outside of Christ, then they are heading for hell, and we may be the only Christian they know. Rather than seeing it as a burden, we ought to view it as a privilege: we have *incredibly good* news for them.

Bold to proclaim

Fifthly, *hell should make believers bold to proclaim*. Understanding the context of a number of texts on hell provides helpful resources for the believer in their Christian life. For example, in both Matt 10:28 and Luke 12:5 Jesus' talk of hell arises out of commissioning his disciples to go and preach: don't fear the person who can only kill you, fear him who can destroy body and soul in hell. The idolatry of pleasing other people and fearing what they think, which we are all so prone to, is best remedied by a wholesome fear of the One who rules

⁶⁶ J Blanchard, *Whatever Happened to Hell?*, pp. 297-98.

⁶⁷ Author: Bartholomäus Ringwaldt.

hell. What do we think our work colleagues or fellow students are going to do when we tell them about Christ? Laugh at us? Talk behind our backs? Not sit with us at lunch times? And when we compare this sort of ‘persecution’ to that which our brothers and sisters in, say, Indonesia face—beatings, torture, jail, and even death itself—our caving into peer pressure or pleasing others really does appear so feeble. This is not to say that for a shy Christian girl at university, talking to her non-Christian friends about Christ should feel easy and normal. God has made us all different in this regard: some of us have more confidence as people than others, depending on our personality and family upbringing. But whoever it is God has made us, and whatever pressure or persecution we fear, when asked to give a reason for the hope within us (1 Peter 3:15), let Jesus’ words stir us to boldness: “Do not fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

Confident to persevere

Sixthly, *hell should make believers confident to persevere*. In Revelation 14, the prospect of God’s future judgments on all who have worshipped the beast, “calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God’s commandments and remain faithful to Jesus.” (14:12). In other words, eschatological judgment in hell that awaits those who worship the beast, serves as a warning to not fall away from faithfully serving Jesus Christ. Similar logic is used in Hebrews, where the writer encourages Christian believers to persevere, since “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (10:31). NT writers use the reality and prospect of hell to warn believers of not falling away. According to Jesus in Mark 9:43-50, if his disciples don’t do radical surgery on their sin then *they* will end up in hell.⁶⁸ Sin is, therefore, serious for *believers*. This key point is, in my view, often seriously neglected. We no longer take sin seriously, and subsequently we don’t teach the full force of biblical texts such as: ‘For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die’ (Rom 8:13). The texts of Scripture on eschatological judgment warn us to persevere and endure to the end, helping us to fight sin, so that in the end we do not fall short (Heb 3:12-14; 4:11).

⁶⁸ This is not to suggest that a Christian can lose their salvation, or have no assurance that their salvation is secure. Rather, it is say that one of the means of grace that God uses to keep Christians persevering to the end, fighting sin and obeying his commands, is the very real danger of hell. See Thomas R Schreiner and Ardel B Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance & Assurance* (Leicester: IVP, 2001); and PT O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Nottingham: Apollos, 2010), on the relevant verses.

Comfort for persecuted believers

Seventhly, *God's final just punishment of the ungodly should comfort persecuted believers*. In 2 Thess 1:6-10 Paul writes of hell in the context of Christians suffering persecution and trials. He assures believers that God will pay back trouble to those who have troubled them. Before we think that this is some sort of vindictive polemic on Paul's part, or contrary to aspects of Jesus' teaching, Paul prefaces his comments with a declaration of God's right and just judgment (1:5-6). What the persecutor of Christians will receive on that last day is only what they will deserve. The Belgic Confession (Article 37) articulates the point well:

And therefore the consideration of this judgement is justly terrible and dreadful to the wicked and ungodly, but most desirable and comfortable to the righteous and elect; because then their full deliverance shall be perfected, and there they shall receive the fruits of their labour and trouble which they have borne. Their innocence shall be known to all, and they shall see the terrible vengeance which God shall execute on the wicked, who most cruelly persecuted, oppressed, and tormented them in this world . . .

The cry of the martyrs in Revelation resonates with this: "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Rev. 6:10).

