The Unpopular Doctrine of Hell.

The doctrine of Hell in the 21st century is taboo. Louis Berkhof stated in his day, “In present day theology there is an evident tendency in some circles to rule out the idea of eternal punishment.”¹ J.I. Packer states, “The sentimental secularism of modern Western culture, with its exalted optimism about human nature, its shrunken idea of God, and its skepticism as to whether personal morality really matters—in other words, its decay of conscience—makes it hard for Christians to take the reality of hell seriously.”² A recent survey shows that among professing Christians (evangelicals and mainline protestants) the idea of an eternal punishment is quickly going out of style. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life in a survey entitled “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey” dated June 2008 asked the question, “Do you believe in life after death?” The results were interesting. Seventy-four percent of adults in the US believe in an afterlife, while 81% of Protestants do, 77% of Catholics do, and 39% of Jews do. What is remarkable here is that 20% of all Protestants, 23% of Catholics, and 61% (!) of all Jews surveyed do not believe in any type of life after death. Even worse, with regard to certainty, only 62% of Protestants, 45% of Catholics, and 16% of Jews surveyed stated that they believe in life after death with certainty! Only 49% of the respondents of mainline Protestant denominations were certain of life after death.³

They also asked the Hell question, “Do you think there is a hell, where people who have led bad lives and die without being sorry are eternally punished?” Only 73% of all Protestants believed in Hell, 60% of all Catholics, and 22% of Jews believed in Hell. The survey showed

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82% of those who belonged to self-defined evangelical churches believed in Hell, while only 56% of those belonging to mainline Protestant churches believed in Hell. The figures for the evangelical churches seems high, but it strongly contrasts with other denominations and affiliations.

In another survey conducted in 2003, the Barna Group found that while 71% of those surveyed believed in Hell, the definition of Hell was not clear. He states, “While there is no dominant view of Hell, two particular perspectives are popular. Four out of ten adults believe that Hell is ‘a state of eternal separation from God’s presence’ (39%) and one-third (32%) says it is ‘an actual place of torment and suffering where people’s souls go after death.’ A third perspective that one in eight adults believe is that ‘Hell is just a symbol of an unknown bad outcome after death’ (13%). Other respondents were ‘not sure’ or said they that they do not believe in an afterlife (16%).”

The doctrine of Hell has been part of the Christian doctrinal corpus since the very beginning, and even long before that with the Jewish canon. However, today there seems to be a number of various and wide ranging viewpoints on Hell, if it is believed at all. While the concept of eternal punishment may be unattractive to the modern mind, the modern notion of an all-loving, touchy-feely, nonjudgmental God, and the deification of the self, it is a critical component of revelation that must be fully investigated. Hell must be defined theologically.

What is Hell, and why is it a Christian doctrine? The Westminster Confession of Faith in chapter 33, section two, states,

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4 Ibid., p. 33.
The end of God’s appointing this day is for the manifestation of the glory of His mercy, in the eternal salvation of the elect; and of His justice, in the damnation of the reprobate, who are wicked and disobedient. For then shall the righteous go into everlasting life, and receive that fullness of joy and refreshing, which shall come from the presence of the Lord: but the wicked, who know not God, and obey not the Gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast into eternal torments, and be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power.

The wicked, those who do not know God nor obey the gospel of Jesus Christ, are cast into eternal torments. Note the Confession states that these people will be punished with an everlasting punishment, and separated from the presence and power of God. Wayne Grudem in his *Systematic Theology* defines Hell as “a place of eternal conscious punishment for the wicked.” Charles Hodge states, “Our Lord in his account of the final judgment says, that the wicked shall go away into everlasting punishment; but the righteous into life eternal.” Hell is a place where those who have rebelled against God and who have not obeyed the gospel command to repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ will be sent for eternal, conscious torment as punishment for rebellion against an infinite and holy God. After looking in some detail at some of the Scriptures that speak of Hell, we will define it with greater clarity and with a series of characteristics, discuss some of the alternatives to Hell and their problems, and then briefly note the implications of the doctrine of Hell if indeed it is a real place.

A popular alternative to Hell as an everlasting conscious punishment from God is called annihilationism. Grudem defines this alternative as ‘a teaching that, after the wicked have suffered the penalty for God’s wrath for a time, God will ‘annihilate’ them so that they no longer exist.” The punishment will be conscious, but will not be eternal. Proponents offer a variety of

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8 Grudem, 1149 – 1150.
supposedly Biblical and extra-Biblical evidences for this view, and I will briefly explore the validity of these arguments when dealing with specific texts.

