

“The Hell You Say”: Salvation and the Final Judgment

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The doctrine of soteriology implies some view of eschatology. If we are to be saved, from what are we to be saved? The traditional answer is that those who are not saved have Hell as their destiny. There is, of course, a spectrum of views on the nature of Hell. Those who see no need for humans to be saved, or those who believe that all people will be saved, see no reason to believe in Hell. Those who hold that not all are saved still have differences of opinion about the nature of the final destiny of the lost. Among evangelical and conservative Anglicans two views have been held. John Stott, among others, held that the biblical imagery of Hell should lead us to believe that Hell means annihilation, or non-existence. J. I. Packer believes that the traditional view of Hell as conscious eternal torment better fits the biblical evidence.

It is rare these days to hear a sermon on Hell. Even in very traditional ecclesiastical settings, the subject is not often broached. In 2011, however, the North American evangelical world was plunged into a short-lived but rather tense period of controversy as the pastor of a popular megachurch released a slim volume entitled *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*.¹ Rob Bell, the pastor in question, discovered that he had serious doubts about the traditional view of Hell as a place of eternal conscious torment. His book caused quite a reaction in the evangelical world, a reaction made worse, perhaps, by the fact that the book was not that well written.

This issue of the *ATR* deals with the question of “salvation.” Soteriology itself begs the question of eschatology. If a person is “saved,”

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

what is that person saved from? Is it enough to say that if I trust in him, Jesus saves me from my sins? Such a statement necessarily leads to the corollary: what if I do not trust in Jesus for the salvation he offers? What if I want nothing to do with God? In short, what is my fate if I die “in my sins”?

As with many theological questions, there is a continuum, a spectrum of views on offer. Some of these views can be discounted as entirely outside the spectrum of Christian thought, but others have had champions who were clearly attempting to think about this subject as Christians, using Christian sources, trying to understand the meaning of difficult and troubling passages in the Scriptures. Perhaps even more than with other subjects, it is not always clear, even to the person holding the opinion, to what degree theological views are driven by the pastoral implications.

Here, then, is an overview of the spectrum of views on salvation and Hell. The first four positions we describe below have in common that there is no “place” as Hell.

*People Have No Need of Being Saved, or All Are Saved:
Therefore There Is No Hell*

First, of course, we should mention that there are those who reject any notion of god. Since there is no god, there is no Hell, and no need for “salvation.” Such people may still be seeking some form of self-fulfillment or meaning, but such a pursuit is entirely self-created. The world itself is meaningless, although humans may impose their own “meaning.” Such a view may even speak of such a self-made meaning in salvific terms.

Certain kinds of existentialism and postmodernism see any kind of meaning found in the universe as a human construct, as something imposed on an essentially meaningless universe. For the consistent existentialist or postmodern, suicide is an option (the French philosopher and novelist Albert Camus was perhaps the most honest in this regard). Many, however, live life as if there is no god, and simply find “meaning” in whatever is considered pleasurable or interesting. Popular examples of this kind of worldview abound and can be seen in slogans like “born to shop,” “find yourself,” “be yourself,” “the self-made man.” Perhaps Frank Sinatra’s “I did it my way” could be considered the anthem for many in this category. Self-fulfillment and positive self-esteem are the closest thing to salvation in the popular application of this view.

Second, there is a position which advocates that there is no god and therefore there is no Hell, and no need for “salvation” after death. But, the concept of salvation may be secularized and reduced to this-worldly political and economic terms.

