

ETERNAL OPPORTUNITY FOR SALVATION THROUGH CHRIST?

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I. An Unnecessary Concept

On the assumption, for the moment, that eternal opportunity for salvation through Christ could not be disproved, we should consider several matters.

A. Other preferable observations adjust our understanding of hell so that eternal option is unnecessary. A big impetus for the doctrine of eternal option comes from the apparent impropriety of a loving God torturing sinners endlessly in hell for no remedial purpose; punitive purpose seems not to call for such severity if punishment should be commensurate with the crime. Several factors reduce the urgency of this “problem.”

1. Sliding-scale judgment. If God judges on a sliding scale, he can take into account that a person did not hear the gospel, was poorly exposed to the gospel, faced more temptation or persecution than others, and other variables. God can gather up the inequities during the time of proclamation and apply them at the time of judgment.

Sliding-scale judgment contrasts with static judgment. Jesus says, “*To whom much is given, of him much will be required*” (Luke 12:48). He implied that God’s expectancy takes into account differences in opportunity, knowledge, ability, and anything else that lies beyond people’s control.

Within the concept of sliding-scale judgment lies the question about unevangelized elect. At least we can say that scripture does not teach that all those who have not heard of Christ are automatically lost because of that factor, which they could not control. It teaches that all salvation is figured relative to Christ whether people lived in the patriarchal period (1 Peter 3-4), under the Mosaic Law (Hebrews 9:15), outside of Israel (Romans 1:14-16), or under Christian proclamation (1 Timothy 4:10). That leaves the unevangelized after Christ. Previous examples from the patriarchal and Mosaic periods show that being saved by Christ and hearing about Christ do not amount to the same thing, which leaves open the possibility of applying that principle to the unevangelized after Christ as surely as it applied to earlier people who had not heard of him. This view differs from eternal option in that it does not involve a change of status from lost to saved after death; it only affirms that in judging people relative to factors on this side of death, God could demonstrate consistency in both his love and his holiness in saving an unevangelized person on appropriate conditions. The variable is handled in the judgment process itself rather than in a later change from saved to lost.

2. Degrees of punishment. All sins are alike in kind but not in degree. While all sins are alike in being contrary to divine intent, they are not equal in how contrary they are to divine intent as they relate to their nature and purpose. The results of some sins are more far-reaching than others, and hell can punish commensurately with the severity of the sin as measured by consequences. Luke records Jesus’ comments that some will be beaten with many stripes depending on what they knew or should have figured out on their own if their attitudes and motives were right (Luke 12:47-48).

3. Hell as separation from God. The interpersonal framework predicts at least that hell is separation from God, whatever the actual form of existence that separation entails. As long as we speak only of possibilities, we may speculate on various options that would be appropriate. Eternal separation might mean not only permanent separation from God, but eternal loneliness. Sin is virtually always a form of self-centeredness, and behaving selfishly is contrary to social relations. Losing the possibility of fellowship could be what “destroy” means. Being created in the image of God means having interpersonal capacity; hence, removing the option would be “destruction.” Another form of that separation could be, not loneliness, but relationships only with other sinners angelic, demonic, human, or otherwise. The separation would be from God in the sense of not being in his grace—or in his “good graces.”

Such a scenario would be hell as poetic justice. Along with whatever else, hell amounts to giving people what they implicitly sought in separating themselves from God and behaving self-centeredly toward other people.

4. Biblical descriptions of hell as figurative. Comments under the previous heading imply that orthodox understanding of certain condemnation texts may interpret them as figurative. We infer that it should do so. We do not know much about the nature of the resurrection condition, specifically about the resurrection body. It is called a glorified body (2 Corinthians 5:1-8); we assume that it is asexual (Matthew 22:30); we cannot tell how far Jesus meant for us to parallel our resurrected condition with that of angels, who are ministering “spirits” (Hebrews 1:14) and so do not have flesh and bones (Luke 24:39). So, it is difficult to say whether the corporeality implied by fire is even cogent if taken literally. Furthermore, fire imagery does not mix with outer darkness imagery (22:13), which implies that one or both are imageries. Fire and brimstone may serve as graphic pictures of how bad it really is—hot and smelly—to be separated from the holy, loving God, the Ultimate Reality.

We mean comments of this sort to be tentative and suggestive rather than dogmatic and doctrinal. They are done with the same mentality and motive as Abraham’s use of s “sanctified imagination” to justify God who promised him a lineage through Isaac before commanding him to sacrifice Isaac. Our suggestions above on hell enables us to continue serving God as believers instead of ceasing to do so because we have found the Judaeo-Christian faith to be false by self-contradiction. Similarly, humble speculation can remove an unnecessary stumbling block to the conversion of present disbelievers.