For any doctrine relating to Christianity, the Bible must be the ultimate authority. What God says about any particular doctrine or belief must be the final word on the subject. Lewis S. Chafer in his *Systematic Theology* states, “Uninstructed minds revolt at the doctrine of eternal perdition and the more sympathetic they are by nature the more they revolt; however, the doctrine does not originate with human reason nor is it influenced by human sympathy. The theologian here, as always, is appointed to discover and defend that which God has revealed.”

Therefore this paper will briefly examine a few of the pertinent New Testament texts on the subject of Hell as an eschatological final judgment for the wicked.

Shedd states, “The strongest support of the doctrine of endless punishment is the teaching of Christ, the Redeemer of man. Though the doctrine is plainly taught in the Pauline epistles and other parts of Scripture, yet without the explicit and reiterated statements of God incarnate, it is doubtful whether so awful a truth would have had such a conspicuous place as it always has had in the creed of Christendom.” In the rest of this paper, I would like to explore just a few of these texts to determine what Jesus said, and to ascertain whether our definition of Hell is accurate, or if perhaps annihilationism is a more appropriate belief.

Our first text is Matthew 25:31-33, 41, and 46. The text in the ESV states, ³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ⁴¹ Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me,”

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you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” Note some of the characteristics mentioned by Jesus in this passage. There will be a separation of some people from other people, the righteous from the wicked. Another is association. There is disassociation from God and association with the devil and his angels. Thirdly, there is a cursing, a damnation to eternal or everlasting fire. Finally there is a contrast between eternal punishment and eternal life.

The word αἰώνιον is used for both everlasting life and everlasting punishment. Hendrickson notes, “The word to be used in the translation should make clear in which respect the two, namely, punishment for the wicked and life for the righteous, are the same. They are the same in this one respect, namely, that they last on and on and on, without ever coming to an end.”¹¹ According to the BDAG, this word is also used of God in numerous places in Scripture, such as Genesis 21:33, Isaiah 26:4 and 40:28, Romans 16:26, and Hebrews 9:14.¹² Shedd has an extensive section in his Dogmatic Theology regarding the importance of this word¹³, but suffice it to say that αἰώνιον clearly implies a situation without end. In fact, of the 69 uses of the adjective in the New Testament 67 are translated by means of eternal or some synonym. In all sorts of ways the meaning of endless duration is made clear in such passages. It appears that this text clearly refutes the notion that the wicked will eventually be annihilated. It mentions

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¹³ Shedd, 892 – 897.
separation from God’s blessing, and eternal or everlasting punishment, fire, and the words used imply that the punishment will go on forever without end, and without annihilation.

Another popular word used in this text along with many others is “fire” (there are 13 instances of the word fire being used in the gospels with reference to Hell). The word “fire” provides a vivid description of the torment and consequences of Hell. Fire burns and ruins what it consumes. It is extremely painful when one is burned with fire. The heat generated causes intense reactions in the body. Man seems to be naturally afraid of fire. While one must not stretch the symbolism and metaphor of fire to an extreme, looking at the characteristics of fire can possibly provide one with some of the characteristics of Hell, since the term is used in comparison and description.

Another text is Mark 9:43 – 48, where Jesus is speaking. “43 And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. 45 And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. 47 And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 48 ‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’” Hell in this passage is translated from the word Ghenna. One commentator states:

The word translated “hell” in vv. 43, 45, 47 is gehenna. The Greek word is a transliteration of two Hebrew words meaning valley of Hinnom. The reference is to the deep valley on the south and west side of Jerusalem. In pre-Israelite times it was the site of child sacrifice to Molech. Some Israelites, in times of spiritual decline, seem to have adopted the practice also (Jer 7:31; 19:6; 32:35; cf. 2 Kgs 16:3). In an attempt to stop the practice, Josiah desecrated the site (2 Kgs 23:10). During intertestamental times it became the garbage and sewage dump of Jerusalem and a symbol of the place of

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14 Some manuscripts add verses 44 and 46, which are identical to verse 48.
punishment (1 Enoch 27:2; 4 Ezra 7:36) because worms and fires were always consuming the refuse (v. 48).  

Hell is obviously in view here. Additionally, the concept of everlasting torment, and not annihilation, is also meant in this passage. Hendrickson states, “Gehenna is defined as ‘the unquenchable fire.’ The meaning is that the punishment for those who enter there is never-ending, everlasting.” Hendrickson continues by stating, “The torment, accordingly, will be both external, the fire; and internal, the worm. Moreover, it will never end.” Also, “When Scripture speaks of unquenchable fire, the point is not merely that there will always be a fire burning in Gehenna, but that the wicked will have to endure that torment forever. They will always be the objects of God’s wrath, never of his love. Thus also their worm never dies, and their shame is everlasting.”

