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Sheep and Goats: Current Evangelical Thought On The Nature of Hell and The Scope of Salvation

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I. INTRODUCTION

It is not too fanciful to suggest that if Christians who believe in the reality of hell were wild animals, they would long ago have been declared an endangered species. The scornful dismissal of hell as a medieval anachronism has for many years ceased to be characteristic only of those outside the church. Liberal theology has rejected it, along with other miraculous and supernatural elements of the Bible felt to be inconsistent with a 'scientific' worldview. There is no shortage of theologians who, having cast off the moorings of the inspiration of Scripture, are happy to sail across a pluralistic 'sea of faith' in the belief that over the horizon lies a New World promising universal salvation.

Evangelicals, maintaining a high view of Scripture, continue to take seriously what the Bible says about hell and the ultimate fate of the impenitent. But the united front they have always demonstrated on this topic has recently taken on a rather more fragmented appearance. At issue is not the ultimate reality of hell, but the way in which it should be understood. Traditionally, evangelicals have usually interpreted the fate of the unsaved as consisting of unending torment. Lately however, a number of prominent evangelicals have 'come out' and declared their belief in conditional immortality, which sees the final punishment of sinners as complete extinction. This trend gained prominence when John Stott, for many the doyen of British evangelicals, wrote in his dialogue with the liberal Anglican David Edwards of his 'tentative' belief in conditional immortality.[1] Similarly, p. 52 some surprise was evident when David Jenkins, the erstwhile Bishop of Durham, made similar views public which on that occasion did not attract the anticipated chorus of protest from conservatives.

At the same time we are seeing a radical rethink starting to take place among evangelicals on another issue on which opinion has traditionally been rock-solid, namely the eschatological scope of salvation itself. Partly in response to the criticisms of traditional Christian exclusivism voiced by radical religious pluralists, a number of evangelicals are arguing that final salvation can be possible without the need for explicit acceptance or knowledge of the Christian revelation.

This article does not claim to add anything new to either of these debates, but rather to provide an outline of the current 'state of the art' on both topics, in the hope that it will provide an introduction for those wanting to be better informed on them.

II. HELL: TORTURE CHAMBER OR FIRING SQUAD?

[1] D. L. Edwards and J. Stott, *Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), 312–29.

Although the belief that hell entails final extinction has recently become a topic of debate among evangelicals, it is not the first time it has done so, and the idea that they have consistently believed in the traditional unending torment view to the exclusion of other views is illusory. Conditional immortality was widely debated among evangelicals in the 19th Century.[2] Nor is the belief itself new. LeRoy Froom's historical study of its development occupies two volumes,[3] and notes its occurrence among a number of early church theologians, Arnobius being its most explicit supporter.[4]

The unending torment view gained its apparently universal acceptance partly as a result of the theological clout of Augustine, its most well known champion in the early church. As a result of his influence it became generally accepted in later centuries, was reaffirmed by Aquinas, and taken into Protestantism by Calvin, who drew on Augustine on many points of doctrine. The re-emergence of conditionalism in the 19th century ran out of steam, possibly because its adherents fell silent in order to avoid splitting evangelicals over the issue at a time when more fundamental issues were being challenged by liberals. As a result, the unending torment view gained the status of evangelical orthodoxy almost by default. Any departure from it has usually been viewed as heretical. Consequently, it has been difficult for evangelical conditionalists to get their views p. 53 heard or published, and it is only in the last twenty years or so that this situation has changed.

The issue hinges on two problems—theological and exegetical—one of which affects the other. The first is that of the immortality of the human soul.[5] Put broadly, the traditional view holds that the soul is by its very nature immortal, being created in the image of God, and is therefore incapable of 'ultimate' death. Conditionalists argue that this view is more Greek than biblical, and hold that immortality is a blessing bestowed on the redeemed as a result of the work of Christ. The view taken on this question, therefore, acts as a control belief for the second problem, that of the exegesis of the various texts concerned with the ultimate fate of the wicked. If it is held that the soul is innately immortal, clearly these texts must be interpreted in a way which reflects this, and 'eternal punishment' has to be understood as 'unending punishment'. If, on the other hand, immortality is made conditional on the acceptance of God's forgiveness, it begs the question as to how the biblical imagery of 'destruction', 'burning', 'the second death', etc., should be interpreted. Conditionalists argue that the plain meaning of all such texts is that God's judgement on the impenitent results in their final extinction or annihilation. 'Eternal punishment' in this context is held to imply 'of everlasting effect' rather than 'everlastingly in progress'. These two issues, then, lie at the heart of the current debate.

