
Pro Rege

Volume 24 | Number 4

Article 5

June 1996

Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment (Book Review)

Michael Williams

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Recommended Citation

Williams, Michael (1996) "Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 24: No. 4, 24.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol24/iss4/5

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Book Review

Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment, by Robert A. Peterson (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed) 1995. 246 pages, paperback, \$12.99. Reviewed by Michael Williams, Associate Professor of Theology, Covenant Theological Seminary.

According to a 1990 Gallop poll, 78% of Americans believe that they stand a good chance of going to heaven, but only 4% believe that they might spend eternity in hell. Peterson's openly evangelistic purpose is to raise the second statistic. Even though he claims that he wants "people who do not know the Lord to fear God's wrath" (236), the book is not a hellfire-and-brimstone exposition of the destiny of the unregenerate. Peterson writes with a pastoral warmth and sincere concern for evangelism that belies the harshness of his chosen subject.

It is doubtful that an unbeliever is likely to pick and read a 250 page book devoted to the doctrine of eternal punishment for the unregenerate, and Peterson is fully aware of that. He actually writes for the average Christian who has questions or doubts concerning the biblical teaching on the subject. And this is where the book shines. Peterson canvasses the biblical materials in such simple, straightforward language, that the book would make a good choice for an adult Sunday School class or Bible study group.

Whether it is the result of an erosion of commitment to biblical authority, a general relativizing of the importance of doctrine, or the wishful universalism of democratic and egalitarian culture, the biblical teaching concerning hell and eternal punishment has indeed fallen upon hard times. Peterson points out that up until the nineteenth century, the doctrine of eternal punishment for the wicked received almost universal affirmation among Christians of all stripes. Since about 1800, however, no doctrine has been so roundly criticized and thoroughly abandoned as the doctrine of hell. The competing doctrines of universalism (ultimately all men will be saved), postmortem evangelism (the dead are given a final opportunity to respond to the gospel), and annihilationism (the unregenerate dead cease to exist upon the last judgment), have all impacted the evangelical consciousness.

Peterson singles out the ideas of John Hick and Clark Pinnock for special attention. Hick, a liberal theologian who has been moving progressively away from his fundamentalist roots for years, argues that hell, eternal punishment, and exclusive grounds for redemption, are all morally repugnant. The result is a universalism in which all Christian claims are relativized into irrelevance. In particular, this universalism shows the theological cost of denying divine wrath against sin. Paint a picture of God in thoroughly benevolent hues, and you will have no place on your canvas for the cross. As David Wells puts it in the forward of the book, "A God who is without wrath is a God whose Christ has no cross, and if he has no cross, it can only be because we are thought to have no need of his cross." The biblically central themes of sin and redemption lose their urgency and point without full affirmation of the doctrine of hell.

As an Armenian evangelical, Pinnock cannot affirm the universalism of Hick (for universalism destroys all human choice), even though he too finds the idea of punishment for the unregenerate a reprehensible proposition. Pinnock is left then with a doctrine of postmortem evangelism. God is so loving as to secure that each and every human being receives a chance to respond to the gospel. If it does not happen during this life, it will take place after death. Peterson's treatment of Pinnock is particularly fine (8-11, 150-52, 229-34). He demonstrates quite well that Pinnock's views do not hold biblical water. I would press Pinnock a bit further, asking him if it is not possible that his ideas proceed from a romantic notion of egalitarian grace. Pinnock's argument is that if God is good and has sufficient power to save all, then he must do everything possible to save all. While the datum does justice to a surface reading of I Timothy 2:4, I believe that it is terribly flawed, for it declares grace to be a thing owed rather than a gift bestowed. In insisting that God be gracious, the grace of God is in fact destroyed, for it loses its very character as gift. The marvelous wonder of God's grace cannot be manhandled by syllogistic reasoning.

The issue of the universal call of the gospel is a missiological concern, not a problem of theology proper. Peterson quite rightly fears that a denigration of the doctrine of hell via universalist or inclusivist notions of grace will mean a devaluation of the church's missiological calling. The serious reality of sin and redemption is a call to evangelistic concern for the church.

The great strength of this book, however, is not its analysis of alternatives to the doctrine of hell, but rather its exposition of the doctrine within scripture. Peterson rightly emphasizes that the doctrine of eternal punishment receives the lion's share of its biblical articulation from the teaching of Jesus, who was not at all shy in using the very real threat of hell as an invitation to the kingdom and kingdom living (39-76).

The argument of the book would have been strengthened if Peterson had employed a covenantal analysis. God's covenant always comes with both blessings and curses. This should not surprise us. Like all relationships between persons, the covenant is an inherently moral relationship. Entering into relationship—or refusing to enter—and living within relationship, are matters of moral decision and responsibility. Jesus warnings concerning hell are to be read in light of the covenant curses of scripture. Peterson's failure to situate hell and eternal punishment within its biblical covenant context notwithstanding; his lucid style, cogent presentation, and thorough survey of the biblical materials, promise to make this a helpful study for both the lay person and the Bible teacher.