

THE NATURE OF HELL

CONCLUSIONS and RECOMMENDATIONS

Taken from David Hilborn (ed.) The Nature of Hell. A Report by the Evangelical Alliance Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals (ACUTE). Carlisle: Paternoster Press 2000, pp. 130-135. Full text available from Christian bookshops and online retailers.

The following conclusions and recommendations rest on core evangelical convictions about God and his Word. These convictions may be summarised as follows:

- Matters relating to hell, as much as to creation, revelation and redemption, are subject to the sovereignty and grace of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.
 - Christian teaching on hell must be derived above all from Scripture, since Scripture is entirely trustworthy and supremely authoritative in all matters of faith and conduct.
 - In the contemporary interpretation of Scriptural teaching on hell, as on other doctrines, we look to the Holy Spirit to illuminate us and lead us into the truth.
 - In reflecting on the doctrine of hell, we look for practical application to the church's urgent task of mission and evangelism.
1. All human beings must face death. In this, they are distinguished from God himself, and from the holy angels. Our mortality is a consequence of sin, which in turn derives from humanity's original rebellion against God (Eccles. 7:2; Rom. 5:12ff.).
 2. After death, all human beings will be resurrected to face the final judgment of God (John 5:25-29; Heb.9:27; Rev. 20:13). Those who through grace have been justified by faith in Jesus Christ will be received into eternal glory, while those who have refused him will be condemned to hell (Phil. 3:20; 1 Pet. 1:4-9; John 12:48). Although justification is by faith through grace (Rom. 5:1, Gal. 3:24), the final judgment itself will take account of how faith has been lived out (Matt. 19:28f.; 25:31-46; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 20:11-15).

3. God has revealed no other way to salvation and eternal life apart from through Jesus Christ (John 14:6; Acts 4:12).
4. In his sovereignty, God may save some who have not explicitly professed faith in Jesus Christ. The most likely groups from which such people might come are those who through no fault of their own have been unable to hear or respond to the gospel – e.g. the unevangelized, children who die in infancy, or those who have severe mental disabilities. While such people and others may receive the mercy of God in salvation, we are not at liberty to presume that any specific individual will be saved apart from professing faith in Jesus Christ. In particular, we can find no convincing warrant in Scripture for 'post-mortem' or 'second chance' repentance. We also reject the teaching of universalism, which holds that all will be saved regardless of their commitment to Christ (Rom. 2:12-16; Luke. 1:15; 18:15-17; Rom 10:9-13; Matt. 7:13).
5. Bearing 4 in mind, Christians should conduct mission and evangelism on the basis that proclamation and demonstration of the gospel are the definitive means by which God intends to save people and make disciples of all nations. Although the gospel is fundamentally 'good news' about the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ, it is appropriate that Christian witness should also include the message of divine judgment and hell (Matt. 28:18-20; Rom. 10:14-15; Acts 10:42; 17:31).
6. Hell is more than mere annihilation at the point of death. Rather, death will lead on to resurrection and final judgment to either heaven or hell (1 Cor. 15:1-58; John 5:25-9; Rev. 20:11-14)
7. As well as separation from God, hell involves severe punishment. Scripture depicts this punishment in various ways, using both psychological and physical terminology. Although this terminology is often metaphorical and although we should be wary of inferring more detail about hell than Scripture itself affords, hell is a *conscious* experience of rejection and torment (Matt. 8:12, 13:42, 24:51; Luke. 13:28, 16:23).
8. There are degrees of punishment and suffering in hell related to the severity of sins committed on earth. We should, however, be wary of speculating on how exactly the correlation between sins committed and penalties imposed will operate (Luke. 10:12, 12:47f.).
9. The Bible describes hell as a realm of destruction. Evangelicals, however, diverge on whether this destruction applies to the actual *existence* of individual sinners (eventual annihilation), or to the *quality of their relationship with God* (eternal conscious punishment). Although Scripture frequently presents God's ultimate punishment for sin as 'death', the meaning of 'death' in Scripture is not confined merely to the cessation of earthly life, and is often used to convey long-term spiritual estrangement from God (Matt 7:13, 10:28; John 5:16; Eph. 2:1).
10. Evangelicals diverge on whether hell is eternal in *duration* or *effect* – that is, whether an individual's punishment in hell will literally go on 'for ever', as a ceaseless conscious experience, or whether it will end in a destruction which will

