

PRINCIPLES, PERMANENCE, AND FUTURE DIVINE JUDGMENT: A CASE STUDY IN THEOLOGICAL METHOD

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Numerous expressions have in recent years called attention to the increased complexity of the hermeneutical task. "The two horizons,"¹ "what it meant and what it means,"² "meaning and significance,"³ and "translators and transformers"⁴ are some indication of how formidable is the task of the Biblical and theological interpreter. Much of the difficulty is wrapped up in the fact that we live nearly 1900 years removed from the latest Biblical documents and even further from some others. We live in a world and address persons that are in some ways quite different from persons of Biblical times. For evangelicals this poses a dilemma. On the one hand we are orthodox, wishing to preserve the deposit of truth given once for all to and through the prophets and the apostles. On the other hand we are evangelistic, desiring to bring other persons to this saving faith in Jesus Christ. In order to do this it is important to communicate that gospel in the clearest, most intelligible and most appealing fashion possible.

If on the one hand we concentrate on the most exact possible repetition of the Biblical message, we run the risk that it will not make sense and thus will not be accepted. If on the other hand we emphasize the contemporary situation of the hearers, we incur the possibility of people accepting the message but of its being the wrong message and therefore ineffectual. To make the message both authoritatively Biblical and contemporarily relevant is a difficult but important task. It is this task that especially concerns us here.

There are two areas where evangelicals have traditionally endeavored to do the work of contemporizing. One is in the area of proclamation, broadly speaking. Most preachers do not merely compile Biblical texts into a sermon made up of quotations. They seek to do interpretation, paraphrasing, drawing illustrations from contemporary experience, and sometimes making quite pointed application to the situations of their hearers. Preachers who can do this effectively are very much in demand.

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¹A. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 10-17.

²A. B. Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) 5.

³E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University, 1967) 8.

⁴W. E. Hordern, *New Directions in Theology Today, I: Introduction* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966) 141-154.

The other area is ethics. Here evangelicals have attempted to deal with complex modern problems by drawing upon Biblical teachings. Yet many of those problems were not found or even anticipated in Biblical times. It is therefore necessary to find ways in which the Biblical material can be related to these troublesome issues. If the Bible cannot be applied directly, then we face a dilemma. Either the Bible has nothing to say about these issues, and our Christian faith is irrelevant to modern ethical concerns, or else we relate our faith to the ethical issues in some rather general way—for example, as Christians we are loving, and the loving thing to do here is a particular course of action. But in that case we are engaging in some sort of natural-law ethic, in which event there may be nothing uniquely Christian about our response. So it is desirable to look instead for principles embodied within the precepts and prohibitions, which can then be applied to the pertinent issues at hand.

We are, however, primarily concerned in this paper with systematic theology. The issue that we as evangelicals face here is basically similar to that in the areas of gospel proclamation and ethics. As conservatives we desire and intend to preserve the basic content of the Christian faith. We believe that there has been a "once for all" deliverance of revealed truths by God to his people (Jude 3). At the same time, we wish to be contemporary. We live in a society that has certain forms of thought and expression, and we want to believe that we can use these to conceive of and express our doctrinal convictions today.

Let us note that all of us are engaged in this endeavor of contemporizing to varying degrees, whether self-consciously or unconsciously. How many Christian churches, for example, offer animal sacrifices? While some practice foot-washing, most do not. Some Christians insist upon baptism by immersion, while some others who agree that immersion was the mode employed in the NT hold that it need not be retained as the form of baptism today.

The answer, I would suggest, is here—as in the other two areas—to determine the permanent essence, or the principle of the doctrine, and express it in a contemporary form that will preserve that essence. In this essay we will attempt to expound such a method. Rather than merely elaborating the method in didactic form, however, we will attempt to do two things. (1) We will try to flesh out the statement of procedure by actually applying it to a specific doctrine. We will thus be studying the method inductively. The focus of our attention, however, should not be primarily upon the doctrinal statement that emerges but upon the method employed to formulate that statement of the doctrine. (2) We will attempt to establish the grounds or basis of the method—that is, we will note that what we are doing is Biblically based.