Obviously a godless version of “salvation” limited only to this world is not a Christian position. Nonetheless it is worth talking about because there is certainly a faint remembrance of a Christian worldview functioning in most atheistic systems. In doctrinaire Marxism, for example, in spite of the fact that there is no belief in God, there is a belief in an historical goal, a purpose to historical existence. Human beings are seen as finding fulfillment by living in a society with an egalitarian system, in which everyone has equal access to and control of the products of the economy (and therefore equal access to health care, education, housing, and so on). The problem with the world, again according to Marxist doctrine, is economic. Some people have most of the money and control the means of production. Therefore there must be a change brought about by a proletariat revolution. The revolution completely changes the way things are run, but it takes time and effort before society reaches perfection. In the end the Marxist hope was in the emergence of “the new man”—an eschatological vision of a society cleansed of selfishness and greed. The shape of the Marxist story, of course, mimics the Christian narrative: according to the Bible the world has a problem—sin. This problem is solved by a salvific event (in the Old Testament the Exodus; in the New Testament the cross and resurrection of Jesus, understood as a new and universally effective Exodus). This salvific event changes the world, but sin continues until the eschaton, the second coming of Christ. In Marxism, the story has many of the same elements: a problem—economic inequality; a salvific event—the revolution; and a consummation of that salvation—the emergence of the new man. But all of this takes place without God. The Marxist narrative has some problems, though: Where did this idea of a purpose in history come from? Why is it that people are selfish and do not wish to change? What evidence do we have that a “new man” will appear in the future? In the end the salvation story of Marx is a Christian parody—a heresy, one might say. Marx, after all, came from a Christian background.

In the Marxist system, of course, salvation is completely this-world and therefore Hell (as an experience after death) does not exist. If there is a Hell, it is this world controlled by the greedy rather than by the workers.

A third view of salvation and Hell would argue that there is a God. However, whether there is a Hell after we die is unknown, but salvation is primarily (although perhaps not exclusively) this-worldly.

There are various permutations of this third option, including Christian ones. Perhaps the most well-known Christian one is called liberation theology. There are various theologies of liberation, some more rooted in the biblical story than others. But all liberation theologies begin by identifying the major issue, “the big sin” as it were, as a social or political problem. So for Latin American liberation theology, the big sin (like Marxism) is political and economic injustice. The solution (naturally) is liberation from that injustice (whether by violent or nonviolent means).

In much liberation theology “salvation” means being freed to live in a state untethered by the previous experience of injustice. To be sure, many liberation theologians will combine a this-worldly liberation with a view of the afterlife, but their primary focus of concern will be the political and social realm.

Since in liberationist models salvation is freedom from the sins of *others*, liberation theology tends to lack much reflection on the sins of those who are, or who are considered to be, sinned against. If not balanced by a desire for people to know God and his love, it is not clear what happens after the desired moment of liberation occurs. For some, it seems, it is simply a matter of going on to the next issue.

The strength of liberation theologies is that they remind us that God is the king of the universe, that Christ is Lord of all and, therefore, there is no issue which is outside of the scope of God’s concern or should be outside of the scope of Christian concern. The weakness is that liberationist thought can forget about questions of “ultimate concern” (the meaning of life) and reduce theology to anthropological (human-centered) or cosmological (world-centered) issues. In a general sense I believe that all Christians should be liberationists, but we must be biblically-informed liberationists, not confusing the kingdom of God with a specific political program. We need a worldly Christianity which seeks to bring God’s love and justice into every situation. After all, “politics” is simply how human societies are structured and organized, therefore “where two or three are gathered together,” there is politics.

Liberation theology, since it tends to see salvation as this-worldly, will not give much attention to the subject of Hell, unless it sees “Hell” as a metaphor for the problems affecting the oppressed, whoever the

oppressed might be. The mission of the church is primarily a secular one—to “humanize.” It is not surprising, therefore, to hear that in some forms of liberationist thought the Holy Spirit (or often just “the Spirit”) is thought to speak through the world and that the church is cautioned to be attentive to the world in order to learn what God is doing. Scripture may help or may hinder. Some liberationists believe that liberation from the Bible (because the Bible is perceived as oppressive) should be part of the agenda of the church. If the Bible is appealed to, Jesus’ earthly life is often thought to trump the cross and resurrection as the focus of theological reflection.

