

Faith Pulpit

Evangelicals and the Doctrine of Eternal Punishment

Historically, the major Christian denominations have taught that those who die outside of Christ will suffer eternal punishment in hell. Many religious leaders today either deny this or aren't sure. While a denial of hell has been a characteristic of theological liberalism and of the cults, its de-emphasis and denial are now the positions of noted evangelical leaders as well.

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw a new Statement of Faith adopted and published by Fuller Theological Seminary in which the old Statement's language of Christ "assigning unbelievers to eternal punishment" was changed to state that "the wicked shall be separated from God's presence." The new Statement changed the persons involved (from "unbelievers" to "the wicked") and the scope of their fate (from "eternal punishment" to separated from God's presence"), thus allowing for greatly broader views.

In promotional literature for Edward Fudge's book, *The Fire That Consumes*—a book written to undermine the doctrine of eternal punishment—it is stated that the traditional conservative view of hell "has been rejected by an increasing number of such faithful scholars as W. Graham Scroggie, John R.W. Stott, Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, F.F. Bruce, John W. Wenham, Dale Moody and Clark Pinnock." For those who wish to read more about the shift in evangelical thought concerning this and other doctrines, several sources could be mentioned.

What is a Bible-believing Christian to make of such changes and modifications? What are the issues involved and what are their implications? Without assuming that this is all that can be said, the following comments and observations are offered to help in reflecting on this important doctrinal shift.

1. What we see happening with the modification of the doctrine of eternal Punishment is a reflection on God Himself. The very center of this discussion is the Bible's teaching regarding the character and sovereign working of God. We are witnessing the remaking of God in our own

image, making Him the kind of God we can defend and wish Him to be.

2. The denial of eternal punishment includes denying some other doctrinal matters, such as the immortality of the soul, and also the modifying of others, such as the holiness of God, the consequences of sin, the nature of salvation, and the meaning of dying and perishing.
3. Often when this doctrine is studied, the interpretive issue of whether or not there is actual fire in hell is discussed. It seems to this writer that it is better to let the genuineness of fire stand rather than modify it because we do not understand how it could be. That problem, after all, belongs to God and not to us. This is particularly true since so many passages in Scripture speak of hell and eternal punishment in terms of actual fire (for example: Matthew 5:22; 18:8,9; 25:41; Mark 9:43–48; Jude 7; Revelation 14:10; 19:20; 20:10,14,15; 21:8).
4. The modification of the doctrine of eternal punishment is not due primarily to some new understanding of Scripture, but, rather, to our desire for what some have called “a kinder, gentler theology.” We are noting an emotional rejection of what we personally cannot hope to explain or wish to defend.
5. When the new evangelicalism began in the late 1940s, as a reaction to its fundamentalist heritage, it initially said it did not wish to change traditional conservative theology. Actually, one of its goals was to reach and win over the religious non-conservative to its conservative position. Almost fifty years later the project does not appear (at least from this writer’s perspective) to have been very successful. Instead, the concessions, modifications and changes have all been made by the new evangelical. The original goal has in fact been abandoned.
6. One does not have to look very closely at contemporary evangelicalism before the contrast is seen between it and conservative fundamental theology. Questions have been raised about the Bible’s accuracy in both doctrinal matters and also matters of history, science and other factual areas. The denial of eternal punishment is simply the latest in a long list of diminished doctrines. As a result, there is much confusion in attempting to answer the question: “What does it mean to be evangelical?” Whereas in its early days the new evangelicalism was defined more by its negative reaction to fundamentalist methodology, today it is defined more by its own greatly modified doctrinal stance. Its great changes in theology of recent years have been called by some the “Evangelical Megashift.”
7. Fundamentalists have also been influenced by the general evangelical climate. While not denying the Bible’s teaching on hell, it is seldom preached on—even in the most conservative circles. One wonders how this can be if pastors are preaching expository messages, working through Bible books and desiring to proclaim the whole counsel of God. One clue is that positive relational preaching is more the order of the day. For some preachers this is a conscious and deliberate attempt to see their churches grow through meeting the felt needs of today’s baby boomers and appealing to their new priorities. When was the last time you heard a sermon on eternal punishment?
8. While defending the doctrine of hell is important, the practical implications of this teaching also should be noted. Evangelism ought to be a part of the Bible-believer’s natural response to belief in eternal punishment. As one has said: ‘If people really believed in hell, they wouldn’t be watching basketball or even TV preachers. They’d be out rescuing people.’ Overstated? Maybe. But it’s worth pondering.¹

Works Cited

1. See: James Davison Hunter. *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation*. U. of Chicago Press, 1987; George M. Marsden. *Reforming Fundamentalism. Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987; Alan W. Gomes. “Evangelicals and the Annihilation of Hell. Parts One & Two,” *Christian Research Journal* (published by

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