I emphasize this point in order to positively refute the notion that the punishment of the wicked will be limited. When thinking about these two passages in both Matthew and Mark, it is best to remember J.C. Ryle, “These are awful expressions. They call for reflection rather than exposition. They should be pondered, considered and remembered by all who claim to be Christians. It matters little whether we regard them as figurative and symbolic. If they are, one thing at least is very clear. The worm and the fire are symbols of real things. There is a real hell, and that hell is eternal.”

Another characteristic description of Hell is found in numerous verses in Matthew, such as Matthew 8:12, 13:42, 13:50, 22:13, 25:30, and Luke 13:28. Hell is described in these verses as a place where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Hendrickson states that “his
weeping is that of inconsolable, never-ending wretchedness, and utter, everlasting hopelessness. The accompanying grinding or gnashing of teeth denotes excruciating pain and frenzied anger.” Matthew Henry provides another vivid description of the meaning of this phrase. “In hell there will be great grief, floods of tears shed to no purpose; anguish of spirit preying eternally upon the vitals, in the sense of the wrath of God, is the torment of the damned. Great indignation: damned sinners will gnash their teeth for spite and vexation, full of the fury of the Lord; seeing with envy the happiness of others, and reflecting with horror upon the former possibility of their own being happy, which is now past.” All of these vivid descriptions are of a place that will be tormenting, full of anger, rage, and bitterness. These views of Hell should remind every Christian that Hell is a real place and real people will be there. It should provoke us to action in spreading the gospel message as the divinely ordained means of bringing lost sinners to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Revelation also has a significant passage regarding Hell as the final judgment for those whose names are not written in the Book of Life. Revelation 20:10 speaks of the lake of fire, “and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.” Also Revelation 20:14-15 states, speaking of the Great White Throne Judgment, “Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” Note that the result of judgment is based on their names being written in the book of life, or those who had placed their faith in Jesus Christ. The final abode for these individuals is the lake of fire,

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19 Hendrickson, Matthew, 874.
defined in verse 10 as a place where the inhabitants will be “tormented day and night forever and ever.” John in Revelation is reinforcing the words of Jesus and his description of Hell. The phrase lake of fire occurs only in Revelation, and that for a total of six times, in 19:20; 20:10, 14 (twice), 15; and 21:8. Hendrickson states “John explains the significance of this phrase by identifying it as the second death. This is the place where the wicked are forever separated from the living God to suffer eternally the torments of hell. It is the place in which the wicked spend eternity.”

John stresses the situation of the wicked, and the imagery of the lake of fire endless tormenting should bring tears to the eyes of Christians who read these words and understand them to mean that their neighbors or friends may be condemned to this eternal death.

Jude also mentions briefly the place of Hell and describes it as “the gloom of utter darkness” in verse 13. Literally, Jude says “the blackness of darkness.” This vivid description is a place of gloom. 2 Peter 2:17 is a parallel passage that states the same thing in similar words. Hendrickson states “these wicked men will spend eternity in utter darkness. They exist without hope in absolute oblivion.”

A brief mention must be made of several other verses that speak of destruction of the wicked, such as the following verses:

- Philippians 3:19: Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.
- 1 Thessalonians 5:3: While people are saying, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

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- 2 Thessalonians 1:9: They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might,

- 2 Peter 3:7: But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.

Regarding these passages, Grudem states that “these passages do not necessarily imply the cessation of existence, for in these passages the terms used for “destruction” do not necessarily imply a ceasing to exist or some kind of annihilation, but can simply be ways of referring to the harmful and destructive effects of final judgment of unbelievers.” Mirriam-Webster’s Dictionary demonstrates that the word “destruction” may refer to something other than complete annihilation, or the wiping out of existence. The first couple of definitions of “destruction” state the “to ruin the structure of, organic existence, or the condition of, or to ruin as if by tearing to shreds.” Therefore the use of the word “destruction” when pertaining to those in Hell does not necessarily mean that those individuals will be wiped out of existence, and in fact there is ample evidence in other Scriptures that indicate that those individuals will be tormented for eternity.

For instance, the word for “destruction” in Philippians 3:19 and 2 Peter 3:7 is ἀπώλεια which can mean destruction, utter ruin, or complete loss. The word for destruction used in 1 Thessalonians 5:3 and 2 Thessalonians 1:9 is ὀλεθρος, which can mean ruin, perdition, death, or destruction, and is usually used in conjunction with a religious component. In this instance in 2 Thessalonians this word is used with the adjective “eternal,” which shows that this destruction is not annihilation or going out of existence at some particular point in time, but continues on

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23 Grudem, 1150.
25 BDAG, 103.
Matthew Henry in commenting on the verse in 2 Thessalonians states, “Their punishment will be no less than destruction, not of their being, but of their bliss; not that of the body alone, but both as to body and soul. This destruction will be everlasting. They shall be always dying, and yet never die. Their misery will run parallel with the line of eternity. The chains of darkness are everlasting chains, and the fire is everlasting fire. It must needs be so, since the punishment is inflicted by an eternal God, fastening upon an immortal soul, set out of the reach of divine mercy and grace.”

