

Chapter 2: HELL – and Its Other Side

There is inclusion of much of this article in *Volume Three* of this series: WAR AND HELL – and Exception-
Clause Footnote Theology.¹

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.² When it first appeared, Dr. J.I. Packer wrote in the Foreword that it was the most significant evangelical book on the issue to date.³

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
. . .⁴

Dixon sets out four areas in which he claims that the traditional position enjoys biblical, as well as rational, support, after allowing that the traditional view “might also be erroneous.”⁵

I shall return to that possibility.

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

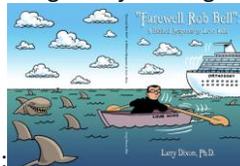
To believe what the Bible appears to say about human destiny apart from the grace of God is a bitter pill indeed, and no one should wonder that attempts are made to explore alternative understandings of God’s revelation on this topic. It is suggested that the Bible is unclear, or incoherent, or inconsistent, 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. . .⁶

Packer makes it clear here that the church can surely *not* be wrong for *two thousand years* in its theology about hell. *Yet*: he subscribed to a Reformation “orthodoxy” which claims “that virtually the

¹ See: <https://waynenorthey.com/2014/04/29/war-and-hell/>, accessed August 23, 2024.

² Dixon, *Other Side*, 1992/2003.

³ In 2011 Dixon 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 presents as a kind of evangelical *fatwa* against Rob Bell. (See for yourself below



— “*Farewell, Rob Bell*”: *A Biblical Response to Love Wins*:

https://www.amazon.ca/dp/B00564HX0A/ref=dp-kindle-redirect?_encoding=UTF8&btkr=1, accessed August 3, 2024.) My review is here: <https://waynenorthey.com/book-review/farewell-rob-bell/>, accessed August 3, 2024.

⁴ Dixon, *Other Side*, 172.

⁵ Dixon, *Other Side*, 173.

⁶ Dixon, *Other Side*, 7.

Justice That Transforms: Restorative Justice — "Not Enough!"

whole church" *had theologically been wrong in many areas of doctrine for one thousand five hundred years*; and still is (500 years plus, later) in its Roman Catholic and Orthodox expressions and counting. *Is this not text-book-case casuistry?*

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

[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.⁷

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.⁸

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 a Christian understanding of punishment, and *its ultimate instance*, if hell is as Dixon says. In such endeavour, I have become convinced over the years that

God's justice is predominantly, and normatively, redemptive or restorative in intention.⁹

How can one however presume to fault Dixon's conclusions shared, as Packer rightly indicates, by majority Christians throughout Western Church History?

The dilemma one is in can be stated as an analogy. The Bible and its interpretation (*Tradition*) are like an enormous jigsaw puzzle, with a vast number of individual pieces. It is in fact a kind of Ultimate Cosmic Jigsaw Puzzle, Christians believe. In the analogy, all the puzzle pieces are identical squares,¹⁰ 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 the 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 called us to. 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

⁷ Dixon, *Other Side*, 149.

⁸ Dixon, *Other Side*, 19 – 150; emphasis in original.

⁹ Theologian Chris Marshall in draft of *Beyond Retribution*; "Judgment and Justice: Some Brief Observations," presented at a postgraduate seminar at the Bible College of New Zealand, May 3, 1999, 1."

¹⁰ I do not believe however in a "flat view" of biblical interpretation!

Justice That Transforms: Restorative Justice — “Not Enough!”

picture of Jesus on a puzzle box cover that was simply the wrong choice of guiding covers (a *heresy* — “(wrong) choice” is one of its original Greek meanings), a failure to “see” Jesus’ true 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. . . Then your 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.*¹¹

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,¹² writes:

Jesus shows that those who think of God in terms of strict distributive or retributive justice *fundamentally misunderstand God* (Matthew 20:1 – 16).¹³

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.¹⁴

God’s ultimate word biblically is, indeed, nonviolent, all-inclusive love, which subsumes all biblical categories of wrath, judgment and punishment. *There is therefore no “other side” of The 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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶

¹¹ Luke 6:35-36.

