**HELL – and Its Other Side**

The doctrine of hell necessarily arises in the context of a Christian consideration of violence. For a theological discussion of violence inevitably brings one to the most extreme instance of violence in God, if the traditional, most dominant, Western doctrine of hell is indeed “biblical” – namely, *eternal conscious punishment of the unbeliever*. I will discuss this by interacting with *The Other Side of the Good News* by evangelical author Larry Dixon (1992/2003). When it first appeared, Dr. J.I. Packer wrote that it was the most significant evangelical book on the issue to date.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The central conclusion of the book in the author’s words is

that there is an “adequacy [in] the traditional view of hell... and that alternative views do not adequately reflect the scriptural data concerning hell (p. 172)...

Dixon

set[s] out four areas in which the traditional position enjoys biblical, as well as rational, support, after allowing that the traditional view “might also be erroneous (p. 173).”

I shall return to that possibility.

Widely read evangelical author J. I. Packer in the Foreword underscores the author’s conclusions thus:

To believe what the Bible appears to say about human destiny apart from the grace of God is a bitter pill indeed, and no one should wonder that attempts are made to explore alternative understandings of God’s revelation on this topic. It is suggested that the Bible is unclear, or incoherent, or inconsistent, or untrustworthy, when it speaks of the outcome of judgment after death, or alternatively that virtually the whole church has for two thousand years misunderstood the texts. I do not think so, nor does Dr. Dixon... (p. 7).

Packer makes it clear here that the church can surely *not* be wrong *for two thousand years* in its theology about hell. Yet he subscribes to Reformation orthodoxy that claims “that virtually the whole church” *had theologically been wrong in many areas of doctrine for one thousand five hundred years*; and still is (2,000 years plus later) in its Roman Catholic and Orthodox expressions wrong to this day and counting. Is this not a kind of casuistry?

Throughout much of the final chapter, Dixon critiques in particular Clark Pinnock, who is quoted thus on p. 149:

“[E]verlasting torment is intolerable from a moral point of view because it makes God into a bloodthirsty monster who maintains an everlasting Auschwitz for victims whom He does not even allow to die.”

Dixon’s dilemma is clearly stated:

Obviously, no follower of Christ wants to be guilty of presenting God as one more heinous than Hitler. However, if the Bible is clear on this issue, the Christian must *not* throw in the towel (pp. 149 & 150, emphasis in the original).

And the author proceeds to present God in his holy hatred of sinners precisely in those terms: *as one more heinous than Hitler*!

The crucial conditional fulcrum for the entire thesis is Dixon’s statement: “if the Bible is clear on this issue”. Dixon and Packer, and indeed a host of Christian voices throughout the ages (though with significant exceptions in every age – some of whom are adduced by Dixon), say the Bible contains precisely such clarity about hell *as a place of* *eternal conscious punishment.*

I am compelled to respond to Dixon’s work because of my own vocation: since 1974 I have worked in criminal justice, and have wrestled with punishment, and its ultimate instance, if hell is as Dixon says. In such endeavor, I have become convinced over the years that:

God’s justice is predominantly, and normatively, redemptive or restorative in intention (Chris Marshall, 1999.)

How can one however presume to fault Dixon’s conclusions shared, as Packer rightly indicates, by majority Christians throughout church history?

The dilemma one is in can be put as an analogy. The Bible and its interpretation (Tradition) are like an enormous jigsaw puzzle, with a vast number of individual pieces. The Bible is in fact the Ultimate Cosmic Jigsaw Puzzle, Christians believe. In the analogy, all the puzzle squares are identical, such that a box cover is essential. But what if there were rival box cover pictures, and centuries long debate about which was more authentic?

I am suggesting that in Christian hermeneutics one is up against that kind of jigsaw puzzle with competing box cover pictures. I am suggesting also that we have no hope of putting the puzzle together without the face of Jesus as interpretative guide. The trick is: to allow the box cover picture as guide, one must already have pieced together a face of Jesus, which in turn informs one’s ultimate picture of God. I’m suggesting that it is nonetheless difficult to see the face of Jesus aright. Many are the claims: “*Lo, here is Christ.*”For some, what is seen are only dark blotches. In that case, one does not really “see”, as Jesus and the prophets often claimed. Piece together the jigsaw puzzle when one only sees dark blotches, and one’s picture of God will turn out differently from doing it with the face of Jesus seen “aright”! There is therefore in the long history of Christian interpretation a hermeneutical quandary one ineluctably must participate in.

