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Rethinking Hell: Apostasy or New Reformation?

“**W**HATEVER HAPPENED TO HELL?” asks British evangelist John Blanchard.¹ “First it was there, then it wasn’t,” satirical novelist David Lodge chimes in.² “Hell disappeared,” American church historian Martin E. Marty repeats, then adds wryly, “No one noticed.”³ As a specialist in popular culture and religion, Marty should know better than most.

In the public square, fire and brimstone are definitely out of vogue. Hell still shows up in conversation often enough, but generally as an expletive rather than as a serious subject. Hell is not unique in this regard—the same can be said of Jesus Christ.

More troubling than hell’s absence from secular society is its general disappearance from many Christian pulpits. Interestingly, although nearly all evangelical pastors and teachers firmly believe that Jesus will “come to judge the living and the dead,” a considerable number of them cannot remember when they last preached or taught on the subject. Might those missing sermons reflect a deeper, widespread problem with the traditional interpretation of hell?

The Rethinking of Hell

Book titles tell the story: *Hell on Trial*⁴ and *Hell Under Fire*.⁵ A banner headline on the front of *Modern Reformation* magazine asks: “Hell: Putting the Fire Out?”⁶—a reference to the international discussion now underway among evangelical Christians. This debate

1. Blanchard, *Whatever Happened to Hell?*
2. Lodge, *Souls and Bodies*.
3. Marty, “Hell Disappeared,” 381–98.
4. Peterson, *Hell on Trial*.
5. Morgan and Peterson, *Hell Under Fire*.
6. *Modern Reformation* (May–June 2002).

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is defined more clearly by *Christianity Today's* cover story titled "Hell: Annihilation or Eternal Torment?"⁷

The worldwide restudy of the biblical doctrine of final punishment did not begin by accident or without good reason. It resulted from the writings of such respected scholars as John W. Wenham⁸ of Oxford, a major British advocate of biblical authority for over half a century and the author of the most widely-used Greek textbook for many years throughout the English-speaking world.

Similar encouragement came from F. F. Bruce,⁹ one of the most trusted New Testament commentators of the twentieth century. And we must not forget John Stott¹⁰—the noted London pastor beloved worldwide for his books, leadership in world missions, and unsurpassed preaching—who urged a fresh investigation of biblical teaching on this subject.

When leaders of this caliber call for a more serious study of hell, or even announce that they have rejected parts of the traditional view and urge others to follow suit, it is enough (borrowing a phrase from the erudite J. I. Packer) to "put the cat among the pigeons."¹¹ Other notables include E. Earle Ellis of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Reformed Anglican visiting professor Philip E. Hughes of Westminster Seminary (and elsewhere), long-time professor Homer Hailey of the Churches of Christ, and Canadian Baptist Clark Pinnock.

Joining these very visible authors are thousands of committed and thoughtful evangelicals—pastors, teachers, professors, and other serious Bible students—who, privately or publicly, question the traditional doctrine of unending conscious torment, denounce it as an unbiblical hindrance to evangelism, or consider it an unnecessary slander against God himself.

What Is Behind the Change?

Albert H. Mohler voices the question many are now thinking: "How did a doctrine so centrally enshrined in the system of theology suffer such a wholesale abandonment?"¹²

7. *ChrTod* (Oct 23, 2000).

8. Wenham argued "The Case for Conditional Immortality," in a paper so titled, at the Fourth Edinburgh Conference on Christian Dogmatics in 1991. In it, he described the traditional doctrine of endless torment as "a hideous and unscriptural doctrine which has been a terrible burden on the mind of the church for many centuries and a terrible blot on her presentation of the gospel." The conference papers were published the following year as *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, and Wenham's quote above appears on page 190. He repeats it in the introduction to his autobiography, *Facing Hell*, on page vii.

9. Bruce contributed a foreword to the original edition of *The Fire That Consumes*, in which he noted the lack of evangelical unanimity on the subject of hell and called for "the fellowship of patient Bible study." See page vii.

10. Stott first expressed his views publicly in a debate with Anglican liberal David Edwards, published in 1988 as *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal–Evangelical Dialogue*.

11. Packer, "Evangelical Annihilationism in Review," 38.

12. Mohler, "Modern Theology," 16.

Mohler blames “theological compromise.”¹³ Alan W. Gomes credits a “desire for a kinder, gentler theology.”¹⁴ D. A. Carson identifies “this age of pluralism” as the cause.¹⁵ Robert A. Peterson says it reflects the fruit of the Enlightenment and the exaltation of human reason.¹⁶ From their perspective, the answers given by these prominent evangelicals, all of whom defend the traditional interpretation of hell as unending conscious torment, make perfect sense.

