



# Whitefield BRIEFING

July 1996 (Vol.1 No.3)

## *Divine Judgement*

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Theological debate seldom makes it into the churches. Perhaps practical and ethical issues step into the spotlight, but the finer points of doctrine rarely see the pulpit. However, recently amongst evangelical Christians there has been one topic which has received renewed and vigorous attention - the doctrine of hell. When John Stott<sup>1</sup> (and at other times a small number of other prominent evangelicals<sup>2</sup>) tentatively suggested that hell may not be everlasting conscious torment, but that those in hell will ultimately be annihilated, many evangelicals were up in arms. Books were written, conferences were held, invitations were withdrawn, and the fire and brimstone sermon returned.

To set the background for this paper, the Bible talks of hell as punishment, as separation, and as destruction<sup>3</sup> It is these categories, and the hermeneutics in-volved in understanding them, that theologians have been attempting to work within and expound. The present situation is that the debate continues, and, although there may be more traditionalists in print than there are annihilationists, suspicion is that the latter group has behind it a ground swell of opinion. This support, although often hesitant to make its voice heard, is gaining some headway. However, truth is not decided democratically. Neither should we make an emotionally motivated response, even though the issue of hell is an extremely provocative one.<sup>4</sup> The aim of this paper is to examine two of the reasons why the debate about hell has become so important.

### **HELL'S COMEBACK**

Firstly, the debate has, once again, raised the ugly head of a group of theological terms that have long been out of vogue: sin, judgement, wrath, punishment, dam-nation, and hell itself. A trawl of journals, papers, publishing lists and sermons shows the scarcity of material on hell (and indeed, the associated subjects), up until at least the 1970s. As Bertrand Russell remarked, "Hell is neither so certain nor as hot as it used to be."<sup>5</sup> The legacy of liberal theology produced "a God without wrath [who] brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgement through the ministration of Christ without a cross."<sup>6</sup> Although it is of course easy to point the finger at theological culprits such as John Robinson, Paul Tillich and John Hick, the point is that the whole evangelical atmosphere of the last century encouraged a lack of interest in such sombre subjects.

*"Heat on the bishop who said there is no Hell."*<sup>7</sup> In December 1993, David Jenkins sparked off a controversy by speaking out against, among other things, the traditional doctrine of hell. "I am clear that there can be no hell for eternity ... Our God could not be that cruel. However, I think for some people who have wasted every opportunity for redemption, there may be extinction."<sup>8</sup>

Amongst those who responded to Jenkins was David Lunn, Bishop of Sheffield, who argued that "The church may not require us to believe in the physical torments associated with hell, but that is not the same as saying it does not exist."<sup>9</sup> Yet Jenkins was adamant in defending his remarks: "I simply do not

believe that God's line is 'love one another or I'll come down and bash you', and certainly not 'bash you for eternity'. What he is really saying to us is 'love one another or you will give yourself hell.'<sup>10</sup>

Referring to the images of punishment in Revelation, Jenkins commented on the BBC's *Today* programme: "Part of the book of Revelation is obviously pretty pathological, isn't it? It wants revenge."<sup>11</sup> "If there is such a God, he is a small, cultic deity who is so bad-tempered that the sooner we forget him the better."<sup>12</sup>

Although it is not surprising that David Jenkins caused a storm (being a church leader known for controversial statements), what is surprising is the fact that criticism of a neglected doctrine like this caused such a stir. Media coverage was wide ranging and in depth, resulting in numerous main articles and leaders.

Recently hell was once again in the news. Not thanks to David Jenkins this time, but through the press coverage received by the Doctrine Commissions report, *The Mystery of Salvation*.<sup>13</sup> With headlines such as "Church elders pour cold water on hellfire and damnation" (*The Independent*), editors reflected an interest in the affairs of the church mixed with at least one helping of cynicism and amusement. The Doctrine Commission reported that those in hell may cease to exist - thus coming down on the annihilationist side of the evangelical debate. Perhaps more surprising is that the Commission defended the doctrine at all. Indeed, whatever evaluation we may make of the report, it has at the very least gone against a strong tide of liberal opinion. The Doctrine Commissions statements and the coverage they received illustrate the tension between a world that has left a belief in hell behind and a church struggling with both a liberal heritage and a growing evangelical presence.<sup>14</sup> Until the recent controversy, the lack of time given by the Church to such a central doctrine represented a malaise in the evangelical constituency. Whatever the merits (or demerits) of the debate between the traditionalist and annihilationist camps, it has at least served to put the issue on the contemporary theological agenda. For it is now being increasingly recognised that hell and divine judgement are no mere trifling theological matters.

