

Eternal Torment—A Help or Hindrance?

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Can we be good without hell? Can society succeed morally without the weight of eternal torment being held over its head? This was a theme article in the June 16, 1997 Christianity Today magazine. Mr. Jerry Walls, the author, purports that the consequence of Divine judgment is a necessary barrier to moral wrong. Unfortunately he assumes that eternal conscious torment in hell is the Biblical penalty. It is not. "For the wages of sin is *death*; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Romans 6:23

Is eternal torment an effective deterrent of evil? The doctrine has had centuries to prove its ability to tame and sanctify. Sadly, as any history student can attest, from the time of our Lord's earthly ministry to the present human history has been filled with an abundance of murder, robbery and vice. All committed by professed Christians aware of teachings about hell. The threat of eternal torment, erroneously preached as part of the Good News, has not controlled evil. It did not and cannot engender godliness in the world.

The true motivating force to serve God and righteousness, the one we pray all Christian people will gain strength from, is love. A love of things Divine such as righteousness, justice, mercy, peace, joy—these alone will bring obedience from a fervent pure heart. Other motives, such as fear, tend to produce Christians "in name only."

Our acquaintance with many Christians throughout the spectrum of Christianity has shown that a very small minority gave themselves to Christ because they feared eternal torment. The scripture 1 John 4:18-19 echoes the motivation for our commitment to Christ. "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love. We love him, because he first loved us."

In Matthew 13 Jesus painted a broad panorama of Christian history. The parable of the wheat and tares describes the course of Christianity from the beginning, to its culmination in a harvest. A householder sowed good seed in his field. The anticipated fruitage was corrupted by the householder's enemy who over sowed the wheat field with tare seed (false wheat) while the householder's menservants slept. When the blade was spring up and brought forth fruit, the act of vandalization was manifest. The true wheat was choked in the midst of overwhelming amounts of imitation wheat.

Jesus Explained the Wheat and Tares

This lesson greatly interested the disciples and so they asked Jesus to explain it. What a great benefit to us that he did! The householder represented Jesus. The field—the Christian world with its fruitages. The good fruit represented Christ's true followers, his faithful disciples. Tares, which outwardly look like wheat, were imitations planted by the enemy—Satan.

The tares were not to be weeded out until the harvest which would take place in the end of this world or age (Greek — *aion*). Jesus' work at the end of the Christian Age is as Chief Reaper. He will then send his angels (Greek *angelos*—messengers), his disciples, to harvest the wheat at his second advent just as he did at the first. Luke 10:1-3; John 4:35,36

Two Seeds, One True—One False

The two fruitages resulted from two different kinds of seed. Wheat, the true Christian, springs forth from the Word of God. This is taught in the parable of the sower. "The seed is the word of God...they which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it and bring forth fruit with patience." Luke 8:11,15 The apostles carried forth the ministry of Christ, preaching the word of life, sowing seeds of the kingdom. The Father "begat us with the word of truth". James 1:18 "In Christ Jesus have I begotten you through the gospel," said the Apostle Paul. I Corinthians 4:15

A sinister turn in church history occurred when the apostles fell asleep in death (compare Matthew 13:25). In their absence Satan sought to corrupt the church. His weapon was error. Just as truth produces a true Christian, so error produces an imitation. Satan's work of corrupting God's truth in Christ began even during the apostles' time. "Every spirit that confesses not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God; and thus is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now is already in the world." I John 4:3

That anti-Christian spirit spread throughout the Christian world sowing tares. Satan hoped to choke the spiritual life out of God's wheat by surrounding them with tares. One of Satan's principal instruments to sow bad seed were the Neo-Platonist Christians. These "philosopher" Christians sought to apply scientific methods in understanding scripture. Their "science" was derived from Plato, a great man—unfortunately also a Pagan. The unfortunate result of bending scripture to fit human philosophy was the creation of bad seed and its fruit—nominal Christians. Human science did no favor to the church of God. How sad that the apostolic admonition was not heeded, "Avoid profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called: which some (believers) professing have erred concerning the faith." I Timothy 6:20,21

A False Seed Close up

One such false seed was the Grecian philosophy of eternal torment for the wicked. Neo-Platonic concepts of the afterlife corrupted the simple truth of the Bible Hell. The New Testament Hades and the Old Testament Sheol no longer were perceived as the death state. They were instead transformed into a place of eternal conscious torment. (Space does not here permit an adequately thorough discussion of death and hell. We encourage you to order the booklet "What Say the Scriptures Concerning Hell?" offered at the end of this letter. The scriptures on these subjects are fully discussed in the booklet.)

The threat of such enormous and eternal suffering held over the heads of unbelievers has not, is not and will not accomplish what God intends for the masses of mankind. Converted to Christ under pressure many people (who would not otherwise burden themselves with Christ's cross), have made a profession of faith.

God's Real Purpose in Christianity

Conversion through coercion is not God's purpose in Christianity. "True worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." John 4:23,24 In other words, God wants our hearts to yield in willing love to Him and His truth. Many unwilling converts, motivated by fear, have feigned obedience to Him. That is how a tare is created.

The purpose of Christianity is to call out a people for God's name. Those called out are God's elect. The elected ones, found faithful in this life, will serve as priests and kings of God. Their ministry will be to the remainder of humanity—those not called and willingly converted during the Christian Era. See Acts 15:14-17 and Revelation 5:10.

Hell in National News

"The Rekindling of Hell" (U.S. News and World Report for March 25, 1991) noted "Record numbers of Americans now believe in a nether world and in a wide variety of after death punishments." According to a Gallop survey done in November 1990, three out of five Americans now believe in hell. However, views of what constitute hell sharply differ.

Some try to understand hell philosophically and, through human wisdom, invent the hell of their choice. Others fall back on creeds of human invention and hold forth the hell of tradition. Some are returning to the Scriptures to study them anew. The Scriptures are shedding light on hell. "Such highly regarded theologians as Clark H. Pinnock, theology

professor at McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton, Ontario; John R.W. Stott, president of the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, and Philip E. Hughes, a noted Anglican clergyman and author, contend that rather than suffering endlessly, those who ultimately reject God will simply be put out of existence in the 'consuming fire' of hell."

"Those who subscribe to this view—called 'annihilationism'—point to New Testament passages that speak of 'eternal destruction' and 'the second death' for those who know not God and to the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel's declaration that 'the soul that sins shall die.'" (U.S. News and World Report, March 25, 1991, p. 63). These men are commendable for turning back to scriptures to understand what hell is. Hughes interestingly observes "that the traditional belief in unending punishment is linked to the erroneous belief in the 'innate immortality' of the soul—a belief, he says, that is based more on Plato than on the Bible."

On the other hand, traditionalists "argue that annihilationism takes some of the punch out of Gospel preaching. 'To tell the unrepentant that the worst fate that could befall them is extinction,' says Harold O.J. Brown, a theology professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 'makes continuing in sin seem less risky.'" And that is the very point of the parable of the wheat and tares. Wheat, the true Christian, rejoice to leave sin behind. They love righteousness and hate iniquity. They are not coerced by terror, but by love and the beauty of God's Word.

Forewarned is Forearmed

Our hope for all God's people is that they will be led on to full Christian fruitage by God's Word. We pray that His people will stand firmly for the truth even against the majority public opinion or entrenched human creeds. Remember that the tares in the parable are the overwhelming majority. Let us all, by the grace of God, receive the Word of God into good and honest hearts, bringing forth good fruit with patience.