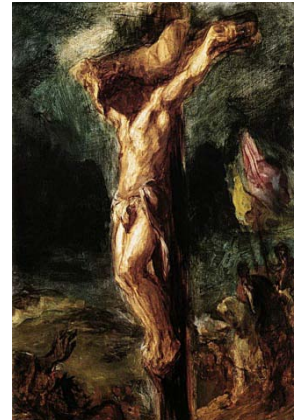


Cross Purposes: Atonement, Death and the Fate of the Wicked

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August 12, 2012

www.rethinkinghell.com



Conditionalists believe that “the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23; emphasis added). Those who do not believe in him will not have eternal life, and will instead perish (John 3:16). After rising from their first death to be judged, they will be sentenced to the second death (Revelation 20:14). Traditionalists, on the other hand, say the body that rises “dies not again,”¹ confessing that “the evil ones ... shall be made immortal” (emphasis added).²

Their language is unambiguous: “Every human being ever born *lives forever*;”³ “everybody *lives forever*;”⁴ the unsaved “will continue *living* in a state with a low quality of life.”⁵

Adherents to both views argue that the punishment Jesus Christ bore on the cross, in place of those who believe in him, poses a real challenge to their opponents’ doctrine. Conditionalists point out that Jesus was indeed executed, not eternally tormented. Traditionalists, however, point out Christ wasn’t annihilated, that he did not cease to exist.

Leon Morris writes, “The atonement is the crucial doctrine of the faith. Unless we are right here it matters little, or so it seems to me, what we are like elsewhere.”⁶ If one’s view of final punishment logically leads to an unbiblical understanding of the atonement, it must be rejected. Contrary to the claims of traditionalists, it is often they, not conditionalists, whose eschatology clashes with what the Bible reveals about the cross.

Death, not eternal torment.

These words from the pen of traditionalist Robert Peterson reveal simultaneously the significant relevance of the cross when it comes to the debate over final punishment as well as the basis for our challenge to traditionalists: “The cross sheds light on the fate of the wicked, because on the cross the sinless Son of God suffered that fate.”⁷ Conditionalists agree, but we claim that this light shines squarely upon our view of final punishment. For example, David Reagan asks himself, “What do you consider to be the single most powerful argument against the traditional concept of eternal torment in Hell?” His answer:

The fact that the Bible says that Jesus paid the price for our sins (Isaiah 53:5, Galatians 1:4, Hebrews 1:3 and 1 Peter 2:24). What was that price? It was extreme suffering followed by death. It was not eternal torment. Unrepentant sinners will therefore experience what Jesus experienced: suffering and death (the “Second Death”).⁸

Edward Fudge concurs, putting the challenge even more strongly when he insists that it is traditionalists who “cannot allow the death of Jesus to teach anything about the nature of the punishment awaiting the lost.”⁹ Fudge argues that we conditionalists can allow the death of Jesus to do that:

The simple truth is that Jesus *died*; he was not *tortured forever*. Jesus’ death for sinners does provide a window into the final judgment awaiting the lost. But the view we see through that window is one of suffering that ends in death—not one of everlasting conscious torment. Jesus suffered and died because he was bearing the sin of others. Unlike sinners in hell, he rose again because his own life was perfectly pleasing to the Father. It was “impossible for death to keep its hold” on the perfectly obedient Son of God (*Acts 2:24*). The apostle Paul literally says that Jesus died “because of” our sin and that he rose again “because of” our justification (*Rom 4:25 NASB*).¹⁰

Traditionalists seemingly acknowledge that it was in his death that Christ served as the penal substitute that diverts the just wrath of God from his people. Wayne Grudem writes that “Christ’s death was ‘penal’ in that he bore a penalty when he died. His death was also a ‘substitution’ in that he was a substitute for us when he died ... As our representative, he took the penalty that we deserve.”¹¹ Robert Peterson explains that “Scripture presents Christ in his death as making a substitutionary atonement for his people (*Rom 3:25-26; Gal 3:13; Col 2:13-14*). This means he died in their place and bore the punishment that they deserved.”¹² John Blanchard says, “In his death, Jesus took the place of sinners and became a propitiation on their behalf.”¹³

How can this be? How can Peterson, Grudem, Blanchard and other traditionalists affirm on the one hand that by his death Jesus suffered the fate deserved by his people, and on the other hand that what we deserve is an eternity of torment in bodies and souls which never die?

The equivalent of eternal punishment?

