

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

CRITIQUE OF FOUR VIEWS ON HELL

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I. Introduction

“There is nothing that keeps wicked men, at any one moment, out of Hell, but the mere pleasure of God.”¹ Since the time of Edwards, when he preached those words in 1741, Hell has become the lost doctrine of postmodern day preaching. Even when the doctrine is taught today, pastors prefer “to talk in vague terms about a separation of the wicked from the righteous.”² The book *Four Views on Hell* takes a look at the doctrine of Hell from the four prominent perspectives recognized today. In a well-organized format, and as part of the “Counterpoints Series,” the text looks at four views or doctrines of Hell, and the responses to those views. First, The Literal View is reviewed and written by John F. Walvoord, a long-time president of Dallas Theological Seminary.³ Second, William V. Crockett who has expertise in classical antiquity, and is the general editor of this text, reviewed The Metaphorical View.⁴ Third, Zachary J. Hayes, a retired teacher of theology at the Catholic Theological Union, reviewed The Purgatorial View.⁵ Lastly, controversial theologian and longtime professor of systematic theology at McMaster Divinity College, Clark H. Pinnock, examined The Conditional View.⁶ Each author made a compelling argument for each view assigned, and while Crockett developed the best

¹ Jonathan Edwards, *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards: A Reader*, 1st Edition, ed. Wilson H. Kimnach, Kenneth P. Minkema and Douglas A. Sweeney (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 50.

² John Walvoord, Zachary Hayes and Clark Pinnock, *Four Views on Hell*, Epub Edition, ed. Stanley N. Gundry and William Crockett (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 7.

³ Dr. John Walvoord, *About Dr. John Walvoord*, <http://www.walvoord.com/about-dr-john-walvoord> (accessed February 15, 2012).

⁴ William V. Crockett, *Amazon.com Author Page William V. Crockett*, Amazon.com, http://www.amazon.com/William-V.-Crockett/e/B00653NJTU/ref=ntt_dp_epwbk_0 (accessed February 15, 2012).

⁵ Zachary J. Hayes, *About Zachary J. Hayes*, <http://www.zondervan.com/Cultures/en-US/Authors/Author.htm?ContributorID=HayesZ&QueryStringSite=Zondervan> (accessed February 15, 2012).

⁶ Bob Allen, *Controversial theologian Clark Pinnock dies*, August 18, 2010, <http://www.abpnews.com/content/view/5451/53/> (accessed February 15, 2012).

argument, Walvoord's argument aligns closest with orthodox Scripture teaching. Ultimately, even though the apologetic depth was lacking at times, Walvoord's argument was well backed by Scripture while other views were not. Therefore, Walvoord presented the most compelling view of the doctrine of Hell, or eternal punishment, even though Crockett brought up several points well worth further study.

II. Brief Summary

In the text, the most pervasive views on Hell, or eternal punishment, which exist in our culture today, are presented, but two views are basically reviewing the doctrine, and two views are refuting the doctrine's existence to some extent. All four views go through a systematic approach, discussing their reasons why their argument is the most compelling view on Hell, and then each of the other three authors provide a brief rebuttal, pointing out the weaknesses in the particular view.

In The Literal View, Walvoord spends his time providing a look at some of the problems the orthodox view presents with eternal punishment, and then gives an overview of all four views being discussed in the text. He then moves through the Old Testament, the Intertestamental Period, and the New Testament views on Hell providing a Scriptural view of each. From here Walvoord concludes with another look at eternal punishment, and a look at how literal readers should view fire and eternal damnation in view of a loving and graceful God.

In The Metaphorical View, Crockett engages with some of the great men of faith in history while walking through the graphic views of Hell, as seen throughout the historical view of Christianity, with an extended explanation of the symbolic use of words in Scripture. From this introduction, of sorts, Crockett moves into his full explanation of the Metaphorical view of Hell, and then concludes with a lengthy look at the doctrine titled Annihilation of the wicked.

Crockett's discussion on Annihilation is so extensive, almost three times as long as the discussion about The Metaphorical View. Ultimately, he concludes "the images of Heaven and Hell are not to be taken literally."⁷

The next chapter discusses Hayes' argument on The Purgatorial View. Hayes spends the first half of his argument on explaining the doctrine of Purgatory, taking a look at the interim period and the cleansing of the soul after death to remove the "unresolved guilt in the person who has died."⁸ Hayes spends the remainder of his argument looking at whether Purgatory is based on Scripture, and how the doctrine was developed over the history of the early church.