¹² Marshall, “Judgment and Justice.” It was since published: Marshall, *Beyond Retribution*.

See also Marshall, *Compassionate Justice*. Both are outstanding studies on biblical justice. My reviews are here: *Beyond Retribution*: (<https://waynenorthey.com/book-review/beyond-retribution/>, accessed August 23, 2024); and here: *Compassionate Justice*: (<https://waynenorthey.com/book-review/compassionate-justice/>, accessed August 23, 2024.)

¹³ Marshall, “Judgment and Justice,” 20. Please see also:

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. (Alison, *Raising Abel*, 48; also cited below)

¹⁴ Marshall, “Judgment and Justice,” 21.

¹⁵ Marshall, “Judgment and Justice,” 14.

¹⁶ Marshall, “Judgment and Justice,” 14.

It is also *deliberate choice* to read “God” this way — a “heresy”! (“*Heresia*” is derived from Ancient Greek *haíresis* (αἵρεσις), the English *heresy* originally meant “choice” or “thing chosen”. — see: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heresy>, accessed August 23, 2024)

Therein lies the tragedy of Dixon, Packer — and a grand swath of Western theologians/Christians.

In my novel, *Chrysalis Crucible*, the protagonist, Andy, is suddenly overwhelmed with new insight, as he and others toured the Nazi concentration camp, Dachau (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dachau>, accessed August 23, 2024):

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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.¹⁷ 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 Gorringer's *God's Just Vengeance*. At one point, Gorringer asks, in light of a pervasive and lengthy Christian legal tradition of retributive views and practices about heretics/wrongdoers/criminals:

How is it that the question whether the law might be wrong, or even wicked, does not arise for these good Christian people?¹⁸

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"*¹⁹ — *or even wicked!* Is it possible — *pace* Packer — that for 2,000 years the Western Church has been largely wrong about what is biblical justice? I think so.

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.*²⁰

As to the second reference just above, brilliant and prolific Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann²¹ 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 you 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

Then a realization blasted into his consciousness like the imagined sudden blistering heat of those ovens at full burn: *Dachau is Christendom's most perfect human picture of hell!*

The parallels overwhelmed. *God is Hitler. The ovens are God's specially built chambers of eternal conscious torment*, to which human victims by the billions are fed because they refused to take the hand of the feudal lord's son in marriage. Jesus the Jilted Lover, whose cry of wrath echoed throughout the Corrupted Cosmos.

Only unlike Daniel and his companions in Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace, these victims would experience the full suffering of the oven for ever and ever, God be praised, amen! For there even the worm "dieth not." This was Christendom's "god."

This was Evangelicals' hell. This was what Billy Graham warned his listeners about, what G. E. holds onto in his evangelistic vision of deity. This was the deep dark open secret about Neal Steinhauer's, Bill Bright's, Evangelicals' "God who loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." (Northey, *Chrysalis Crucible*, 581.)

One asks: How can one "love" such a "god," except in a *pro forma* way — "Because the Bible tells me so!"?

¹⁷ Travis, *Judgment of God*.

¹⁸ Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, 5.

¹⁹ Dixon, *Other Side*, 173.

²⁰ To invert Psalm 30:5; see also Isaiah 54:7 – 8:

7 "For a brief moment I abandoned you,
but with great compassion I will take you back.

8 In a burst of anger I turned my face away for a little while.
But with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,"
says the LORD, your Redeemer.

²¹ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Brueggemann, accessed August 23, 2024.

Justice That Transforms: Restorative Justice — “Not Enough!”

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.²²

*Divine compassion is indeed the order of the universe.*²³ 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.*²⁴

Wes Howard-Brook, in reading the Church Fathers from the second to the fifth centuries,²⁵ notes how universally the Fathers embraced supersessionism²⁶ 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 supersessionism reads *like* the first significant development of the doctrine of hell in Augustine. It is also interesting to note that 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 some are banned forever from God’s covenant love.²⁷

It is one thing for some Church Fathers — Augustine for instance — to have misread the Gospels and the Prophets on this, so long ago. It is another that centuries later, theologians like Dixon and Packer tragically perpetuate that early Church misreading/heresy.