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[2] For a fuller treatment of the history of conditionalism in this period see D. J. Powys, 'The Nineteenth and Twentieth Century debates about Hell and Universalism', in N. M. de S. Cameron (ed.), *Universalism and the Dogmatics of Hell: Papers Presented at the Fourth Edinburgh Conference Dogmatics, 1991* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1992), 93–138.

[3] L. E. Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of our Fathers*, 2 Vols. (Washington: Review and Herald, 1965).

[4] E.g in *Adv. Gentes* 2:14 (Ante-Nicene Christian Library, Vol xix, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1871).

[5] For a full discussion of this subject see M. J. Harris, *Raised Immortal: Resurrection and Immortality in the New Testament* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1983).

Apart from privately-published works by Basil Atkinson[6] and Harold Guillebaud,[7] and the appearance of Froom's historical study from an Adventist publishing house, it was the publication of John Wenham's *The Goodness of God* in 1974 that marked the re-emergence of conditionalism in evangelical circles.[8] But the most substantial evangelical treatment of conditionalism has come from the pen of the American scholar Edward Fudge, whose book *The Fire that Consumes* first appeared in the USA in 1982. A revised British edition was published in 1994.[9] Between the publication of these two editions controversy over the issue intensified, seeing Wenham and Fudge joined in the conditionalist ranks by such names as Clark Pinnock, Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, Stephen Travis Michael Green and, as already noted, John Stott.

In the latest edition of his book, Fudge takes the opportunity of making some responses to works whose publication was prompted by the first edition and which seek to p. 54 uphold the traditional view. His frank opinion of these is that they continue to rely on tradition as the main foundation of their arguments, and do nothing to advance the exegetical understanding of the actual texts.

The main body of Fudge's book commences with an introductory chapter which sets out the importance of the doctrine of hell, and various ways in which it has been understood by Christian thinkers through past centuries. He also charts the progress of conditionalist theories amongst evangelicals. His second chapter is an examination of *aiōnios*, 'eternal', concluding that it has both quantitative and qualitative aspects. Quantitatively, Fudge points out that while 'eternal' certainly can mean 'forever', it is also used adjectivally of some things which clearly do not last forever, such as the Aaronic Priesthood, Caleb's inheritance, Solomon's Temple, 'and practically every other ordinance … of the Old Testament system'.[10] Thus 'eternal' in this sense means 'forever', but 'within the limits of the possibility inherent in the person or thing itself … it speaks of unlimited time within the limits of the things it modifies'. Qualitatively, the New Testament employs *aiōnios* to contrast the supreme characteristic of the age to come over against the present. On this basis, 'eternal' can refer to the *quality* of being rather than its duration, and Fudge argues that it is in this context that phrases such as 'eternal punishment' should be understood. It is 'eternal' in the sense that it belongs to the aeon of which eternity is a characteristic. Thus in these contexts it is virtually synonymous with 'transcendent'. 'Eternal life', on the other hand, certainly is endless, but this is guaranteed not so much by it being described by *aiōnios*, but by other dimensions to it indicated by different phraseology.

Fudge then devotes two chapters to the question of the immortality of the soul and the way this has been construed historically. He shows that 'immortality' is frequently used by traditionalists to describe the ability of the soul to survive physical death; they then tend to assume from this that immortality has to be a universal human characteristic. Fudge argues that such assumptions do not accurately reflect the writings of the Fathers

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[6] B. F. C. Atkinson *Life and Immortality: An Examination of the Nature and Meaning of Life and Death as they are Revealed in the Scriptures* (n.d.).

[7] H. Guillebaud, *The Righteous Judge* (1964).

[8] J. Wenham, *The Goodness of God* (Leicester: IVP, 1974). 2nd edn. issued as *The Enigma of Evil* in 1985, 3rd edn. issued in 1994 (Guildford: Eagle).

