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Hell Under Fire, Part Two

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A second issue that has contributed to the modern denial of hell is a changed view of justice. Retributive justice has been the hallmark of human law since premodern times. This concept assumes that punishment is a natural and necessary component of justice. Nevertheless, retributive justice has been under assault for many years in western cultures, and this has led to modifications in the doctrine of hell.

The utilitarian philosophers such as John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham argued that retribution is an unacceptable form of justice. Rejecting clear and absolute moral norms, they argued that justice demands restoration rather than retribution. Criminals were no longer seen as evil and deserving of punishment, but were seen as persons in need of correction. The goal—for all but the most egregious sinners—was restoration and rehabilitation. The shift from the prison to the penitentiary was supposed to be a shift from a place of punishment to a place of penance, but apparently no one told the prisoners.

C. S. Lewis rejected this idea as an assault upon the very concept of justice. “We demand of a cure not whether it is just but whether it succeeds. Thus when we cease to consider what the criminal deserves and consider only what will cure him or deter others, we have tacitly removed him from the sphere of justice altogether; instead of a person, a subject of rights, we now have a mere object, a patient, a ‘case’.”

Penal reforms followed, public executions ceased, and the public accepted the changes in the name of humanitarianism. Dutch criminologist Pieter Spierenburg pointed to “increasing inter-human identification” as the undercurrent of this shift. Individuals began to sympathize with the criminal, often thinking of themselves in the criminal’s place. The impact of this shift in the culture is apparent in a letter from one nineteenth century Anglican to another:

“The disbelief in the existence of retributive justice . . . is now so widely spread through nearly all classes of people, especially in regard to social and political questions . . . [that it] causes even men, whose theology teaches them to look upon God as a vindictive, lawless autocrat, to stigmatize as cruel and heathenish the belief that criminal law is bound to contemplate in punishment other ends beside the improvement of the offender himself and the deterring of others.”

The utilitarian concept of justice and deterrence has also given way to justice by popular opinion and cultural custom. The U. S. Constitution disallows “cruel and unusual punishment,” and the courts have offered evolving and conflicting rulings on what kind of punishment is thus excluded. At various times the death penalty has been constitutionally permitted and forbidden, and in one recent U. S. Supreme Court decision, the justice writing the majority opinion actually cited data from opinion polls.

The transformations of legal practice and culture have redefined justice for many modern persons. Retribution is out,

and rehabilitation is put in its place. Some theologians have simply incorporated this new theory of justice into their doctrines of hell. For the Roman Catholics, the doctrine of purgatory functions as the penitentiary. For some evangelicals, a period of time in hell—but not an eternity in hell—is the remedy.

Some theologians have questioned the moral integrity of eternal punishment by arguing that an infinite punishment is an unjust penalty for finite sins. Or, to put the argument in a slightly different form, eternal torment is no fitting punishment for temporal sins. The traditional doctrine of hell argues that an infinite penalty is just punishment for sin against the infinite holiness of God. This explains why all sinners are equally deserving of hell, but for salvation through faith in Christ.

A third shift in the larger culture concerns the advent of the psychological worldview. Human behavior has been redefined by the impact of humanistic psychologies that deny or reduce personal responsibility for wrongdoing. Various theories place the blame on external influences, biological factors, behavioral determinism, genetic predispositions, and the influence of the subconscious—and these variant theories barely scratch the surface.

The autonomous self becomes the great personal project for individuals, and their various crimes and misdemeanors are excused as growth experiences or ‘personal issues.’ Shame and guilt are banned from public discussion and dismissed as repressive. In such a culture, the finality of God’s sentencing of impenitent sinners to hell is just unthinkable.

A fourth shift concerns the concept of salvation. The vast majority of men and women throughout the centuries of western civilization have awakened in the morning and gone to sleep at night with the fear of hell never far from consciousness—until now. Sin has been redefined as a lack of self-esteem rather than as an insult to the glory of God. Salvation has been reconceived as liberation from oppression, internal or external. The gospel becomes a means of release from bondage to bad habits rather than rescue from a sentence of eternity in hell.

The theodicy issue arises immediately when evangelicals limit salvation to those who come to conscious faith in Christ during their earthly lives and define salvation as anything akin to justification by faith. To the modern mind this seems absolutely unfair and scandalously discriminatory. Some evangelicals have thus modified the doctrine of salvation accordingly. This means that hell is either evacuated or minimized. Or, as one Catholic wit quipped, hell has been air-conditioned.

These shifts in the culture are but part of the picture. The most basic cause of controversy over the doctrine of hell is the challenge of theodicy. The traditional doctrine is just too out of step with the contemporary mind—too harsh and eternally fixed. In virtually every aspect, the modern mind is offended by the biblical concept of hell preserved in the traditional doctrine. For some who call themselves evangelicals, this is simply too much to bear.

We should note that compromise on the doctrine of hell is not limited to those who reject the traditional formulation. The reality is that few references to hell are likely to be heard even in conservative churches that would never deny the doctrine. Once again, the cultural environment is a major influence.

In his study of “seeker sensitive” churches, researcher Kimon Howland Sargeant notes that “today’s cultural pluralism fosters an under-emphasis on the ‘hard sell’ of Hell while contributing to an overemphasis on the ‘soft sell’ of personal satisfaction through Jesus Christ.” The problem is thus more complex and pervasive than the theological rejection of hell—it also includes the avoidance of the issue in the face of cultural pressure.

The revision or rejection of the traditional doctrine of hell comes at a great cost. The entire system of theology is modified by effect, even if some revisionists refuse to take their revisions to their logical conclusions. Essentially, our very concepts of God and the gospel are at stake. What could be more important?

The temptation to revise the doctrine of hell—to remove the sting and scandal of everlasting conscious punishment—is understandable. But it is also a major test of evangelical conviction. This is no theological trifle. As one observer has asked, “Could it be that the only result of attempts, however well-meaning, to air-condition Hell, is to ensure that more and more people wind up there?”

Hell demands our attention in the present, confronting evangelicals with a critical test of theological and biblical integrity. Hell may be denied, but it will not disappear.

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