One doctrine that has frequently come under attack is the idea of a future divine judgment, including punishment for sins. One who has dismissed this idea as untenable is Nels F. S. Ferré, who contended that the idea of God presupposed by a doctrine such as hell is inconsistent with the Christian view of God. Is this therefore simply an outmoded way of thinking of God—a product of an age when kings and emperors, as well as slaveholders, had literally the power of life and death over those subject to them?

Ferré believed that there are conflicting traditions in the Biblical teaching regarding the future. There are passages that teach an eternal hell, although

in his judgment it is uncertain whether Jesus himself taught such a doctrine.⁵ Another NT strand of tradition is that the wicked shall perish. They will be annihilated at death.⁶ The third tradition is "the sovereign victory of God in Christ over all, in terms of his own love." Ferré found evidence of this in passages such as 1 Tim 4:10; Phil 2:10–11; Rom 11:32.⁷ His major objection to the idea of an eternal hell, however, was that it conflicts with the idea of the sovereign love of God. Nothing less than the total victory of God's love can be consistently Christian, since it would limit either God's goodness or his power.⁸

If we are to maintain this idea of future divine punishment, we must do several things: (1) determine that this indeed is part of the essence of the doctrine; (2) define precisely the principle that must be maintained; (3) identify what thought forms available to us may be legitimately employed in expressing this (and other) doctrines; (4) articulate this doctrine in such a thought form. Note that we are doing systematic theology. Thus we cannot adopt one conceptual framework for dealing with the doctrine of Christ but another when treating the doctrine of the Church, for example. We are not pragmatists who seize upon whatever serves our purposes, whether consistent with our other ideas or not. Our theology is of a whole.

In the process of carrying out these steps, we also will often examine the various expressions that have been given to this doctrine at various points in the history of the Church. The aim of such an endeavor will not be to form a lowest common denominator to preserve, for the history of the Church does not carry the same type of authority as the redemptive history recorded in the Bible.

How do we determine that the conception of permanent future punishment is of the essence of the doctrine of future things, or of the doctrine of salvation? In another place I have outlined several criteria of permanence, any one or more of which should be regarded as indicators of permanent essence: (1) constancy across cultures; (2) universal setting; (3) a recognized permanent factor as a basis; (4) an indissoluble link with an experience regarded as essential; (5) the final position within progressive revelation.⁹ One of these criteria that appears to me to carry implication of the permanent character of the doctrine of divine judgment and punishment in the life hereafter is the first. We find this doctrine expressed in a variety of settings.

We are familiar with Jesus' teaching about the separation of the sheep from the goats and the consignment of the latter to eternal punishment (Matt 25:46). In the same context Jesus also gave the parable of the talents. Here the worthless servant was thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (v 30). In the parable of the wise and foolish virgins there

⁵N. F. S. Ferré, *The Christian Understanding of God* (New York: Harper, 1951) 244–245.

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 242–243.

⁷*Ibid.* p. 246.

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 246–247.

⁹M. J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 1. 120–124.

is a finality to the closing of the door. When the foolish virgins, who have not prepared adequately, ask for the door to be opened to them the request is denied with the simple and categorical "I tell you the truth, I don't know you" (Matt 25:10). This concept appears elsewhere in Jesus' teaching as well. In the parable of the weeds the owner has the weeds gathered, bundled and burned (Matt 13:30). In the parable of the net, just as the bad fish are thrown away, so shall the angels "come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt 13:49-50).

Paul also gave expression to this concept in several places. He told the Romans: "But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed" (Rom 2:5). Peter also speaks of this future judgment, devoting an entire chapter to it (2 Peter 2). It is particularly informative to observe Peter's statement, for he appears to be employing precisely the same type of argument we are using here. He observes that God has acted in judgment to destroy sin in times past, and thus he will do the same with these false teachers who are now coming among them. Peter appeals to the consignment to Tartarus of the angels who sinned (v 4), the destruction of the ancient world in the flood in Noah's time (v 5), the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (vv 7-8). He then concludes: "If this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment. This is especially true of those who follow the corrupt desire of the sinful nature and despise authority" (vv 9-10). It is apparent from the remainder of the passage that there is a strong future dimension to this judgment and punishment (vv 13, 17, 20, 21).