[9] E. W. Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes: the Biblical Case for Conditional Immortality* revising editor, P. Cousins (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1994 2nd edn.).

[10] Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes*, 13.

and other major theologians (including Calvin) who assert that in the fullest sense immortality belongs only to God, and that any human immortality' must therefore be derivative from him, and dependent upon him for its continuation.

Most of the remainder of the book is taken up with exegesis of the biblical texts relating to final punishment (which includes perspectives from the apocrypha and pseudepigrapha), but there is one especially noteworthy chapter which draws out the eschatological implications of the death of Christ. Fudge argues that this holds important clues for a proper understanding of the final state of the unsaved. The death of Christ is seen against the background of the Levitical sin-offerings which entailed the utter destruction of the sacrificial victim. This was p. 55 designed to show the fate which sinful humanity deserves and which had instead been transferred onto the victim. Since the Levitical sacrifices were pointers to the sacrifice *par excellence* which was offered by Christ, Fudge concludes that his death also entailed complete destruction, and is therefore a pattern of the judgement awaiting sinners. Fudge's book concludes with a rebuttal of universalism, and a critique of some of the theological objections made against the conditionalist case. His conclusion is that none of these can be sustained.

Probably the doughtiest advocate of the conditionalist cause on this side of the Atlantic is John Wenham (who contributes a foreword to the new edition of Fudge's book). In a paper given at the Fourth Edinburgh Conference on Christian Dogmatics in 1991 entitled 'The Case for Conditional Immortality',[11] he gives an analysis of all the New Testament passages dealing with eschatological punishment. His conclusion is that in all but 1 of 264 references to the final state of the wicked there is nothing to suggest that unending torment is the final fate of the lost, but rather that the plain sense of most of these references implies destruction. Wenham argues that the traditional interpretation of these verses as teaching endless punishment derives from the control belief of the innate immortality of the soul. Like Fudge, he concludes this to be an unbiblical concept, arguing that the picture given by Scripture emphasises human mortality rather than immortality. Again, like Fudge, Wenham points out that the ability of the soul to survive physical death is not the same thing as immortality, and that while Scripture clearly asserts the former it says nothing about its nature and endurance. To interpret is as immortality is therefore an assumption which goes beyond what Scripture actually reveals.

The one reference which Wenham concedes as apparently implying unending torment is Revelation 14:11. In facing up to this, Wenham firstly expresses reservations about basing doctrine on the symbolism in this most enigmatic of books. He suggests that the 'smoke of their torment [going up] for ever and ever' in this verse does not refer to the eternal state as such, but alludes to an eternal symbol denoting that final judgement has been executed. He argues that John derives his imagery from the archetypal judgement of Sodom and Gomorrah. The final result of that judgement was 'total irreversible desolation and dense smoke rising from the land'.[12] Thus it is not the actual torment that goes on for ever and ever. The smoke of the judgement on Sodom and Gomorrah remains symbolically as an eternal reminder of God's justice; what John is therefore attempting to express is the fact that the final execution of judgement on sinners entails the same order of destruction as was inflicted on p. 56 Sodom and Gomorrah, and will result in a similar eternal symbolic reminder, even though the actual judgement process and its physical consequences are of finite duration.

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[11] J. Wenham: 'The Case for Conditional Immortality', in N. M. de S. Cameron (ed.), *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, 161–91.

[12] Wenham, 'The Case for Conditional Immortality', 179.

Wenham also addresses some objections usually made against conditionalism. These include the claim that, since we were made for eternity, conditionalism negates the dignity which this entails. Wenham counters this by asking how such dignity can be enhanced by unending torment: nothing is served by ceaseless pain and a learning process about the awfulness of one's sin when there is no hope of release or reformation.

Conditionalism is also said to detract from the glow of God's justice and judgements. Wenham argues that, on the contrary, the traditional idea of eternal punishment is neither loving nor just, and speaks of sadism rather than justice. Neither is it reconcilable with the final supremacy of Christ, since it leaves part of creation eternally unredeemed. He also deals with a common misinterpretation which sees destruction as not constituting a real punishment: 'this assumes that the first death is the end and that there is no Day of Judgement and that we are not judged according to our works. This is plainly unscriptural and not the view of any conditionalist that I know.'[13] All unrepentant sinners will receive what they deserve, and the degrees of punishment will vary accordingly, though ultimately destruction will be entailed for all of them.

