

FOUR VIEWS OF HELL

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Introduction

The book, “Four Views of Hell” is not a book for those who are not decisively grounded in their beliefs regarding the doctrinal subject of hell. The book is just what the title alludes to; four theological views from four different positional theologians whose goal is to convince the reader that their theological position on hell is convincingly the most accurate viewpoint. In the book we have the following authors and views: John F. Walvoord, literal interpretation; William V. Crockett, metaphorical interpretation; Zachary J. Hayes, purgatorial interpretation; and, Clark H. Pinnock, conditional interpretation. Each author does a superb job in presenting their particular position. My intention is to summarize this book with a central outlook focusing upon the diverse opinions of aforementioned authors, with their positions and viewpoints, regarding the theological subject of hell.

Brief Summary

When giving a basic overview of the book, “Four Views of Hell” the easiest way to do so is by stating each position with the primary concepts of each one. Because each viewpoint has different strengths and weaknesses the sub-topics of each viewpoint may be differing in nature as it would be difficult to lock every one of the views into specific sub-topic. John Walvoord, in his presentation of the literal interpretation of hell, see’s Scriptural exegesis as paramount for proper interpretation. William Crockett, the metaphorical position, concentrates on the historical and symbolic imagery of Scripture with specific attention towards fire, darkness and smoke. Zachary Hayes, the purgatorial interpreter, spends a great deal of time and explanation in the realm of historical and Catholic specific theology and thinking. Clark Pinnock, the conditional interpretation, holds to annihilation and has a well balanced attack against the literal viewpoint using morality as his primary strength against literalism.

When looking at these diverse strengths some of the focal points are: Biblical interpretive methodologies; opposing viewpoint difficulties; conceptions of eternity; harmonization of God's love and judgment; intercessory concepts; methods of judgment; nature of hell; forms of punishment; and, types of suffering.

Critical Interaction with the Author's Work

Because this book is one of "counterpoints" there is a presentation of each viewpoint and then the author of each counter viewpoint has a few pages to summarize differing or supporting comments.

The literal viewpoint is strong in presenting Biblical accounts that support its literal interpretation for a eternal, conscious, punishment in a hell; containing real flames of torment as a result of a justified penal punishment for rejection of God's gift of redemption through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Seemingly, the other positions never really address the issue of Christ's redemptive sacrifice for sin. Pinnock refers to the literal interpretation of hell as that of a sadistic nature with unfair punishment and cannot equate how a God of love could send a transgressor of temporal sins to a eternal damnable punishment of endless torment and pain.

Pinnock seems to forget the agony of Christ, who was marred beyond physical recognition as he died a horrendous death totally separated from God the Father. Perhaps, this is why a God of love would, and could, morally send one who rejects His sacrificial death, to this fiery hell? After all this God of love also sent His only begotten Son to die this hellish death on behalf of a sinful mankind. One should be careful to take into account the divine attribute of God's holiness when considering appropriated punishments. Walvoord emphasizes this thought

as well, “God is a God of infinite righteousness as well as infinite love.”¹

Another strength for a literal interpretation is the Greek word for “eternity.” “As Buis points out, the Greek word *aionios* is used in the New Testament sixty-six times: fifty-one times of the happiness of the righteous, two times of the duration of God in His glory, six other times where there is no doubt as to its meaning *being endless*, and seven times of the punishment of the wicked.”² Walvoord uses many text proofs and believes that in the Book of Revelation, where the one thousand year millennium is spoken of, provides one of the strongest text proofs available:

The lake of fire does not provide annihilation but continual suffering. In Revelation 10:20, when the devil is cast into the lake of fire at the end of the millennium, the beast, the world ruler, and the false prophet who were thrown into the lake of fire at the beginning of the thousand-year reign of Christ are still there, sharing torment in the lake of fire with devil “day and night for ever and ever.” (Rev 20:10).³

This assumption is supported by many other conservative fundamental pastors; Here is an excerpt from Oliver Greene’s book titled: *Hell*:

“*Forever and ever*” used in Revelation to describe the torment of the beast, the false prophet [Rev 19:20], and Satan [Rev 20:10], is expressed in the same Greek words used to note the *eternal duration* of God’s own existence [Gal 1:3-5; Heb 1:8; Rev 4:9-11; Rev 10:5,6].... Therefore “forever and ever” *means* FOREVER and EVER!⁴

The metaphorical viewpoint agrees with the literalist position for a conscious, eternal hell; but, stresses that the fire, smoke and darkness are figurative rabbinic hyperboles of judgment which would be obvious to the early Jewish mind. “Rabbis in ancient times (and this

¹ William Crockett, ed., *Four Views of Hell* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan: 1996) 27.

² William Crockett, ed., *Four Views of Hell*, 23, 24.

³ Ibid, 23.

⁴ Oliver Greene: *Hell* (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour Inc: 1969) 57-59.

includes Jesus) often used colorful speech to bring home forcefully their points.”⁵ Crockett contends that the graphicness of hell in the earlier centuries were actually just “metaphors pointing toward real but indefinable states.”⁶ Crockett associates the beauties of heaven with metaphoric symbols that would be known to the first century Jewish mind and then argues the same descriptive tactic is used to emphasize the severity of hell; thus, not to be taken in a literal sense.

