

COUNTERPOINTS

"Four Views on HELL"

William Crockett, General Editor

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Literal View- John F. Walvoord, Chancellor, Dallas Theological SeminaryMetaphorical View- William V. Crockett, Prof. New Testament, Alliance Theological SeminaryPurgatorial View- Zachary J. Hayes teaches theology at Catholic Theological UnionConditional View- Clark H. Pinnock, Prof. Theology, McMaster Divinity College

This is a short book—and each writer makes his argument in plain English. It's pretty exciting for an armchair theologian-wannabe like me to be able to "keep up" with these titans of text. So hats off to the editors at Zondervan.

The big surprise to me came from the Catholic Hayes. I'm not convinced about purgatory, but he clearly shows that the doctrine wasn't just invented out of thin air.

I especially appreciated his critique on Theology-versus-Exegesis. A self-described "student of the history of doctrine", Hayes lances the boil that is evangelical arrogance regarding "strict" biblical interpretation. He calmly notes the longstanding—and very wide—historical diversity of views among evangelicals all claiming to approach the scriptures "purely" and with no "non-textual suppositions". Somebody somewhere must be hauling some baggage along with their research...

On with the review:

THE LITERAL VIEW

"Most Christians have natural problems with the concept of eternal punishment."

And so, with a whimper—not a bang—John Walvoord begins his brief, uninspired defense of the LITERAL view of hell. And it really *is* a defense—he shows no enthusiasm for his position, striving throughout his article to appear sorry for what he's writing. Of course, he's in a tough spot, being standard-bearer for an orthodox evangelical view that has become a caricature—one that sorely lacks spirited defenders these days among either clergy or scholars.

Heading up such a prominent institution (Dallas Theological Seminary), Walvoord is a man of no small stature in the evangelical world. Yet his argument for the LITERAL view, published in 1996, has done nothing to diminish the quest among sincere evangelicals for a biblical view of hell more consistent with their understanding of God.

Walvoord's focus is on actual, physical flames and unending, conscious, high-temperature torment—which he emphasizes as being punitive, not redemptive.

On the matter of duration he gives short shrift to *aionios* by citing Harry Buis:

- "...in the New Testament 66 times; 51...of happiness of the righteous, 2... of the duration of God in His glory, 6... where there is no doubt as to its meaning being endless, and 7... of punishment of the wicked." *The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1957)

And then W.R. Inge:

- "No serious Greek scholar can pretend that *aionios* means anything less than eternal." *What is Hell?* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1930)

Walvoord at least allows that Buis and Inge's categorical statements have been "challenged by some on the basis of texts where there may be a question about it." He then addresses Romans 16:25, 2 Timothy 1:9, Philemon 15 concluding that, despite different translations, "In none of these cases does it simply mean 'for a long time'." But he's man enough to include THIS statistical quote from Buis as well:

- "*Aion* is used 95 times; 50...of unlimited duration, 31... of duration that has limits, and 9 to denote the duration of future punishment." *The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1957)

Fully a third of the times *aion* appears in the New Testament, it plainly means limited duration. Yikes—how do you disregard THAT and still claim to have a "neutral" exegesis?

Walvoord only briefly mentions *olam*. As with *aionios*, his principal argument appears to be based on the logic that the same word is used to describe duration of both heaven and hell—resulting in the rhetorical conversation-stopper:

- IF HELL ISN'T FOREVER, THEN NEITHER IS HEAVEN.

Walvoord's section is the weakest in the book. If he's not the most vigorous living advocate for the LITERAL view of hell, he may be the best credentialed.

RESPONSES TO THE LITERAL VIEW

Crockett—Metaphor-Man— agrees with Walvoord on duration and consciousness, but differs on... temperature. Crockett, however, is on a bit of a slippery slope— holding the dominant 20th Century evangelical view of endless conscious suffering, while casting aside the literal flames and smoke. Walvoord didn't get a chance to answer his questioners, but he might well ask Crockett: "How can you say the HEAT is metaphorical, but the DURATION is literal?"