In the final view, The Conditional View, Pinnock presents his argument discussing the traditions of Hell and then moves into the difficulties with defending a doctrine of eternal punishment. Pinnock spends the majority of his time discussing Hell as an absolute where some, who choose separation from God, will then fall into Annihilation, which "makes better sense of Hell in terms of justice."⁹ He then moves into an explanation of the commentary on Hell, and concludes that Hell, or a place of eternal punishment, is far too severe for the mere offense of sin, stating the "real choice is between Universalism and Annihilationism" since the "Traditional View is so weak that it is likely soon to be replaced with something else."¹⁰

III. Critical Interaction with Author's Work

Walvoord's argument for the Literal View is within long-standing, historical orthodoxy when looking at the doctrine of Hell or eternal punishment. His argument stands on Scripture as his basis for determining a literal Hell, one that is "for the wicked, is everlasting, punitive, [and]

⁷ Walvoord, 76.

⁸ Ibid, 99.

⁹ Ibid, 153.

¹⁰ Ibid, 166.

not redemptive.”¹¹ Walvoord stands on Biblical inerrancy, and says those who “deny [this] have no problem supporting an idea that eternal punishment does not exist.”¹² Overall, Walvoord gives a good overview for the Literal View, but leaves many things untouched. He states in his discussion on the lake of fire that Revelation 20:10 provides proof for eternal suffering, and not annihilation, but he does not go beyond Revelation 20:10.

For those who hold to an orthodox view of Hell, Walvoord “presents a straightforward defense of a literal view of Hell filled with the unredeemed who are perpetually and eternally tormented in a burning flame.”¹³ For those who hold to a view that Hell must be some non-eternal form of punishment, their minds would most likely not be changed by his arguments. One area specifically addressed by the other authors, where Walvoord could have presented a stronger case, is in the literal flames of the fire, and an explanation of how fire and darkness could coexist. The contention that Hell could not be a literal flame, was addressed using the classic text in Luke 16:19-31 with story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, a story held to be a parable by most everyone. Other, non-classical text could have been even been used like Job 18 where Scripture speaks about how God punishes the wicked saying “indeed, the light of the wicked is put out, and the flame of his fire does not shine.”

Crockett, in his argument, used every available means from Scripture to the Dead Sea Scrolls, and makes extensive use of footnoted material (something Walvoord did not chose to do) from some great men of faith like Calvin and Luther, in addition to several more modern writers like Hodge, Elwell, Bruce, Erickson, Packer, Graham, and C.S. Lewis to back up his metaphorical view of Hell. While Crockett’s argument is well put together and more persuasive

¹¹ Walvoord, 12.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Rev Jeff Wright, "Book Review: Four Views on Hell," *Jeff Wright: Exalt Christ*, April 03, 2010, <http://jeffwright.exaltchrist.com/?p=690> (accessed February 15, 2012).

than Walvoord's argument, it is basically an adjustment or modification of the Literal View and most of his argument settles on Annihilationism as in his conclusion where "the images of Heaven and Hell are not to be taken literally," though he does state that "Heaven and Hell are real."¹⁴

Hayes' argument for the Roman Catholic position of Purgatory is the weakest point in the book, although probably not the farthest removed from traditional orthodoxy, which is reserved for the Conditional View. Hayes presents his argument for Purgatory as an apologetic of Catholicism and their view of Hell, and only backed his conclusion based upon one non-Canonical text, Maccabees 12:41-46. Hayes himself asks the question "Is there a scriptural basis for this doctrine?" and then points to "an important text" found in Matthew 12:31-32.¹⁵ He goes on to say that the "tendency among exegetes today is to see Matthew 12:31-32 as having little if anything to do with Purgatory."¹⁶ Then Hayes concludes to say "thus [the] Roman Catholic exegetes and theologians at the present time would be inclined to say that although there is no clear textual basis in Scripture for the later doctrine of Purgatory, neither is there anything that is clearly contrary to that doctrine."¹⁷

The final view of the text, The Conditional View, is Pinnock's argument for Universalism, and for those who refuse God, Annihilationism. While Pinnock presents a well thought out case, his conditional basis for Hell is generally a refutation of the orthodox view in favor of what is now well known in our culture today as Universalism, or the doctrine, "which asserts that all men will eventually be reconciled to God."¹⁸ Stating that he concludes the

¹⁴ Walvoord, 76.

¹⁵ Ibid, 103,105.

¹⁶ Ibid, 105.

¹⁷ Ibid, 107.

