

# Q&A: Do we neglect the doctrine of hell?

Sarah asks:

*Hi Will,*

*Do we neglect the doctrine of hell? I recently read Jonathan Edwards' "sinners in the hands of an angry God" and my reaction was:*

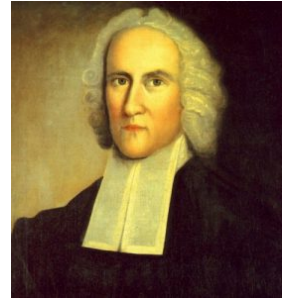
*To marvel at the magnitude of my rescue;  
To be reminded of the urgency of sharing the gospel and my part in that.  
(I also thought you'd have to be brave to talk like that in our generation!)*

*I understand that Jesus spoke more of hell than heaven. Salvation is a rescue – should we talk more about the reality of hell both to draw people to the Rescuer, and to increase our worship of God and our evangelism, whilst avoiding both the Middle Ages fascination with grisly imagery and the laughed off sandwich board person proclaiming that the end is nigh. If I am honest, (and holding this alongside election) I want to belong to God to escape the horror of hell.*

*A related question is do we neglect the doctrine of heaven...*

**[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog or asked of me elsewhere and posted with permission. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]**

Hi Sarah, thanks for the question.



I must admit, I've never read this sermon from Edwards, (which was penned in 1741, and now available online for those who are interested). He is preaching on Deuteronomy 32:25 :- *To me belongeth vengeance, and recompence; their foot shall slide in due time...* (to use Edwards' probable translation). I haven't been able to look at it in depth, but there are a couple of things to note that can help us here:

**Firstly**, Edwards gets the *audience* right, at least initially. The text is not so much about God raging against the world, it is about God's broken heart about *his own people*! Edwards describes them as "wicked unbelieving Israelites, who were God's visible people, and who lived under the means of grace; but who, notwithstanding all God's wonderful works towards them, remained... void of counsel, having no understanding in them."

In this he is, indeed, reflecting the focus of judgement language in the New Testament. e.g. Jesus uses language such as "hypocrites" and John talks about "a brood of vipers", referring to his own people. Similarly, it is the *temple* which will have no stone left on top of another. It is a message, first and foremost, *to the people of God*, including the church.

This understanding locates judgement in the midst of grace. Jesus is no Pharisee, loading down but not lifting a finger to help. No, he is the good shepherd, reflecting the heart of his Father. He has *come* to his intransigent people, to take responsibility for them if they would have him.

You ask “should we talk more about the reality of hell?” If we do, we need to take heed; we can’t preach judgement without going through our own refining fires. And sometimes I see a whole bunch of tinder-dry unChristlikeness amongst those who take Christ’s name. I fear it needs to be a great conflagration, and I am well and truly including myself in this brood.

**Secondly**, Edwards asserts that the wrath of God is real and present, withheld only by his grace, and he is right about this. This is hard for people to hear, (we are understandably uncomfortable with divine anger!), and it should always be communicated clearly. But it must be, and can be, communicated:

After all, the wrath of God is simply an aspect of his justice. It isn’t fickle, or out-of-control. It is the appropriate response to wrongdoing. We are bland and apathetic, God is not. We harden our hearts and walk past injustice, God does not. There are times we should be more *angry* at the unchecked sin in the world, and certainly at the unchecked sin in our own lives. The fact that there are homeless people on the streets of my otherwise middle-class town, is an injustice, it should *move* us. The tears of a teenager misused by her porn-addicted boyfriend, should induce something in us; a cry for justice at the least, the power to act if we can. Those who don’t want God to be wrathful shouldn’t also ask us to care about #metoo. God is not #meh about this world.

Similarly, the wrath of God is never disconnected from his righteousness and his grace. We sometimes have this image of God as someone caught in an internal battle “Do I love them, or do I hate them?” No, God is love in all things. “Making things right” through bringing justice in judgement is an act of love. Withholding judgement as an act of grace is love. When we face analogous issues – say, perhaps, in our parenting – we often experience conflict because we lack

the wisdom, or the security, or, indeed, the affection to do it well. God does not lack those things.

