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Jesus Christ, the savior of all men, especially those who believe.
I Timothy 4:10

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ETERNAL PUNISHMENT

Is It Really of God?

By Lee Salisbury

THE CONCEPT OF ETERNAL PUNISHMENT though considered by many to be orthodox Christian doctrine, must be Challenged and indeed refuted. Some of its destructive implications are:

- The character of God is maligned.
- The devil is exalted and Jesus Christ is made a failure.
- Numerous plain statements of scripture are contradicted.
- Teachings of some of the most respected church fathers are contradicted.
- Like a corrupt tree, it brings forth evil fruit

God's Nature Maligned

God's nature is love (1Jn.4:8, 16)... "agape" love which always seeks the best for others and never ceases until this objective is accomplished. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things, and *never fails* (1Cor.13:7, 8). God, having perfect foreknowledge in creation, knew that all mankind would follow Adam into sin. Therefore God made provision for man's reconciliation before the foundation of the world (1Ptr.1:19,20). Statisticians tell us that over the past 6,000 years approximately 160 billion people have lived on the earth. The doctrine of "eternal punishment" declares that all who do not believe on Jesus Christ while in their mortal bodies spend eternity in an inescapable, unending hell. If 10% of the earth's people believed on Jesus Christ then the remaining 144 billion must consequently spend eternity being punished. *This would mean that God's purpose in creation was eternal punishment for some 144 billion people!*

Apart from any knowledge of the grace and mercy of God we could hardly say this reflects a God of justice. Having a higher revelation of God's "agape" love, can we now accept this doctrine as being consistent with a God of love?

Yes, our holy and just God does require accountability of man to Himself and does punish man for his sin and rebellion. But, if the punishment is unending then what purpose does it serve? Such behavior by an earthly father would be considered sadism. Is our heavenly Father's love and punishment to be degraded to the level of such an earthly father? No, for though man may fail, God's love never fails. If He did, He would deny Himself.

Exaltation of the Devil

The doctrine of "eternal punishment" makes hell an eternal monument to the devil's works of sin and death. Did Jesus fail at destroying the works of the devil (1Jn.3:8)? Did the first Adam's offense unto condemnation and death for all accomplish "much more" than the last Adam's free gift of grace unto justification for all (Ro.5:15)? Did Jesus tell a lie when He said, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth will draw all men unto me."? Is the last enemy, death, not destroyed? Are those to whom God becomes "All in all" (1Cor.15:28) only those who managed to escape the devil's clutches? Does every knee bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil.2:11) because God is really like Nebuchadnezzar (Dan.3), forcing all into submission without respect to the desire of their heart? If "eternal punishment" is true, then all of the above are true and the devil is exalted.

Contradiction of Scripture

The doctrine of "eternal punishment" contradicts the plain statements of scripture. To profess it is to take "away from the words of the book" (Rev.22:19). This requires us to ignore or revise the following scriptures: Regarding *all men*: Lk. 2:10; 1Tim.4:10; 1Cor.15:22,23; 1Tim.2:3-6; Rom. 5:17,18; Tit.2:11; Jn.12:32,33; 2Ptr.3:9; Rom.11:26,32; Heb.8:11; Psa.22:27,29. Regarding *every man*: 1Cor.11:3; Jn.1:9; Heb.2:9; Mk.9:49; Isa.45:23; Phil.2:10, 11; 1Cor.15:23. Regarding *all families*: Gen.12:3; 28:14; Gal.3:8. Regarding *all flesh*: Jn.17:2; Joel.2:28; Isa.40:5; Psa.65:2. Regarding *all things*: Eph.1:9-11; Col.1:20; Rev.21:5; Ac.3:21; Rom.11:36; Heb.1:2; Phil.3:21; 1Cor.15:28; Rev.4:11. Regarding *the world*: Jn.8:12; 2Cor.5:19; Jn.3:16; Jn.1:29; Jn.4:42; Jn.12:47; Jn.17:21; Isa.45:22; Jn.16:33. Regarding *the whole world*: 1Jn.2:2. Regarding *the creation*: Mk.16:15; Col.1:23; Rom.8:21; Rev.5:13 Psa.145:8,9. If the doctrine of "eternal punishment" is true, then not one of the above scriptures (and there are many more) can be accepted at face value. God's ability to regenerate the spirit of man and to fulfill His own word is limited by the heartbeat of man.

