

Bell, Hell, Eternal Torment? A Pursuit of Biblical Truth

PART ONE

Now that the bulk of the chatter over Rob Bell's book has begun to die down, I think it's time to address not Rob Bell or his universalism, but the response that mainline Christianity has given. I've seen all kinds of videos posted in response and blog articles written - many of which shed no more light on the subject of hell than Rob Bell did with his endless question-asking.

Let me start by saying that I think Rob Bell asked a lot of good questions. I think his responses left much to be desired, but it showed at least on his part an honesty with the difficulties he has over the traditional view of hell. He asked tough, candid questions that most of us prefer to ignore. But ignoring them doesn't make them go away! And are we any better Christians for not asking them ourselves and trying to wrestle with the Biblical data? Or is the traditional view of hell something we just hold as one of the tenets of the Christian faith so there's nothing more to say?

I began reading the Bible a few years back as if I had never read it before. I tried (as best I could) to lay aside presuppositions and traditional baggage. NOT (and please hear me on this) because I thought those traditions were inherently wrong OR because I simply wanted to rock the boat, BUT because I EARNESTLY WANTED TO PURSUE THE TRUTH FOR MYSELF. I hope that is how you read your Bible. Often those who most loudly proclaim the Bible as their authority are the most guilty of simply taking something for granted that has been assigned the label of "Orthodoxy: Do not Tamper." The traditional view of hell is one of those that I think, largely because it is such a horrible thing to think about, has been left un-tampered with. Allow me to do a little tampering.

If you're unfamiliar with the discussion at large, the traditional view of hell is also known as "eternal, conscious torment." It pretty much posits an eternal punishing in a "lake of fire" in contrast to the eternal bliss experienced by believers. From ancient times, this place of punishment has been somewhat literally depicted by church fathers and commentators as a physical reality of pain that never subsides. I'll spare you the quotes on an article that is going to be long enough already without adding endless quotations to the mix. Simply look up early church views on hell and you will be provided with endless ghastly depictions and attempts to describe what hell will be like.

So, you may be wondering, isn't the traditional view the only view allowed by the Biblical data? You may be surprised to hear that many scholars declare quite emphatically, "NO!" So what are the options? Well, in contrast to the traditional view there are those, like Rob Bell, who adhere to a form of universalism. A strict universalism would claim that "all roads lead to God." Just

pick your path, and it will get you there, because Jesus is reconciling all things to himself. Rob Bell seems to hold to a slightly modified view where not *everyone* will end up in bliss because not everyone will ever (even at the threat of hell's flames or the for the fear of God) *choose* to be redeemed. In this case, the hinge-pin is really *choice*. In this view some will actually be lost, but not because they never heard the Gospel or responded to it, but because in the end, they still refused to be reconciled to God. Universalism is generally regarded as heretical, but does at least make use of some texts of Scripture to make their case. Rob Bell softens the heresy and for that, we'll give him a small "h" rather than calling him a full-blown (big "H") Heretic and tying him to the proverbial stake.

These are not the only alternatives to a literal, traditional view of hell, however. The reader might be surprised to hear that solid, Evangelical scholars differ on some particulars about how to read the Bible's teaching on this doctrine. In fact, this doctrine was treated in one of Zondervan's "Viewpoint" books entitled *Four Views on Hell*. It was edited by William Crocket who is, incidentally, one of the authors of the four views in question. In order of appearance in the book, the four views are (1) The Traditional (and quite literal) view of hell, espoused by John Walvoord; (2) The Metaphorical view of hell espoused by William Crocket; (3) The Purgatorial view of hell defended by Zachary Hayes; and (3) The Conditional view of hell embraced by Clark Pinnock. For the sake of brevity, I will refrain from diving too deeply into any of these views, but my main point here is that the views are many and more diverse than most Christians realize.

Before I get into what view I hold to (which I hold tentatively), I want to take a moment to let you know that I grew up embracing the Traditional view of hell. I certainly didn't like it, but I believed the Bible taught it and so, to be faithful to Scripture, I held it and defended it if the topic came up. The fact is, I was unaware until only recent years, that there *were* other views of hell on the table. I suppose this is because hell does not make for a pleasant discussion and admittedly, the Biblical data is less than we would like to have, but certain verses seem to juxtapose the eternal existence of a believer's soul in bliss with the likewise eternal existence of the unbeliever's soul in torment (stay tuned for treatment of each of those passages in upcoming articles). So, I held unswervingly to the traditional view until only a recent time.

So, what view do I hold? Not just yet. I need to address one more thing before I continue. It is because of my commitment to pursue truth and influence others to do the same that I urge you once again, to allow the Bible to speak for itself. Read God's Word as if you have never read it before and do your best to derive your beliefs solely from what it says. Notice I'm not telling you that you need to go read this guy or that guy or watch this video or that to be convinced. That is because I really do believe in *Sola Scriptura* while I believe some others simply like the force that the claim might give to their argument. Unfortunately, while I know that my pursuit in this is TRUTH, it is often alleged that those who hold to my position do so because the "Biblical" view of hell is too hard to accept. It is said that people like me go to the Bible *looking for* something else to believe about hell because the grim reality is just too much to bear. Now, I will readily admit that I do think the picture of hell as viewed through traditional lenses is a very terrible thing - but so is sin against a holy God. God is God and I am not. He can do with us as He

sees fit and He can do with the finally impenitent what He sees fit. My question is, "What does God *tell us* He will do with the finally impenitent?"