So should we talk about these things? Yes. In fact, our current series at the St. Nic's evening service is looking at the foundations of faith, drawing on the list in Hebrews 6:1-2 as an inspiration. "Eternal judgement" is one of the topics we will be looking at. The application will likely include those things that you mention: gratitude about the grace of God, and urgency about declaring the gospel. It will also include the imperatives that relate to pursuing God's the Kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.

But your question is not just about judgement, it is about the concept of hell. And this is where you'll probably find that I differ from Edwards. I push back at the caricature of "total eternal torment", for I find little, if any, of it in the Bible. If anything, the *exact nature* of the final state after judgement, is a second-order issue for me; I won't go to the stake for it.

My eschatology (my understanding of "the end") looks to the renewal of this earth as the gospel hope. I've talked about this in my review of N. T. Wright's excellent *Surprised By Hope*. Wright draws on C. S. Lewis with regards to the outcome of judgement, and speaks of a final state of "beings that once were human but now are not, creatures that have ceased to bear the divine image at all."

Wright's view has merit. My own take is closer to *annihilationism*, that the outcome of eternal judgement is either eternal life (for those in Christ), or simply ceasing to exist (you can't get more eternal than that). I've written about this before, and I won't reiterate it here.

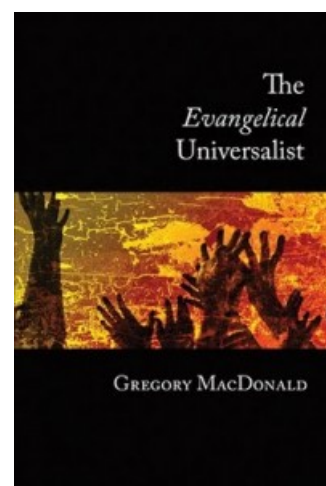
So yes, we should talk about these things more. But here's my final thought: You say "I want to belong to God to escape the horror of hell" and I get that. But I don't think I would

quickly, if ever, say it that way. I *would* say this: I want to belong to God, because he is the most holy, delightful, awe-inspiring, identity-giving, glorious One. He is my eternal Father, and I love him.

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## Review: The Evangelical Universalist

*“Evangelical Universalism”* – an intriguing theological framework. It’s “universalism” because it’s a belief that all will eventually be “saved.” It’s “evangelical” because unlike other forms of universalism it maintains that Christ is the one and only way to salvation, and does not deny the authority of Scripture.



On the face of it, it seems to be oxymoronic.

But someone who strikes me as thoughtful challenged me to read the book, and so I did.

Some time ago actually, but things have been busy.

MacDonald writes well, with an appropriate studiousness and humility. My views are sympathetic with annihilationism and much of his arguments against the “traditional view” presuppose eternal torment and I approached my read with this in mind.

His introduction outlines his personal motivations in studying the topic. In many ways it is a basic theodical angst:

*“The problem was that over a period of months I had become convinced that God could save everyone if he wanted to, and yet I also believed that the Bible taught that he would not. But, I reasoned, if he loved them, surely he would save*

*them; and thus my doxological crisis grew. Perhaps the Calvinists were right – God could save everyone if he wanted to, but he does not want to. He loves the elect with saving love but not so the reprobate... Could I love a God who could rescue everyone but chose not to?... I longer loved God because he seemed diminished. I cannot express how deeply distressing this was for me...” (Page 2)*

From this point he moves on to some more detailed philosophical considerations and then some exegetical considerations which he hopes will allow “universalist theology... to count as biblical.”

