

Hell, Judgement and the Last Things

How can a loving God consign people to the fires of everlasting torment? This is the question at the heart of a lot of criticisms of Christianity from both the outside and inside.

People on all sides of the debate hold their views very seriously, and it is important to do honour to the strength and honesty of their convictions. However, nothing is to be gained by avoiding the question. It is a huge area, and one which I have done nothing more than begun to scratch the surface – and every aspect of it impinges on many other areas of theology, all worthy of reflection. There aren't easy, formulaic answers here, but I hope that we can begin to think about salvation in a real way.

Tonight we are going to try to look honestly at the whole question. Is there a hell? If so, is anyone there? Is it permanent? Who is going there? Can you be a Christian and not believe in Hell?

What is the Christian Doctrine of Hell?

For all its importance, Hell doesn't feature all that much in the creeds. They talk about the relation of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and God the Father a lot, and they talk about Jesus' coming reign and judgement, but they aren't all that interested in speculating about the hereafter.¹

In the absence of much in the way of official doctrine, where do we get our picture of hell from? I would suggest mainly from medieval art. Dante's Divine Comedy is the best writing about it – very very vivid. In pictorial art, things like the Last Judgement were a big theme in the renaissance. But the whole demons torturing people with pitchforks thing seems to me to be a combination of the idea of what medieval kings did to people who betrayed them and the idea that the demons were kind of in hell, just hanging around, so they might as well make themselves useful.

There has been a lot of debate over the centuries, but the four broad categories can be listed thus:

1. Everyone is In: Universalism
2. God Locks the Door: Exclusivism
3. The Door is Locked from the Inside: Inclusivism
4. Only the Elect are Saved: Predestination

I think that it is important to note that all of these views have been held by committed Christians over the centuries: I don't think that any of them could be described as "official"

¹ Except Athanasius, who says:

At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies: and shall give account for their own works.

And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting: and they that have done evil into everlasting fire.

Frankly, that doesn't seem to leave a lot of hope for any of us, which probably explains why you never hear it said.

Four Versions of Hell

1: Everyone Is In: Universalism

Universalism is the view that everyone is in Heaven. Either there is no Hell, or else it is empty.

This view can be traced back to Origen (185-254). He was very strongly opposed to Dualism (the idea that there is a universal battle between two equal and opposite powers – good and evil), which was popular in the era of late antiquity (Manicheism is a variety of dualism, as is Zoroastrianism) He argued that “to reject dualism is to reject the idea that God and Satan rule over their respective kingdoms for eternity... All ‘will be restored to their condition of happiness ... in order that the human race ... may be restored to that unity promised by the Lord Jesus Christ’”²

Surprisingly, Karl Barth was also a universalist, based on his theory of predestination.

Modern universalism can be represented by J T Robinson in his book *In the End God*, where he says “May not we imagine a love so strong that ultimately no one will be able to restrain himself from free and grateful surrender?”³

Surely everyone must at least hope that this is true –that God’s love is eventually triumphant. As Mother Julian said (or, rather, reports that God said to her):
“All will be well, and all will be well, and every kind of thing will be well.”

Bible

- 1 John 2:2
- Phil 2:10-13
- Romans 11:32
- 1 Tim 2:4
- John 12:32
- Col 1:18

Angel Points

- Takes the fear out of Christianity. Everyone is in, everyone feels good.
- It seems to mesh better with our culture’s view of God and so on

Devil Points

- Is it trivialising of evil? Do we really think that an unrepentant Hitler is in heaven?
- Does it over-ride free will?
- It seems to mesh too well with our culture’s view of God and so on.

See Also

- <http://www.spiritualitytoday.org/spir2day/92441noffsinger.html> for more on Mother Julian of Norwich

² McGrath pp 364-365

³ McGrath pp 365

2: God Locks the Door: Exclusivist

The basic scheme of this view is that all humanity is condemned to eternal punishment, but can escape the punishment by believing the good news – that Jesus has taken the guilt / responsibility on himself, and has suffered in our place. God is pictured as a judge, who has no choice but to condemn the guilty.

This is the position held by most “conservative” Christians. It is associated with Augustine of Hippo 354-430, who quoted passages such as John 6:51: “I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, they will live for ever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”⁴

There are various ways of looking at what is supposed to have happened (i.e. various doctrines of Atonement or Soteriology (which is the more currently fashionable term – it refers to Salvation (in the “Soter” part of the word)), but generally speaking, God is supposed to have done something by way of Jesus’ death and resurrection, which enables us to claim something like legal immunity from punishment. I have heard this described as the “Forensic” model.

The picture of literal flames and devils poking people with pitchforks seems to have been rejected by most people who believe in this theory - there was recently a fair bit of coverage when the Roman Catholic teaching on Hell emphasized that it is a place of absence from God, rather than a literal lake of fire.

There is a subset of this view, sometimes called “Annihilationist” which says that at some point in the process the damned will cease to exist.

Bible

- Dan 12:2
- Matt 18:8, 25:41,46
- John 5:29
- 2 Thess 1:8-9
- Jude 7
- Rev 14:11

Angel Points

- Does justice to the Gospel’s sense of the cosmic drama of Jesus death and resurrection
- Has a certain moral seriousness to it. Our actions in this life have eternal consequences.