The OT is not as clear and explicit in its references, but there are numerous statements about God's coming judgment, as we noted in Peter's argument. There do appear to be references to an unending future punishment in passages such as Isa 66:22-24. Concluding a lengthy eschatological passage dealing with the new heavens and new earth, the Lord says of those who have rebelled against him that "their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched."

It would appear from this and from other passages that could be cited that the idea that God will execute judgment and punishment in the future is part of the essence of the Christian doctrine, since this is found in a variety of cultures and times, written and spoken by different authors and speakers.

A second criterion that applies here as well is that of universal setting. In the sheep and goats passage it is apparent that Jesus is talking about the great judgment of the entire world at the second coming. "All the nations will be gathered before him" (v 32). Although this message was undoubtedly given to a limited group at a specific time, it is put into a universal setting. All persons are to be involved.

We see a similar use of the universality criterion in Paul's discussion of judgment in Romans 2. Here he talks about individuals passing judgment on others (v 3) and relates this to God's future judgment. It also is placed in a universal context, for Paul speaks of God giving "to each person according to what he has done" (v 6). This in turn is an allusion to Ps 62:12; Prov 24:12. Those who are self-seeking, reject the truth, and follow evil will receive wrath and anger.

There is another criterion as well that argues for the permanence of the idea of future divine punishment—namely, a recognized permanent factor as a basis. The basis of this judgment is the nature of God. Because God is just, and because he is unchanging, he will judge. It is assumed and argued that what he has been in the past he will continue to be in the future. Thus if A implies B—i.e., the righteousness of God means that there will be judgment and destruction of sin—then because of the constancy of A there will also be the constancy of B.

To be sure, there have been those who have questioned the permanence and constancy of God's nature, or at least the uniformity of Biblical witness to that nature. Marcion, of course, is the primary example who comes to mind. He virtually maintained that there are actually two different gods in the OT and NT. The OT god was a harsh and severe being, while the NT god, the god of Jesus, was a much more loving and forgiving god. But even this factor of divine constancy is found in both Testaments (e.g. Mal 3:6; James 1:17). Thus we conclude that an established permanent doctrinal factor serves as the basis of this conception, and therefore the latter is also permanent.

Peter will be seen to be employing this principle in his argument, and it is also implicit in several other passages that we have examined. In Peter's case he argues from the very nature of the Lord: his patience with persons, but the fact that eventually he will inevitably do what he has promised to do (2 Pet 2:8–9).

One of the bonuses that can be obtained inductively from an examination of the Biblical passages we have cited is the evidence that the criteria we have enumerated have not simply been arbitrarily selected. Rather, they are derived from Biblical usage. For Jesus and the NT authors were themselves engaged in something of the type of contextualization that we have taken as our task. Jesus, for example, indicated that he had not come to "destroy the law, but to fulfill it." Even though progressive revelation was still occurring, there was a continuity between what had come earlier and what was now being said—but with an emphasis upon the final authority of this later expression. Jesus said, "You have heard . . . but I say to you." Thus Jesus can be seen to be using the fifth criterion, the final position within progressive revelation.

The other criterion that we have mentioned but not employed is the fourth: an indissoluble link with an experience regarded as necessary. We may observe Paul employing this argument in another connection in 1 Cor 15:17–19: "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men." So we see the Biblical writers using all of the very criteria that we are employing here.

We may also learn from what the Biblical writers do in stating their presentations, as well as the reasons they give for them. The authors of the gospels were reporting what Jesus said and did. Each was writing to a somewhat different audience, however. As we observe the variations in how they said what they did, and the constancy of what they maintained in common, we will find some guidance for our own task.