The Purgatorial view presented by Hayes seems to stress the central theme of relationship between God the Creator and man the created. Hayes notes that purgation was around well before the Roman Catholic Church adopted it. Hayes defines purgatory as: “to refer to 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.”⁷ For the purgatorial view it is important to understand that what God has done in Christ is complete. God is not completely finished with mankind; thus, purgatory became a way for the dead to become complete through a final purification process. Another dimension of purgatory affords the living to make intercession on behalf of the dead. “It is a process in which the concern of the living for the dead, expressed through prayers and charitable works, may have a beneficial effect on the healing of the dead.”⁸ This view is an infringement on the substitutionary atonement provided by Christ because it implies that Jesus’ sacrifice was not enough to satisfy God.

Another differing point between Catholic theology and most Protestant theologians is this, “the text of Scripture is not in any sense a verbal message from God. The message of

⁵ William Crockett, ed., *Four Views of Hell* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan: 1996) Ibid, 51.

⁶ William Crockett, ed., *Four Views of Hell*, 45.

⁷ Ibid, 93.

⁸ Ibid, 98.

revelation is opened to the reader by the operation of the Spirit and not directly by the text of the Bible.”⁹ Though the purgatorial interpretation has tremendous laxity for the soundness of inspired Biblical inerrancy, as seen in Hayes acorn to oak tree illustration, there does appear to be a final point where the person in purgatory will eventually pass into heaven or condemned to a literal hell.

The conditional view, known as conditional immortality, strongest point of contention comes from arguments of reasoning though it does have some solid thoughts for consideration as well. Pinnock defines the annihilation position as, “that God does not grant immortality to the wicked to inflict endless pain upon them but will allow them finally to perish.”¹⁰ Here are some of Pinnock’s challenging questions directed towards the literal interpretation camp: “How can one reconcile this doctrine with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ? Is he not a God of boundless mercy? How then can we project a deity of such cruelty and vindictiveness?”¹¹ Pinnock goes so far as to state that his view allows God to be “morally justified in destroying the wicked,” which truly oversteps his boundaries as if God needed to justify His fairness to His created!¹² One of the solid opinions I aforementioned is that if annihilation could be adopted to an accepted doctrine of hell it would eliminate this seemingly dualistic cosmological existence of kingdoms, heaven and hell. Pinnock argues that annihilation would also make the victory of Christ complete. The literalist would contend that the victory is complete and that Satan, along with the wicked, consigned to hell are proof enough! When dealing with the judgment methods

⁹ Ibid, 102.

¹⁰ Ibid, 142, 143.

¹¹ Ibid, 140.

¹² Ibid, 151.

of the conditional interpretation, Pinnock argues that only man in his free will can make the final determination to be annihilated and that it is not something that God will force upon him.

Argumentatively, this just prolongs the decision which in the literal and metaphorical positions is already dealt with by the choice of the acceptance or rejection of Christ before physical death.

Though this position has some good points it is not without difficulties: Biblical texts of degrees of punishment; distributive judgment, harmonization of eternal life with annihilation; and, if the first century Father's were wrong in their literal interpretations then the Holy Spirit was not sovereign. Focusing on the annihilationist's particular difficulty with the harmonization of eternal life with annihilation, Leon Morris states, "The punishment is just as eternal as the life. One is no more limited than the other."¹³

Conclusion

Summarizing the book is difficult because so much doctrine and counter-doctrine is being used. The book utilizes seasoned theologians and certainly provokes the reader to dwell upon their position towards hell. It seems that the only major fault found with the literal position is that it is unpopular and becoming less acceptable towards society. Walvoord says this may be but not to let popularity be the standard for determining truth. One other strength not mentioned in my summarization is that; the Biblical writers, Jesus and the early church Fathers all seemed to embrace the literalist position in one form or another. Pinnock argues that other major doctrines have been revised because Augustine and others were wrong; and if so, isn't it possible that the traditional doctrine of hell could be wrong? One thing I noted in checking the Biblical references of Pinnock is that most of them did not dice up to what he was trying to imply. The metaphorical view poses the difficulty of what in the Bible is metaphorical and what is not; and

¹³ Walter J. Elwell, Ed: *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academics: 2001) 395.

who decides what is? I find no real substance to the purgatorial view and believe it is built more upon historical tradition than anything else.

I believe that each theologian did a worthy job of presenting their interpretation and what the deciding factor for each individual may come down to is: what is their idea of convincing evidence? Is it Biblical inerrancy, morality issues, tradition etc.? Me, I will take Scriptural proofs over others and this will ultimately lead me to continue to embrace the literal view. Keeping in mind that to embrace a view does not always mean in its complete totality.

In conclusion, each interpretation should cause one to think long and hard about the position they support and about the tremendous responsibility it carries with it. Each individual will have to account to a just and holy God for the position that they have embraced and proclaimed. “The principle here seems to be, the greater our knowledge, the greater is our responsibility, and the greater will be our punishment if we fail in our responsibility.”¹⁴ May God empower and illuminate us to properly apply this doctrine!

¹⁴ Milliard Erickson: *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academics: 1998) 1248.

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