¹⁸ J. R. Root, "Universalism," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2001, 2nd ed, 1234.

traditional belief “of unending torment in hell [as] unbiblical” he comes back around to make the point that “whatever Hell turns out to be like, it is a very grim prospect, though Annihilationism makes Hell less of a torture chamber.”¹⁹ Pinnock believed, though Hell was a terrifying place, “conditional immortality has been proposed as faithful to the biblical material” though it is rarely seen as such by those in a traditional orthodox study of Scripture.²⁰

IV. Conclusion

In this review of *Four Views on Hell*, each argument was presented and evaluated. The reader was given an argument on Hell where one could quickly see the demarcation lines between each view. However, all four authors stop somewhat short from making a full apologetic case for their particular view in question. They all agree that historically, the Traditional or Literal View is the orthodox view, and then “they all acknowledge it has fallen out of favor” as of late.²¹ “Today a number of evangelical churchmen embrace variations of [these views] in terms such as ‘[B]iblical Universalism’, ‘qualified Universalism’, and ‘conditional immortality’” as the alternative to the Literal View and the eternal separation from God.²² The underlying issue as to why the Literal view is no longer favored is loosely addressed throughout the book, but has an overall tone in line with our pluralistic society saying no just God of grace and mercy can possibly send anyone to an eternal punishment, no matter the sin. “How can we project a deity of such cruelty and vindictiveness [Who] tortures people without end,” which is

¹⁹ Walvoord, 165.

²⁰ Eric Stoddart and Gwilym Pryce, "Observed Aversion to Raising Hell in Pastoral Care: The Conflict Between Doctrine and Practice," *Journal of Empirical Theology* (Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden) 18, no. 2 (January 2005): 133.

²¹ Cris D. Putnam, "Book Critique: Four Views On Hell," *Logos Apologia*, March 14, 2011, <http://www.logosapologia.org/?p=1725> (accessed February 15, 2012).

²² R. P. Lightner, "Hell," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2001, 2nd ed., 547-548.

what the Literal view teaches?²³ With this as the general tone of each view, a better examination of the views would be to treat them within the culture setting of today as: The Doctrine of Hell, Annihilationism, Purgatory, and Universalism.

The doctrines that most closely follow Scripture are not always going to be in line with secular society, or liberal theology, but looking at these four views of Hell is beneficial to the reader no matter what theological base they align with today. Of the four views, Crockett's argument for a less literal view of Hell was well thought out and presented, and makes Hell more palatable to the modern day reader, but Walvoord's Literal View is still the most orthodox, and most closely aligned with the teaching of Scripture, and therefore, the best alternative of the four.

²³ Walvoord, 140.

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“Four Views on Hell” is a book that consists of four different views on hell, as obviously stated by the title. The four views are: eternal conscious torment, terminal punishment, universalist view, and hell and purgatory. Four different authors contributed to the book: Denny Burk, John G. Stackhouse Jr., Robin A. Parry, and Jerry L. Walls. Denny Burk is an associate pastor at Kenwood Baptist Church and a Professor of Biblical Studies at Boyce College. The authors of Four Views on Hell meet this subject head-on with different views on what the Scriptures say. Is hell to be understood literally as a place of eternal smoke and flames? Or are such images simply metaphors for a real but different form of punishment? Is there such a thing as 'conditional immortality,' in which God annihilates the souls of the wicked rather than punishing them endlessly? Each view in turn is presented, critiqued, and defended. This evenhanded approach is ideal for comparing and contrasting views in order to form a personal conclusion about one of Christianity's key doctrines. The Counterpoints series provides a forum for comparison and critique of different views on issues important to Christians. The authors of Four Views on Hell meet this subject head-on with different views on what the Scriptures say. Is hell to be understood literally as a place of eternal smoke and flames? Or are such images simply metaphors for a real but different form of punishment? Is there such a thing as 'conditional immortality,' in which God annihilates the souls of the wicked rather than punishing them endlessly? The topic of Hell is one of the more contentious in modern Christian philosophy and rather highly debated in theology depending on the denomination. Four Views on Hell provides an informative and interesting overview of several views on the matter. The book is broken down as follows: 1. The late John F. Walvoord defends a traditional literal and eternal view of hell. A Theological Critique Submitted to Professor Malcolm Hester Liberty Theological Seminary in partial fulfillment of the requirements for completion of the course. THEO 530. INTRODUCTION The book, Four Views on Hell, is part of the Counterpoints series published by Zondervan. Editors Stanley Gundry and William Crockett assembled an excellent book that presents a well-balanced and fair presentation of the four major views on Hell. Four authors present their personal beliefs through essays, each followed by rebuttal by the remaining three authors. The four major views debated are the literal, metaphorical, purgatorial, and conditional.