

## **The Road from Hell... with the best of intentions**

In our modern world, few among the academic elite still believe in hell. Soren Kierkegaard (1813-55), who tasted the depth of despair, once wrote: "I believe that we all will be saved." An increasing number of "self-confessed" evangelicals now espouse some form of universalism or annihilationism . They claim that God's love is so overwhelming that there will be no one left to suffer in hell. God will triumph in the end. Canadian theologian Clark Pinnock considers "the concept of hell as endless torment in body and mind an outrageous doctrine, a theological and moral enormity, a bad doctrine of the tradition which needs to be changed." He even charges that it makes "God into a blood-thirsty monster who maintains an everlasting Auschwitz for victims whom he does not even allow to die." Madeleine L'Engle writes in *The Irrational Season*, "I cannot believe that God wants punishment to go on interminably any more than does a loving parent. The entire purpose of loving punishment is to teach, and it lasts only as long as needed for the lesson. And the lesson is always love." And avant garde Reformed theologians also seek to soft-pedal the doctrine of everlasting punishment.

Jan Bonda, a retired pastor in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, promotes his own version of universalism. He believes that the judgment of the godless will end. He states, "All who are lost will one day come to conversion and return to the Father, the God of love; together with the church they will kneel and join in their hymn of praise for the salvation he extends to all in the name of Jesus."

In his foreword to *The One-Purpose God*, a volume which is subtitled, *An Answer to the Doctrine of Eternal Punishment*, retired Christian Reformed minister Sierd Woudstra notes that Bonda was always troubled with the Christian faith as formulated in the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dort, which seem "so ready to consign the majority of the human race to eternal damnation." He believes that these three creeds are seriously flawed. Woudstra himself never had peace with the thought that the majority of folk who have never been Christian will be lost forever. He is "buoyed by the fact that in recent years the awareness has grown stronger in evangelical circles that it is quite unthinkable that the God we meet in Jesus Christ would send the majority of the human race to a bleak, Christless eternity." Woudstra agrees with Bonda's claim that this teaching is unbiblical. Bonda reconfirmed his belief that "it cannot be true that the masses of the world will perish forever." No wonder that Woudstra found Bonda's book "exciting," "comforting," and "challenging."

According to Bonda, eternal punishment has as its only one purpose an obedient return to the God of love. The wrath of God will burn without ceasing until His purpose is accomplished. He asserts that there is nowhere in Scripture a "statement that tells us that God wants those who are punished to suffer without end – that is not the purpose for which God created humans!"

God does not have in mind the destruction of evil doers but their redemption and healing. Bonda argues that there is enough evidence in Scripture to show that

God will achieve His goal of wanting to save most, perhaps even all. He claims that Jesus when He referred to final judgment meant that this judgment would have an end. He never intended that judgment would go on forever and ever. He says that in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke -16: 19-31) the rich man in spite of his lostness, remains a child of Abraham!" However, Bonda bases his argument mainly on the exegesis of Romans. A major section of the book (Chapter III-VIII) consists, in particular, of an exposition of Paul's teaching on the central place of Israel as God's chosen vessel to save the world. He mentions the Messianic Jews with appreciation; although he faults them for not rejecting "the doctrine of eternal punishment as unbiblical since all Israel will be saved." And he contends that the Reformed doctrine of original sin cannot be based on Paul's teachings. He argues that when Paul speaks about "God's reckoning" of sins, he refers to sins committed by "the individual himself and does not speak in terms of hereditary sin as a guilt of the first human, which is 'reckoned' as the sin of all his posterity." He argues that the proper reading of the Biblical texts shows that God's declared purpose in Christ is that all be believers that the doctrine of saved and God's unwavering determination will bring it to pass. He says that the answer to the doctrine of eternal punishment is found in God's law, "the single command of love, given to all human beings."

The doctrine of eternal punishment clashes with this commandment. The bottom line is "the one law that God gave humanity: that all of them, without exception, shall love him and their neighbors with all their heart. This eliminates the possibility that he might have another purpose for part of humanity." Bonda's sharpest break with traditional Reformed theology is his view of salvation after death. He claims that God will even justify the dead through faith. He writes, "Considering that most people died without having come to faith in Christ, this must mean that they will come to believe at some time after death."

Bonda charges that the image of God in the Reformed tradition is "terrifying." He alleges that eternal damnation and the traditional doctrine of election were first taught by the church father Augustine (354-430). And he asserts that Augustine wanted to explain to believers how it makes sense that many will be lost. John Calvin was the truest reproduction of Augustine's "grim image of God." Bonda speaks, therefore, about the "harsh Calvinist image of God." Furthermore, he incriminates that the theologian who succeeds in convincing believers that the eternal punishment does not lead to a terrifying image of God has yet to arise. Hence, he can state in a footnote that Dr. K.Schilders *Wat is hel?* (1932) "is the most depressing book that I have read in the last fifty years." I must admit that I did find Schilder's work rather depressing myself. However, I have never read a book on the subject that brings cheer. Schilder's work, though wordy and complex in thought, maintains the historic Reformed position and is thoroughly Scriptural.

What does Bonda's view do for missions? Woudstra says that Bonda fears that his views might conceivably lead to a weakening of the church's sense of calling

to go and make disciples of all, since presumably all will eventually make it through the pearly gates anyway. According to Bonda, his view encourages missions. He says that the harvest does not get saved automatically; it is not brought in without workers. And the ministry of the Church will not be "completed until all humanity has been saved."