On the basis of the foregoing we must resist and reject as inappropriate any contemporary conceptions that would exclude this concept of future divine judg-

ment and punishment. If a conception of the nature of love says that there would have to be a final absolution of the guilt of all, whether repentant or not, then we must find this conception, as well as the broader scheme of ideas that necessitates it, to be untenable. That is one modification of the doctrine that cannot be made without distortion of the Biblical teaching.

We must ask ourselves, however, what is the principle that underlies this doctrine and what is the form of its expression. Just how much of its articulated statement in the Bible is of the essence? What can be safely modified or replaced without jeopardizing the teaching?

When we raise this question we must ask whether the literal details sometimes associated with the doctrine must be maintained. For example, Jesus speaks of future punishment as endless. He also uses the concept of physical flame and unquenchable fire to describe hell. Are these ideas essential to the doctrine and therefore necessary to maintain, or are they parts of the form of expression used in the Biblical account and in later imagery and therefore capable of being replaced with other images? What we are attempting to determine, in other words, is the degree of detail of the pertinent principle.

We therefore need to look closely, first, at the conception of eternity. Is this something that must be attached to the concept, or are we free to relinquish it? Here we need to note several considerations.

A first observation is that the teaching regarding the endlessness of the punishment cuts across several cultural settings in the Bible. While not every mention of this future judgment includes the reference to endlessness, it is significant that such indications are found in widely varying settings. The statements about unquenchable fire and undying worm, for example, are found in both Testaments. Thus we find very similar references in Isa 66:24; Mark 9:47-48 (cf. vv 43, 45).

We also find the application of the adjective *aiōnios* ("everlasting," "forever") to such nouns as fire or burning (Isa 33:14; Jer 17:4; Matt 18:8; 25:41; Jude 7); contempt (Dan 12:2); destruction (2 Thess 1:9); chains (Jude 6); torment (Rev 14:11; 20:10); punishment (Matt 25:46). We need to note, of course, that the adjective *aiōnios* may refer simply to an age rather than having its customary meaning of eternity. It is common practice, however, to give preference to the more common meaning of a word unless there is contextual evidence to suggest something different. In these cases the context seems to suggest nothing different from the common usage.

We may also argue from the parallel usages of "eternal" in referring to punishment and to life that this punishment must be eternal. A salient case of this is found in Matt 25:46: "And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." If *aiōnios* means unending in the case of life, it must mean the same when referring to death.¹⁰ It might, of course, be argued that the idea is of eternal death—that is, of death that is final, so that once dead the person stays permanently dead (i.e., in some sort of state of extinction or unconsciousness). Note, however, that the adjective "eternal" or "everlasting" does not attach to death but to punishment. It is not merely the

¹⁰J. A. T. Robinson, *In the End, God* (New York: Harper, 1968) 131 n. 8.

state of being dead but the punishment that is unending.

But what of the specific idea of a literal flame with physical suffering? It appears that we are not required to hold to the literalness of this specific image of hell described in the Bible, and for several reasons:

The first reason is the lack of uniformity of the Biblical images. It is of course true that the imagery of physical flame and bodily torment is found in the Bible. Other images are also found, however. One of these is the idea of outer darkness (Matt 8:12). To be sure, it may be conceivable that there could somehow be both great darkness and physical flame, but in general it would appear that the two are mutually exclusive, that the presence of physical flame would create illumination. This future punishment is also depicted as torment (Rev 14:10-11), as the pit of the abyss (9:2, 11), as the second death (21:8).

A further reason for not treating this idea of physical flame and suffering as the essence of the doctrine or as part of the underlying principle is that there seems to be no indispensable link in Scripture between this concept of physical suffering and any essential experience. If the point of the experience being maintained is punishment for sins, a sense of anguish or remorse for one's sinfulness, and the finality of one's condition, then there would seem to be several possible ways in which that could be accomplished. This form of the statement can be varied without disturbing or upsetting the essential content.

Nor is there anything particularly final about this form of conception in terms of the point of development in progressive revelation. The contrasting images are apparently at the same basic point in the process. We have no basis to feel that one of these is in any sense the culmination and completion of other ways of viewing the concept.