A fourth view takes the end of human life with great seriousness. In this view, there is a God. This God is loving. Salvation is in Christ—and is given to everyone—regardless of what a person believes; therefore there is no Hell. This view is generally called “universalism”: the assertion that “all will be saved.” In this version of salvation, in which God is seen primarily as a God who is love, God’s love trumps God’s justice. At this point in our spectrum we are introduced to the word “grace”: God’s love means that he acts graciously toward sinful people and forgives. Biblical support may be seen in 1 John, in which the phrase “God is love” seems to imply that this is the basic, foundational definition of God, and perhaps in the letter of James, which says that “mercy triumphs over judgment” (2:13).²

The strength of this position is that it has ready answers for questions concerning the plurality of religions in the world. When quizzed about the fate of the good (or bad!) “pagan” who has never heard about Jesus, the universalist Christian can respond that God has saved such a person by the cross and resurrection. The difference between Christians and non-Christians, therefore, is that Christians know that they are saved, but non-Christians have yet to hear that good news.

There are, of course, multiple problems with the universalist position. It is obvious that such a view would lead to complacency in mission and evangelism—if non-Christians do not need to hear the gospel and respond to it in order to be saved, why preach to them at all? (Clearly, this has been a major factor in Anglican missionary history—the vast majority of cross-cultural missionaries have come from the Anglo-Catholic and evangelical wings of the church and only rarely from the so-called broad church wing.)

² All Scripture passages are from the English Standard Version.

The major problem with this position, however, is its blatant disregard for the serious warnings, in Scripture and throughout the Christian tradition, that ultimate loss is a real possibility. Several points must be raised in challenge to such “Christian” universalism. For example, if forgiveness is simply on the basis of a decision by God, why does God take the extreme measure of going to the cross? (The usual answer is the answer of Abelard—the cross is an example to be followed, a picture of what love looks like. This is frequently called the “exemplarist” theory of the atonement—although there is no real atonement here at all.) Second, if people do not need to trust in Christ, or even know about Christ in order to be saved, why does the Bible insist that Christ should be preached and that people should be converted (Acts 10:42–43)? And third, does the universalist position not rob human beings of the dignity of human freedom, that we are actually free to love God—and, therefore, ultimately free to reject God’s love? In the end, the universalist position says that what one believes or does is ultimately of no consequence or significance, since God will simply force all to be saved in the end.

This position is not totally without support in Scripture and tradition. The New Testament does say that it is not God’s will that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). The argument of some universalists is that once people actually see the reality of God’s love for them in Christ (perhaps at the moment of death, perhaps in some form of purgatory), they will surely choose life over death. Certainly this was the position of the great early Christian teacher and biblical scholar, Origen (although it was also the reason that he was never canonized and was declared heretical). Karl Barth also seems to be in this category.

Not All Are Saved: Therefore There Is a Hell

The fifth position says that there is a God, and that this God is a God of love who has opened a way of salvation for all people. Some people trust in the grace of God for forgiveness; some do not, and those who do not must face what the Bible speaks of as “Hell.”

We have come now to the crux of the matter. If the first four positions we have described above either are not Christian positions or are inadequately Christian, we seem to be left with having to acknowledge the reality of something, some “place” which the Bible

calls Hell. Certainly the Scriptures and two thousand years of Christian tradition say that there is a final destination for those who refuse God's love in Christ. Does this mean, therefore, that Christians must acknowledge that the ultimate destiny of some (if not for many, or even perhaps *most*) people is eternal, conscious torment in the lake of fire as described in not a few passages of Scripture?

Immediately we must face several problems. The first is the problem of interpretation. How are the biblical texts about Hell to be read? Are the descriptions of Hell *meant* to be read metaphorically or literally? Even if there is an acknowledgment that some aspects of the language of Hell are metaphorical (the language of torment in fire, for example), does this mean that every aspect of biblical teaching on this subject can simply be discounted? For example, can we reject the literal physical torture of hellish descriptions and still be left needing to acknowledge that Hell is an eternal place of conscious punishment? On the other hand, there appear to be images of Hell in the Bible which seem to imply that Hell is not a fiery place of constant permanent torment, but a way of speaking about an end to existence. It seems, therefore, that at least three different conclusions could be reached simply by the reading of Scripture: Hell as a place of eternal physical torment; Hell as a place of eternal torment, but not literal physical torment—perhaps mental, spiritual anguish; and Hell as the end of existence, or annihilation.

A second issue to be faced is that of church tradition. Advocates for all three of these positions claim that Hell is a real, terrible, and horrific possibility. All three claim to have Scripture on their side. To be fair, the first, and possibly the second positions have the advantage of being the majority position of the tradition of the church, whereas the third, although advocates assert it is the position of the Bible itself, cannot claim as much support from the tradition of the church.