But I don't see how Bonda's version of universalism will ever encourage Christians to forsake all and go abroad to proclaim the Gospel! If salvation is possible even after an unbeliever has died, I can't see the need for missions. I am convinced that universalism is the death knell of all missions and is undercutting the work of evangelism today.

In support of his view of universalism, Bonda refers to Origen (185-254) as one who refused to believe in eternal punishment. Origen was a brilliant theologian, who is perhaps best remembered as the father of universalism, and who continues to influence theologians to this day, including Bonda. His systematic theology, *On First Principles*, provides a framework for his view of hell as remedial punishment. He spoke of the ultimate restitution of all things, including the salvation of Satan. All the penalties the sinners deserve will be paid eventually, for "the goodness of God through Christ will restore his entire creation to one end, even his enemies being conquered and subdued." In other words, Origen concluded that all that is lost will be returned to God. "The great final destiny, which Origen saw shining for all humanity and all of creation: God – the God of love-would be all in all."

How valid is an appeal to Origen? Origen's universalism was not the result of painstaking study of the Scriptures. His theology betrays the influence of the Greek philosopher Plato. The Church in the sixth century condemned his views as heresy. His teachings were also repudiated by John Calvin. Modern scholarship shows that Origen was a brilliant and complex but not a consistent thinker. In his essay, *Universal Salvation in Origen and Maximus*, Professor Frederick W. Norris points out that Origen insists more than once that the Christian faith demands the eternal punishment of evil and the eternal reward of the good. Norris ventures the idea that popular sources on Origen could contain an unfair presentation of his thought.

Bonda also appears to be influenced by Karl Barth (1886-1968). On the one hand Barth repeatedly denied the charge of universalism. On the other hand the salvation of all men and women seems to be the result of his view of election. For Barth the true and sole object of election is Jesus Christ Himself. Those whom God elects He elects "in Him." The Church has the task to proclaim to each person that he is elect because Christ Himself has known rejection. According to Barth, the content of the Gospel proclamation is:

*In Christ thou, too, art not rejected – for He has borne thy rejection – but elected. A decision has been made, in Jesus Christ, concerning the*

*futility of thy desire and attempt to live that life; and it has been decided that thou canst live only this other life.*

When a theologian opens the Bible, he must listen to its message. He cannot pick and choose and take out what he dislikes. In his attempt to explain away the doctrine of everlasting punishment Bonda reads into the Bible what is not there. If we really want to show compassion to unbelievers, we should be honest with them and tell them the simple fact that only those who trust Jesus Christ will be saved; and only those who do not believe in Him will be lost. Bonda overlooks the radical antithetical nature of the Gospel message. The right stands over against the wrong; the good over against the evil. Jesus Christ is the Truth (John 14:6); Satan is the Father of lies (John 8:44). Heaven is the abode of angels and the perfected saints; hell exists by the virtue of God on account of the fall of Satan and his angels.

The Biblical images of hell are graphic. Hell is the place where "their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:48). It is described as the place of outer darkness, characterized by "weeping and gnashing to teeth" (Matt.8:12). The parallelism in Matthew 25:46, "Then they (the goats) will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life," affirms the eternal nature of hell. Hell will never be emptied. The punishment is received, but the results are everlasting. Hell exists because God views men as fallen kings. We are nobility. God holds us responsible for our actions. Man has to bear the consequences of his rejection of God. The Scripture lesson is plain: "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him" (John 3:36). Hell is a real and permanent place reserved for the unregenerate at enmity with God. Its inmates hate God and are full of sin. They only love themselves and have no desire to repent.

In *The Great Divorce*, C.S.Lewis gives this striking description of the awesome nature of hell:

*There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, "Thy will be done, " and those to whom God says, in the end, "Thy will be done. "All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no hell.*

God does not have to save anyone. All deserve God's wrath. Salvation begins with God's sovereign choice of us (John 1:11-13; cf. James 1:18). God chose His people in Christ before the creation of the world. Their names are written in the book of life (Phil.4:3; cf.Heb.12:23). Our Lord laid down His life for His sheep (John 10:15). In Romans 8:28-30, the election and calling of God are put in carefully expressed succession of acts. Therefore, the doctrine of election is not an Augustinian invention or a doctrine peculiarly to Calvin, it is rooted in Scripture. As Dr. Loraine Boettner put it in *The Reformed Doctrine of*

*Predestination*, "When all mankind might have been punished, how can God be charged with injustice if He punishes only a part of them?" Reformed Christians believe in the existence of hell because they believe in Christ. If there is no sin and no eternal punishment, Christ's death on the cross cannot be explained. The Bible does not speak about eternal punishment apart from the gospel of reconciliation. God poured out His wrath upon His Son on the cross. The cross is also a marvelous demonstration of God's love (John 3:16).

The growing popularity of various forms of universalism reflects the influence of our pluralistic times. It is becoming harder and harder to be faithful to the Scriptures and the Reformed Confessions. If we would adopt Bonda's view, the severity of God's warnings and the eternal punishment as a consequence for all untouched by the Gospel would be silenced. I concur with the late missiologist Lesslie Newbigin: "It is one of the weaknesses of a great deal of contemporary Christianity that we do not speak of the last judgment and of the possibility of being finally lost."

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