

Four Views on Hell. Edited by William Crockett,
Zondervan Publishing House, Academic and Professional Books,
Grand Rapids, Mich., 1992. Softcover, 190 pp.

Is hell freezing over? The idea of irreversible punishment which is associated with hell provokes strong resistance. This doctrine has been discredited, considered outmoded or sub-Christian. The Russian theologian Berdyaev rightly diagnosed the spiritual sickness of our time: "It is remarkable how little people think about hell or trouble about it. This is the most striking evidence of human frivolity." Even evangelicals tend to give this doctrine the silent treatment. Yet the doctrine of hell is plainly taught in Scripture.

What is hell? As the title suggests, this book consists of four views representing different perspectives on the subject. John F. Walvoord, chancellor of Dallas Theological Seminary, argues that the fire of eternal punishment is literal. He says that those who accept a literal view of hell do so largely because they accept a literal view of prophecy. William V. Crockett, of the Alliance Theological Seminary, argues that the wicked face a real hell, a place of frightful judgment. But hellfire and brimstone are not literal depictions of the torments of hell; they should be understood metaphorically. Crockett views hell as a place of profound misery where the wicked are banished from the presence of God. In support he cites John Calvin, who wrote, "We may conclude from many passages of Scripture, that it (eternal fire) is a metaphorical expression." Zachery J. Hayes of the Catholic Theological Union defends the doctrine of purgatory. He defines it as "the state, place or condition in the next world between heaven and hell, a state of purifying suffering for those who have died and are still in the need of such purification." This process will continue until the last judgment, at which time there will be only heaven and hell.

The fourth essay, "The Conditional View," was written by Clark H. Pinnock of McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, who has achieved a considerable reputation among evangelicals and Reformed circles. Though he is still relatively young, Pinnock's theology has already been the subject of a doctoral dissertation by Ray C. W. Roennfeldt, a Seventh Day Adventist scholar. The title he gave to his work sums up Pinnock's pilgrimage as a theologian: "Clark H. Pinnock on Biblical Authority. An Evolving Position." Since Pinnock is such an influential theologian I believe that his view on the destination of the unsaved deserves special attention.

Pinnock advocates the theory of annihilation or conditional immortality and rejects eternal conscious punishment. He contends that God does not grant immortality to the wicked to inflict endless pain upon them but will allow them finally to perish. Pinnock claims that the traditional doctrine of hell is not biblical. He writes, "God gives us life and God takes it away. There is nothing in the nature of the human soul that requires it to live forever. The Bible teaches conditionalism." This belief marks a shift in his thinking. In his book *A Case for Faith*, published in 1980, Pinnock says that scriptural teaching on hell impresses upon us how terrible it will be to exist outside the presence of God. He states that sinners in hell will enjoy the horrible freedom they have chosen, and there is no reason to think they would have it otherwise.

Pinnock represents the new "evangelical mega-shift" thinking in regard to hell. His view is supported by such notable evangelicals as John Stott and evangelist Michael Green. In his foreword to Roennfeldt's book, Pinnock explains his shift. He says that he is being drawn to a new orientation which sees God as love, "away from the view of God as authoritarian and austere judge." He now sees God as relating to us "primarily as parent, lover and covenant partner." He shifted over from Calvinism to Arminianism. And he notes that this major shift "is bound to affect all other beliefs, including beliefs about biblical authority." Pinnock, who was once a staunch defender of Biblical inerrancy, no longer defines inerrancy in terms of original autographs or historical accuracy, but uses it metaphorically for "the determination to trust God's Word completely." He now maintains that true belief in biblical authority is shown in hearing and obeying, not in inerrancy.

Pinnock is a theologian on the move. In his response to Hayes he even shows sympathy for the idea of purgatory. He believes that we can think of it "as an opportunity for maturation and growth." His evolving position shows that our view of Scripture affects even such a crucial doctrine as the final destiny of the unsaved. Roennfeldt observes that how long Pinnock will remain prominent within North American evangelicals is open to question, particularly in the light of his changed view on inerrancy.

Walvoord and Crockett clearly demonstrate that the annihilation theory has no Scriptural foundation. The Bible clearly teaches that there is punishment after this life and it is of eternal duration.

Walvoord comments that the doctrine of eternal punishment should spur us "to preaching the gospel, to witnessing for Christ, to praying for the unsaved, and to showing compassion on those who need to be snatched as brands from the burning."

Since the four authors interact with each other the readers can get a good overview of the doctrine of eternal punishment. An excellent study of a neglected doctrine.

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