The third problem, frankly, is the issue of theology proper: what does the doctrine of Hell say about the nature of God? Can we square a doctrine which consigns a large number of people to torture for ever and ever with the God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ described in the pages of the New Testament?

Evangelical and other conservative, traditional Anglicans have struggled with these questions. They have not reached a consensus. In the following section of this essay we will examine the reasoning of two twentieth-century evangelical Anglican heroes of the faith, John

R. W. Stott and James I. Packer, two men who are respected, almost revered, in evangelical Anglican circles. Each has (rather reluctantly) written about Hell. Both consider Hell to be real, and terrible. But the two reach radically different positions. We will conclude this essay by appealing to yet another conservative Anglican hero, C. S. Lewis. Lewis's approach to the question of Hell is more imaginative and suggestive. His pictures of the final destination of the wicked may enable us to think of Hell in a way which preserves both the awful reality of the possibility of eternal separation from God, and the acknowledgment that we must remain somewhat "agnostic" about the details of that "place."

John Stott and Annihilationism

Sometimes referred to as the "Pope" of evangelical Anglicanism, John Stott is best known as a preacher and teacher. His many books, most of them extended expositions of New Testament books, have sold in the millions. An Anglican priest, he spurned invitations to take episcopal orders, knowing that he was called to teach the Scriptures. He devoted the decades of his life to traveling the world to teach and encourage the growing churches of non-Western Anglicanism and to explaining and arguing the truth of the Christian faith in his writings.

It was not until quite late in his ministry that he publicly expressed his opinion about the nature of Hell. Stott was asked to take part in an exchange of views with a more liberal Anglican priest, David Edwards. The results of their exchange were published as *Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue*.³ Among other hot-button topics (the authority of Scripture, the doctrine of the atonement, miracles, and so forth), Edwards challenged Stott on his understanding of the traditional view of Hell. Rightly discerning that one's doctrine of salvation implied some kind of stance on the question of Hell, Edwards raised an issue with Stott's understanding of the Lausanne Covenant of 1974. Stott was the major author of the Covenant and had written a commentary on it. The Covenant states that "We affirm that there is only one Savior and only one Gospel." It goes on to affirm that proclamation of Jesus as Savior does not mean that all are "automatically or ultimately saved, still less to affirm that all religions offer salvation in

³ David L. Edwards and John R. W. Stott, *Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988).

Christ.”⁴ Edwards reasons, rightly, that such a statement implies that those who do not accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are, according to Stott and the Lausanne Covenant, “‘lost’ or ‘perishing’ because doomed to Hell.”⁵

Stott’s response was revealing: “It is with great reluctance and with a heavy heart that I now approach this topic.”⁶ Stott’s reluctance has several sources. First, he deplores the way that some evangelicals speak of Hell with “glibness.” For him the topic is so serious as to be “almost unbearable.” The thought that some might spend eternity without God reminds Stott of Jeremiah’s lamentation over fallen Jerusalem (Jer. 9:1), of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41–42), and of Paul’s wish that he could himself be cut off for the sake of his fellow Jews who had rejected the Messiah (Rom. 9:1–4). Thoughts of Hell, of eternal separation from God, brought no joy to John Stott.

But it was not just the thought of the possibility of eternal loss which bothered Stott on the occasion of responding to Edwards. Stott was also aware that evangelicals differed greatly in their interpretation of Hell. He was aware that, given his own status in the evangelical world, anything he said, one way or the other, would bring tension and division. Stott worked long and hard to bring evangelicals together. He was hesitant to speak on a subject which he knew would be a source of controversy. Still, he was challenged, and the question was a serious one, and so he spoke his mind and his heart.