It is clear that the issue of conditional immortality will continue to be a subject of debate for some time. In putting the matter firmly on the agenda probably the main contribution that scholars such as Fudge and Wenham have made is to free the concept from the smear of heresy which has usually been associated with it. It now has the status of a legitimate interpretation of Scripture, even if it remains a controversial one with which not all will agree. Part of the problem is the tendency for confusion over terminology and the exact way it should be understood; and evangelical conditionalists would certainly want to distance themselves from some ways in which the belief has been formulated. Clarifying matters and establishing a conditionalist eschatology which seeks seriously to take into account all the biblical evidence is therefore no mean achievement; for this credit must be given. We turn now to a related issue—if hell (however we understand it) is a reality, who is able to escape it, and on what basis?

III. MUST THE PIOUS PAGAN WHO HAS NEVER HEARD OF CHRIST SUFFER IN HELL?

This question has been a bone of contention for Christians ever since Porphyry raised it with Augustine in the 3rd Century AD.[14] Augustine's P. 57 answer has been the foundation of the traditional response: that Jesus is the only saviour, and an explicit act of faith in him is essential for salvation. Therefore, only Christians can be saved, since it is impossible to have saving faith apart from Christ. Those without knowledge of Christ are thus without hope because they fall outside the scope of salvation, constituting a *massa damnata* which includes the greater part of humanity. Faced with the moral difficulty of condemning those who never had the chance to hear the gospel, the usual response is to appeal to general revelation. This is held to communicate enough knowledge of God's nature for the individual to respond to. Those who have never heard of Christ will not therefore be judged for rejecting him, but (since no-one ever lives up to the moral standards revealed through general revelation) for 'rejecting the light they had'.

Liberal theologians have generally recoiled from this position, and have sought to avoid its conclusion in a number of ways. These frequently entail some form of

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[13] Wenham, 'The Case for Conditional Immortality', 189.

[14] As quoted by Augustine in his Letter to Deogratias, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 1 vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

universalism, often associated with a religious relativism which denies Christianity its unique revelatory and salvific significance. John Hick has come to be particularly associated with this school of thought,[15] and more recently the American Catholic scholar Paul Knitter.[16] Both have condemned the traditional argument as unjust and unreasonable, but until recently there has been no evangelical response other than to reassert the traditional view. Now the question is being tackled by a number of evangelical scholars, notably John Sanders[17] and Clark Pinnock;[18] their conclusions seem set to cause perhaps more controversy in evangelical ranks than the conditional immortality issue. Rejecting traditional restrictivism, they argue that God is concerned with saving as much of humanity as possible. Their conclusion is that the final number of the redeemed will not be a tiny remnant composed only of Christians, and that general revelation and non-Christian religions both have salvific potential. Sanders terms this approach 'inclusivism'.

Inclusivists such as Sanders and Pinnock make three main criticisms of the traditional restrictivist view. First, they argue that it does not do sufficient justice to 'universalist' texts (e.g. John 1:9, 3:16–17; 1 Tim. 1:15; 2:4; 4:10; 2 Pet. 3:9) which assert God's desire to save all. To interpret these as saying that Jesus p. 58 died for all, but that only some have the chance to respond, is simply not good enough. If salvation is available only where the gospel is preached, this means that the shortcomings of the church's evangelistic efforts are frustrating God's desire to save all humanity, and that therefore he is unable to save all those he would like to. Sanders also points out the 'double-think' which is evident when considering the final destiny of children who die in infancy. Evangelicals are quick to affirm that they will be saved by God's love; but when it comes to the question of the unevangelized, sin is made to prevail, even though the doctrine of original sin teaches that *both* groups are equally sinful and deserving of condemnation. Why is salvation possible for the first group but not the second? Sanders urges us to recognize that God has ways of making himself known to all people so that they can receive the redemption he offers.

A second criticism of the restrictivist view is that it confuses the ontological necessity of Christ for salvation with the epistemological necessity of knowing about it. The restrictive proof texts such as Acts 4:12 and John 14:6 certainly say that Christ is the only source of salvation, but they need not imply that explicit knowledge of this is necessary for it. In other words, although salvation is only possible only through Christ, it does not necessarily follow that only Christians are able to find it.