Devil Points

- What about people who died before Jesus was born / have never heard of him / were presented a wholly inadequate picture of Jesus and consequently have not accepted him?
- Is it really as simple as believing a formula? What is it? How do I know if I really really really believe it? What about James (letter of)?

⁴ McGrath 365

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- If I believe it at one time, then find myself no longer believing it, does it then stop working? What if I am unlucky enough to die while not believing it? Could I really be said to be believing when I'm in a coma? And so on.

3: The Door is Locked from the Inside: Inclusivism

If the “traditional”, exclusivist picture has God locking people in hell, the inclusivist view has people staying there by their own choice. God’s mercy is always available, but in the act of rejecting it people systematically make themselves more and more unable to choose it.

Given that, Hell becomes more “purgative” and less “retributive” – there is always the possibility of leaving and going to Heaven. Heaven being understood as the presence of God, Hell being understood as God’s absence: someone who has chosen Hell does not want God’s presence.

This view is characteristic of C.S Lewis, appears to be held by Dallas Willard (according to McClaren anyway⁵), and Leslie Newbigin⁶, to name a few people at random.

It seems implicit anywhere that the prophets of the Old Testament are considered “saved”.

Bible

- Essentially the same verses as both the Universalism and Exclusivism sections above

Angel Points

- Seems to give a more ethically reasonable picture of God
- Keeps the idea of human choice as being important
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Devil Points

- I worry about how grace fits in here – is it a bit “works righteousness”?

See Also

- C.S. Lewis [The Problem of Pain](#) has a very good argument on this area
- C S Lewis [The Great Divorce](#) turns the argument into a story.
- Brian McLaren [The Last Word and the Word After That](#) (esp. Pp 181-183, 186 -189)

4: Particular Redemption: Only The Elect are Saved

This, possibly the most terrifying of the doctrines, could be stated thus: “Let us suppose that Christ died for all people. But not all people will be saved. Therefore it follows that Christ died to no effect for those who are not saved. This raises the gravest of questions concerning the efficacy of his death. But if Christ died only for those who are to be saved, he will have succeeded in his mission in every case. Therefore Christ died only for those who are to be saved.”⁷

⁵ McClaren pp186

⁶ McClaren Pp 183

⁷ McGrath pp 367

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It is associated with reform thought – Calvinism in its various manifestations.

Of course, a cynic might point out that, if I were to disagree with it, then that was simply because I was predestined to, and hence my argument carries no weight. Is there really any possibility of debate here?

Bible

- Romans 8:28-31

Angel Points:

- It affirms the saving power of Jesus' atonement.
- Reassuring if you (think you) are "in".

Devil Points:

- Surely God desires all to be saved?
- How do you know if you are one of the elect?
- It seems to lead to a doctrine of a God who creates people solely in order to condemn them to an eternal punishment for (to me) no obvious reason (technically, this is known as Double Predestination). Is this a theory of God in whom we can believe?

How it fits together with Atonement / Soteriology

If your view of the Salvation of Christ – your view of Atonement or Soteriology – is that the "Kingdom of God" (or "Kingdom of Heaven"), the thing which Jesus seems to spend a lot of time talking about (when he wasn't healing the sick, praying, or performing various other wonders) is all about "Getting to Heaven when you die", then it will have impacts on other aspects of your theology, and your personal behaviour. Or, at least, it ought.

In fact one reason given for believing in the exclusivist position is "why else would Jesus have wanted us to make disciples of all nations"? Why the urgency? If it isn't about saving their souls, then why bother? Just let it all hang out, and let God worry about it?

Obviously this isn't the sort of lazy lying about that people ought to be engaged in!

My problem with this is that it reduces Jesus and his life to a cipher. The only point of Jesus' life, in this view, appears to be in order to die, the only point of Christian discipleship is to convince people to "believe" certain theories about Jesus. Otherwise, if God's going to sort everything out eventually, what's the urgency? Why should people bother believing?

Personally, I'm increasingly suspicious of cut and dried, too neat answers. Certainly you can see the Bible through the lenses of that theoretical viewpoint, and explain everything neatly, though with a certain amount of cutting off of things which don't seem to fit, but I don't think that it does justice to the Biblical witness.

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If Christianity is reduced to a formula of “believe this and go to Heaven – fail to believe it and go to The Other Place”, then it seems to (a) largely miss the point (b) open it up to all sorts of theoretical problems about what is belief, why couldn't God just forgive people, etc and (c) replace the Jesus of the gospels with a theoretical construct⁸.

I think that it is a shame when the joy of being part of the Kingdom of God – God's wonderful good news for the world – is turned into something one dimensional and rather fearful. If God has an opinion about how the world should be run, who wouldn't want to hear it? If God is doing stuff in the world now, who wouldn't want to be a part of it?

As far as the theoretical questions of how we can construct a picture of Hell which seems consistent with the message of the Gospel and believable given that we are supposed to be believing in a God of grace, the question we have to ask about our ideas about Hell is: what does it say of God?

