John Stott on Everlasting Torment

From Essentials

A dialogue between David L Edwards and John Stott

Judgement and Hell

It is with great reluctance and with a heavy heart that I now approach this subject. You quote the Grand Rapids report which describes the unevangelised millions as human beings who, 'though created by God like God and for God . . . are now living without God'. This is a phrase which I have myself often used, because it seems to me to sum up the poignant tragedy of human lostness. And when it is extended to the possibility that some who live without God now may also spend eternity without him, the thought becomes almost unbearable.

I want to repudiate with all the vehemence of which I am capable the glibness, what almost appears to be the glee, the *Schadenfreude,* with which some Evangelicals speak about hell. It is a horrible sickness of mind or spirit. Instead, since on the day of judgement, when some will be condemned, there is going to be 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28), should we not already begin to weep at the very prospect? I thank God for Jeremiah. Israelite patriot though he was, he was charged with the heartbreaking mission of prophesying the destruction of his nation. Its ruin would only be temporary; it would not be eternal. Nevertheless, he could not restrain his tears. 'Oh that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people' (Jeremiah 9:1; cf. 13:17; 14:17).

It is within this prophetic tradition of tragedy, of sorrow over people's rejection of God's word and over the resultant inevitability of judgement, that Jesus wept over the impenitent city of Jerusalem. He cried out: 'If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace . . r (Luke 19:41-42; cf. Matthew 23:37-38). In this too Paul had the mind of Christ. He wrote of the 'great sorrow and unceasing anguish' he felt in his heart for his own race, the people of Israel. His 'heart's desire and prayer to God' was for their salvation. He was willing even, like Moses before him, to be himself 'cursed and cut off from Christ' if only thereby his people might be saved (Romans 9:1-4; 10:1; cf. Exodus 32:32). He had the same deep feelings for the Gentiles. For three whole years in Ephesus, as he reminded the church elders of that city, 'I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears' (Acts 20:31; cf. 20:19; Philippians 3:18).

I long that we could in some small way stand in the tearful tradition of Jeremiah, Jesus and Paul. I want to see more tears among us. I think we need to repent of our nonchalance, our hard-heartedness.

(a) *What is hell?*

You raise two main questions in relation to hell. The first concerns what is meant by it, and the second who may be condemned to go there. We both agree that the imagery which

Jesus and his apostles used (the lake of fire, the outer darkness, the second death) is not meant to be interpreted literally. In any case it could not be, since fire and darkness exclude each other. You comment positively on the Lausanne Covenant's expression 'eternal separation from God'; it is a conscious echo both of Jesus' words 'depart from me' (Matthew 7:23; 25:41) and of Paul's 'shut out from the presence of the Lord' (2 Thessalonians 1:9). We surely have to say that this banishment from God will be real, terrible (so that 'it would be better for him if he had not been born', Mark 14:21) and eternal. The New Testament contains no hint of the possibility of a later reprieve **or** amnesty. The biblical phraseology includes, in contrast to 'eternal life' and 'eternal salvation', 'eternal judgement' (Hebrews 6:2 and possibly Mark 3:29), 'everlasting contempt' (Daniel 12:2), 'eternal punishment' (Matthew 25:46), 'everlasting destruction' (2 Thessalonians 1:9) and 'eternal fire' (Matthew 18:8; 25:41). And the imagery supporting this phraseology includes the pictures of the door being shut (Matthew 25:10-12) and the great chasm being fixed (Luke 16:26).

You press me, however, to go beyond this. You rightly say that I have never declared publicly whether I think hell, in addition to being real, terrible and eternal, will involve the experience of everlasting suffering. I am sorry that you use in reference to God the emotive expression 'the Eternal Torturer', because it implies a sadistic infliction of pain, and all Christian people would emphatically reject that. But will the final destiny of the impenitent be eternal conscious torment, 'for ever and ever', or **will** it be a 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 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 cauterising their feelings or cracking under the strain. But our emotions are a fluctuating, unreliable guide to truth and must not be exalted to the place of supreme authority in determining it. As a committed Evangelical, my question must be —and is— not what does my heart tell me, but what does God's word say? And in order to answer this question, we need to survey the biblical material afresh and to open our minds (not just our hearts) to the possibility that Scripture points in the direction of annihilation, and that 'eternal conscious torment' is a tradition which has to yield to the supreme authority of Scripture. There are four arguments; they relate to language, imagery, justice and universalism.