The Jews in Western Christendom paid appallingly — at the hands of Christians! — in the wake of supersessionism’s legacy.²⁸ Humanity has also paid horrifically in a variety of ways — at the hands of Christians! — the wake of the traditional doctrine of hell — the single greatest anti-evangelistic tool ever imagined!

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.²⁹

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!*³⁰ — just as the doctrine of

²² Brueggemann, *GOD, NEIGHBOR, EMPIRE*, 91 - 92; emphasis added.

²³ Theologian Stanley Hauerwas, in *With the Grain of the Universe*, argues precisely this point.

So likewise argue theologian Nancey Murphy and physicist George Ellis, in *On the Moral Nature of the Universe: Theology, Cosmology, and Ethics*.

²⁴ Brueggemann, *GOD, NEIGHBOR, EMPIRE*, 2016, 94; emphasis added.

²⁵ Howard-Brook, “Come Out, My People!”

²⁶ See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Supersessionism>, accessed August 23, 2024.

²⁷ See much on my website about hell here: <https://waynenorthey.com/?s=hell>, accessed August 4, 2024.

²⁸ See for starters Wikipedia: “Christianity and antisemitism,”

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_and_antisemitism, accessed August 4, 2024.

²⁹ Marshall, *Beyond Retribution*, 2001.

³⁰ See theologian Klaas Govers on this here: <https://waynenorthey.com/vengeance-is-love-klaas-govers-trans-floris-and-judith-kersloot/>, accessed August 23, 2024; accessed August 4, 2024. We read:

Vengeance is recovery

The Hebrew word for vengeance is *naqam*. And *naqam* has the meaning: restoring justice.[² — Elsewhere (<https://wereldgeschiedenis.com/#article/4166>, accessed August 23, 2024) the author says, “God’s wrath is not blind anger, but a ‘seeing anger’ that looks beyond. So if God rebukes his enemy, it has

Justice That Transforms: Restorative Justice — "Not Enough!"

original sin is a post-resurrection Christian doctrine of grace and forgiveness, according to James Alison in *The Joy of Being Wrong*.³¹

No contemporary biblical theologian in fact this reviewer has read captures that eschatological insight better than James Alison in *Raising Abel*,³² drawing on the work of René Girard.³³ 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.³⁴

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 creative rupture 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*.³⁵

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 ultimately embraced by God's love, its "other side" — *pace* Dixon.

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.³⁶

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

to do with the breath of his Spirit." Goverts renders Isaiah 11:4 – "By the breath of his mouth [referring to the Messiah], he will slay the destroyer [Dutch – *afbreker*]."

He writes,

So his wrath is a creative anger that brings about something which otherwise would not have been. Sometimes we need to deconstruct (make a clearing) in order to create another path, a passible way." Vengeance is the restoration and recovery of justice. Traditionally the word *naqam* also has to do with *qum*, which means 'rising up.' Thus, vengeance has got everything to do with raising up what has fallen.

Vengeance biblically, therefore, has everything to do with the restoration of all things.[³ — In Acts 3:32, the Dutch word for restoration is '*wederoprichting*' and carries both the sense of restoration and raising up.] "God of vengeance, shine forth," says Psalm 94. Popular opinion says if God appears with his vengeance, it will become dark. But Psalm 94 says, the light will shine. There will again be radiance in our lives.

³¹ Alison, *Joy of Being Wrong*.

³² Alison, *Raising Abel*.

³³ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ren%C3%A9_Girard (accessed August 23, 2024).

³⁴ Alison, *Raising Abel*, 48.

³⁵ Alison, *Raising Abel*, 175; emphasis added.

³⁶ Marshall, personal email, May 9, 1999.

Justice That Transforms: Restorative Justice — "Not Enough!"

who decides to go to hell. Hallelujah and amen.³⁷

Conclusion

There *is* no other side of the Good News. The other side of hell is God's love on fire — in an agony to win us over to himself. *Hallelujah and Amen!*

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³⁷ Griffith, *War on Terrorism*, 184 – 185.