Distortion in Translation

People insist upon the doctrine of "*eternal punishment*" because the King James Bible (and others influenced by it) associate the word eternal with punishment and destruction. God raised up scholars to give us concordances, lexicons, and both Greek and Hebrew word studies, because no translation is perfectly true to the original manuscripts. The Christian's surest guide to truth is the Holy Spirit who Jesus said will "teach you all things" (Jn.14:26). The King James Bible translated the Greek noun "aion" and its adjectival form "aionios" variously as world, age, eternal, and everlasting. One word should not be translated to have so many separate meanings when there are specific Greek words with these meanings. *World* means the material earth on which man lives, and is properly translated in "the invisible things of Him from the creation of the *world* [*kosmos*] are clearly seen" (Rom.1:20). *Age* means an indeterminable period of time which has a beginning and an end, and is properly translated in "the mystery which hath been hid from *ages* [*aion*] and from generations"(Col.1:16). *Eternal* means that which is perpetual, with no beginning and no end, as is properly rendered in "His *eternal* [*aidios*] power and Godhead" (Rom.1:20). Please note the Greek word "aidios" which actually means eternal. But "aidios" is never found in relation to punishment of unbelievers.

Some would suggest that the Greek form in which the adjective "aionios" is used allows for the

translation "eternal". The most basic laws of grammar prohibit this. A word derived from a parent word cannot have a meaning greater than or different from the parent word. The meaning of the adjective form of a word depends upon and corresponds to the meaning of the noun from which it is derived. As an example, a *daily* (*adjective*) paper comes *every day* (*noun*) not monthly or hourly.

A reasonable objection may well be "why didn't the King James translators translate "*aionios*" to be *age* instead of *eternal*? Or why does the commonly accepted Vines' expository dictionary (V.E.D) insist that "*aionos*" means *eternal*? The beloved brethren who have given themselves to these scholarly pursuits are to be honored, but they, like us, are subject to seeing "through a glass, darkly" (1Cor:13:12). V.E.D. for example, states that the gift of tongues ceased after apostolic times and that both the gifts of knowledge and prophecy are unnecessary since the Holy scriptures are sufficient for guidance, instruction and edification. Mr. Vine's viewpoint is typical of the "fundamentalist" school of theology, which for all practical purposes eliminates the need and expectancy of God's people to hear directly from Him. To the many who have come into the Baptism of the Holy Spirit and today comprise the Pentecostal and charismatic segment of the church, V.E.D. is obviously biased. The gifts of the Holy Spirit did not terminate with the early apostle, but are to be just as much in evidence today. The same kind of prejudice is perpetuated with the doctrine of "eternal punishment." Numerous Greek scholars have sought to bring correction. A sampling of some of their works follows:

- *Young's Analytical concordance to the Bible*, by Robert Young, LL.D.; Thomas Nelson Publishers.
- *Young's Literal translation of the Holy Bible*, by Robert Young, LL.D.; Baker House.
- *Greek English Concordance*, by J.B. Smith; Herald Press.
- *The Emphasized Bible*, by J.B. Rotherham; Kregel Publications.
- *Concordant Literal New Testament*, by the Concordant Publishing Concern.

The Word "Aion"

The word "aion" means age or that which pertains to the ages. Ages have beginnings and endings. Their durations are for indefinite periods of time. There is no time element to eternity and therefore the word is *eternal* is totally inappropriate translation. God *made the aions*: "by whom also He made the worlds [aions]" (Heb.1:2). God is called *the God of the aions* or the "ever-lasting [aional] God" (Rom.16:26). There was a time before the aions: "according to His own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world [aionios] began" (2Tim.1:9). We live in the present aion: "Who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil world [aion]" (Matt.13:39). There is an age after this aion: "it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world [aion], neither in the world [aion] to come. (Matt.13:32).

There are aions to look forward to: "that in the ages [aions] to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace" (Eph.2:7). Jesus reigns to the aion of the aion: "But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever [to the aion of the aion]" (Heb.1:8). At the end of this age: "then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father...then shall the Son also Himself be subject unto Him that put all things under Him, that God may be all in all" (1Cor.15:24,28).

