

[MJTM 17 (2015–2016)]

BOOK REVIEW

Preston Sprinkle, ed. *Four Views on Hell*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014. iv + 220 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-0-310-51646-0. \$18.99.

Eternal conscious torment (ECT) has been assumed to be the default setting of evangelicalism until recently. When annihilationism (or conditional immortality or terminal punishment) made its debut, it got people's attention. While there had been several prestigious proponents such as John Stott, for many evangelicals the most controversial was Clark Pinnock, who changed his mind to this position and also contributed an essay to the first edition of this book (William Crockett, ed., *Four Views on Hell* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992]). Then Rob Bell's book, *Love Wins*, came to the scene in 2011, igniting a social media firestorm with accusations of universalist heresy. Now five years later, Zondervan wisely deemed it appropriate to bring out a second edition with new contributors.

What they have produced is just as timely as its first edition was twenty-four years ago. However, the differences between the two editions show where the conversation has headed for evangelicals. The first edition featured a literal view of ECT (by John Walvoord), a metaphorical view of ECT (William Crockett), annihilationism (Clarke Pinnock), and a Roman Catholic purgatory view (Zachary Hayes). Times have changed. Now the conversation is between ECT (by Denny Burk, who seems to presuppose that hell language is metaphorical despite Walvoord seeing it as "questioning the accuracy and inerrancy of Scripture" [77] in the first edition), annihilationism or terminal punishment (John G. Stackhouse, Jr.), the universalist view (Robin Parry), and the purgatorial view (Jerry Walls, who is a Protestant philosopher, not a Roman Catholic). All of the three

returning positions are advancements from their predecessors, and Preston Sprinkle, the editor of the second edition, offers introductory and concluding remarks, creating helpful bookends to the debate.

The first essay, which is by Denny Burk, argues his case for ECT with rigid precision. His argument begins with the notion that an offense against an infinite being demands an infinite punishment. He then proceeds to argue what he sees as ten foundational texts (Isa 66:22–24; Dan 12:2–3; Matt 18:6–9; 25:31–46; Mark 9:42–48; 2 Thess 1:6–10; Jude 7; 13; Rev. 14:9–11; 20:10, 14–15) as displaying (1) final separation, (2) unending experience, and (3) just retribution. In other words, Scripture teaches a clear final place for the wicked, a clear punishment of conscious torment, and a clear moral logic: ECT is necessary and good, not tragic and sad for God and the saints.

Stackhouse offers the next essay espousing terminal punishment. Stackhouse looks at the nature of hell, its moral logic according to a necessarily terminal punishment view (as opposed to an ECT or universalist view), the language of death and destruction and why they necessitate a terminal punishment view over the others; he gives an extended treatment on the relevance of the cross (why it does not make sense through ECT), and the necessity of free will in love (countering the universalist position). In the end, the logic for terminal punishment is simple: to reject God is to embrace death or destruction, which is the dominant way the Bible talks about disobedience. While it lacks the flare Pinnock brought, the essay is a robust and cool-headed defense of the view.

Parry for universalism offers perhaps the most surprising and dense essay in the collection. He begins with a list of early church thinkers that are universalists. In addition to Origen, towering church fathers as Gregory of Nyssa, Athanasius, Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nazianzen, Dionysius, Maximus, Isaac of Nineveh, and even Jerome and Augustine are cited as orthodox proponents of a form of universalism, which challenges the notion that all forms of universalism were considered heretical in historic orthodoxy. Parry goes on to argue that there are several *prima facie* options in the Bible, but he

offers a “Christ-Centered Biblical Metanarrative” reading of Scripture, where he argues that his position best coheres with the deepest theological contours of the Christian faith. Next, he explains an “already/not yet” dynamic in Scripture where the specificity of salvation to only believers now is understood as a foretaste of the total redemption to come. After that, he treats the nature of judgment and hell. He points out that there are some Scriptures that see judgment as restorative and temporary, and he offers the explanation that passages that speak about harsher penalties could function as hyperbolic deterrents rather than literal descriptions. He also argues for post-mortem salvation. He moves on to treat his position’s most difficult texts (Matt 25:31–46; Mark 9:42–50; 2 Thess 1:5–10; Rev 14:9–11; 20:10–15). He points out that “eternal” has several nuances, one of which is something temporary. He also points out that Rev 14 and 20 both end with descriptions where the disobedient and judged nations (thought to be either annihilated or tormented everlastingly in the other two views) are actually found worshiping God. His final section argues that the notion that God will convince all people to choose him need not be understood as violating free will, and in fact, could be seen as God restoring human freedom to its true potential. Parry presents a truly systematic argument for the biblical possibility of universal salvation.

Walls’ essay offers a Protestant argument for purgatory where in the first edition the argument appealed to Roman Catholic sources. Walls argues that purgatory is the baby that Protestants threw out with the bathwater of indulgences and other abuses that spurred the Reformation. It is grounded in 1 Cor 3:10–15. Walls takes great pain to show what purgatory is not: it is not probation between heaven and hell (souls are going in one direction—to heaven); it is not a second chance for unbelievers (it is only for believers); it is not works righteousness (it is done by Christ’s saving mercy); it does not undermine free will (it is the painful process of believers’ finally cooperating with God to let go of remaining sins); it is not a place of punishment but healing (sanctification over satisfaction). If no one enters heaven with sin in their heart, purgatory is about sanctification for their brokenness so that they may enter heaven fully healed.