First, *language.* The vocabulary of 'destruction' is often used in relation to the final state of perdition. The commonest Greek words are the verb *apollumi* (to destroy) and the noun *apOleia* (destruct¯ion). When the verb is active and transitive, 'destroy' means 'kill', as when Herod wanted to murder the baby Jesus and the Jewish leaders later plotted **to** have him executed (Matthew 2:13; 12:14; 27:4). Then Jesus himself told us not to be afraid of those who kill the body and cannot kill the soul. 'Rather,' he continued, 'be afraid of the One [Gods who can destroy both soul and body in hell' (Matthew 10:28; cf. James 4:12). If to kill is to deprive the body of life, hell would seem to be the deprivation of both physical and spiritual life, that is, an extinction of being. When the verb is in the middle, and intransitive, it means

to be destroyed and so to 'perish', whether physically of hunger or snakebite (Luke 15:17; 1 Corinthians 10:9) **or** eternally in hell (e.g. John 3:16; 10:28; 17:12; Romans 2:12; 1 Corinthians 15:18; 2 Peter 3:9). If believers are *hoi sotomenoi* (those who are being saved), unbelievers are *hoi apollumenoi* (those who are perishing). The phrase occurs in 1 Corinthians 1:18, 2 Corinthians 2:15; 4:3, and in 2 Thessalonians 2:10. Jesus is also recorded in the Sermon on the Mount as contrasting the 'narrow . . . road that leads to life' with the 'broad . . . road that leads to destruction' (Matthew 7:13; cf. also Romans 9:22; Philippians 1:28; 3:19; Hebrews 10:39; 2 Peter 3:7; Revelation 17:8,11; the word used in 1 Thessalonians 5:3 and 2 Thessalonians 1:9 is *olethros,* which also means 'ruin' or 'destruction'). It would seem strange, therefore, if people who are said to suffer destruction are in fact not destroyed; and, as you put it, it is 'difficult to imagine a perpetually inconclusive process of perishing'. It cannot, I think, be replied that it is impossible to destroy human beings because they are immortal, for the immortality - and therefore indestructibility - of the soul is a Greek not a biblical concept. According to Scripture only God possesses immortality in himself (1 Timothy 1:17; 6:16); he reveals and gives it to us through the gospel (2 Timothy 1:10). And by the way, 'annihilation' is not quite the same as 'conditional immortality'. According to the latter, nobody survives death except those to whom God gives life (they are therefore immortal by grace, not by nature), whereas according to the former, everybody survives death and will even be resurrected, but the impenitent will finally be destroyed.

The second argument concerns the *imagery* used in Scripture to characterise hell, and in particular that of fire. Jesus spoke of 'the fire of hell' (Matthew 5:22; 18:9) and of 'eternal fire' (Matthew 18:8; 25:41), and in the Revelation we read about 'the lake of fire' (20:14-15). It is doubtless because we have all had experience of the acute pain of being burned, that fire is associated in our minds with 'conscious torment'. But the main function of fire is not to cause pain, but to secure destruction, as all the world's incinerators bear witness. Hence the biblical expression 'a consuming fire' and John the Baptist's picture of the Judge 'burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire' (Matthew 3:12, cf. Luke 3:17). The fire itself is termed 'eternal' and 'unquenchable', but it would be very odd if what is thrown into it proves indestructible. Our expectation would be the opposite: it would be consumed for ever, not tormented for ever. Hence it is the smoke (evidence that the fire has done its work) which 'rises for ever and ever' (Revelation 14:11; cf. 19:3).

Four objections are raised to this understanding of 'the lake of fire'.

(1) There is the vivid picture of hell as a place where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched' (Mark 9:48). It is a quotation from the last verse of Isaiah (66:24), where the dead bodies of God's enemies are consigned to the city's rubbish dump to be eaten by maggots and burned. It is not necessary to apply this as Judith did, however, namely that God would take vengeance on the hostile nations, 'to put fire and worms in their flesh' so that 'they shall weep and feel their pain for ever' (Judith 16:17). Jesus' use of Isaiah 66:24 does not mention everlasting pain. What he says is that the worm will not die and the fire will not be quenched. Nor will they - until presumably their work of destruction is done.

(2) At the end of the so-called parable of the sheep and goats, Jesus contrasted 'eternal life' with 'eternal punishment' (Matthew 25:46). Does that not indicate that in hell people endure eternal conscious punishment? No, that is to read into the text what is not necessarily there. What Jesus said is that both the life and the punishment would be eternal, but he did not in that passage define the nature of either. Because he elsewhere spoke of eternal life as a conscious enjoyment of God (John 17:3), it does not follow that eternal punishment must be a conscious experience of pain at the hand of God. On the contrary, although declaring both to be eternal, Jesus is *contrasting* the two destinies: the more unlike they are, the better.