"If Christianity is indeed primarily about salvation, and if salvation comes to mean something

very different when hell drops out of sight, then the doctrine of hell is an important part of Christianity. Indeed, it may be essential, at least in some form, if Christianity is to avoid trivialization."<sup>15</sup>

It has been argued by some that criticism of the doctrine of hell has led to large amounts of people rejecting traditional Christianity and leaving the church.<sup>16</sup> However, according to John Bowker, it is not the doctrine as such but the abuse of the doctrine which has caused the problems. Where the imagination of hell "has gone wrong and where it needs passionately to be exorcised and cleansed, is where that imagination is being exploited and abused - where it is used, in other words, as an instrument of bullying and spiritual terrorisation."<sup>17</sup> The imagination of hell might be maintained to secure concepts of accountability and consequence, yet the "literal imagination of fire and torment would be to attribute to God a character and a behaviour far worse than anything that even the worst parents would ever exhibit to their children."<sup>18</sup>

Liberal theology is not the only sphere from which hell has been dislocated. 'Hell on earth' has become a popular description of the most awful atrocities this century has seen, and the inhumanity of human beings to each other has caused us to question whether in fact there can be anything worse - can a God of love actually do more evil (note the assumption that hell is an evil) than an Auschwitz, than a Hiroshima, than a Dunblane? If there is such a state as hell, have we not surely witnessed it in our own generation? The point is that Christians and non-Christians alike have moved 'hell' from the future to the present.

Again, for all the 'hell on earth' we see around us, our penal systems have moved away from retributive philosophy. Whatever the cries of the political right may be in criminal justice debates, retribution has been out of fashion for a long time. Although some may be attempting to bring a notion of retributive punishment back, 'restoration' and 'deterrent' are the key words in current thought. The rationale for punishment is to return offenders to society as 'normal' citizens and to prevent them from offending again, rather than simply paying them back for their wrongdoing.

Perhaps more relevant, however, is the lack of 'hell' in our classrooms. Although we may believe that this is a good thing, for many years now teachers have been accused of letting the side

down. The argument is that although we expect our children to behave according to Christian morality, without the teaching of divine judgement, our expectations will almost certainly be disappointed. Witness the reaction to the murder of James Bulger. The cries (mainly from politicians and newspaper editors, rather than church leaders) were that 'morality' is not being taught in our schools. What is that morality based on? Christian values? If so, then what gives a sense of reality to those values? The answer has traditionally been heaven and hell. Similarly, in the United States many agree that the teaching of values in education is vitally important. However, such instruction has traditionally been based on Christian principles. Martin Marty argues that Christian values and talk of God also include talk of reward and punishment - hence hell is relevant.<sup>19</sup> He observes that originally in the religious history of America, moral discourse did not occur without mention of hell. Later, however, attempts were made to talk of moral education without reference to God and hence without reference to heaven or hell. The result is that "Hell disappeared - no one noticed"<sup>20</sup> As a result moral education has by and large failed. Through our penal systems, through our theology, and through our education systems, hell has become "culturally unavailable".

This paper is not arguing for a return to the caricature of the fire and brimstone sermon. Rather, such a debate should cause churches to put the issues of judgement plainly before their congregations. It is not only the prosperity, health and wealth gospel that has lured us into the 'what Jesus can do for you' gospel, but also many of the trappings of modern evangelical life. So at least one of the benefits of the debate between annihilationist and traditionalist is that it has brought this important doctrine in view once again. The late John Wenham, a convinced conditionalist<sup>21</sup>, was quite clear about the awfulness of the situation: "Jesus and his disciples taught again and again in terrible terms that there is an irreversible judgement and punishment of the unrepentant. Warnings and loving invitations intermingle to encourage us to flee the wrath to come."<sup>22</sup>

## DIVINE JUDGEMENT

So the evangelical furore has at least made us talk about hell. However, an important second point needs to be made. Within the debate between traditionalist and annihilationist views, there is an assumption that hell, whatever its nature, will become a reality for some. In the light of the reaction examined, the question as to why some will go to hell needs to be answered. Much of the contemporary rehabilitation of hell has been in terms of what may be called the 'free-will defence'. Based on popular responses to the problem of evil, the argument is that all those who end up in hell do so by choice. C.S. Lewis would be the most popular articulator of this position. "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done', and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done'. All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell."<sup>23</sup>

Such a 'defence' of hell is to be found in all areas of Christian apologetic thought: conservative, Protestant and Catholic, theologian and philosopher, academic and populariser. However, it is most clearly seen in the work of contemporary philosophers of religion.<sup>24</sup> The 'free-will defence' has much to commend it. It envelops issues of (a) responsibility (that we are held accountable for what we do); (b) personhood (that we are not robots, but creatures with free wills); and (c) desert (we will be judged according to our thoughts and actions). It also acknowledges the importance of the human choice between life and death.

As an apologetic tool therefore, the 'free-will defence' is perhaps the most persuasive. No one can conceive of God forcing people into heaven.

Part of this argument's appeal for the apologist is the fact that you can talk about hell without also talking of divine wrath. Traditionally there is no difficulty with a theology that embraces both the notion that we can freely choose to reject God's grace and the fact that God in his sovereignty actively punishes us for our sins. However, the danger of the emphasis on our choice over and above God's action is that God is gradually understood as a passive partner, perhaps even a disinterested bystander. The biblical God who judges, punishes and casts people into the outer darkness is removed. Yet, according to the Bible, we face a judgement, as

well as a choice. The problem is that, from a biblical perspective, the flip-side of free choice is divine judgement. For the person who chooses evil, the punishment is hell. For the person who responds to God's grace, the reward is the presence of God's glory.

If, in our thinking, we seek to be Christian, whether traditionalist or annihilationist, we must not become so wrapped up in the logic of the argument, that we forget the biblical teaching of a God who judges both now (perhaps even in and through the events we label 'hell on earth') and in the future.

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