MacDonald exhibits some hermeneutical depth, drawing on Thomas Talbott he is honest about his assumptions:

*“Talbott asks us to consider three propositions:*

- 1. It is God’s redemptive purpose for the world (and therefore his will) to reconcile all sinners to himself.*
- 2. It is within God’s power to achieve his redemptive purpose for the world.*
- 3. Some sinners will never be reconciled to God, and God will therefore either consign them to a place of eternal punishment, from which there will be no hope of escape, or put them out of existence all together.*

*Now, this set of propositions is inconsistent in that it is impossible to believe all three of them at the same time...*

*Universalists thus have to reinterpret the hell texts. But they are in a situation no different from Calvinists or Arminians in this respect. ‘Every reflective Christian who takes a stand with respect to our three propositions must reject a proposition for which there is at least some prima facie biblical support.’ (Page 37, 38)*

And he brings a decent biblical theology to bear. Consider the diagram on Page 77 and also 105, which pretty much sums up his third and fourth chapters, that correlates crucifixion->resurrection of Christ to Israel's exile -> return (via the suffering servant) to the fall -> (universal, in his view) restoration of humanity. This also gives a decent missiological ecclesiology:

*"Thus, the church is seen as an anticipation in the present age of a future salvation for Israel and the nations in the new age. This, in a nutshell, is the evangelical universalist vision I defend." (Page 105)*

It is clear through all this that his motivations and arguments are, indeed, evangelical, even if we may question his conclusions.

It is somewhat difficult to argue against him as he does a great deal to argue that a number of theological frameworks (Calvinism, Molinism...) are compatible with universalism. So what framework do I use in any rejoinder? He could always escape into a different framework. Nevertheless, my concerns include:

1) A view of hell as mere purgatory. Apart from anything else, this quantifies grace. Some receive enough grace to be saved in this life, some need grace extended into the afterlife. In his appeal to the omnibenevolent God that makes hell redemptive, one could simply ask why the omnibenevolent God invokes hell at all and simply saves everyone forthwith, or, if there must be pain, through trials and revelations of truth in this life. Some form of hell must be invoked to maintain biblical warrant, but seems superfluous in a universalist framework.

2) Where does the universalism end? If all humanity is restored, then given his hermeneutical framework, all creation is restored. Does this mean salvation, say, for the devil and

the demonic cohort, who are creatures? I didn't see him deal with this but it raises significant questions both exegetically and theologically.

3) What does it do with our kerygma? While MacDonald usefully ties ecclesiology to soteriology, in application and proclamation he runs into difficulties in his framework. He says, drawing from Colossians, that "the Church must live by gospel standards and proclaim its gospel message so that the world will come to share in the saving work of Christ" (Page 52). But by his framework, this mode of proclamation is arbitrary and contingent – it will presumably finish, incomplete, at the day of judgement. Unless of course the redemption in hell is also done through the proclamation of the church but then we really are stretching into conjecture.

4) There are times when I think he mishandles corporate/individual salvation. His transition into considering Abrahamic covenant as a transition from nation to individual is too simplistic (Page 55). His desire to undermine categorical understandings of salvation for "all people" in Romans 5 ignores the context of Jew/Gentile categories (Page 83). Perhaps he has a need to extract individuals from the judgement on nations (and vice versa), but this again stretches into conjecture.

In the end, however, my problem comes down to "how would I preach this?" And the answer is, I don't think I could. The finality of judgement is what gives us the impetus to cry "Maranatha", it's what energises our nurture as we provoke one another "all the more as we see the Day approaching", it's what stimulates our mission so that the Son of Man may find active lively faith on earth when he returns. These are activities, yearnings, longings, directions, purposes that inherently and rightly belong to this Kingdom, this age. To belay any aspect of these things to another mode of redemption appears antagonistic to the whole gospel imperative.