The traditionalist resolution to this seeming inconsistency is to appeal to the hypostatic union of Christ’s divine and human natures. Peterson explains,

He suffered the equivalent of eternal punishment ... When Jesus endured the wrath due sinful humanity, it was as the incarnate God-man; when by virtue of his human nature he suffered separation from his Father’s love, it was as the eternal Son of God who had become human ... because of the infinite dignity of Christ’s person, his sufferings, though finite in duration, were of infinite weight on the scales of divine justice (much as his righteousness, though displayed during his incarnation over a finite period, is of infinite weight). As God incarnate, Jesus was capable of

suffering in six hours on the cross what we can suffer only over an infinite period of time.¹⁴

Grudem puts it this way:

Jesus was able to bear all the wrath of God against our sin and to bear it to the end. No mere man could ever have done this, but by virtue of the union of divine and human natures in himself, Jesus was able to bear all the wrath of God against sin and bear it to the end...when Christ's sufferings at last came to an end on the cross, it showed that he had borne the full measure of God's wrath against sin and there was no penalty left to pay.¹⁵

Larry Dixon sums it up, writing, "The Cross is God's infinite response to man's sin. Christ exhausts the punishment due to sinners because he himself was the infinite and eternal God."¹⁶ According to many traditionalists, then, the finite duration of Jesus' suffering and anguish is the equivalent of the eternity of agony awaiting unbelievers on account of His divine nature.

This demonstrates that, when many traditionalists say that Christ died in the place of sinners, what they really *mean* is that he *suffered pain* in their place. At best, they are simply unaware of the inconsistency. At worst, this is disingenuous doublespeak that doesn't actually answer the conditionalist challenge. Either way, when used to defend the traditional view of final punishment, this reasoning renders the Lord's death an afterthought at best.

Minimizing His death

In fact, I think this traditionalist reasoning skirts dangerously the border of heresy. Again, in their appeal to the dual natures of Christ, Peterson and Grudem identify his suffering leading up to his death as that which propitiates God's wrath, and it is that suffering, finite in duration, which is the equivalent of the everlasting suffering awaiting the unsaved. Peterson explains in more detail:

The traditional understanding of the punishment of hell includes two elements: separation from God (*poena damni*, the punishment of the damned) and the positive infliction of torments in body and soul (*poena sensus*, the punishment of sense). Jesus suffered the punishment of hell for sinners. That he endured separation from the Father's love is evidenced by his cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mat 27:46). On Calvary's cross Jesus also endured God's wrath. In Gethsemane Jesus was deeply grieved at the prospect of drinking the cup of God's wrath (Jer 25:15). This is why he thrice asked the Father, "If it is possible, may this cup be taken from me" (Mat 26:39; compare Mat 26:42, 44). On the cross, then, the Son of God suffered the pains of hell: separation from God and the positive infliction of torments in body and soul.¹⁷

We see, then, that according to the traditional view of hell, Jesus bore the punishment of hell—separation from God and infliction of suffering—completely on the cross *up until his life left him*. This flatly contradicts the biblical testimony which consistently identifies Christ’s *death* as primarily that which he bore on behalf of the elect. Paul tells the Romans that “at the right time Christ *died* for the ungodly,” and that “God demonstrates his own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ *died* for us” (Romans 5:6, 8). Later he tells them, “Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ *died*” (Romans 14:15; compare with 1 Corinthians 8:11).

Furthermore, the death that redeems is particularly physical death, notably a sort of death traditionalists deny will be experienced by the unsaved in hell. Paul calls this the gospel “by which also you are saved” in his first letter to the Corinthians, writing, “I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ *died* for our sins according to the scriptures, and that he was *buried*, and that he was *raised* on the third day” (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). The language of burial and resurrection clearly indicates that the death of Jesus’ body is in view, language Paul also uses in his second letter to the Corinthians when he writes of “Him who *died* and *rose* again on their behalf” (2 Corinthians 5:15). Peter likewise says, “Christ also *died* for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that he might bring us to God, having been put to *death* in the *flesh*” (1 Peter 3:18). The author of Hebrews writes, “we have been sanctified through the offering of the *body* of Jesus Christ once for all” (Hebrews 10:10).

By focusing so heavily on Christ’s pain, then, traditionalists minimize the propitiatory importance of his death, which Scripture identifies as being of *utmost* importance. But the problem doesn’t end there. It seems to me that the traditional view doesn’t just minimize the importance of Christ’s death, it renders his death irrelevant. If the finite duration of Jesus’ suffering is the substitutionary equivalent to the eternity of suffering awaiting the risen, undying wicked, *why did he go on to die?* If in his suffering the Lord bore the full wrath of God, what penalty was left to pay with his death? This is why I dare to suggest that the traditional view of hell leads to a view of the atonement that skirts dangerously close to heresy: it ultimately reduces the salvific value of Christ’s death to zero, rendering it unnecessary and arbitrary.

By His stripes we are healed

But what about Peterson’s claim that the punishment of hell, which Jesus bore, consists (apparently exclusively) in separation from God and in pain and suffering? As to separation from God, Jesus did ask, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). As to pain and suffering, Isaiah says that “he was pierced for our transgression” and that “by his scourging we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5). The author of Hebrews writes that “he learned obedience from the things which he suffered” (Hebrews 5:8). Peter says “Christ also suffered for you” and “while suffering, he uttered no threats” (1 Peter 2:21,

23). Jesus said, “Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer” (Luke 24:46). Don’t these testify to the separation and suffering Jesus experienced on our behalf *before* he died?