Hayes— Prince-Purgatory— completely disagrees with Walvoord and launches into a masterful expose' of evangelicals who claim a monopoly on un-biased scriptural exegesis. Evangelical scholars will admit their theology may be a

“systematic construct”, but will claim to be building on a “strict” reading of scripture. With allusion to Oscar Cullman’s ground-breaking *Christ and Time*, rev. ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964], he states: “It is not, therefore, a pure, positive exegetical datum to say that the biblical language of eternity is equivalent to ‘everlasting duration’... such a statement [is] a theological interpretation reflecting a particular philosophical preference.”

Hayes reveals Walvoord’s exegesis to be anything BUT neutral, concluding: “The [LITERAL view is] as laden with unexpressed presuppositions as [is] any other attempt at interpretation.”

Pinnock— Doctor-Destructo— is an Annihilationist who believes the unsaved will be “finally destroyed”. This belief is also called Conditional Immortality, referring to eternal life NOT being granted to the wicked. Anyway, he has a list of eight pithy objections to Walvoord’s views:

- 1) that they’re inconsistent with “tradition”. Walvoord complains, for instance, that any and all non-LITERAL views stray from long-held orthodoxy. But, says Pinnock, “tradition” would dictate belief in infant baptism, double-predestination, Augustinian millennialism and so on... positions Walvoord rejects.
- 2) that it is “morally grotesque” for Walvoord to say endless torture emanates from a God who wills the salvation of the world.
- 3) that Walvoord holds clearly non-textual presuppositions, like ignoring biblical passages that speak of hell as “death” and “destruction”.
- 4) that despite problems in his own exegesis, Walvoord “still has the temerity to state that a person like me who takes a different view from him must be rejecting the inerrancy of the Bible.”
- 5) that since not all scripture can be taken literally—figures of speech, apocalyptic visions, and poetic passages—surely eschatological writings about future assertions are best understood non-literally.
- 6) that Walvoord ignores what is, to Pinnock, an un-biblical belief in immortality of all souls.
- 7) that the crux of Walvoord’s argument is this illogical statement: “even a small sin against Almighty God would be infinite in significance and deserving of infinite punishment.” Pinnock says it’s plain that “sins committed in time and space cannot deserve limitless divine retribution.”
- 8) that believing in literal fire provides us with a spur to evangelism, as Walvoord concludes, betrays the pragmatic, not biblical, foundation for a LITERAL view.

THE METAPHORICAL VIEW

“It’s been a long time, maybe twenty years, since I have heard a sermon on hell.”

What a terrific opening line! William Crockett refers to hell as being “a dirty little secret that rears its nasty head at inappropriate moments

In rapid-fire manner Crockett catalogs the excesses throughout church history at depicting the horrors of physical torment. He gives a *tour de force* primer on the

validity and frequency of analogy, hyperbole, symbolism and metaphor within scripture. He neatly sums up the oxymoronic corner a literalist is painted into by contrasting Jude's description of "hell as 'eternal fire' in verse 7, and then... 'blackest darkness' in verse 13." Jolly good stuff.

Alas, Crockett's case consists mostly of demonstrating that Walvoord & Company have overstated their case. Yet his only real point of departure with Walvoord is on the exact physical details of hell. He insists throughout that hell will indeed be endless conscious suffering. His bottom line: "...the scriptures do teach about a real hell, a place of frightful judgment. But precisely what it will be like, we do not know."

There's almost an interesting tangent on the purpose of fire in Jewish thought, but, as usual with Crockett, he only wants to show what the writers *didn't* mean—ie: they weren't speaking literally. We get it already.

And then, since the staking out of his view consists mostly of debunking others, Crockett spends half his allotted space unleashing a fusillade at annihilationism. He contends that it's rather dodgy to base a theology on a "possible" meaning of metaphorical passages. It's safer instead to gather a larger number of passages and look for the most "probable" meaning.

RESPONSES TO THE METAPHORICAL VIEW

Walvoord is perplexed. He marvels that his own published writings on "the doctrine of sin and its infinite character in relation to the infinite righteousness of God" have not managed to quell the uprising against his LITERAL view. He cites his own research into fulfillments of Biblical Prophecies— "half [of which] have already been fulfilled very literally" in saying that it is, in fact, his belief in literal prophecy that *leads him to* believe in a LITERAL hell.