We therefore conclude that the idea of a future, personal, literal time and state of punishment is required of us and must be maintained in any presentation of the doctrine of the last things. It is personal, fixed and eternal. It does not appear that we are bound, however, to the idea of physical flame. We are free to seek other conceptions to express the essential principle of the doctrine.

What does appear, however, to be the basic underlying issue is more nearly the concept of the absence of God. This appears quite uniformly throughout the several images, both the direct or overt passages and the parables. So, for example, in the parable of the wise and foolish virgins the foolish come when the door has been closed, and they are therefore excluded (Matt 25:10-12). Later in the chapter, when the "goats" are sent away, they are removed from the Lord's presence forever. In the story (parable?) of Lazarus and the rich man, Lazarus is carried to paradise, and the chasm between the two is so fixed and immense that no one can go from one to the other. To be sure, this would appear to be more a picture of the intermediate state than of the final state, but there is enough continuity between the two states that this feature of the story is pertinent to our point of consideration. There is also Jesus' statement: "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers" (Matt 7:23).

The nature of sin and its effects is also of importance to us. Sin is a rejection of God, a failure to believe him, a falling short of his standard. It has the effect of separating one from God. If hell is the finalization (both temporally and qualitatively) of sin and its effects, then it would appear to be the ultimate form of this separation.

What makes hell what it is, then, is the absence of God's favorable presence. If human beings have been created for fellowship with God, and if God is the most complete fulfillment of the person, then hell consists of deprivation of one's real source of being and satisfaction. This is what produces the sense of agony. We are primarily spiritual beings. That which would most fully satisfy the spiritual nature is not available to the person in hell. This characteristic of hell is also discerned from the contrast with heaven. The dominant feature of heaven is the presence of God. The primary activity of heaven is worship and adoration of God and fellowship with him. As the antithesis of heaven, hell's primary feature is the absence of God.

If what we have said is correct, we must finally find an imagery that will adequately convey to our age the central idea contained within the concept of hell. There are two ideas that I believe will help to express this.

One of these is the idea of loneliness. We live in an age in which there is a strong concern for and focus upon interpersonal relationships. This sense of need and importance is in part, however, a result of the depersonalization and estrangement that many feel. In our world many have no one to whom they are really close, who cares for them unconditionally, and who shares with them and with whom they can share. All of us have at one time or another experienced loneliness and emptiness from having no other human being care for us. This sense of loneliness, when amplified by knowing that this condition will be unending and unrelieved, and by being separated from the most important Person in all of the universe, gives a bit of feeling for what the essential experience of hell is like. The bereaved person who has just lost a loved one, or the lover who has been rejected by the most beloved, know this better at that moment than do most of us in our experience.

There is another experience fairly common in our world of today. We live in a time that focuses heavily upon achievement. We have a potential and are expected to live up to it. Sometimes a wrong decision made at one juncture of life destroys forever the possibility the person had. This sense of failure to experience and achieve one's potential, to fulfill one's destiny as it were, plagues many persons. By multiplying this many times over, one could conceive of a very serious falling short of one's essence. Imagine a creature that could have become human if it had chosen correctly but that wasted its opportunity and now knows it. What an awful sense of lack, failure and regret such a being would experience!

These two images—the sense of loneliness, and the sense of failure to fulfill one's potential—express powerfully something of what hell is like. Being separated from God, knowing that one will not and cannot have that for which one was designed and created and that this situation will always be the case, is of the very essence of hell.

To summarize: We have applied the method of contemporizing the Christian faith to the doctrine of future divine judgment and punishment. We have observed that this is an indispensable part of the Christian faith, and that it is essential to maintain the idea of its being eternal. The determination of this permanence was made by the use of criteria that Jesus and the Biblical writers

also employ, and it includes the concept of eternity. The image of physical flame, however, is part of the form of expression and expresses an idea of anguish that may be better conveyed in our time by the use of such concepts as loneliness and failure to attain one's potential.