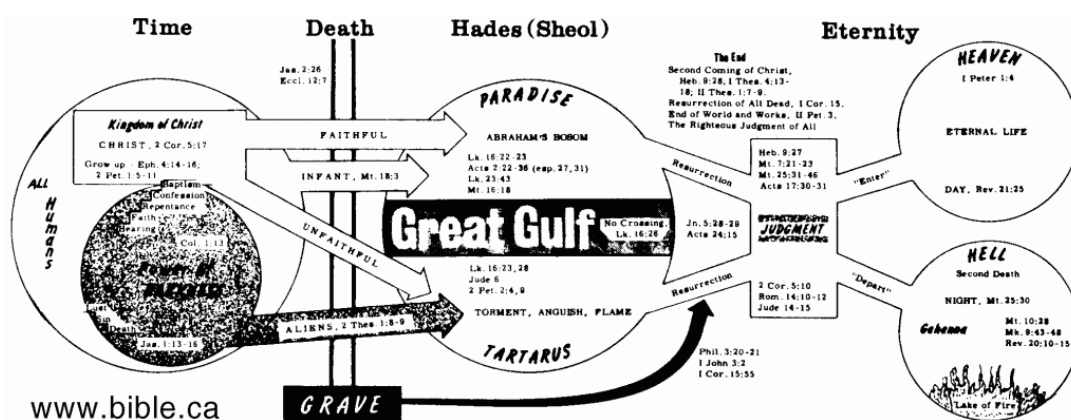
I agree with his theodical concerns. His hermeneutical critique has some merit. But if I must choose which framework to use I would still lean towards annihilationism as that which best encapsulates the biblical revelation.

This is a well written book. It does not dishonour Scripture. It is not intended to undermine the Christian gospel. It is worth engaging with. But in the end it takes us to places that are unwarranted and unhelpful.

## Q&A: Do you agree with [the following explanation of] after death happenings?

Anonymous asks:

Do you agree with the image at the link below regarding after death happenings? <http://www.bible.ca/hades-lk-16.gif>  
[Image reproduced here]



Thanks for the question. The answer is "mostly." It is a diagram that refers to the "intermediate state" – that state

of existence between a person's physical death and the return of Christ and the final judgement. I've answered a question on this topic previously.

The diagram draws heavily on the Luke 16 parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus which portrays an existence in which there is a "great gulf" between the (righteous) Lazarus and Abraham and the (unrighteous) Rich Man. I assume the word "paradise" is taken from Christ's proclamation on the cross to the one crucified next to him. "Tartarus" is a word from Greek Legend to do with the lowest reaches of the heavens and earth; it is not a biblical word and it is careless to use it.

Within the domain of "all humans" (circle on the left) you have a division between the "Power of Darkness" and the "Kingdom of Christ." There is tartaric doom for those who are in the power of darkness and the "unfaithful" in the kingdom of Christ. I'm not sure what the originator is getting at here but this framework doesn't sit well with me. The simple demarcator is Christ as Messiah and those that are "in Christ" by covenant of grace through faith and those who are not. I'm not too unhappy with "infants" being classified as those childlike innocents to which the Kingdom of God belongs but in my mind individualistic soteriological analysis such as this is unhelpful. The people of God are in Christ in paradise when they die, that is all that needs be said.

I have no problem with a general resurrection occurring before a final judgement at the end. I do have a difficulty with what follows that event. "Heaven" is a nebulous term. The way we use the word (as in "go to heaven when we die") is actually more of a referent to the sense of paradise in the intermediate state. The resurrection glory that follows the general resurrection is not so much heavenly but immortal, glorified, new heavens and new earth including some sense of imperishable physicality. Consider 1 Cor 15.

And I am of the opinion that the Lake of Fire for those who

are not in Christ is not a gateway to eternal torment but the means of the true eternal punishment – eradication of existence itself. In this sense, unless I can be convinced otherwise, I am something of an annihilationist.

Hope that helps.