But did not Dives cry out because he was 'in agony in this fire' (Luke 16:23-24,28)? Yes, he did. But we must be cautious in interpreting a parable (if it was that) which speaks of 'Abraham's bosom' as well as hell fire. Moreover, these two states were experienced immediately after Dives and Lazarus died (verses 22-23). The natural interpretation would be that Jesus was referring to the so-called 'intermediate (or interim) state' between death and resurrection. I myself believe that this will be the time (if indeed we shall be aware of the passage of time) when the lost will come to the unimaginably painful realisation of their fate. This is not incompatible, however, with their final annihilation. Similarly, the 'torment' of Revelation 14:10, because it will be experienced 'in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb', seems to refer to the moment of judgement, not to the eternal state. It is not the torment itself but its 'smoke' (symbol of the completed burning) which will be 'for ever and ever'.

(4) But does the Book of Revelation not say that in the lake of fire 'they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever'? Yes, that sentence occurs, but only once (20:10), where it refers not only to the devil, but to 'the beast and the false prophet', just as the noun for 'torment' had been used of 'the harlot Babylon' (Revelation 18:7,10,15), though without the addition of the words 'for ever and ever'. The beast, the false prophet and the harlot, however, are not individual people but symbols of the world in its varied hostility to God. In the nature of the case they cannot experience pain. Nor can 'Death and Hades', which follow them into the lake of fire (20:13). In the vivid imagery of his vision John evidently saw the dragon, the monsters, the harlot, death and hades being thrown into the lake of fire. But the most natural way to understand the reality behind the imagery is that ultimately all enmity and resistance to God will be destroyed. So both the language of destruction and the imagery of fire seem to point to annihilation.

The third argument in favour of the concept of annihilation concerns the biblical vision of *justice*. Fundamental to it is the belief that God will judge people 'according to what they [have] done' (e.g. Revelation 20:12); which implies that the penalty inflicted will be commensurate with the evil done. This principle had been applied in the Jewish law courts, in which penalties were limited to an exact retribution, 'life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot' (e.g. Exodus 21:23-25). Would there not, then, be a serious disproportion between sins consciously committed in time and torment consciously experienced throughout eternity? I do not minimise the gravity of sin as rebellion against God our Creator, and shall return to **it shortly, but I question**

whether 'eternal conscious torment' is compatible with the biblical revelation of divine justice, unless perhaps (as has been argued) the impenitence of the lost also continues throughout eternity.

The fourth and last argument relates to those texts which have been used as the basis for *universalism.* I am not a universalist, and you tell me that you are not either. So there is no need for me to say more than that the hope of final salvation for everybody is a false hope, since it contradicts the recorded warnings of Jesus that the judgement will involve a separation into two opposite but equally eternal destinies. My point here, however, is that the eternal existence of the impenitent in hell would be hard to reconcile with the promises of God's final victory over evil, or with the apparently universalistic texts which speak of Christ drawing all men to himself (John 12:32), and of God uniting all things under Christ's headship (Ephesians 1:10), reconciling all things to himself through Christ (Colossians 1:20), and bringing every knee to bow to Christ and every tongue to confess his lordship (Philippians 2:10-11), so that in the end God will be 'all in all' or 'everything to everybody' (1 Corinthians 15:28).

These texts do not lead me **to universalism,** because of the many others which speak of the terrible and eternal reality of hell. But they do lead me to ask how God can in any meaningful sense be called 'everything to everybody' while an unspecified number of people still continue in rebellion against him and under his judgement. It would be easier to hold together the awful reality of hell and the universal reign of God if hell means destruction and the impenitent are no more.

I am hesitant to have written these things, partly because I have a great respect for longstanding tradition which claims to be a true interpretation of Scripture, and do not lightly set it aside, and partly because the unity of the world-wide Evangelical constituency has always meant much to me. But the issue is too important to suppress, and am grateful to you for challenging me to declare *my* present mind. I do not dogmatise about the position to which I have come. I hold it tentatively. But I do plead for frank dialogue among Evangelicals on the basis of Scripture. I also believe that the ultimate annihilation of the wicked should at least be accepted as a legitimate, biblically founded alternative to their eternal conscious torment.