Tears

Eighthly, *the inevitability of death and the eternal fixity of hell should lead us to tears*. The doctrine of hell is a painful topic, and those who do not respond with some emotional pain have simply not understood it. Jesus anguished over Jerusalem's stubborn resistance to his message: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" (Matt 23:37). Paul wrote with emotional angst over the lost state of his Jewish brethren, wishing that he himself might be sent to hell instead of them (Rom 9:3)! God still pleads with sinners: "Why will you die? Turn, and live!" (Ezek 18:32-33). John Stott writes: "I long that we could in some small way stand in the tearful tradition of Jeremiah, Jesus and Paul. I want to see more tears among us. I think we need to repent of

our nonchalance, our hard-heartedness.”⁶⁹ When was the last time you wept over someone you know who is heading for hell?

Heaven

Ninthly, *hell shall not mar heaven*. JAT Robinson has stated that “In a universe of love, there can be no heaven which tolerates a chamber of horrors, no hell for any which does not at the same time make it a hell for God.”⁷⁰ Evangelicals have perhaps downplayed the aspect of Christ’s death that accomplishes in no uncertain terms the ‘restoration of all things’ (cf. Col 1:20). In this regard, John Wenham is right to warn against the snare of some sort of eschatological ‘symmetry’,⁷¹ or even an implicit dualistic ‘stalemate’ between God and evil. So what do we then do with an eternal hell in the new creation? Our first port of call is, of course, Scripture. Jesus said to the thief on the cross that he would experience “paradise”, yet Revelation speaks explicitly of the “smoke of torment” that arises forever and ever (Rev 14:11) and of the eternal “lake of fire” (Rev 20:10). While in our minds we might find the two incompatible, we should be cautious of teaching our Lord lessons on compatibilism: there is nothing in Scripture that hints in any way that hell will somehow disturb or spoil the enjoyment of heaven.

WGT Shedd may provide some help by viewing hell as only a ‘corner’ in the universe,⁷² but perhaps JI Packer is more on target when he considers the issue *theologically*:

[I]t is said that the joy of heaven will be marred by knowledge that some continue under merited retribution. But this cannot be said of God, as if the expressing of his holiness in retribution hurts him more than it hurts the offenders; and since in heaven Christians will be like God in character, loving what he loves and taking joy in all his self-manifestation, including his justice, there is no reason to think that their joy will be impaired in this way.⁷³

And, therefore, when Jesus said to the thief on the cross that “today” he would be with him in “paradise” (Luke 23:43), we can have full confidence that Jesus’ “truly” was not a wish but rather a promise: if God is perpetually happy within himself as the glorious Trinity—even

⁶⁹ Edwards and Stott, *Essentials*, p. 313.

⁷⁰ JAT Robinson, “Universalism – Is it Heretical?”, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 2 (1949): p. 155.

⁷¹ J Wenham, *The Enigma of Evil. Can We Believe in God’s Goodness?* (Leicester: IVP, 1985), p. 32 n. 7.

⁷² WGT Shedd, *The Doctrine of Endless Punishment* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1990), p. 159.

⁷³ JI Packer, ‘The Problem of Eternal Punishment’, *Evangel* 10:2 (Summer 1992): p. 18.

while he judges sinners and punishes them justly in hell—then, in the new creation, there is no reason to doubt that our joy will be perfect and complete, for when we see him we shall be like him (1 John 3:2).

V

A Time For Everything Under the Sun: Keeping Hell in Perspective

Gospel urgency

The thought that people are heading to hell should lead us to tears and to urgent efforts of gospel mission. When the church loses such urgency the church loses a part of its soul. Hopefully this booklet on hell may at least serve as an electric shock to stun us out of so much of the triviality of our lives and help us get life back into perspective: there is a heaven and hell and the destination of every person on earth is binary. Moreover, perhaps for some who read this booklet the topic of hell may be another step along the way to pursuing the path of fulltime paid Christian ministry. Certainly it was one of the things that drew me into the desire to be a preacher of the glorious gospel of our Lord Jesus. When the gospel is viewed against the backdrop of hell, “who, having been called to be a preacher, would stoop to be a king.”⁷⁴