During this time of the aions, Christians have aional life (Jn.3:16) aional salvation (Heb.5:9) and an aional inheritance (Heb.9:15). Presently, Christians have been "sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession" (Eph.1:14-15). There will come a day when Christians no longer have just the earnest, but will receive the full inheritance of true eternal life which is when God becomes "all in all" (1Cor.15:28). In the meantime, there will continue aional judgment (Heb.6:2) aional condemnation (Mk.3:29), aional fire (Matt.25:41) and aional punishment (Matt.24:26).

Church History

There is no documentation that the church councils of the first four centuries embraced the doctrine of "eternal punishment." The church councils at Nice in A.D. 325, at Constantinople in A.D.381, at Ephesus in A.D.431 and at Chalcedon in A.D.451 never embraced this doctrine. In contrast, there is documented evidence that many church leaders and teachers of the first centuries A.D. wrote acclaiming the doctrine of "universal salvation" or "ultimate reconciliation", none of whom were censored. It was not until 553 A.D. that the *Roman Catholic Church* denounced the teaching of ultimate reconciliation as heresy. This is the same organization which:

---in the 2nd century started calling it elders "priests"

---in the 3rd century instituted sacerdotal mass, claiming the unbloody sacrifice of Jesus

Christ

---in 300 A.D. endorsed prayers for the dead

---in 375 A.D. revered angels, dead saints, and images

---in 431 A.D. exalted Mary as the "Mother of God"

---in 526 A.D. instituted extreme unction

---in 533 A.D. renounced the doctrine of ultimate reconciliation

A Wrong Spirit Fostered

The doctrine of "eternal punishment" fosters a self-righteous, vindictive spirit in believers. The psalmist, speaking of idols said, "they that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them" (Psa.115:8). If a Christian has an image or mental picture of god that projects Him as One who writes off those who disregard Him, then that believer similarly tends to reject those who disagree with him. Church history is replete with inquisitions and martyrdom's manifesting this image of God. An extreme example is Queen Mary (1516-1558) of England, who won her title "Bloody Mary" by torturing and murdering non Catholics. She justified her actions, proclaiming "as the souls of heretics are to be hereafter eternally burning in hell, there can be nothing more proper than for me to imitate the divine vengeance by burning them on earth." Bloody Mary's image of God lives on today. Condescending, pharisaical attitudes which continually divide the body of Christ, justify themselves because of a perverted image of God. "My little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen"(1Jn.5:21).

Christianity Degraded

The doctrine of "eternal punishment" aligns Christianity with the pagan religions of the world. Pagan religion recruits and rules its members by fear. The common theme of pagan religion is that non-members displease an angry god and will therefore spend eternity being tortured and tormented in the flames of hell. The pagan god rules by threat and intimidation. Preachers who have to use fear of "eternal punishment" to move people to come to the altar, and Christians who need the doctrine of "eternal punishment" to keep them from falling into sin or to motivate them to evangelism and prayer, sadly reveal their lack of true relationship with the God whose love casts out fear because fear has torment (1Jn.4:18). Is it any wonder that Christianity, whose gospel is the "power of God unto salvation" (Rom.1:16), has made so little impact upon the world's population?

The Conscience Says "No"

The Holy Spirit-illuminated conscience is the truest witness of the Holy Spirit. Any doctrine born of God will commend itself to the Christian's conscience. Though many say they believe this doctrine to be true, they very seldom, if ever, preach it, and if they do they will say, "I wish it were not really true or "If I could change it, I would." These or similar statements only reveal the voice of their consciences, which do not find an Amen! To the doctrine of "eternal punishment." you, the reader, test this statement: Say out loud: "Every person who has not believed on Jesus Christ while living in this mortal body on this earth deserves to be eternally punished." What is the witness of your

conscience?

Knowing the Father

The central issue is *do we really know the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ?* The Pharisees though they knew God, and so insisted that Jesus keep the law rather than heal on the Sabbath. James and John though they knew the Lord and that he would approve their request to send down fire from heaven and consume those who would not receive His ministry. Each of these men could draw upon the letter of the scripture to support his beliefs. In the same way many good people have relied upon the letter of the word in justifying "eternal punishment." My appeal to you, the reader, is to distinguish between the *letter* of the word and the *spirit* of the word. Examine your own heart as to the nature of God's love and judgments. Is your God the god of eternal punishment? For many years I thought He was, until He challenged me to look again. My prayer is that we may be as Job, who declared, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee." (Job.42:5).

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