But what if they all are mistaken, unknowingly distracted from the real answer by centuries of tradition, human assumptions, and denominational creeds?¹⁷ What if the muting of hell is due neither to emotional weakness nor loss of gospel commitment?

What if the biblical foundations thought to support unending conscious torment are less secure than has been widely supposed? What about a growing doubt concerning the idea that God, who gave his Son to die for sinful human beings, will keep billions of those same people alive forever, only to torment them without end?¹⁸

Since publication of *The Fire That Consumes* in 1982, earnest believers throughout the world have voiced suspicions just such as these. I have spoken with evangelical university and seminary professors, and have heard from still others, who have carefully restudied all that the Bible says about the destiny of the wicked and have felt the necessity to reorder their understanding. Not infrequently, they speak of colleagues who share their views but who, for a variety of reasons, presently choose to keep those views to themselves.

Some Biblical Details That Inspire Change

The more deeply one digs into the Scriptures for understanding regarding final punishment, the clearer it becomes why many godly pastors and teachers are taking out their Bibles and restudying matters that they formerly took for granted. For example, Scripture makes it clear that God will resurrect (or transform) the redeemed unto immortality and incorruption, but Scripture never hints that the wicked will be raised either immortal or incorruptible. Instead, the Bible indicates that the wicked will be banished from God’s presence and expelled into the lake of fire, to experience the second death.

13. Ibid.

14. Gomes, “Evangelicals and the Annihilation of Hell,” 15.

15. Carson, quoted by Peterson, “Undying Worm, Unquenchable Fire,” 37.

16. Peterson, *Hell on Trial*, 120.

17. That is always a possibility. Most of the Christian Church was confused about the core doctrine of justification by grace through faith from about the time of Augustine until the Protestant Reformation—a period of more than a thousand years.

18. For non-Calvinist Christians, the moral offense is magnified by three when the traditionalist speaks from a Calvinistic perspective. Not only must the non-Calvinist hearer struggle (1) with the notion of unending conscious torment, but, as the Calvinist is conscience-bound to affirm, (2) the chief (“most ultimate”) reason why one is in hell to begin with is “God’s sovereign decision to pass by many sinners and allow them to suffer the consequences for their sins”; and (3) the only reason the sinner in hell continues to live and suffer for eternity is that God intentionally keeps that person alive for that very purpose. (Peterson, “Systematic Theology,” 164; Helm, *The Last Things*, 118, 120.) I mention this, not to be divisive, but to encourage greater understanding by those on both sides: to the non-Calvinist, that the Calvinist *must* speak from deep convictions; to the Calvinist, that the non-Calvinist *must* be horrified when that happens.

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Jesus warns of everlasting *punishment* in the age to come, and he also explains the nature of that punishment, as do Paul and John among others. It is the second *death*, the wages of sin. It is everlasting *destruction*, at the hands of God who is able to destroy both soul and body. To undergo this punishment is to *perish*—eternally and entirely, fully and forever—and to *forfeit eternal life*, the gift of God that throughout the New Testament always stands as the blessed alternative to death, destruction and perishing.

These details, and scores of others from both Testaments, provide a clearer view of the biblical hell than does the majority tradition of unending conscious torment. They represent an understanding of the divine character more fully in accord with the revelation of God revealed in Scripture and in Jesus Christ, including both his goodness and his severity. They furnish a place to stand with confidence, a position grounded firmly in Scripture, an incentive to forego timidity based on uncertainty, a boldness to declare the whole counsel of God on this important subject.

“But,” someone asks, “if the traditional doctrine of hell does not come entirely from the Bible, how did it originate and why is it almost universally held? And what exactly does the Bible teach, if not what we have always heard? These are very important questions that deserve answers. With these questions clearly in mind, let us journey together through the Scriptures and through centuries of Christian history.

My Perspective: Evangelical Christian Theist

What one learns from a study of the Bible depends largely on where one stands in relation to other things. Is she a theist, an atheist or an agnostic? If a theist, is she a Christian? If she professes to be a Christian, is she liberal, evangelical, or fundamentalist? Is he open to learn on this biblical subject, or does he suppose that the answers are already clear and settled? If he is open to study, what will be his determining authority?

Is he committed most of all to a particular Confession, to what he thinks “the church has always taught,” to philosophy and reason, or to the words of the Bible itself? If he professes the latter, does he reason from a specific truth—such as God’s love, wrath, or justice—or from an overall gathering and inductive weighing of passages on the subject from both the Old and New Testaments?

What will be the final criterion when these various standards do not point the same direction—something they do not always do. Is she willing to confess an element of mystery where she cannot find full answers—or does she then bend and stretch some scriptures to cover the gap left by others? The matter of authority is not a simple one, even to the reader with good intentions.