In my understanding, Dixon and Packer seem to look at a “dark blotches” violently punitive picture of Jesus on a puzzle box cover that was simply the wrong choice of guiding cover (a *heresy* (wrong direction/choice in one of its original Greek meanings), a failure to “see” Jesus’ real face. Their box cover differs, in the end profoundly, from the picture of Jesus who exemplified and said:

*But love your enemies, do good to them...* Thenyour reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, *because* *he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful* (Luke6:35-36)*.*

Interestingly, Dixon does not once in his book refer to this passage, where *mercy* is ultimate.

New Testament theologian Christopher Marshall, in reference to hell in a draft manuscript on biblical restorative justice[[2]](#footnote-2), writes:

Jesus shows that those who think of God in terms of strict distributive or retributive justice *fundamentally misunderstand God* (Matthew 20:1 – 16, 1999, p. 1, emphasis added).

On the contrary, Marshall, in surveying the biblical evidence, writes in the conclusion of his paper:

For our purposes the point to notice is that God’s final word is not retribution but restoration, the re-creation of heaven and earth so that sin, suffering, sickness and death are no more (*ibid*, p. 21).

God’s ultimate word biblically is, indeed, nonviolent, all-inclusive love, which subsumes all biblical categories of wrath, judgment and punishment. *There is no “other side” of Good News! There is Good News, period! And the other side therefore of “hell” as it turns out is God’s burning love.*

Chris Marshall also writes:

But it is crucial to recognize... the *figurative, parabolic nature of the* *language* used to describe realities which… lie outside human experience (p. 14).

He then cites one writer, Jerome Quinn, who says:

Such language is ‘figurative and connotative rather than denotative and literalistic’.... To imagine some kind of cosmic torture-chamber where the

lost suffer endless or prolonged retribution is to miss the figurative, apocalyptic nature of these utterances, as well as the paraenetic or pastoral intention behind them (p. 14).

Marshall further urges with reference to specific details about the fate of those who reject God that perhaps a humble agnosticism is the wisest option... Neither Jesus nor Paul supply specifics about the fate of the wicked, indicates Stephen Travis (1986). *Neither should we.*

And therefore I will not speculate further.

A book-length treatment of “justice” with reference to Christian retributive views in criminal justice is Timothy Gorringe’s *God’s Just Vengeance* (1996). At one point Gorringe asks, with reference to a pervasive and lengthy Christian tradition of retributive views and practices about “criminals”:

How is it that the question whether the law might be wrong, or even wicked, does not arise for these good Christian people (p. 5)?

I could wish that Dixon would ponder more what he allows is at least possible, *that biblically the traditional view of hell* “might also be erroneous (p. 173)” – or even wicked.

In Dixon’s reading, grace/restorative justice seems to have been arrested mid-stream in favour of a retributive justice for the wicked – which is mercy’s inversion.

In Dixon’s theology, *God’s* *grace is for a moment, but his wrath endures forever* (to invert Psalm 30:5; seealso Isaiah 54:7 – 8).

As to the second reference just above, Walter Brueggemann (2016) indicates that

The term “abandon” [in these verses] is about divorce. It is the same word we know in the Gospel quote from Psalm 22, “Why have your forsaken?”…

The two verses deeply intertwine divine admission and divine resolve. Two times there is divine admission; two times there is rhetorical reversal. Twice there is “compassion”, first “great compassion” that leads to homecoming, second “in overflowing love.” We are left to wonder how it was that the poet could dare to host such a line of divine decision-making. More than that, we are left to pause over this revolution in God’s own heart. This is, to be sure, a God of overflowing wrath. But more than that! *This is a kind of self-critical reflection that* *permits Yhwh to act as a “better self” toward Israel,* ***whether Israel seeks to return or not****.* ***Divine compassion is the order of the day***(2016, pp. 91 & 92; emphasis added).

*Divine compassion is indeed* ***the order of the universe.*** Psalm 103:8–12 attests to that as in Isaiah 54; similar instances are found in Psalm 86:1, 2, 4, 6,16, 17, in Psalm 103:13, and in Isaiah 49:15. Brueggemann comments on these passages:

*It is that father, this mother, who meets the desolate* ***in transformative******resolve*** (*ibid*, p. 94, emphasis added).