Does this mean, however, that every Christian should give up their normal job and stand on the street corners of our cities and plead with every passer-by to accept Christ before the coming judgment? Should we blitz ever letterbox in the world with a gospel tract? Can you really justify trimming the hedge when your neighbour is going to hell? I am, of course, speaking in the extreme. But then, isn't hell extreme? Should we not do everything we possibly can to keep people out of hell while we have breath in our lungs? As Charles Wesley put it:

Happy, if with my latest breath
I may but gasp His Name,
Preach Him to all and cry in death,
“Behold, behold the Lamb!”

In short, if hell is real and eternal, how then shall we live before the terrible and awful day of God's judgment? Or as CS Lewis put it more practically (in the university context): the Christian “must ask himself how it is right, or even psychologically possible, for creatures who are every moment advancing either to heaven or to hell, to spend any fraction of the little time allowed them in this world on such comparative trivialities as literature or art,

⁷⁴ Thomas Carlyle, reference unknown. In defense of lost references, see Heb 4:4.

mathematics or biology.”⁷⁵ In other words, if hell is real, what should I do tomorrow? Indeed, what should I do with the rest of my life?

The rest of your life

In his brilliant essay “Learning in War-Time”, which repays careful reading, CS Lewis comments: “Before I became a Christian I do not think I fully realized that one’s life, after conversion, would inevitably consist in doing most of the same things one had been doing before: one hopes, in a new spirit, but still the same things.”⁷⁶ Lewis remarks that when he went to fight in the Great War he thought that it would be “all war”, but the nearer he got to the front line the less everyone spoke about the campaign.⁷⁷ Why? Because it is fantastical to think that a soldier’s life consists of nothing else but ‘active service’ for one’s country and fighting the enemy 24/7. Normal life continued on the frontline, albeit under difficult circumstances. In the trenches, soldiers still read books, wrote letters, enjoyed the simplicities of hot meals and warm clothes, told jokes, cried and laughed together. Life, even in a war, is more than the war; and the Christian life is more than just saving people from hell—as vital and essential as such an endeavour is. The Christian religion, even though it occupies our concentration, time, energy, money, and the best of our resources, does not do so to the exclusion of natural human activities. Certainly God’s claims on our lives are infinite and inexorable, and every part of our lives should be lived in full submission to the Lord Jesus. But to think it necessarily follows from this that the only thing that matters in life is thinking about, or doing ‘gospel ministry’ 24/7, is to have a truncated Christian worldview. To live as if the ‘sacred’ (as opposed to the ‘secular’) must occupy the whole of one’s concentration, time, energy, money, resources, is not only to have a distorted view of the Christian life—the Bible presents no such divide between ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’—it is to aim for the impossible. No matter how hard one tries, devoting one’s ‘active service’ to evangelism 24/7 is simply not possible, even for the fulltime paid Christian worker.

Living for God’s glory

The reason no war or hell can suppress these natural human activities is because they are *God-given* in the first place, and are to be received with thanksgiving and enjoyed as things that are good in themselves (cf. Gen 1:31; 1 Tim 4:3). Eating and drinking—two activities that we think so little about in many ways—are to be performed for God’s glory (1 Cor

⁷⁵ CS Lewis, “Learning in War-Time”, p. 172.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

10:31), and not primarily as simply ‘means to the end’ of doing more evangelism so that people can be saved from hell, as is sometimes insinuated. Certainly, at one level, eating and drinking are a means to this good end, but that is not Paul’s point in 1 Corinthians 10:31: food and drink exist primarily for the glory of God. Another example is rest. Rest is given for the sake of rest, and not simply as a ‘means to another end’, though it is that too. We rest once a week in order to work for the rest of the week; but to think that rest is *only a means* and not also an *end* is to miss not only the goal of original creation but also what the new heavens and new earth will be like to experience (Heb 4).