He began by agreeing with Edwards that the imagery in the New Testament (concerning the lake of fire, weeping and gnashing of teeth, outer darkness, and so forth) is “not meant to be interpreted literally.”⁷ Stott also rejected the idea that any Christian could be happy with a description which implied that God was “the Eternal Torturer” who inflicted pain sadistically. What then is meant by “Hell”? At that point Stott stated the alternatives clearly and took his stand:

But will the final destiny of the impenitent be eternal conscious torment, “for ever and ever”, or will it be total annihilation of their being? The former has to be described as traditional orthodoxy, for most of the church fathers, the medieval theologians and the Reformers held it. And probably most Evangelical leaders hold

⁴ The Lausanne Covenant, quoted in Edwards and Stott, *Essentials*, 288.

⁵ Edwards and Stott, *Essentials*, 288.

⁶ Edwards and Stott, *Essentials*, 312.

⁷ Edwards and Stott, *Essentials*, 314.

it today. Do I hold it, however? Well, emotionally, I find the concept intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterizing their feelings or cracking under the strain. . . . As a committed Evangelical, my question must be—and is—not what does my heart tell me, but what does God’s word say?⁸

He then launched into a defense of the position of annihilation, arguing that the language of the Bible with regard to the final state of the lost is primarily a language of “destruction.” Here Stott raised what might be the most telling critique of the doctrine of Hell as conscious eternal torment: “It cannot, I think, be replied that it is impossible to destroy human beings because they are immortal, for the immortality—and therefore the indestructibility—of the soul is a Greek, not a biblical concept.” Stott did not elaborate on this point, but it is a crucial insight which we should develop just a bit further. In his own defense of the annihilationist position, Baptist theologian Clark Pinnock argues that an early acceptance of ideas of immortality by church fathers like Augustine and others skewed traditional exegesis on the subject of Hell. “God created humans mortal,” says Pinnock, “with a capacity for life everlasting, but it is not their inherent possession. Immortality is a gift God offers,” it is not an inalienable right. For Pinnock, as it seems for Stott, the logic of the tradition runs like this:

Presumably the traditional view of the nature of hell was originally constructed in the following way: People mixed up their belief in divine judgment after death (which is scriptural) with their belief in the immortality of the soul (which is unscriptural) and concluded (incorrectly) that the nature of hell must be everlasting conscious torment. The logic would be impeccable if only the second premise were not false.⁹

Having raised the logical objection to Hell as everlasting, Stott continued by examining the Bible’s teaching itself. His conclusion was that the imagery of fire (found in John the Baptist’s teaching, Jesus’ own words, and in the book of Revelation) implies “destruction.” Fire burns what is put into it. The imagery itself implies that sin, evil,

⁸ Edwards and Stott, *Essentials*, 314–315.

⁹ Clark H. Pinnock, “The Conditional View,” in *Four Views on Hell*, ed. William Crockett (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992), 148–149.

death, Satan and his angels, and those who follow them will one day be no more. The Revelation speaks of the fire that is never quenched, but, said Stott, “it would be very odd if what is thrown into it proved indestructible.”¹⁰

Stott’s third argument concerned justice. His logic again seems unassailable: if God is just, how could he punish eternally a person whose sins were temporal? Stott did not minimize the seriousness of sin here, but he saw a disproportionality between the crime and the punishment. Indeed, Stott could have gone on to argue this point somewhat more. It seems that a major reason that some are willing to accept such a seemingly disproportionate sentence is the person sinned against. God is eternal, it is sometimes argued, therefore the offense against him is not the same as an offense against another created being. But surely this is unjust: would we punish a thief more severely for stealing a loaf of bread from a rich man than for pinching it from a poor person?

Finally, Stott argued that his position was not the same as the universalists. He did see the possibility of final loss, of eternal separation from God. Jesus is the only Savior, he said, and this leads to the real possibility that some may reject that salvation. Stott honored the gift of human freedom, even if that gift implies that some choose not to be saved.

Stott’s response surprised many in the evangelical community, for he came out clearly as an “annihilationist.” Stott was not the first Anglican evangelical leader to speak in favor of this position. John Wenham had tested those waters years before in his widely read book, *The Goodness of God*.¹¹ The Anglican priest and New Testament scholar Philip Edgecombe Hughes, one-time professor at Trinity School for Ministry, held the same position. But Stott was the acknowledged spokesman of English evangelicalism, and his endorsement of the position sent some shock waves around the evangelical community.