Wes Howard-Brook (2016) in reading the Church Fathers from the second to the fifth centuries notes how universally the Fathers embraced supersessionism in relation to the Jews. The Church is claimed to have replaced Jews due to their (so the accounts go) obstinate unfaithfulness. It is interesting to note that the doctrine of supersessionismreads *like* the first significant development ofthe doctrine of hell in Augustine. It is also interesting to notethat this is profound misreading not only of the Gospels, but of God in relation to Israel! There is no biblical doctrine of eternal “supersessionism” whereby the Jews are forever banned from God’s covenant love***.*** There is likewise no biblical doctrine of a “hell of eternal conscious torment”whereby all humanity is banned forever from God’s covenant love***.***

It is one thing for Augustine to havemisread the Gospels and the Prophets so long ago. It is another that centuries later “theologians” like Dixon and Packer tragically perpetuate that early Church misreading. The Jews paid horrifically in the wake of supersessionism’s legacy – at the hands of Christians![[3]](#footnote-3) Humanity has also paid horrifically in a variety of ways – at the hands of Christians.

Christopher Marshall observes:

Throughout Christian history, the fear of being consigned to hell by a truly merciless God has fuelled and justified all manner of horrific violence (*ibid*, 2001, p. 6).

The grand and joyous paradox of the Gospel, for those with eyes to see the wildly liberating “picture on the box cover” is: *God’s final judgment/wrath is his mercy![[4]](#footnote-4)* – just as the doctrine of original sin is a post-resurrection Christian doctrine of grace and forgiveness according to James Alison in *The Joy of Being Wrong* (1997).

No contemporary biblical theologian in fact this reviewer has read captures this eschatological insight better than James Alison in *Raising Abel* (1996), drawing on the work of René Girard. The book is a sustained call for Christians in their conversion journey to acquire an “eschatological imagination” that subverts inevitably an anti-christian “apocalyptic imagination” such that:

The perception that God is love has a specific content which is absolutely incompatible with any perception of God as involved in violence, separation, anger, or exclusion (p. 48).”

Therefore:

The commonly held understanding of hell remains strictly within the apocalyptic imagination, that is, it is the result of a violent separation between the good and the evil worked by a vengeful god. It seems to me that if hell is understood thus, *we have quite simply not understood the* *Christian faith*; and the Christian story, instead of being the creativerupture in the system of this world, has come to be nothing less than its sacralization. That is, *the good news which Jesus brought has been quite* *simply lost* (p. 175, emphasis added).

To repeat: In the end, the greatest critique of Dixon’s thesis is simply this: *there is* *biblically no “other side of the Good News”!* There is Good News, *period!* Hell too is ultimatelyembraced by God’s love, its other side.

I suggest that no genuine love affair human or divine is imaginable with Dixon’s depiction of a divine time-limited vicious threat hanging over one’s head. Surely only abject fear, not love, is evoked.

Chris Marshall, in a personal email wrote similarly:

I did have a look at Dixon’s book …. What a depressing piece!! It

illustrates the problems in pulling out a single theme for analysis in isolation from the larger context of the biblical story (May 9, 1999).

Theologian Lee Griffith writes:

It is upon the least lovable people that God heaps the burning coals of love (Romans 12:20 – 21). This is the terror of God. This is the fire of hell, the eternal torment. Those who would reject all love are forced to endure it… It is God who crosses the chasm. It is God who decides to go to hell armed with the burning coals of love… This is the terror of God from which we cannot hide because, in Jesus, God invades not only the earth but hell itself. God is the one who decides to go to hell. Hallelujah and amen (Griffith, 2002, pp. 184 & 185).

1. *Conclusion*

There *is* no other side of the Good News. The other side of hell is God’s love on fire.

*Hallelujah and amen!*

1. # 1 In 2011Dixon wrote a kind of sequel entitled: *“Farewell, Rob Bell”: A Biblical Response to Love Wins*, with a book cover image that for the life of me appears to be a kind of evangelical *fatwa* against Rob Bell. (See:

 [https://www.amazon.ca/dp/B00564HX0A/ref=dp-kindle-redirect?\_encoding=UTF8&btkr=1](https://www.amazon.ca/dp/B00564HX0A/ref%3Ddp-kindle-redirect?_encoding=UTF8&btkr=1), last accessed July 1, 2017.) My response is here: <https://waynenorthey.com/book-review/farewell-rob-bell/>, last accessed July 1, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Since published. See Marshall (2001) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See for starters Wikipedia: “Christianity and antisemitism”, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_and_antisemitism>, last accessed July 1, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See theologian Klaas Goverts on this here: <https://waynenorthey.com/vengeance-is-love-klaas-goverts-trans-floris-and-judith-kersloot/>; last accessed September 18, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)