I am a theist, a Christian and an evangelical,¹⁹ persuaded that Scripture is the very Word of God written. For that reason I believe it is without error in anything that it

19. The term “evangelical” itself covers a spectrum of opinions regarding the proper role of tradition vis-à-vis Scripture. Certainly the opinions of our theological ancestors deserve attention, respect, and careful, prayerful, hesitant thought before being rejected—but evangelicals *say* that even those opinions are subject to critique in the light of Scripture, and to rejection when such critique warrants it. However, as Roger E. Olson documents, “[t]he present traditionalist temperament of many conservative evangelical theolo-

teaches, and that it is the only unquestionable, binding source of doctrine on this or any subject.²⁰ This is a negative statement since it eliminates anything else as an unquestionable or binding source of doctrine. It is also a positive statement since it requires me to *use* Scripture as a final authority and not simply to *praise* it for that purpose.

Such a high view of Scripture does not take away from a healthy respect for the common opinion of the universal church throughout the centuries. If someone begins to suspect that he alone has discovered a certain truth, he has good reason to doubt its validity. No uninspired speaker or writer knows anything definitive about final punishment that has not come from the Word of God.

At the same time, the church's greatest theologians and most devout believers have always realized that God can continually cause new light to break forth from the Word that has been there all the time. One of the greatest compliments that can be paid the church is that it is always reforming, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit and under the authority of the Word.

These are not mere words, but standards by which this book is to be critically measured. Not a day passed during its original research and writing, or during its subsequent revisions, without my earnest prayer for divine leading and wisdom. A number of special friends also supported that work in regular prayer.

Any child of God can ask assistance in weighing the message of uninspired authors while beseeching a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of the things God has said (Eph 1:17–18; Jas 1:5–7). This not only comforts; it creates a sense of humility and of responsibility (Jas 3:1). We must open Scripture prayerfully and handle it with care. We must then listen to it without objection or argument. It is the Word of the living God.

Standards That Easily Distract

Before we begin our exploration of Scripture and Christian history, we must acknowledge our common guide and agree to honor his authority. That guide, of course, is the Holy Spirit, who speaks truth through the canonical writings of prophets, apostles, and other holy men, now collected in Scripture. As evangelical Christians, it is very easy to claim the Bible as our authority, but fail to carry out the implications of that claim when dealing with difficult issues—especially if that means standing with the minority.

gians leads them to seek rapid closure to any theological discussion of new proposals . . . [and] to reject any innovative interpretations of Scripture . . . Since most evangelicals have always believed in the eternal suffering of the wicked, conservative evangelical theologians tend to react negatively to any suggestion of annihilationism.” Olson, *Reformed and Always Reforming*, 187. For example, the case for unending conscious torment presented by my co-author Robert A. Peterson in *Two Views of Hell* consists of an endorsement by eleven other theologians through the centuries, an appeal to ten passages of Scripture, and three rationalistic arguments drawn from various areas of systematic theology. Peterson, *Two Views of Hell*, 117–81.

20. I am a full member of the Evangelical Theological Society in good standing, having joined that organization about forty years ago. I have served as an ETS regional vice-president and have been published several times in its scholarly *Journal (JETS)*, as also in *Christianity Today*. The first edition of *The Fire That Consumes* was an Alternate Selection of the Evangelical Book Club.

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Then the tendency is to look for a way out, to grab some passing straw in an effort to escape the whirlpool from which we see no ready exit. It is easy to deceive ourselves under such circumstances. We need to be very sure, therefore, what we are excluding when we say that the Bible is our final authority.

Desires

It is always tempting to read into Scripture what we wish. The nineteenth-century Anglican archbishop, Richard Whately of Dublin, warns us not to confuse our own desires with the Bible's teaching.

In judging of the sense of Scripture, we should be careful to guard against the error of suffering our wishes to bias the mind. If indeed we had to devise a religion for ourselves, we might indulge our wishes as to what is desirable, or our conjectures, as to what seems to us in itself probable, or our judgment, as to what may seem advisable. But when we have before us "Scripture-revelations" on any subject, it is for us to endeavor to make out what it is that Scriptures teaches, and what it does not teach.²¹

Easy Answers

The desire for easy answers can also mislead our minds during difficult Bible study. Edward White, author of the nineteenth-century classic, *Life in Christ*, reminds us of this danger.

