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Hell Under Fire, Part One

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Have postmodern westerners just decided that hell is no more? Can we really just think the doctrine away? Os Guinness notes that western societies "have reached the state of pluralization where choice is not just a state of affairs, it is a state of mind. Choice has become a value in itself, even a priority. To be modern is to be addicted to choice and change. Change becomes the very essence of life." Personal choice becomes the urgency; what sociologist Peter Berger called the "heretical imperative." In such a context, theology undergoes rapid and repeated transformation driven by cultural currents. For millions of persons in the postmodern age, truth is a matter of personal choice—not divine revelation. Clearly, we moderns do not choose for hell to exist.

This process of change is often invisible to those experiencing it, and denied by those promoting it. As David F. Wells comments, "The stream of historic orthodoxy that once watered the evangelical soul is now dammed by a worldliness that many fail to recognize as worldliness because of the cultural innocence with which it presents itself." He continued: "To be sure, this orthodoxy never was infallible, nor was it without its blemishes and foibles, but I am far from persuaded that the emancipation from its theological core that much of evangelicalism is effecting has resulted in greater biblical fidelity. In fact, the result is just the opposite. We now have less biblical fidelity, less interest in truth, less seriousness, less depth, and less capacity to speak the Word of God to our own generation in a way that offers an alternative to what it already thinks."

The pressing question of our concern is this: Whatever happened to hell? What has happened so that we now find even some who claim to be evangelicals promoting and teaching concepts such as universalism, inclusivism, postmortem evangelism, conditional immortality, and annihilationism—when those known as evangelicals in former times were known for opposing those very proposals? Many evangelicals seek to find any way out of the biblical doctrine—marked by so much awkwardness and embarrassment.

The answer to these questions must be found in understanding the impact of cultural trends and the prevailing worldview upon Christian theology. Ever since the Enlightenment, theologians have been forced to defend the very legitimacy of their discipline and proposals. A secular worldview that denies supernatural revelation must reject Christianity as a system and truth-claim. At the same time, it seeks to transform all religious truth-claims into matters of personal choice and opinion. Christianity, stripped of its offensive theology, is reduced to one 'spirituality' among others.

All the same, there are particular doctrines that are especially odious and repulsive to the modern and postmodern mind. The traditional doctrine of hell as a place of everlasting punishment bears that scandal in a particular way. The doctrine is offensive to modern sensibilities and an embarrassment to many who consider themselves to be Christians. Those Friedrich Schleiermacher called the "cultured despisers of religion" especially despise the doctrine of hell. As one

observer has quipped, hell must be air conditioned.

Liberal Protestantism and Roman Catholicism have modified their theological systems to remove this offense. No one is in danger of hearing a threatening “fire and brimstone” sermon in those churches. The burden of defending and debating hell now falls to the evangelicals—the last people who think it matters.

How is it that so many evangelicals—including some of the most respected leaders in the movement—now reject the traditional doctrine of hell in favor of annihilationism or some other option? The answer must surely come down to the challenge of theodicy—the challenge to defend God’s goodness against modern indictments.

Modern secularism demands that anyone who would speak for God must now defend Him. The challenge of theodicy is primarily to defend God against the problem of evil. The societies that gave birth to the decades of megadeath, the Holocaust, the abortion explosion, and institutionalized terror will now demand that God answer their questions and redefine himself according to their dictates.

In the background to all this is a series of inter-related cultural, theological, and philosophical changes that point to an answer for our question: What happened to evangelical convictions about hell?

The first issue is a changed view of God. The biblical vision of God has been rejected by the culture as too restrictive of human freedom and offensive to human sensibilities. God’s love has been redefined so that it is no longer holy. God’s sovereignty has been reconceived so that human autonomy is undisturbed. In recent years, even God’s omniscience has been redefined to mean that God perfectly knows all that He can perfectly know, but He cannot possibly know a future based on free human decisions.

Evangelical revisionists promote an understanding of divine love that is never coercive and would disallow any thought that God would send impenitent sinners to eternal punishment in the fires of hell. They are seeking to rescue God from the bad reputation He picked up by associating with theologians who for centuries taught the traditional doctrine. God is just not like that, they reassure. He would never sentence anyone—however guilty—to eternal torment and anguish.

Theologian Geerhardus Vos warned against abstracting the love of God from His other attributes, noting that while God’s love is revealed to be His fundamental attribute, it is defined by His other attributes as well. It is quite possible to “overemphasize this one side of truth as to bring into neglect other exceedingly important principles and demands of Christianity,” he stressed. This would lead to a loss of theological ‘equilibrium’ and balance. In the specific case of the love of God, it often leads to an unscriptural sentimentalism whereby God’s love becomes a form of indulgence incompatible with His hatred of sin.

In this regard, the language of the revisionists is particularly instructive. Any God who would act as the traditional doctrine would hold would be ‘vindictive,’ ‘cruel,’ and ‘more like Satan than like God.’ Clark Pinnock has made the credibility of the doctrine of God to the modern mind a central focus of his theology: “I believe that unless the portrait of God is compelling, the credibility of belief in God is bound to decline.” Later, he suggests, “Today it is easier to invite people to find fulfillment in a dynamic, personal God than it would be to ask them to find it in a deity who is immutable and self-enclosed.”

Extending this argument further, it would surely be easier to persuade secular persons to believe in a God who would never judge anyone deserving of eternal punishment than it would to persuade them to believe in the God preached by Jonathan Edwards or Charles Spurgeon. But the urgent question is this: Is evangelical theology about marketing God to our contemporary culture, or is it our task to stand in continuity with orthodox biblical conviction—whatever the cost? As was cited earlier, modern persons demand that God must be a humanitarian, and He is held to human standards of righteousness and love. In the end, only God can defend himself against His critics.

Our responsibility is to present the truth of the Christian faith with boldness, clarity, and courage—and defending the biblical doctrine in these times will require all three of these virtues. Hell is an assured reality, just as it is presented so clearly in the Bible. To run from this truth, to reduce the sting of sin and the threat of hell, is to pervert the Gospel and to feed on lies. Hell is not up for a vote or open for revision. Will we surrender this truth to modern skeptics?

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