Walvoord makes several pot-v-kettle statements: baldly declaring, for example, that his opponents are motivated to seek metaphorical interpretation because "these people do not want to accept what the Bible teaches." And this gem: "It is obvious that arguments for a literal view of hell fall on deaf ears largely because those who hear do not want to hear." Ex-cuuuse me. Little wonder traditional, orthodox views like his are losing adherents.

Hayes: "I feel completely at home with [the METAPHORICAL] perspective." He offers no criticism at all, rather he seeks to buttress Crockett's view as "the most literal approach."

Pinnock concludes that Crockett hasn't "really solved anything". He thinks Crockett "understands the problems of the traditional view", but by offering the METAPHORICAL view as an alternative can only have achieved one of two things:

a) taken the "hell out of hell"... concluding that the pain and suffering aren't as intense as actual fire; or

b) done nothing at all... merely removing offensive, literal terms but maintaining an endless conscious torment that may or may feel like fire and thirst and physical torture.

Pinnock chooses (b), stating that Crockett's MERAPHORICAL view has achieved nothing at all. He observes that preachers still can't return to this subject without intellectual embarrassment. Pinnock concludes that Crockett's view means "God will still torture people everlastingly, at least as intensively as (maybe more intensively than) the traditional view envisages."

THE PURGATORIAL VIEW

"PURGATORY ...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 need of such purification. This... is understood to continue... until the last judgment, at which time there will be only heaven and hell."

Hayes states that the concept of "an interim period... is common in Christian eschatology." He summarizes the historical development of this interim as centering on "incompleteness". He states that "Origen and other early Christian writers (believed)... the completion of the mystery of Christ (head and body) will arrive only at the end of history." And "there is something incomplete about the situation of all who have died before the end of history and the return of the Lord in judgment at the parousia."

This "interim period" is widely agreed to hold that "No individual is fully redeemed until all the redeemed are together in the body (Heb. 11:39-40), united with the head, the one mystery of Christ in its wholeness (cf. Eph. 4:13, 15)."

So far, so good, I suppose. At least we're shown that the concept of PURGATORY has some basis in biblical theology. But then Hayes launches into a description of the "inner logic of purification after death." His premises are that impure people may not enter God's presence and "that most people die with their life's projects apparently unfinished."

Thankfully he devotes several pages to the question of whether PURGATORY is scriptural— but gives the following proviso: "In Roman Catholic thought, Christians never deal solely with the text of scripture. There is also a history of acceptance and interpretation of that text, for no text is self-interpreting." Hayes finds the strongest supporting text in 2 Macabees. Knowing Protestants don't accept that text as canon he also invokes Matthew 12:31-32 where Jesus spoke of a sin that "will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come." Then there's 1 Corinthians 3:11-15 about our works being tested, which closes with Paul's remark: "he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through flames."

Hayes also gives a fascinating history of the development of the doctrine of PURGATORY, making much of the point that it "was not the invention of

theologians. On the contrary, long before theologians became involved, individual Christians prayed for the dead... the roots of purgatorial doctrine are found... in the concrete practice of the faithful." He then recaps the two great clarifying events that both resulted from and led to a hardening of the doctrine of PURGATORY. The first during Medieval times with the Eastern Church and the second with the Western Reformers in the sixteenth century.

Hayes concludes with a rather mushy meditation on "The Understanding of Grace and Justification", then sums up by referring to PURGATORY as a "tradition" that evolved from "the basic human need to deal with the consequences of our lives, both for ourselves and for others."

RESPONSES TO THE PURGATORIAL VIEW

Walvoord swats aside Hayes' "exposition and defense" of the Purgatorial view effortlessly, deriding it for:

- ...being based upon the Allegorical School of Interpretation at Alexandria (Origen)
- ... relying upon Apocryphal Writings
- ... its roots in post-Biblical, Medieval revelation
- ... it's lack of Biblical support
- ... its inaccurate Definition of Grace and
- ... the fact that the Catholic Doctrine of PURGATORY keeps changing.