Certainly the picture which we get from Jesus is that the need to repent – to offer our lives to God – is urgent, and that the consequences of living only for ourselves are severe. This doesn't necessarily imply that Universalism is false – perhaps, in the end, God's love really does win everyone over. But it suggests that it is far from a done deal.

On the other hand, the idea that God would condemn people to Hell based on them having been unfortunate enough to have been born in a place and time which meant that they have never had the chance to hear, or have heard in such an unappealing way that there was never a real choice, seems difficult to believe to say the least.

Which is why I tend towards the inclusivist view. It keeps Hell as a real possibility, but it doesn't make God into some sort of arbitrary tyrant. It leaves free will in existence (which I think may not be the case for Universalism), and seems to do at least some justice to Jesus' words.

This raises the question of what sort of person would refuse to enter Heaven? One possibility here⁹ turns on the nature of forgiveness. To be forgiven requires accepting forgiveness – which requires admitting oneself to having been in the wrong. It requires admitting the claims of someone else – indeed Someone Else – as superior to me.

Luther describes sin humanity as *homo incurvatus* – humans turned in on themselves – which seems like a good picture. Sin is making myself first in the universe. Repentance is admitting that I am not the centre of the universe after all. Is this an admission everyone wants to make? As people live, perhaps they become the sort of people who are capable of that choice – or incapable of it. If Heaven is allowing God's claim, and Hell is rejecting it, perhaps the people in Hell are unwilling, or incapable, of turning again.

⁹ I take this from Lewis, Problem of Pain “Hell”

Is not having accepted Jesus exactly the same thing as having “rejected” him? It can be, but is it necessarily the case that it is? I can’t help but believe that God will be at the very least fair. God’s ways are high above my ways much in the same ways as the heavens are high above the Earth – but that means God is more fair, not less fair.

Jesus, Rhetoric, and Judgement

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‘When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’

Matthew 25:31-46

It is often pointed out by advocates of the exclusivist view that Jesus mentions Hell more than anyone else in the Bible. The conclusion which they want you to draw from this that Jesus knew what he was talking about re. the whole afterlife business, and that it supports their arguments.

It can also be noted that these people tend to assume that you, the fortunate beneficiary of their helpful counselling, is the one who is in danger of Hell. They, the happy owners of the truth, correct and doctrinally sound, are not.

I think we have to look beyond our normal picture, our normal habit of taking Jesus’ parables and sayings and trying to erect a superstructure of theoretical understandings above it. We need to take Jesus’ words as we find them, try to listen to what he is actually saying.

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The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats seems to me to be about action, first and foremost. What did you *do* for the least of these? The appropriate response to hearing it is action, not curiosity. We are to feed the hungry, not to preach at them; not because it gives us some sort of an in for converting them, but because it is a thing which is good in itself. To put it another way, the Kingdom of God is to be found here at least as much as anywhere else – in feeding the hungry, as much as preaching to them – perhaps even more so.

Recently I was asked: Why did Jesus die? Traditionally there is a theoretical answer, pulling in one of the various Theories of Atonement. But this is to put the cart of theory a long way ahead of the horse of historical event. Jesus died and rose again, and, in doing so, overturned the expectations not only of those who wanted him dead and gone, but also those of his disciples. Beyond that, the theories are just that. They are contingent. They are not “The Faith” itself. They are attempts to describe the indescribable, to do justice to the upending of Heaven and Earth, the coming of God’s kingdom.

Look at it this way: perhaps Jesus’ death is just what God’s forgiveness looks like, given our situation.

The Good News?

At the end, Jesus has to be Good News. If the gospel isn’t good news, then it isn’t anything. Our lives have to reflect that Good News. And any view of Heaven and Hell has to be good news. The good news of heaven is to me that all our hopes for the world, that longing for everything to work out OK in the end will be fulfilled. If our doctrine of Atonement doesn’t fulfil this requirement, then I don’t think it does justice to the gospel.

The flip side of the coin is Hell. I don’t pretend to have the full answer, but I think that judgement is directed at the “holy”, not sinners. In the end, we are all dependent on God’s grace. We want to build our little empires of theory, initially wanting to do justice to what we think God is doing, but soon enough it turns into a way to try to get ownership of God. We decide who is in and who is out, and the real God, the God known only to Godself, seems to be left out of the picture. Here, perhaps, is where Jesus’ judgement is to be found.

‘But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.’ – Matthew 23:13-15

Jesus’ judgement is a warning to all of us who try to tie God up in our little theoretical boxes and pass judgement of everyone who dares to disagree with us. It is a warning: it is not an invitation to focus on building theoretical systems where we get to decide who is in and who is out.

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At the end, Jesus is the judge. His judgement will be a judgement of love, not of hate. His forgiveness extended to those who crucified him when he said “Father forgive, for they know not what they do”. Beyond them, this is the judgement of forgiveness which reaches to us. This is what we are supposed to have faith in – not a doctrine, but God, made flesh for us.

This is why the language of judgement and forgiveness is a better model than that of simple cause and effect. When you put your hand on a live wire, you get electrocuted. There is no appeal from that. When you transgress the law of a king, then the king might have mercy.

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