Perhaps we never ought to be more suspicious of our arguments than when they are derived from the presumed advantages of the projected conclusion. There can be no doubt that the desire for a neat and simple argument in support of a truth may dispose even able men to offer some little violence to evidence that points in the direction of complexity. What we consider neatness and simplicity is not always a characteristic of Divine working, or Divine teaching. A passion for simplicity of statement has often blinded men to facts that indicated more complexity than might at first have been supposed.²²

This danger is ever-present regarding any subject, but it hovers over a study of hell like some bird of prey. "How will this view affect evangelism?" people may ask. "Which

21. Whately, *A View of the Scripture Revelations*, 185–86. Of the four major Protestant streams since the Reformation, the Anglican has been the most open to conditionalism, followed by the Anabaptists and Lutherans, with the Calvinist tradition holding most tenaciously to the doctrine of unending conscious torment.

22. Edward White, *Life in Christ*, 293. White emphasizes the positive aspect that life is to be had only through Jesus Christ, rather than the negative aspect that contradicts the doctrine of unending conscious torment. White believed that man's soul survives bodily death in an intermediate state. His conditionalist contemporary, Henry Constable, believed that body and soul both die in the first death. Both men affirm a resurrection of good and bad, a universal judgment, and the entire destruction of body and soul in the case of those who are cast into hell. The two men demonstrate that one's view of hell does not require a certain view of temporal death or the intermediate state.

view of hell most motivates sinners to repent?”²³ These questions come to mind, but are secondary and must wait their turn. First we must ask what the Bible teaches. Only when that is settled are we ready to consider the practical implications of such teaching.

Evangelicals who profess great fidelity to Scripture have not always been careful to respect its form and manner of speaking. “Evangelical zeal for literal interpretation has too often resulted in running roughshod over those literary forms for which literal interpretation is inappropriate,” writes J. Julius Scott.²⁴ The problem is compounded, Scott continues, because “some biblical genres, such as Hebrew poetry, wisdom literature and apocalyptic, are strange to western readers.”²⁵

Private Interpretation

We also need to avoid the danger of thinking we have discovered new truth never known or taught before. The great Reformers rejected ecclesiastical tradition as having authority equal to Scripture, and so must we. But they never intended that every man should invent his own interpretation of the Bible, nor did they intend to enslave the church’s corporate interpretation to “the free-lance opinion of any one individual.”²⁶ Robert E. Webber addresses this abuse of a good principle when he exhorts: “Evangelicals should come to grips with the fact that the Bible belongs to the church. It is the living church that receives, guards, passes on, and interprets Scripture. Consequently, the modern individualistic approach to interpretation of Scripture should give way to the authority of what the church has always believed, taught, and passed down in history.”²⁷

Webber was one of a group of evangelical leaders who met in May, 1977, for a period of self-analysis, resulting in a now-classic document known as “The Chicago Call: An Appeal to Evangelicals.”²⁸ In the section, “A Call to Biblical Fidelity,” the group said: “We deplore our tendency toward individualistic interpretation of Scripture . . . Therefore we affirm that the Bible is to be interpreted in keeping with the best insights of historical and literary study, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, with respect for the historic understanding of the church. We affirm that the Scriptures, as the infallible Word of God, are the basis of authority in the church.”²⁹

23. Albert Mohler wisely warns against “watering down” biblical teaching of final judgment, however understood, as a tactic to gain more converts. (Mohler, “Modern Theology,” 40–41.) However, John Stott’s example is undeniable proof that missionary zeal does not depend upon one’s acceptance of the traditional view of hell. Brian A. Hatcher studied the relationship between one’s views of hell and missionary practice, as demonstrated by a generation of missionaries associated with the Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS) from 1845–75, and reached the same conclusion. (Hatcher, “Eternal Punishment and Christian Missions,” 39–61.)

24. Scott, “Some Problems in Hermeneutics,” 74.

25. *Ibid.*, 74–75.

26. Braun, *Whatever Happened to Hell?* 48.

27. Webber, *Common Roots*, 128.

28. The text of “The Chicago Call” is included in Webber’s *Common Roots*, quoted here and below.

29. Webber, *Common Roots*, 252–53. The text continues with a reminder of the fallibility of all human creeds and confessions: “We affirm the abiding value of the great ecumenical creeds and the Reformation

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To a church often dominated by mass-media pastors, magazine editors, parachurch organizations, and free-lance interpreters, these words carry timely wisdom, and we ought to give them careful attention. Even true prophets are subject to discerning by other spiritual people (1 Cor 14:29; 1 Thess 5:20–21), and many false prophets are in the world (1 John 4:1). How important, therefore, that we test everything by Scripture, always remembering that we are not the first to do so, and that we do not read Scripture in isolation apart from the people of God.

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confessions. Since such statements are historically and culturally conditioned, however, the church today needs to express its faith afresh, without defecting from the truths apprehended in the past” (ibid., 253).