Walvoord: "...the treatment as presented... is its own refutation." So there.

Crockett praises Hayes's "fair and balanced tone" and embarks on a breezy narrative neatly summarizing the rather sanguine Catholic view of the scriptures and earliest Christian doctrine as a "seed that grows and develops". Protestantism broke sharply with this view, emphasizing that early writings and doctrines are better—"and any deviation from that pure form is considered corruption." In the end, Crockett states: "...we have no evidence that Jesus or the apostles ever taught the doctrine—even in a weak seed form." And PURGATORY is "a later invention of the church."

Pinnock admires the quality of Hayes' work, calling him a "learned, fair and orthodox theologian [whose] reasoning is subtle, balanced and sound... he typifies the kind of Catholic scholar from whom we evangelicals can learn." But, notes Pinnock, Hayes doesn't write about hell. We're left to surmise from Hayes' other writings that he indeed believes, as Pinnock puts it, that "hell is the final destiny of impenitent sinners, from which there will be no exit."

Pinnock tosses in an interesting note: "I am glad that he is not a universalist, for scriptural warnings about destruction would seem to rule that out. Hayes also tells us why hell exists... [it] is a necessary implication of human freedom." Pinnock admits to Arminian leanings and observes that "a universalist... really has to work with a predestinarian theology." Going so far as to conclude "...a Christian who is a predestinarian ought to be a universalist in principle. A good God who could save everyone surely would save everyone." Nicolai Berdyaev

and Karl Rahner are held up as forceful proponents of "the gift of human freedom."

Pinnock waltzes through a door left wide open by "Hayes's professed agnosticism about the nature of hell...". He concludes "If we do not know the nature of hell, then any position might turn out to be true, mine just as well as Crockett's, since Crockett [also] says he does not know what hell will be like...".

Pinnock then admits to having "shared the knee-jerk reaction against [PURGATORY] in evangelical thinking...". Citing the difficult case of those who die in infancy—whom virtually all evangelicals believe will end up in heaven—he asks "Where do we suppose that they grow into maturity? Obviously, evangelicals have not thought this question out." And then "Hayes got me to thinking about this as an area of evangelical doctrine that may need opening up. I am not, of course, the first one to think of it." He cites George MacDonald, J.B. Phillips, William Barclay and C.S. Lewis before wrapping up thusly:

"I would defend [it] this way... Christian character is not perfectly transformed at death. Therefore it is reasonable to hope that there might be a perfecting process after death. Without discounting the decisiveness of decisions made in this earthly life, a doctrine of purgatory would allow for continued growth in the same direction." "Evangelicals would not think of [it] as a place of punishment or atonement because of our view of the work of Christ...".

THE CONDITIONAL VIEW

"It seems to me that many believers today, faced with a choice between hell as an everlasting conscious punishment and universal salvation, will choose universalism. What I offer them is a third possibility... superior to both the traditional view and its current rival in every way."

With that startling declaration, Clark H. Pinnock quickly dispenses with the traditional views (both literal and metaphorical) as fast-fading anachronisms, and identifies universalism as more prevalent among evangelicals than his own CONDITIONAL position. This is of no small moment, since any careful reader of this "Four Views" book will by the mid-point sense that Crockett, as General Editor, has enlisted Walvoord to gang-up on Pinnock—with Hayes brought in for comic relief (Hayes doesn't even write about hell, galloping off on a Purgatorial tangent). The two traditionalists identify Destruction Theology as the greatest threat to evangelical orthodoxy. How telling it is then, that Pinnock protests himself a victim of "friendly fire", crying out that it's the universalists who should be shot at. Alas, Crockett didn't even invite one to the duel.

Anyway, Pinnock describes universalism as "stemming from Origen... turning hell into a purging and refining fire that finally deposits all its inhabitants in heaven." He commends the theology as:

"...an attractive position because it takes sin seriously, while upholding God's unqualified victory. It is also an easy position for traditionalists to switch to, because all it really requires them to do is expand the number of people elected to salvation. This process presents little problem because

within Augustinian logic, it has always been possible to imagine God electing everybody to salvation and effecting his will irresistibly the normal way."