5. Hell as the result of personal sin only. We set aside any notion that the eternal destiny of one person is caused by another person’s sin or goodness. Sin is not transferable because sin is an act and acts are not transferrable. So, we reject the notion of original guilt unto eternal condemnation, particularly when combined with unconditional election. Likewise, we set aside the unworthy notion about the “treasury of the saints,” where earlier Christians did more than necessary, and so their leftovers could be transferred to others who could gain some more good works on their tally sheet.

6. Eschatological limit. The biblical witness on eternal states may not be sufficiently clear to reach firm conclusions, given the possibility of poetic exaggeration for emphasis in the Book of Revelation and elsewhere. Under that view, the witness of scripture addresses what is pertinent to our present living; a veil lies across the rest.

The “hell” problem has fostered several ideas. Among them is (a) the notion of subjective vs. objective lostness. In God’s mind (objectively), everyone is regarded as saved through Christ. Some, however, may never come to accept their acceptance, which results in

a hell of their own making. Another idea is (b) conditional immortality, or the similar concept called annihilationism. The best form of this approach says that the unsaved cease to exist—or are positively destroyed—after judgment and a variable length or degree of punishment appropriate to the degree of their sinfulness. Fairly close to conditional immortality but less biblical would be (c) death as final end. Sinners cease to exist at death; only the saved are resurrected. (d) The concept of purgatory relates to this issue as well. Hell is for purification, variable punishment, and remediation. Then, of course, there is (e) eternal option for salvation, also called “the larger hope.” That view is a form of universalism—at least potential objective universalism. A more extreme form of universalism is the notion of (f) earthly “hell.” During life here, sinners experience enough of sin’s consequences to compensate for their disobedience. A helpful resource for introducing the subject of hell is *Four Views on Hell*, edited by William Crockett, Zondervan Publishing House, 1992.

B. The eternal option doctrine does not bear its burden of proof. Quite typically, people hit on an idea that seems to solve a problem; and they find that it “fits with” things scripture does say. The difficulty is that another idea may also “fit with,” or “account for,” those same statements. Under such conditions it is misleading to say that these things “support” a conclusion when they would “support” other conclusions as well. As long as there is more than one way to handle the data, proposals remain opinions.

In the case of eternal option, however, we would be doing more than holding it as an opinion; we would be claiming that scripture teaches it. Since it does not obviously do so to the exclusion of other possibilities, we would find ourselves “*adding to the word of God,*” which would make us false teachers. For the sake of brevity here, we simply affirm that none of the texts appealed to for the idea of eternal option to salvation are adequate to establish the doctrine.

II. A Concept That Creates Problems

Not only is the concept of eternal option an un necessary reading of certain texts, it also creates contradictions with other matters revealed in scripture.

A. Implies universalism. Although it may not at first seem to do so, eternal option implies either that universalism is the case or that the problem of evil is insoluble. If the salvation option is left open long enough to redeem all the evil, then potential universalism becomes actual universalism; so universalism is the case. If universalism does not realize its potential, evil is not finally conquered. If a holy God creates what he knows will sin without at the same time knowing that he will decisively deal with that sinful creation, he becomes unholy by creating a situation that is permanently contradictory to his own holy nature. He becomes unholy for not fulfilling his responsibility to deal with the possibility he was responsible for bringing about.

B. Makes the problem of evil insoluble (cp. previous paragraphs)

C. Controverts the teaching of scripture about irreversible destinies. Material related to that point is available in *What the Bible Says About Salvation*, pp. 112-14.

Summary of Alternatives to Eternal Torment of Sinners

1. Annihilationism, the belief that what would otherwise last forever is destroyed into nothingness by a deliberate, positive act of God
2. Conditionality immortality, the idea that everything is continually held in existence (“sustained”) by God, and in the case of evil persons God withdraws that sustaining, and the person ceases to be (cp. Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:3; also called “immortality” as distinguished from immortality)
3. Eternal option for salvation
4. Earthly life is the hell experience.
5. Objective salvation but potential irreversibility of subjective hell
6. No real existence after death
7. Degrees of (reward and) punishment and sliding-scale judgment
8. Hell as poetic justice/interpersonal alienation or separation from God
9. Purgatory, or hell as temporary and of varying lengths for each person

“Eternal Hope” and Related Issues

There is a connection between “eternal hope” and (a) suffering and evil as well as with (b) “Foreknowledge and Sin.” It relates to (c) the problem of divine holiness in the light of foreknown creaturely sin. (d) The chapter on “Universalism” in *What the Bible Says About Salvation* should handle the main texts interpreters use in support of that doctrine. In addition, (d) the references in *WBSAS* to the unevangelized elect relate to the issue. The page references appear under “unevangelized” in the “Topical Index” plus 20-21, 77-78, 104-12, 115, 521, 553, 555. Finally, (e) the evidence for irreversible destinies after the judgment is available in *WBSAS* again, pp. 112-24