While any declaration of a “winner” or a “loser” in a book exchanging views like this usually exposes the bias of the reviewer, there are several criteria that point to Parry and to a lesser extent, Walls, gaining the most in this book, and Burk losing the most ground, regardless of whether the reader ultimately agrees with them. Burk’s essay began with a glaring problem: he argues that an offense against an infinite God demands an infinite punishment. Nowhere in Scripture is this logic supported (it seems completely untenable to anything but a limited atonement view, and even then, Christ did not die an *infinite* punishment in the elect’s place). He then turns and uses this as a heuristic device, forming his three exegetical points, which ended up often assuming ECT rather than directly proving it (which Stackhouse pointed out). In this regard, Burk’s ECT is very limited in appeal, attractive to only strict, five-point Calvinists. Meanwhile, Walls, who appeals to the greater Christian tradition that upholds the primacy of divine love and human free will, oddly did a better job arguing for ECT than Burk did.

Stackhouse did a great job in his presentation of the terminal punishment view, but compared to the universalist and purgatory views, terminal punishment is no longer the edgy, new kid on the block. ECT and terminal punishment seemed the most at hermeneutical loggerheads: if to reject God means to be judged permanently in whichever form, one either prioritizes the “eternal punishment” passages as literal and annihilation imagery as metaphors of this or prioritizes annihilation passages as literal and eternal punishment imagery as metaphors for annihilation.

The very notion that universalism and an evangelical purgatory view are presented as evangelical options, where they were not considered twenty-four years ago, is a victory to their positions. A person that succeeds in a format like this, a four views book, does several things: they present a comprehensive argument for their position using not just Scripture but church history and logic, integrating the argument with other loci of doctrine. They then offer a charitable but heavy counter argument to their opponents, and in doing so, set up a way of

maximizing their central arguments that absorbs and explains their opponents' best texts.

Parry's essay did this. His was really a multi-dimensional systematic argument (this is the antithesis of Burk's rather simplistic approach of a deductive argument with ten proof-texts). His argumentation was so pithy that his opponents simply left several sections un-rebutted. Parry not only appealed to the Bible (which the others did) but also showed a type of universalism prevalent amongst the church fathers (something Stackhouse neglected at great cost). This seems to problematize any simple accusation of heresy by appeal to historic orthodoxy. Also, his "Christ-Centered Biblical Meta-Narrative" and his "already/not-yet" schemes allowed for the *prima facie* texts that speak about ECT, terminal punishment, and the exclusivity of salvation to retain their voice as a possibility but also not detract from a universalist possibility. In this regard, his argument was modest and almost took on a modal logic: If there are three *prima facie* possibilities of punishment in Scripture and universalism is truly a possibility, it becomes a kind of necessary possibility by the merit that it is the greatest possibility. Nevertheless, his weakness then is that, if, in his hermeneutic, Scripture allows for a diversity of stands and possibilities, and his universalism is one real possibly, could not ECT or terminal punishment also be equally as real? If his exegesis was complex and speculative (his position's weakness, for sure), his logic was not. Parry is definitely the best logician and rhetorician of the bunch. The result was a position so attractive, its opponents said things like that it is "consistent with the wonderful tellings of the biblical story" (139) or that while "I think Perry is wrong, but I hope he is right" (140). According to Sprinkle, who ultimately disagrees with Parry, his essay is a "game-changer" (196).

As previously mentioned, this is also a victory for Walls's purgatory view, albeit not as much as Parry's universalism. Walls's view is the "third wheel" of the four positions, since his view does not directly deal with the fate of unbelievers. This means his responses to the other three almost function like the objective referee. Walls demonstrates himself in all the responses to be a sophisticated, fair, and amicable mind.

Moreover, his defense for an evangelical purgatory view is coherent. While his strict appeal to 1 Cor 3:10–15 is debatable and his appeal to C. S. Lewis an obvious ploy, at its most basic form, if God does not allow a sinful heart into heaven, and believers can have sin in their hearts, there is a theological necessity for something like purgatory to heal the sinner. Nevertheless, his and Parry's essays were ones with nothing to lose and everything to gain.

It seems that for a book like this, space hampered all the tangents necessary to discuss the views. In addition to continuing to think about the nature of eternity, punishment, fire, death, and destruction in the Bible, which Sprinkle encourages further thinking about in his conclusion, the reader surely will have to continue reading on the meaning of other crucial issues, such as the character of God, the nature of the atonement, the nature of predestination, etc. Those who read this book thinking they will arrive finally at one clear position should not deceive themselves into thinking that this topic is so simple.

All in all, this four views book is a great achievement. Surely this book will be the go-to book if anyone, pastor or academic, wants to familiarize themselves with the debate.

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