Have I mentioned Pinnock is an Arminian? He sets forth his case by saying: "I will argue that it is more scriptural, theologically coherent and practical to interpret the nature of hell as the destruction rather than the endless torture of the wicked." In a section called *HELL AS CLOSURE AND ABSOLUTE DEATH* he efficiently dismantles the "annoying [claim] that no biblical case can be made for the annihilation of the wicked" by reciting a catalog of Old and New Testament passages like Matthew 10:28 where the Lord himself warned about God's ability to "destroy both the body and the soul in hell" and Philippians 3:19 which states concisely of the wicked that "Their destiny is destruction."

But the centerpiece of Pinnock's argument is his contention that "the immortality of the soul... must [be] the real basis of the traditional view of the nature of hell... an unbiblical anthropology that is read into the text."

He sets out four problem areas facing those who would argue for the "natural immortality" of the wicked, whose only presumed reason for continuing to exist would be to experience ongoing, conscious torment:

ONE, Exegetical: a- God alone has immortality (1Tim.6:16); b-God grants embodied life to his people (1Cor.15:21, 50-54; 2Tim.1:10); and the work of Oscar Cullman, "The *teaching* of the great philosophers Socrates and Plato can in no way be brought into consonance with that of the New Testament." *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Body? The Witness of the New Testament* (London; Epworth Press, 1958) Complete text at: http://www.religion-online.org/cgi-bin/researchd.dll/showbook?item_id=1115

TWO, Moral: a-God invites all to a feast (Matt. 8:11); b-He is a forgiving, loving Father (Luke 15:11-32); and the work of Anthony Flew "If Christians really believe that God created people with the full intention of torturing some of them in hell forever, they might as well give up the effort to defend Christianity." *God and Philosophy* (London, Hutchinson, 1966)

THREE, Justice: a-God's judgments are equitable (Exod. 21:24); b-Jesus established an even higher standard (Matt. 5:38-39); and the irrefutable logic of monstrous, vindictive wastefulness in prolonging life merely to inflict pain.

FOUR, Metaphysical (avoiding "Cosmological Dualism"): a-God is to be "all in all" (1Cor. 15:28); b-God will make "everything new" (Rev. 21:5); "How can God in any meaningful sense be called 'everything to everybody' while an unspecified number of people still continue in rebellion against him and under his judgment?". John R. W. Stott, *Essentials, A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (London; Hodder & Stoughton, 1988).

Then Pinnock tackles another quartet, this time four "Proof Texts" used to support the nature of hell as endless conscious torment:

ONE, Mark 9:48 "Their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched." Jesus was speaking of those cast into *gehenna*. The cite is from Isaiah 66:24 about dead bodies, Pinnock notes, not the torture of living people—worms aren't eternal and the fire's not being quenched can most simply be taken to mean it won't go out until its fuel is spent.

TWO: Matt. 25:46 "They will go away to eternal punishment but the righteous to eternal life." Pinnock says the concept of "conscious" torment isn't present in the text—arguing that this is only a statement of final, ultimate, irreversible judgment. Jesus' words here do not define the nature either of eternal life or eternal death. He says there will be two destinies and leaves it there.

THREE: Luke 16:23-24 (Rich Man v. Lazarus) For starters, Pinnock writes "unless there is a lot of room in the patriarch's lap, the detail seems to be imagery rather than a literal description of what the future life will actually be like." And the story is about *Hades*, the intermediate state, not the final state for which Jesus would have used *gehenna*.

FOUR: Rev. 14:9-11 "...tormented with burning sulfur...the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast..." Pinnock: "...while the smoke goes up forever, the text does not say the wicked are tormented forever. It says that they have no relief from their suffering as long as the suffering lasts." And "the text does not describe the end of history either, which is termed the second death, an image very much in agreement with annihilation (Rev. 20:14)."