To a certain extent, this is true, but this serves as no challenge to conditionalism. Read the words of conditionalists Reagan and Fudge again; both affirm that final punishment consists in suffering *and* death. Neither does this challenge the contention that the primary element of the atonement was Christ’s bodily death. We looked at texts from multiple authors to multiple audiences which consistently emphasize that Christ *died* for us, and did we not see Paul identifying the death of Jesus as being of first importance, going so far as to call it the gospel that saves us? Suffering, though an element of the atonement, is not the primary element.

But the reality is that even in those contexts in which we’re told of the suffering and separation from God experienced by Christ, that experience is an element of his *death*. They do not stand alone. Yes, he asked if his god had forsaken him, quoting a psalm whose author says, “You lay me in the dust of death” (Psalm 22:15). Yes, he was pierced and scourged for us, but he also “poured out himself to death” (Isaiah 53:12). Yes, he learned to be obedient by his suffering, “obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:8). Yes, he suffered for us, and while suffering did not utter threats, in the context of “having been put to death in the flesh” (1 Peter 3:18). Yes, it was written that the Christ would suffer, “and rise again from the dead the third day” (Luke 24:46).

The pain, anguish, suffering and separation experienced by the Lord on our behalf was not atoning in and of itself. His experience on the cross *while alive* did not stand alone from the death in which it culminated. Christ suffered, to be sure, but he suffered as part of the process of being executed; so, too, will the risen wicked suffer as part of the process of being executed. But it was primarily the result of Jesus’ execution that atoned for sin.

Put to death in the flesh

In the future we’ll look at the reverse challenge from traditionalists who insist that conditionalism must be false because either Christ wasn’t annihilated or because of conditionalism’s allegedly heretical Christological implications. In the meantime, the conditionalist challenge remains strong and unanswered. Traditionalists *say* that Jesus died for our sins, but what they *mean* is that he suffered pain *leading up to his death*, a finite amount of pain qualifying as an eternity of pain by virtue of the union of his natures. This contradicts the biblical testimony that he was “put to death in the flesh” on our behalf, and renders his bodily death an afterthought. Conditionalists, on the other hand, affirm that the wages of sin is death, that Christ died so that ultimately the elect will not, and that death actually does await unbelievers after rising to judgment.

In order to affirm the biblical view of the atonement, traditionalists must acknowledge that the death of Jesus was, at the very least, one element of the atonement, as Robert Morey

does when he lists it as the third aspect to the punishment Jesus bore, following the separation and suffering He experienced.¹⁸ If they do so, however, they lose the ability to object to conditionalism on the grounds that the atonement didn't consist in annihilation, for neither do they believe that the bodies of the risen wicked will die like Jesus' did. In other words, they don't believe the punishment Jesus bore matches the punishment awaiting unbelievers, so they can't challenge us on that basis. And because traditionalists don't believe the bodies of the risen wicked will ever die, their view of eternal punishment is at the very least considerably more unlike the substitutionary death of Christ than ours. I conclude with the words of Robert Taylor:

Scripture is explicit as to the penalty Jesus paid for the forgiveness of our sins. "When I see the blood, I will pass over you," says the Lord (Ex. 12:13). Read the account of the Day of Atonement in Leviticus chapter 16, or that of the Passover in Exodus chapter 12, or the Good News of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. The story is the same; redemption is by blood. It is Christ's sacrificial death and His death alone that paid for the sins of the world.¹⁹

Notes:

¹ Gill, J. *A Body of Doctrinal Divinity: Or a System of Evangelical Truths* (The Baptist Standard Bearer, Inc., 2001), 679.↵

² The Belgic Confession, Article 37.
<http://www.reformed.org/documents/BelgicConfession.html>↵

³ MacArthur, J. "The Answer to Life's Greatest Question, Part 1."
<http://www.gty.org/resources/print/sermons/42-141>↵

⁴ Koukl, G. (Host). (2011, June 5). "Christopher Morgan on Hell and Inclusivism." *Stand to Reason* [radio]. 1:09:25. <http://www.strcast2.org/podcast/weekly/060511.mp3>.↵

⁵ Habermas, G. and Moreland, J.P. *Immortality: The Other Side of Death* (Thomas Nelson, 1992), 173.↵

⁶ Morris, L. *The Cross in the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1999), 5.↵

⁷ Peterson, R. *Hell On Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment* (Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995), 216.↵

⁸ Reagan, D. *Eternity: Heaven or Hell?* (Lamb & Lion Ministries, 2010), 117.↵

⁹ Peterson, Robert A.; Fudge, Edward W. (2010-09-15). *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical & Theological Dialogue* (pp. 204-205). InterVarsity – Kindle Edition.↵

- ¹⁰. Ibid.↵
- ¹¹. Grudem, W. *Systematic Theology* (InterVarsity, 1994), 579.↵
- ¹². Peterson. *Two Views*. p. 175.↵
- ¹³. Blanchard, J. *Whatever Happened to Hell?* (Crossway Books, 1995), 110.↵
- ¹⁴. Peterson. *Two Views*. p. 175.↵
- ¹⁵. Grudem. *Systematic Theology*. p. 578.↵