J. I. Packer: Not Literal Flames, but “Worse”

Among those somewhat saddened by Stott’s affirmation of annihilationism was his friend Jim Packer. If Stott was the evangelical preacher of twentieth-century evangelical Anglicanism, Packer was

¹⁰ Edwards and Stott, *Essentials*, 316.

¹¹ John W. Wenham, *The Goodness of God* (London: InterVarsity Press, 1974).

(is!) the theologian. Like Stott, Packer articulated a clear, orthodox, and reasonable theology for orthodox Anglicans. Packer, however, had perhaps a stronger commitment to a Puritan and Calvinist understanding of the faith. This commitment placed Packer more within the mainstream of the Christian tradition's understanding of Hell as conscious and eternal torment.

When Stott's views were published in the *Essentials* volume, some evangelicals reacted by doubting that Stott was still an evangelical. A conference was even held to discuss Stott's views at which one of the participants argued that a denial of the traditional view of Hell was the equivalent of denying the deity of Christ or the doctrine of the atonement.¹²

Packer was more circumspect. In an article which appeared in 1990,¹³ Packer responds to his friend in three ways. First is the biblical argument. According to Packer, there is just too much evidence from Scripture that Hell is eternal. Matthew 25:46, for example, speaks in parallel of "eternal life" and "eternal punishment." Surely, the argument runs, if we are to doubt that Hell is "eternal" we would be led to say that its parallel—eternal life—must also be doubted. Similarly, for Packer and others, 2 Thessalonians 1:8–9 speaks of those who do not know God in Jesus Christ being "punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the majesty of his power." Packer is not convinced that these texts can be made to speak of annihilation, and attempts to do so, by Stott and others, he refers to as "avalanche-dodging."¹⁴

Packer goes on, however, to attempt to show that the doctrine of Hell should not be thought of in crudely physical terms. Packer is convinced that the imagery of Hell is, indeed, metaphorical. He even thinks that Jonathan Edwards's sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," which has become the classic statement of the traditional doctrine of Hell, was meant to be understood metaphorically. But here Packer runs into trouble, since he has no desire to downplay the seriousness of Hell. "Do not try to imagine what it is like to be in hell," he says. "The mistake is to take such pictures as physical descriptions, when in fact they are symbolizing realities . . .

¹² See *Christianity Today* (June 16, 1989): 60–62.

¹³ J. I. Packer, "The Problem of Eternal Punishment," *Crux* 26, no. 3 (September 1990): 18–25.

¹⁴ Packer, "Problem of Eternal Punishment," 24.

far worse than the symbols themselves.”¹⁵ But what does this mean? Does Packer mean that the metaphors of Hell in the New Testament are not meant to point to physical torment but to some other kind of torture—mental and spiritual, perhaps? How is this better? It is still conscious, everlasting pain, whether physical or some other kind. In fact, Packer says, it is *not better*. It is *worse*. But in what sense? Does this not still leave God in the position of a sadist, torturing his victims day and night for eternity?

Packer’s worry about Stott’s position leads to a third point: Packer is worried about Stott’s reasons for adopting an annihilationist position. The reason he thinks he has found is what he calls “secular sentimentality.”¹⁶ Packer objects to the sense of moral superiority that some evangelicals have which seems to have led them in a universalist direction. He worries that rather than relying on Scripture, some are being driven by subjective feelings which amount to little more than sentimentality. Pinnock once again puts his finger on a crucial issue here:

James I. Packer says that he objects to the sense of moral superiority he detects in critics of the traditional view and charges that they are driven by secular sentimentalism. This is not altogether helpful, however. If secular sentimentality drives the saintly John Stott (the person Packer is referring to), what drives Packer? Is it hardheartedness or a thirst for retribution? Enough of that! The real issue here is God’s nature and the conscience, not mere human feelings. Is he the God of boundless mercy or one who tortures souls to death?¹⁷

Although most holding the traditional position would want to deny it, this position does appear to imply that the lake of fire finally triumphs over the cross, that “justice” (in the sense of punishment of sin) trumps love. Certainly the traditional view preserves a sense that the gospel must be preached—people are in mortal danger—but it may also demotivate those who hear the gospel in these terms. Does

¹⁵ Packer, “Problem of Eternal Punishment,” 25.