Third, inclusivists attack the traditional understanding of general revelation as being without salfivic significance, on the grounds that it entails God providing sufficient revelation for condemnation, but insufficient for salvation; he gives men and women enough rope to hang themselves with, but no lifeline by which they can escape. The only kind of God who would do that would be one who, contrary to what Scripture says, apparently does **not** truly desire all to be saved. They argue that the traditional appeal to Romans 1–3 as proving the salvific inadequacy of general revelation is exegetically flawed, pointing out that Paul is concerned to show that those with either kind of revelation are equally guilty in failing to live up to the light shown to them. If the rejection

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[15] J. Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1973).

[16] P. Knitter, *No other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (London: SCM, 1985). Not to be confused with the following!

[17] J. Sanders, *No other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

[18] C. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: the Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

of general revelation is regarded as an implicit rejection of Christ, there seems no reason why an acceptance of it (however theologically defective) cannot be counted as an implicit acceptance of him. Restrictivists may protest that this means there can be salvation outside the light of the gospel, but Sanders reminds us (again) that they do not have any difficulties with this concept when it comes to the question of the salvation of children who die in infancy.

Sanders and Pinnock both argue that salvation should be seen as universally accessible, outside the Christian revelation as well as in. They seek to do justice both to the particularity and finality of Christ and the universal salvific will of God, maintaining that grace sufficient for salvation is available to all through general revelation. The salvation extended to those that respond to this is no less Christocentric, though they are not explicitly aware of it in those terms. They argue that God p. 59 has been at work in all ages and in all cultures to make salvation accessible to all. If God genuinely wants all to be saved he must have ways of making this possible. Scriptural support for this is sought in texts which speak of God's universal love, and from Old Testament evidence which shows that God's gracious acts were not confined to the Hebrews (e.g. Deut. 2:5, 9, 19, 22–23; Amos 9:7). God did not cease from gracious dealings with other nations simply because of the special covenant with Israel by which they received special revelation. The universal covenants, (Gen. 1:26–30; 9:8–19) imply this. The convenants with Israel were complementary to the universal ones; they were not intended to supersede them, but to ensure their fulfilment by creating the historical framework in which Christ would eventually appear. The universal Noahic covenant is as much one of redemption as of physical preservation—it is preparing the way for the subsequent covenant with Abram, which effectively implements the earlier promise made to Noah. The special call of Abram makes sense only in the context of God's concern for all nations. Christian theology has mistaken Abram's election by regarding it as God somehow turning his back on other nations. Rather, in choosing Abram God was working out his plan of salvation for many. Abram was not given a special rederuptive privilege when he was chosen, but a unique vocation. Augustine and Calvin transformed the concept of election into a soteriological category; Western theology has proceeded to accept this to such a degree that it is now assumed *ex hypothesi*. Election does not refer to grace and salvation in this way, Sander argues, but to the choice of the specific to ensure the blessing of the many.

The inclusivist view cites the many Old Testament references to favoured Gentiles (e.g. Melchizedek, Enoch and Jethro) as evidence that God was still active in salvation outside of the covenant with Israel. When God judged the pagan nations it was because of moral failures rather than religious ones. The very fact that they were held accountable indicated that a genuine knowledge of God was possible. Their religion may not have harmonized with that of Israel, but the direction of the heart, not the content of theology, was what mattered to God. The righteous Gentile theme is also echoed in the New Testament with the Magi, the Canaanite woman, the Roman Centurion, and, supremely, by Cornelius. Sanders also notes with approval the inclusivist aspects of the *Westminster Confession* (8.6): 'Although the work of redemption was not actually wrought by Christ till after his incarnation, yet the virtue, efficacy and benefits thereof were communicated unto the elect in all ages successively from the beginning of the world.' Western theology has therefore erred in losing sight of the universal scope and availability of saving grace. It has restricted God's saving purposes to synagogue and church, thus narrowing it to a tiny thread of history rather than expressing the worldwide scope of salvation history as portrayed in the early chapters of Genesis.