be 'forever', in the sense of being final and irreversible. It should be acknowledged that both of these interpretations preserve the crucial principle that judgment is on the basis of sins committed in *this* life, and that when judgment is to hell, it cannot be repealed (Matt. 25:41-6; Mark. 9:43-8; Luke 16:26).

11. God's purpose extends beyond judgment to the redemption of the cosmos. Evangelicals diverge on whether a place is preserved for hell in this new order of things, but it is important to stress that, either way, God's demands of justice will have been fully and perfectly met by this point (Rev. 20:14, 21:4, cf. 22:15).
12. We urge church leaders to present biblical teaching on hell to their congregations, and to relate it to their ongoing ministries of personal visitation, evangelism and social action.
13. We commend sensitivity and discernment in presenting the message of hell – particularly to those for whom commitment to Christ is uncertain or unrealised. Where such people are terminally ill, we urge a simple, compassionate presentation of the gospel, which may include mention of hell as appropriate and necessary. The same applies to relatives and friends of those approaching death.
14. When Christians have died, we encourage declaration of their heavenly inheritance in pastoral care of their bereaved relatives and friends, and in the conduct of their funerals or cremations.
15. Where the relationship of a deceased person to God has been unclear, or even apparently hostile, we would caution against explicit pronouncement on that person's eternal destiny. Rather, we urge those caring for their bereaved friends or relatives, and those conducting their funerals or cremations, to commend the gospel of Christ, spelling out the eternal consequences of unbelief in more general terms as appropriate and necessary.
16. We encourage theological colleges and related Christian organisations to train church leaders to a high standard of biblical preaching, teaching and pastoral care in matters related to hell. We are concerned that this difficult subject is too often avoided today, and that our mission and witness may be compromised as a result.
17. We urge evangelicals involved in religious education in schools to ensure that modules on Christianity include presentations on death, judgment, heaven and hell.
18. We recognise that the interpretation of hell as eternal conscious punishment is the one most widely attested by the Church in its historic formulation of doctrine and in its understanding of Scripture. We also recognise that it represents the classic, mainstream evangelical position. We note that hell is defined explicitly as 'eternal punishment' by the doctrinal bases of the British Evangelical Council and the Evangelical Movement of Wales, both of whom have representatives on ACUTE.
19. We recognise that the interpretation of hell in terms of conditional immortality is a significant minority evangelical view. Furthermore, we believe that the

traditionalist-conditionalist debate on hell should be regarded as a secondary rather than a primary issue for evangelical theology. Although hell is a profoundly serious matter, we view the holding of either one of these two views of it over against the other to be neither essential in respect of Christian doctrine, nor finally definitive of what it means to be an evangelical Christian.

20. We understand the current Evangelical Alliance Basis of Faith to allow both traditionalist and conditionalist interpretations of hell. The current form of the EA Basis, however, makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusions on this matter, because it has no specific clause devoted to general resurrection, final judgment and heaven and hell *as such*. We believe that the inclusion of such a clause might be helpful, not least as a means of clarifying what we take to be an implicit openness to conditionalism in the present wording of the Basis.
21. We appreciate the concerns of some that the influence of conditionalist theology has grown within evangelicalism in recent years, but recognise that the majority of those who have published as 'evangelical conditionalists' have strong evangelical credentials, and have in particular demonstrated a genuine regard for the authority of Scripture.
22. We encourage traditionalist and conditionalist evangelicals to pursue agreement on the matter of hell, rather than merely acquiescing in their disagreement. As they do so, we call upon them to maintain constructive dialogue and respectful relationships, even when their differences seem intractable. To these ends, we commend our report for consideration, discussion and implementation.