

Part 1: The Traditional Doctrine and Why We Dislike It

Notes and Quotations from Other Sources:

- A. I've written this book for all those, everywhere, who have heard some version of the Jesus story that caused their pulse rate to rise, their stomach to churn, and their heart to utter those resolute words, "I would never be a part of that."<sup>1</sup>
- B. A staggering number of people have been taught that a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven, while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chance for anything better. It's been clearly communicated to many that this belief is a central truth of the Christian faith and to reject it is, in essence, to reject Jesus. This is misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus's message of love, peace, forgiveness and joy that our world desperately needs to hear.<sup>2</sup>

C. From the *Westminster Larger Catechism*:

Question 29: What are the punishments of sin in the world to come?

Answer: The punishments of sin in the world to come, are everlasting separation from the comfortable presence of God, and most grievous torments in soul and body, without intermission, in hell fire forever.<sup>3</sup>

- D. 1033 ... To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from him for ever [sic] by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called "hell."

1034 Jesus often speaks of "Gehenna" of "the unquenchable fire" reserved for those who to the end of their lives refuse to believe and be converted, where both soul and body can be lost. Jesus solemnly proclaims that he "will send his angels, and they will gather . . . all evil doers, and throw them into the furnace of fire," and that he will pronounce the condemnation: "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire!"

1035 The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity. Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into

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<sup>1</sup> Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, New York, HarperCollins e-books, 2011, p.4

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pp.4-5

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://www.reformed.org/documents/larger1.html>  
Accessed 11/21/2011.

hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, "eternal fire." The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs.

1036 The affirmations of Sacred Scripture and the teachings of the Church on the subject of hell are a call to the responsibility incumbent upon man to make use of his freedom in view of his eternal destiny. They are at the same time an urgent call to conversion: "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few."<sup>4</sup>

- E. Why Hell? many people ask. Why does God condemn people to eternal damnation? How can the image of God the Judge be reconciled with the New Testament message of God as love? St Isaac the Syrian answers these questions in the following way: there is no person who would be deprived of God's love, and there is no place which would be devoid of it; everyone who deliberately chooses evil instead of good deprives himself of God's mercy. The very same Divine love which is a source of bliss and consolation for the righteous in Paradise becomes a source of torment for sinners, as they cannot participate in it and they are outside of it.

It is therefore not God Who mercilessly prepares torments for a person, but rather the person himself who chooses evil and then suffers from its consequences. There are people who deliberately refuse to follow the way of love, who do evil and harm to their neighbours: these are the ones who will be unable to reconcile themselves with the Supreme Love when they encounter it face to face. Someone who is outside of love during his earthly life will not find a way to be inside it when he departs from the body. He will find himself in 'the valley of the shadow of death' (Ps.23:4), 'the darkness' and 'the land of forgetfulness' (Ps.88:12), of which the psalms speak. Jesus called this place, or rather this condition of the soul after death, 'the outer darkness' (Matt.22:13) and 'the Hell of fire' (Matt.5:22).<sup>5</sup>

- F. ... [O]ne cannot preach what the tradition has said about literal hellfire, because it is such a morally and judicially intolerable notion ... The fact that Augustine and Edwards could have cauterized their consciences into believing it should make no difference at all to us ... One simply has to admit that tradition contains a number of obnoxious things that need changing; so let us be bold to change them.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church, Second Edition, Revised in Accordance with the Official Latin Text Promulgated by Pope John Paul II*, New York, Doubleday, 1994, pp.292-293

<sup>5</sup> <http://orthodoxeurope.org/page/10/1.aspx#53> (accessed 1/2/2012)

<sup>6</sup> Clark H. Pinnock in *Four Views on Hell*, Counterpoints Series; Stanley N. Gundry, series editor; William Crockett, General Editor; Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1996; Epub edition, June 2010; p.74

G. Timothy Keller in *The Reason for God*, Chapter 5: How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?

1. A God of judgment simply can't exist.
2. A God of judgment can't be a God of love.
3. A loving God would not allow Hell.
4. A belief in Hell inevitably leads to a judgmental attitude toward others.
5. Belief in a loving God is at the core of all world religions.<sup>7</sup>

H. The sentimental secularism of modern Western culture, with its exalted optimism about human nature, its shrunken idea of God, and its skepticism as to whether personal morality really matters—in other words, its decay of conscience—makes it hard for Christians to take the reality of hell seriously.<sup>8</sup>

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I. Notes on the use of the word *tradition* in the Bible and when speaking about Christian doctrine:

- **Tradition** in the New Testament is a neutral term and can be understood in two contrasting ways.
  - Positively: 1 Cor 11:2; 2 Thess 2:15, 3:6
  - Negatively, Matt 15:1-6, Col 2:8
- When speaking of Christian doctrine the same distinction comes into play.

1. There are “traditional” doctrines of Christianity such as:

- a) the Trinity,
- b) dual-nature Christology (the human-divine dual nature of Jesus)

- It is sometimes argued that these doctrines are not explicitly or straightforwardly taught in Scripture, yet the vast majority of Christians believe them and have done so for a long time.
- This is because a very long time ago the ideas were extensively argued and conclusions were drawn about what Scripture actually says and implies. No further questioning is really needed or we will just be rehashing the same old arguments.

2. There are also doctrines we might refer to as “traditions of men.” These do not come from discussions about what the Bible actually teaches, but are superimposed on a Christian framework from outside of it. These might include Purgatory or other elements of Roman Catholic dogma, ideas from the book of Mormon, etc.

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<sup>7</sup> Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, New York, Dutton, 2008, pp.68-83

<sup>8</sup> J.I. Packer, “Hell” in *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs*; Wheaton, Tyndale House, 1993, electronic version

- False teaching often comes into the church in the form of Tradition Type 2.
- It can also come into the church by means of denying Tradition Type 1.

Examples:

- The Trinity is not really up for grabs. It takes work to understand it out of the Bible, and even more work to teach it well, but it is there if we are careful to dig it out properly. It is a belief of Tradition Type 1.
- If we lose the idea of Purgatory or anything from the Book of Mormon that contradicts Scripture, we have not lost anything. It was never needed to begin with. It is a belief of Tradition Type 2.
- In the current debates or about the doctrine of hell:
  - All parties theoretically submit to biblical authority.
  - All parties claim to use the Bible in their teaching and forming of doctrine.
  - The debate can be seen as a question: Is a traditional doctrine of Tradition Type 1 or Tradition Type 2?
    - Have we misunderstood the Bible all along and, therefore, spent centuries needlessly imposing a doctrine upon Christian which the Bible does not demand?
    - Or is the standard understanding of Hell more of an argument that was already settled long ago. Are those who contradict the traditional approach just digging up an old argument the way Jehovah's Witnesses dig up 1600 or 1700 year-old arguments about the Trinity when denying the Deity of Christ?
    - Our answer to this question will play a huge role in our take on the whole discussion.
      - If Hell is a doctrine of Tradition Type 1, we will see it as something we need to carefully learn and understand, even if it is difficult. We will not view it with much suspicion or mistrust, but will rather approach it with a something like a sense of Holy awe.
      - If Hell is a doctrine of Tradition Type 2, we will question it deeply feeling the church has perhaps been radically wrong. We will view it as something that either unwitting or potentially evil men have foisted upon us to our hurt.
    - Our answer will determine our attitude toward the doctrine and may dictate the side we take in the discussions or debates. Our answer to this question is of great importance.