Well, I believe that a strong Biblical case can be made (though I still hold it tentatively) for the view Clark Pinnock defends in the aforementioned viewpoints book called the "Conditional View." It is also been called the "Conditional Immortality View" and perhaps is best known as the "Annihilationist" view. This view would posit that the ultimate end of those finally unrepentant souls is utter extinction. It emphasizes the thematic view throughout the Bible on the final end of the wicked which is "death" or "destruction." This end is often held in contrast to the fate awaiting believers - eternal life - and would be the more natural opposite of eternal life. It is the curse of Genesis 3 on mankind for having rebelled against God. It was God's intention that He fellowship with His creation in perfect harmony, but that program was interrupted by mankind's first sin. The result - the ideal, eternal existence of communion and fellowship with God was set aside and death entered our world. No sense of immortality for the sake of eternal torment was expressed in the Old Testament, and none will be found if sought. It would not be until the New Testament was written that Biblical support for eternal, conscious torment would seem to surface. And addressing those texts will have to await further posts on the subject.

For now, I am interested in your thoughts. Many, I believe, would be convinced annihilationists if not for the sheer weight and force of tradition. It is not something I overturn lightly and something that only the Biblical data can force me to do. In this case, I have no other choice, because my conscience does not allow me to continue to believe or teach something I do not believe the Bible to teach.

Before you rush to the defense of "orthodoxy" to save me from heresy, I want you to consider that perhaps you have not given quite enough time to this important doctrine to draw such bold conclusions. Further, consider the fact that many of your favorite Bible teachers may also be open to views other than the traditional view (ever heard of F.F. Bruce, John Wenham, D.A. Carson? They don't all share my view, but they all hold to something other than the traditional view). Like I said, I hold this position tentatively. Should a better case be brought to my attention for another view that does the Scriptures more justice, I would gladly change my position. Before you send me links to books or articles that I should read, however, I will provide a partial list of publications and resources that have informed my thinking on this subject. Perhaps that article you thought would change my mind is already in the list. Here it is:

Articles:

(1984) Edward Fudge* "[The Final End of the Wicked](#)"

(1990) Clark Pinnock* "[The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent](#)"

(1991) James Brandyberry* "[Important Forgotten History: The Roots of Opposition to Conditionalism](#)"

(1991) Alan Gomes: "[Evangelicals and the Annihilation of Hell, Part One](#); [Part Two](#)

(1994) Alan Linfield: "[Sheep and Goats: Current Evangelical Thought of the Nature of Hell and the Scope of Salvation](#)"

- (1994) Robert Peterson - "[A Traditionalist Response to John Stott's Arguments for Annihilationism](#)"
- (1997) Robert Peterson - "[Basil Atkinson: A Key Figure for Twentieth-Century Evangelical Annihilationism](#)"
- (1997) J.I. Packer: "[Evangelical Annihilationism in Review](#)"
- (1998) Jeff Spencer: "[The Destruction of Hell: Annihilationism Examined](#)"
- (1998) Samuele Bacchiocchi* "[A Biblical View of Human Nature](#)"
- (1999) Samuele Bacchiocchi "[Survival of the Soul: A Historical Glimpse of the Belief in the Survival of the Soul](#)"
- (1999) Samuele Bacchiocchi "[Hell: Eternal Torment or Annihilation?](#)"
- (1999) Samuele Bacchiocchi "[The State of the Dead](#)"
- (1999) Robert Peterson "[Does the Bible Teach Annihilationism?](#)"
- (1999) Norman Geisler "[Annihilationism](#)" (excerpt from *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*)
- (2001) William E. Arp - "[Tormented or Terminated?](#)"
- (2007) Glenn Peoples* "[Fallacies in the Annihilationism Debate: A Critique of Robert Peterson and other Traditionalist Scholarship](#)"
- (2007) Robert Peterson "[Fallacies in the Annihilationism Debate? A Response to Glenn Peoples](#)"
- (?) J.P. Holding: "[An Examination of Annihilationism](#)"

Books:

- Crockett, William V. *[Four Views on Hell](#)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996. Print.
- Edwards, David L., and John R. W. Stott. *[Evangelical Essentials: a Liberal-evangelical Dialogue](#)*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1989. Print.
- Fudge, Edward, and Robert A. Peterson. *[Two Views of Hell: a Biblical & Theological Dialogue](#)*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000. Print.
- Fudge, Edward. *[The Fire That Consumes: a Biblical and Historical Study of Final Punishment](#)*. Houston, TX: Providential, 1982. Print.
- Morgan, Christopher W., and Robert A. Peterson. *[Hell under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment](#)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004. Print.
- Peterson, Robert A. *[Hell on Trial: the Case for Eternal Punishment](#)*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 1995. Print.
- Wenham, John William. *[The Goodness of God](#)*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1974. Print.

Audio:

- Steve Gregg: [Three Views of Hell Part One](#); [Part Two](#)
- Glenn Peoples: [Postive Case for Annihilationism](#)
[Hell, Part Two: Tradition Strikes Back](#)

[Hell, Part Three](#)

Video:

Edward Fudge [Origin of Traditional Hell](#)

[The Fire That Consumes](#)

Greg Boyd

[Thoughts on Eternal Punishment](#)

I now eagerly await your responses. God bless you in your pursuit of truth,