¹⁶ See James I. Packer, “Evangelicals and the Way of Salvation: New Challenges to the Gospel—Universalism, and Justification by Faith,” in *Evangelical Affirmations*, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer and Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1990), 126.

¹⁷ Pinnock, “The Conditional View,” in Crockett, *Four Views on Hell*, 151.

one really want to serve and love a God who would threaten to punish, eternally and horribly, those who do not respond?

Dante or C. S. Lewis

But perhaps we are approaching this subject the wrong way around. It is clear that one of the most powerful tools that the tradition has had concerning the doctrine of Hell is the imaginative descriptions that have been used to describe and underline the horrible possibility of loss for those who reject God's love. The book of Revelation is just one of those powerfully imaginative documents. In Jewish tradition multiple apocalyptic texts describe Hell in excruciating detail.¹⁸

Few can doubt, I think, the impact that Dante has had on our continuing perceptions of what is meant when the word "Hell" is used. Vivid descriptions of the indescribable and awful horror of loss are better painted (with words or on canvas) than explained.

And so perhaps an imaginative author like C. S. Lewis (another orthodox Anglican, though one somewhat more high church than Stott or Packer) may help us. In *The Great Divorce*¹⁹ Lewis describes a bus tour which inhabitants of Hell take to Heaven. The wonderful way in which Lewis describes these two places is striking. For him, Heaven is more real than life as we now know it. The world of Heaven is more solid, more alive than anything we can know or imagine. Hell, however, is gray, isolated, self-serving, and fading. In the end, as Lewis says in another place, Hell exists "where being fades away into nonentity."²⁰

Conclusion

I hesitate to do this, but in conclusion please allow me to relate my own story, a story about my father.

My father was not a churchgoer. He was dragged to my ordination and to a couple of weddings and funerals over the years, but while I was growing up his default setting on religious issues was scorn and ridicule. Gordon was a veteran of World War II and, among other

¹⁸ See, especially, Martha Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell: An Apocalyptic Form in Jewish and Christian Literature* (Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).

¹⁹ C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1945).

²⁰ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1940).

things, his experience of that horror gave him a deep scepticism about almost everything. He was also a chain smoker, quitting only late in life when his younger brother had a serious heart attack. My uncle's illness seems genuinely to have frightened him. Perhaps it reminded him of his own finiteness and vulnerability. Perhaps it even got him wondering whether he was ready to die. But even abandoning the cigarettes could not keep my Dad from the consequences of his lifelong habit. In the last years of his life he suffered from emphysema: his lung capacity was greatly reduced, he coughed horribly and depended on his puffers to keep him breathing.

One cold Montreal winter he contracted a cold. It turned serious and he ended up in intensive care. While there he had a near-death visionary experience. He never mentioned it to me, but he told my wife and my sisters. Many reports of near-death experiences seem to involve being drawn to a comforting white light. Not so with Gordon. He had a horrifying vision of human-like figures with animal heads reaching out to seize him. That vision frightened him to the core and he began to wonder about eternal things. He stopped complaining when my mother asked me to say grace when we visited. He began to listen to conversations that turned to God instead of hiding scornfully behind his newspaper.

Had my father experienced a vision of Hell? Perhaps. Maybe his subconscious took deep-rooted archetypal and cultural symbols of evil and created that vision of ultimate loss. What I do know is that that vision was also a gift from God. My father became open to hearing about God's love and kindness. When Gordon finally succumbed to his illness a couple of years later, I had the amazing privilege of praying with him on his deathbed. My mother, my wife, my daughter, and one of my sisters were there. As I prayed "depart O Christian soul from this world" I felt his head grow cool and knew in my heart that he was, at last, a "Christian soul" and that he would not experience the terror of his vision, but would be welcomed into the arms of a loving Savior. Surprisingly, his hellish vision seems to have played a major role in his ultimate willingness to turn to God.

I am against using Hell as a rhetorical weapon to frighten people into the kingdom. In my own father's case, it seems in God's strange wisdom to have worked.