Pinnock argues that it is helpful to make a distinction between Christians and 'Believers'. Believers are those who have responded to general p. 60 revelation and

exercised the faith principle of responding to God; however deficient their theology they are made acceptable to God on the basis of faith. The Old Testament saints were 'believers' in this sense. Christians are those who have come into the fullness of God's saving revelation and who know about the work of Christ explicitly, with the blessings of sonship which 'believers' do not yet have, such as the assurance of forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The source of salvation is the same for both groups—Christ. In considering the significance of general revelation it is necessary to remember its source—God. God is the God who saves, so it follows that all revelation—general as well as special—must have a salvific potential. Salvation or condemnation depends on the response to it. Those who turn their backs on the truths in general revelation are heading for condemnation. Scripture speaks of general revelation as a 'witness' to God (e.g. Acts 14:7; Rom. 1:20; Ps. 19:1) which seems to indicate that saving faith can be arrived at through it. This is not arrived at through human reasoning but by the prompting and instruction of God (Rom. 1:19). Those saved in this way will be those who in spiritual anguish in the face of sin have cried out to whatever representation of God they knew. Romans 1–3 implies that those with a proper response to general revelation can commit themselves to God's mercy. We must also remember the promise of Scripture that those who truly seek God will find him.

On the basis of these arguments, inclusivists widen the role of the Holy Spirit in salvation history rather more than has been customary in the Western theological tradition. Rather than linking his activity to the Christian dispensation and within the church, they see the Holy Spirit as having been active in all people in all ages convicting them of sin, opening the door for them to respond to whatever revelation God has given them. So if the capacity to respond to this does not come about through reason but by God's initiative, then it is a gift of grace which is capable of being manifested outside of the church. The church's privilege has been to receive the knowledge of the Holy Spirit and salvation, rather than the exclusive title to it. While it remains true that there is no salvation outside Christ, there can be salvation outside the church.

Inclusivists also believe that a proper understanding of the cosmic nature of the work of Christ supports their position. This results in a contemporary recasting of the Alexandrian Logos theology. John 1:14–18 reminds us that the Word existed prior to the Incarnation and was active in enlightening humanity. The revelation of the Word was thus not confined to the period of the Incarnation; that was indeed the supreme revelation, but not the only one. Many of the early Fathers such as Clement, Justin and Ireneaus, viewed what was best in paganism as having been revealed by God. They believed that the Word was active in revealing himself outside the covenant with Israel, that those who responded would be save; and they did not hesitate to claim that the god of the pagan was the same god the Christian worshipped. (That did not p. 61 mean that they did not criticize the *way* they worshipped.) Inclusivists claim that the unevangelized who worship God in spirit and in truth are genuinely saved, even though some of their worship, practices, and perceptions of God may need correction. It is the communication of these correctives that lies at the heart of the great commission, so that the good news of what has been accomplished by God in Christ may be enjoyed in all its fullness.

Pinnock is specially concerned to establish an evangelical theology of religions. He agrees that there is much in non-Christian religions which is negative, but feels that evangelicals have given insufficient credit to other aspects which are noble and good, something which the Bible itself recognizes in what Pinnock terms the 'holy pagan tradition', already noted above. He argues that it was these aspects of their respective faiths which made Melchizedek, Abimelech, Jethro, and those like them acceptable to God, and that it is therefore possible for believing men and women of other faiths to enjoy a right relationship with him, under the terms of the Noahic covenant. In this sense, he is

happy to accept the term 'pagan saints', though he is uncomfortable with Rahner's 'anonymous Christians'. The acid tests are whether someone truly fears God (under whatever name he is worshipped), and whether that person seeks righteousness in their behaviour. 'Faith is what pleases God. The fact that different kinds of believers are accepted by God proves that the issue for God is not the content of theology but the reality of faith.'[19] This asserts the principle of justification by faith which has always been the cornerstone of evangelical theology. The exact knowledge an individual needs to be able to exercise such saving faith we cannot tell, nor can we know with certainty who such people are. 'All we know for sure is that people are free to respond to God anywhere in the world, thanks to his grace. This encourage us to be open to the work of God in the wider world as we proclaim the gospel and encounter outsiders.'[20] Evangelicals, therefore, need to be more positive in their attitudes to those of other religions. What is needed is a middle way which avoids the extremes of, on the one hand, rejecting all non-Christian religions as worthless, and, on the other, of naively regarding them as having equal validity. '[I]t is possible to appreciate positive elements in other faiths, recognising that God has been at work among them. On the other hand, it is not necessary to be blind to oppression and bondage in religion, Christ being our norm and criterion for measuring. Spiritual discernment … is what is critical.[21]