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**Q&A: With regards to hell:  
Can you please share some of  
your thoughts about this  
subject? What is it that you  
believe?**

**Anonymous asks:**

*G'day Will,*

*I was raised to believe that hell was a place of eternal torment.*

*I always had trouble accepting this teaching, as it seemed contrary to God's character and that it seemed to be playing a role in turning people away from God..... "If God could be so mean and nasty as to painfully torture people in hell for eternity, then I don't want anything to do with God".... Perhaps you may have heard someone even speak these very words.*

*Strangely, I believe the bible does not teach this at all (eternal torment – eternal life in hell)*

*Eternal life is a gift, by the grace of God, to those whom*

*give their hearts to Jesus. The alternative is to “perish”. The Lord shall “burn them up” to become “ashes”, leaving them “neither root nor branch”.*

*They “shall go away into everlasting punishment” and this punishment is to be eternally cut off from God, by death.*

*Jesus makes it ever so clear;*

*“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” John 3:16*

*Interestingly, it was the devil who was first to suggest that sinners would not die (Genesis 3:4). A hell where sinners never perish would prove the devil right.*

*Question: Can you please share some of your thoughts about this subject? What is it that you believe?*

*Thanks*

Hi Anonymous,

I thought I had blogged about this topic before but I can't seem to find it. If I do I'll update this post with the link.

The view you are describing is a form of annihilationism with which I have some sympathy. In this view the hope of the gospel for salvation is towards eternal life forever in the peace and presence of God. But the question remains as to what happens to those who do not come to faith but choose to remain in their rebellion. Some say that all people will eventually come to faith (universalism, something I disagree with), or that those who do not trust in Jesus remain eternally in the power of their sin (the “traditional” eternal damnation viewpoint), or, as you espouse, that those who are not in Christ do not attain to the “eternal” as well as the “life” of “eternal life.”

There are some variations in the position – as to when the

“ceasing to be” might happen – depending on the nuances of one’s eschatology – e.g. does it take place at death, before a millennium, after a millennium etc. My view is that for annihilationism to have any biblical justification it must be taken to be in effect post-judgement.

For me it is not a first order black-and-white issue. There are complexities around what the Bible means at various places by “death”, “second death”, “perishing”, “punishment” etc.

Sometimes death is clearly relational only, sometimes it may be ontological. Some stories (such as Lazarus and the Rich Man) presuppose an ongoing existence, but possibly only during an intermediate time before the final judgement.

My response is:

1) To firstly assert the clear positive, the hope of the gospel is eternal life in and with Jesus Christ our Lord in the glory of God our Father. 1 Corinthians 15 makes the immortality of resurrection life very clear.

2) Turning to the back of the book, Revelation 19 and 20 refers to the imagery of a “lake of fire that burns with sulfur” (19:20). This lake of fire is interacted with as follows:

1. 19:20-21 The beast and the false prophet are “thrown alive” into the lake – yet the rest (kings of the earth) were simply killed.
2. 20:9-10 The devil is thrown into the lake, but those who are with him (nations gathered for battle) are “consumed” by fire from heaven.
3. 20:10 The torment of the devil, beast and false prophet is clearly “day and night forever and ever”
4. 20:14 Death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire.
5. 20:14 The lake of fire is described as “the second death”
6. 20:15 “Anyone whose name is not written in the book of

life was thrown into the lake of fire.”

The doom for Satan, beast and false prophet is clearly eternal, unceasing torment. That is undeniable. However, torment language is not used when we get to Death and Hades and those that are in them (and not in the book of life) – here the fire is described simply as the “second death.”

Matthew 25:41 refers to an “eternal fire” but it is specifically referenced as that which is “prepared for the devil and his angels” (thus matching Revelation). The question remains open as to whether the judged join the devil and angels eternally or are consumed by the fire that is also used to torment the devil and his angels.

Mark 9:48 picks up on Isaiah 66:24 however, and references “hell” – where “the worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.” I take this as a reference to the unquenchable nature of the fire and the decay (represented by the worm) – in other words, it represents something that can not be overcome.

Taking all this – if there is any eternal conscious torment, it is restricted to the demonic host. There is also eternal judgement on all people – no one escapes – but it is quite defensible biblically that this eternal judgement can take the form of annihilation or of being consumed, experiencing a “second death” etc.

Hope this helps,

W.