The doctrine of hell does not mitigate or even suppress the natural human activities that God has blessed his world with, nor should it necessarily change what you were doing before you became a Christian (1 Cor 7)—all of life should be lived for God’s glory. Plumbing and preaching should both be performed for God’s glory. Only someone with a deficient doctrine of creation, redemption, and eschatology would think otherwise.

This means that the Christian minister can take a day off or go on holiday and enjoy it as something good *in and of itself* (not just to recharge the batteries for ‘more evangelism’). The Christian can remain in the job they are already in and do it “heartily, as for the Lord and not for men” (Col 3:23). The Christian student can read English literature at university for the love of good writing. The Christian teenager can go out for an evening with friends and enjoy a movie and not worry about evangelising everyone on the way there or the way home; that night he or she can go to sleep with a clear conscience, and sleep for the glory of God. It is okay to mow the lawn, clean the pool, read the newspaper, walk the dog, play the guitar, do the shopping, bath the kids. It really is God-honouring and gospel loving to do all those things and to enjoy them as good things in themselves to be received with thanksgiving from our good and gracious Father, even while hell exists. “An appetite for these things exists in the human mind, and God makes no appetite in vain.”⁷⁸ Moreover, Jesus rose *bodily* with normal human desires for food and drink, and in so doing reaffirmed God’s physical world and natural human desires as things that would be an essential part of the new creation. The Christian hope is a *realistic* one, a new heavens and a *new earth*. Understanding God’s affirmation of his physical world, and the order he has ordained for it is a helpful framework in which to deal with hell.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 175.

Living like Jesus: a time for everything

Alongside understanding the normal human (Christian!) life, observing the way God made the world to operate also helps to keep hell in perspective. At some point “in the beginning”, perhaps after the Fall (we don’t know), God created hell. Yet, despite its existence God established a working order to the world that neither the Fall nor hell mitigate. In Genesis 9 God reaffirmed his rhythmical order to the physical world: day and night, summer and winter, springtime and harvest. After the Fall and in the age of redemption there is still day and night, a time to work and a time to sleep. As Ecclesiastes 3 states, “there is a time for everything under the sun”—yes, *everything*. There is a time to talk about hell, and a time to go to the beach; a time to evangelise, and a time to sweep the driveway; a time for tract distribution, and a time for games with the kids; a time to pray for the unsaved, and a time to watch the Olympics. And if we think that this is somehow ‘out of touch’ with the ‘last days’, then we must remember how Jesus lived: for him, there was a time to study the Torah, and a time to work with wood; a time to heal the crowds, and a time for dinner with friends; a time for a wedding, and a time for a sermon; a time to go away, ‘rest a while’ and pray, and a time to observe the lilies of the field. Just as God in the OT moved with majestic leisureliness through history—why *did* he take so long to bring about his promises?—so Jesus never ran anywhere (that we know of), and, on the one occasion where he should have ran (when Lazarus was about to die), he delayed two days. You may say, “yes, but he was God and he knew that he would raise him from the dead”. Exactly. And that’s why he was able to keep hell in perspective, and so should we.

The right perspective

In my experience of modern evangelicalism there is a certain kind of ‘evangelical busyness’ or ‘activism’, a sort of ‘ministry mania’, in which marriages are compromised, kids are neglected, and people with real issues are forgotten, that has more to do with an insipid Arminianism than with a robust Calvinism. Christ is on his throne; he has sent his Spirit into the world to irresistibly call his elect and apply the benefits of his saving death, so that on the last day he will lose none of those whom the Father has given him. It is this kind of Reformed theology that should lead to a vibrant and active gospel ministry in our churches and lives, but one which also at the same time does not create an either-or fallacy with the many other good things God calls on us to do and enjoy, such as love our wives, play with

our kids, work hard, receive our food and wine with glad hearts, and then, at the end of the day, to go to bed and sleep to his glory—and all while hell exists.⁷⁹

© Jonathan Gibson, 2010

⁷⁹ I am indebted to Charles De Kiewit, David Gibson, and Simon Flinders for their feedback on this booklet. Some of the content of this booklet first appeared in *The Briefing*, Issue: 381, June 2010 (Matthias Media), and is reproduced here with permission.