One last list from Pinnock. He wants to "run a check" on the four main sources of Theological Method:

ONE: Scripture – Two elements to watch, Authority and Interpretation. Pinnock agrees that the Bible is authoritative, but he rejects the Traditionalists interpretations of the eschatological texts because they "selectively over-interpret and over-literalize biblical symbols of the future. (I say selectively because most do not take the biblical language of perishing literally!) Being overly-literal is unwise because eschatology is an area of biblical teaching (like creation) that what we know by way of specific factual information is limited... modesty in interpretation is called for."

TWO: Tradition – "I agree that tradition is a valuable source for theology, though it needs correcting from time to time." He cites evangelicals having rejected infant baptism, double predestination and sacramentalism

of the mass. He concludes that the real reason evangelicals are so resistant to change on this issue is their fear of being seen as "going liberal. Many of them have decided that believing in everlasting conscious torment is a defining characteristic of evangelical belief." He goes on at some length describing the smear tactics used (guilt-by-association, etc.)

THREE: Reason – "Both sides are trying to present their position... as coherent." Although, says Pinnock, "Traditionalists appeal more often to mystery than annihilationists do, perhaps in order to get off the painful hook of some of the objections, [but] the traditional view can be intelligently defended, and I leave the reader to decide which view is most reasonable."

FOUR: Experience and Culture – Maybe the most important factors, Pinnock, believes. Obviously he thinks the Hellenistic view of immortality infected theology. He also cites the use of the traditional horrors as a "huge stick" to assist in societal restraint, as well as "frightening people into faith".

Pinnock's conclusion? The traditional view "is unbiblical... detrimental to the character of God... defended on essentially pragmatic grounds and is being rejected by a growing number of biblically faithful, contemporary scholars." He argues that his own view may actually preserve the doctrine of hell against widespread acceptance of universal salvation, since it "does not involve sadism, though it does retain belief in the biblical category of the second death."

"In any case, the objections to the traditional view of the nature of hell are so strong and its supports so weak that it is likely soon to be replaced with something else. The real choice is between universalism and annihilationism, and of these two, annihilationism is surely the more biblical, because it retains the realism of some people finally saying No to God without turning the notion of hell into a monstrosity."

RESPONSES TO THE CONDITIONAL VIEW

Walvoord has evidently mastered the cut-and-paste buttons on his word-processor. His retorts remind me of the joke about a group of old pals at a retirement home who'd heard each other's jokes so many times that they finally decided to number them and make each other laugh by saying "Thirty-nine!".

Walvoord hollers out: Opinion Doesn't Change Facts! What About Scriptural Inerrancy and Non-literal Interpretation of Prophecy? You're Ignoring Passages! *Aionios* Means Eternal! This guy's a piece of work... I don't get the feeling I'd enjoy golfing with him.

Crockett agrees with much of Pinnock's critique of literalism, but that's all. He claims that Pinnock fails to explain why generations of believers immediately after the New Testament period were silent about annihilation, if indeed they believed it? Crockett protests that Pinnock has mostly made an emotional case—while admitting to using emotion in his own presentation! Then he concludes his response by asking us to "examine the words of Jesus and the

apostles in light of the first-century setting and then ask: What would this writer or speaker have meant, given what we know about his audience...?"

Hayes distills The Question: "Is such a final loss simple non-existence? Or is it a continued subjective existence in the self-enclosed isolation one has chosen in one's historical existence?" Hayes finds reason to think Pinnock may be right. However, he ends the book thusly:

"Finally, our theologizing... is an effort not to resolve the divine mystery, but to come to a deeper understanding of what it means to trust in the infinite mystery of God's indiscriminate, life-giving, saving love. That this love has been victorious in the case of Jesus Christ is the foundational rock of Christian eschatology..."

"In the light of that foundational mystery, we ought not claim to know too much in detail. "

"There is a great difference between trusting a personal, loving God, and having a foolproof security system. Similarly, there is a vast difference between hoping and knowing. Can we live responsibly in trust and hope without having a clear, detailed knowledge of what awaits us as our future, in this world or in the next?"

Amen.