One of the more popular arguments against the concept of Hell, despite what has been presented so far, is that God is Love and the concept of eternal and conscious torment for unbelievers is inconsistent with this God. The argument goes something like, “A God who is love and is represented by the love and compassion of Jesus would never consign a person to eternal torment simply for not believing in Him.” Their alternatives include immediate annihilation without any punishment, or universalism, in which everyone will eventually be saved except for Satan and his angels. However, this line of reasoning is faulty on a number of lines. One is that, yes, John states that God is love, but He is not only love. God has a number of attributes as recorded in the Bible. God is merciful, faithful, just, omniscient, righteous, holy, and many other attributes. Requiring God to only be love, and then defining love in such a way as to exclude all or many of His other attributes is an exercise in eisegesis in which man defines God (or perhaps, god) on his own terms rather than on God’s terms, which are recorded in the Holy Scriptures. Dabney states that in pursuing this line of reasoning, “We see the absurd contradictions into which such a mode of interpretation would lead us.”

26 BDAG, 563.
27 Matthew Henry, 2Thes1:5.
Another fault with this line of reasoning is that it removes the punishment for rebellion and wickedness against a Holy and Just and Righteous God. This would make God a liar, and remove all incentive in this world to be good. Grudem states that “if there was no punishment of unbelievers at all, even people like Hitler and Stalin would have nothing coming to them, and there would be no ultimate justice in the universe.” This makes sense for a naturalistic atheist, where evolution is the dominant worldview, but is clearly abhorrent to the God of the Bible. Many people that hold this view let their sentimentality cloud their judgment, and this judgment clouds their reading of the Scriptures.

Following this line of argumentation, many often say that eternal punishment is unfair, because it wrongly assumes that the punishment does not fit the crime. However, this reasoning assumes that we as humans are able to comprehend the extent of the evil done when sinners rebel against a Holy God. We simply do not understand the gross degree to which sin is a heinous crime against an infinite and Holy Creator God. In fact, who are we as humans, created beings, to have the audacity and boldness to suggest to God that this punishment is too severe? This line of reasoning may also be refuted by asking whether a short time-limited punishment actually pays for all of the unbeliever’s sin and satisfies the justice of God. If it does not, then God is made to be unjust by letting the person go and annihilating him. However, if the time-limited punishment does satisfy God’s justice, then why doesn’t the person get to be admitted into heaven instead of being annihilated? In either case, God is made to be unrighteous and unjust, which by definition is not of God.

This doctrine is very hard, especially for moderns and our sensibilities. However, this doctrine should have profound implications for Christians and how we live our lives. It should always be in the back of our minds when we interact in this world with unbelievers. Grudem

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29 Grudem, 1151.
states that “If our hearts are never moved with deep sorrow when we contemplate this doctrine, then there is a serious deficiency in our spiritual and emotional sensibilities.” Paul when writing about his Jewish brethren in Romans 9 states that

"I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh."

Additionally, God states in Ezekiel 33:11, "Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel? Clearly, even God and His greatest apostles do not take any pleasure in the destination of unbelievers, and neither should we.

We should not rebel against this doctrine as hard as it is to comprehend for us. Perhaps God has put in our hearts a love for all of His creation and creatures that are created in His image, and we mourn at the fact that some of them will be consigned to this fate. This should not cause us to rebel against and hate this doctrine, but rather to take it to heart and give our lives to fulfilling the Great Commission. God has enlightened us to the fact that many will be condemned to Hell. Therefore, this should spur us on to greater action in witnessing, teaching, and holy living. While God has elected His people before time, we are not concerned with trying to discern whom God has chosen and who he has not. The only way we can prevent someone from going to Hell is to preach the gospel to them, as commanded in the Great Commission and in Romans 10:14, and trust God to take care of the rest. If Hell is real, and real people go there, all Christians should be so moved as to subordinate all else in their lives for the proclamation of the gospel message wherever they may be in whatever vocation and situation they may find themselves.

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30 Grudem, 1151-1152.
Finally, we can realize as Christians that the evil and wickedness in the world will someday be set right, and justice will prevail. All human beings have within them a sense of justice (Romans 2:14-15) that longs to see wrongs set right, and evil and injustice be punished. Knowing that God will eventually punish the wicked for their wrongdoing and rebellion is comforting and goes a long way in satisfying that sense of justice we have as creatures made in the image of God. We do not celebrate the fact that evil people will get their just rewards, but we celebrate the fact that God’s justice will prevail and He will receive all of the glory and honor that is due to Him. Every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.