Pinnock believes it is helpful to distinguish between 'objective religion' (the beliefs and practices of a given religious system) and 'subjective religion' (the piety, faith, worship and fear of God as it is expressed in the life of p. 62 someone within that system).We should ask not which religion a person belongs to, but rather, what religion belongs to that person. That is not to say that the theology of a religion is unimportant. It can help or hinder the exercise of saving faith. But Pinnock argues that 'there is enough truth in most religions for people to take hold of and put their trust in God's mercy'.[22]

Pinnock also urges us to recognize that religions (including Christianity) are not static. Their traditions are evolving dynamically. They form an important element in the totality of the historical and cultural continuum which will find its ultimate purposive resolution in the final triumph of Christ. Pinnock speculates that God is at work in all religions, guiding this evolution in such a way as to make the apprehension of the saving-faith principle clearer for those within them, and in the process, more open to the message of the gospel. He cites recent interactions of Christianity with some traditions of both Buddhism and Islam as examples of this process. This knowledge should encourage us to approach other religions in an open and positive way, rather than with the uneasy suspicion and distrust which is usually characteristic of the evangelical attitude.

IV. CONCLUSION

It is obvious that both the subjects dealt with in this article will continue to give rise to controversy and debate for some time, and that much ink remains to be split before the last word is written. Many will see them as perhaps threatening, challenging as they do some long-cherished and sincerely held beliefs which have been close to the very heart of evangelicalism. In dealing with them we would do well to heed the words of Fudge.

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[19] Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 105.

[20] Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 106.

[21] Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy, 109*.

[22] Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 111.

Writing of conditionalism, he states that the debate 'may test the depth of the evangelical church's practical commitment to the authority of Scripture. It is very easy to profess that the Bible is our final standard and measure of doctrine. It is quite another matter to actually scrutinize a cherished doctrine, long held by a majority of Christians, in the bright pure light of God's Word … Indeed our evangelical will … is now on the line. May God make us faithful in deed as in word'.[23]

These wise words should guide us as we approach both these issues.[24]

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Divine Justice and Universal Grace: A Calvinistic Proposal

by Terrance Tiessen

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THE PROPOSAL

Since Augustine's time, Christian theologians have not achieved consensus on the role or operation of divine grace in salvation. By the Second Council of Orange (A.D. 529) Augustinianism had been absolved of the charge from Faustus of Riez that it was fatalist, and the church had affirmed the absolute necessity of prevenient grace and the inability of the human will to initiate faith[1] That did not, however, establish a consensus concerning who is *determinative* in the personal appropriation of salvation, the gracious God or the responsive human individual. After centuries of discussion there now seems to be an unresolvable disagreement, within the evangelical community, between Lutheran and Wesleyan theologians, on the one hand, and Calvinists on the other.

Calvinists (within the tradition of Augustine) stand convinced that the grace of God must be the determinative factor in salvation so that boasting of the human contribution

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[23] Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes*, xii.

[24] All the works cited above contain a wealth of references to other material, and the following will also be of interest to those who wish to pursue these subjects at greater depth. The evangelical debate on conditionalism is mentioned in D. Tidball, *Who are the Evangelicals?* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1994), ch. 8. His notes on that chapter also contain helpful references. Suggestions for further reading include: J. Blanchard, *Whatever happened to Hell?* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 1993); O. Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* (London: Epworth, 1958) and *Immortality and Resurrection* (London: Macmillan, 1958); P. Cotterell, *Mission and Meaninglessness* (London: SPCK, 1990), esp. chs. 4–6; L. Dixon, *The Other side of the Good News* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1992); A. Fernando, *Crucial Questions about Hell* (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications, 1991); D. Pawson, *The Road to Hell* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992); H. Thielicke, *Death and Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970).

[1] Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Distiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 192.