

THE WAGES OF SIN

By WILLIAM DALTON

CATHOLIC TRADITION would seem to speak with a very faltering voice on the victory of good over the power of evil. On the whole, it has been haunted from the time of Augustine with the fear of hell, that last dreadful abode of the dead where evil persists eternally.

It is hard enough for man in his narrowness and hardness of heart to believe the magnificent good news of God's love and salvation. But even when the word has been heard, each individual has to reckon with the possibility that this love for him personally may be in vain. He has to reckon with the possibility that this may be the fate of those he dearly loves.

True, the horror of hell has been somewhat mitigated over the centuries. No preacher today would speak of Augustine's *massa damnata*. We do not consign, almost automatically, all jews and infidels to eternal damnation. The confidence with which we insisted on eternal fire has been undermined. Most modern theologians would hesitate to affirm with certainty that any human being will ever be consigned to hell. And, within catholic theological circles, it is now discussed whether hell is really a form of annihilation; whether a man alienated from God by unrepented sin in this life has within him no seed of eternal life; and so, at death, simply drops out of existence.

For all this, the doctrine of hell, when taken seriously, has had and continues to have a tremendous influence on the thought and feelings of the Church. It is not surprising that the picture which dominates the Sistine Chapel is that of a majestic and pitiless Christ pointing the way to eternal fire, while human beings (who are or were his brothers and sisters!) cower and shrink in terror before him. One thinks of the pious christian monk who holds out the crucifix to the heretic at the stake until the fire becomes too hot: better to retract now in these earthly flames and save your soul than to be condemned forever to the flames of hell. One remembers sermons given not so long ago which struck nothing short of animal fear into the hearers – followed, no doubt, by a great rush to the

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confessional box. I can personally remember a horrible nightmare caused by such horrendous but facile pulpit eloquence when I was a child ten years old.

But even now, when a more refined doctrine of hell is prevalent, the fear remains. The unnamed horror of eternal separation from God and from all that is good is not much less than eternal fire. And one can wonder whether annihilation is much of an improvement. With man's inborn craving for life, one might be forgiven for thinking that any form of existence, even the lowest form of life in hell, is better than sheer nothing. The point of fear is that I have to reckon seriously with this hell, whatever it is, both for myself and others. For myself first. One can extol and celebrate God's tremendous love for me in Christ, but I personally remain free finally to reject it. I cannot be sure that in my case his love will win through. The slender link between me and my salvation is my weakness and sinfulness. If you like, it is myself I have to fear, not God; although I may well ask why he has put me in this cruel situation. With some inkling of my possibilities for evil, I have good grounds for fear. It is a shattering thought.

And the thought of the eternal damnation of my human brothers and sisters is equally shattering. Now more than ever in the history of the world does mankind, in its more enlightened members, regard itself as a unity. My brother belongs to me and I to him. My christian commitment calls me to love my brother, wherever I find him, and even to die for him. I love him, not because he is moral or pious, but simply because he is a man. I find it incredible that the medieval theologians could teach that the happiness of the just in heaven would be increased by the vision of their fellow-men suffering in the torments of eternal fire. For me, it would be small comfort to enter into eternal life if this part of me is damned or simply falls into nothingness. This is made more acute when I think of my personal friends; but in principle it applies to all men. Would it be too much to say that I can never be saved unless all my human brothers and sisters are saved as well?

And it must be added that I, though finally saved, have added to the world's sin during my earthly life. This is not merely a matter of bad example, but of that context of human sin, the social environment in which we all live, the *hamartia* of Paul, which tends to lead men astray from God and to destroy them. So it may well be that, by my sin, I have helped to destroy my brother. I must share some responsibility for his damnation, and I have to live with this thought

for all eternity. How does this fit in with my perfect fulfilment in eternal life?

Briefly, it would seem that the doctrine of hell, both in its brutal ancient form and in its more sophisticated modern version, tends to condemn us to fear, to paralyse our hope and to close our hearts to the good news. It may seem to keep us moral through the motive of fear; but what sort of morality is this? Surely the basis of a morality which is christian is trust in God and in one another, joy and unconditioned self-giving to the good news. Whatever departs from this towards sadness and mistrust, no matter what laws are kept and what morality practised, is sin. Thus we have the paradoxical conclusion that the doctrine of hell, invoked to keep man moral, helps to keep him enslaved to sin.

Yet this doctrine of hell seems to be based firmly on the scriptures and on the official teaching of the Church. There is no need to discuss all the relevant texts of the New Testament. They are listed in any of the older theological manuals. The great judgment scene in Matthew can stand for all.¹ There Jesus passes judgment on all the nations. The good, who have fed the hungry and cared for the poor and the afflicted are called into the kingdom of the blessed; while the wicked, who have neglected these least brothers of Christ, are cast into eternal fire.

What is more important, the Church, in its official pronouncements, has presented as catholic faith the literal understanding of this and other biblical texts. According to its creeds and conciliar statements, 'the wicked are forever tortured in the fires of everlasting gehenna'.² Again, there is no need to cite all the references. They, too, can be found in any theological manual.

So we find ourselves in deep trouble. The scriptures, supported by official Church statements, seem to present a teaching which is abhorrent to the sensitive christian of today.

Is this a case of bowing one's head, submitting to God's revelation, and leaving all to the mystery of God and his ways? I do not think so. The christian who finds it hard, even impossible, to accept the doctrine of hell, is not necessarily being self-willed or disobedient. He may well be inspired, directly or indirectly, by another concept of God, his Christ and his ways, found also in these same scriptures. This God is the God of love, the God who is love. The Old Testa-

¹ Cf Mt 25, 31-46.

² First Council of Lyons; cf Denzinger-Schönmeister, 837.

ment gives us an admirable picture of this God in the story of Jonah. Jonah had, no doubt, good precedent in his religious tradition for hating the Ninevites and looking forward with satisfaction to their destruction. But God, who is not man, whose thoughts, then as now, are so generous and wide as to shock his self-righteous holy men, had other ideas:

And the Lord said, 'You pity the plant for which you did not labour, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night, and perished in a night. And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?'³

This God is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is revealed through his Son, not as a God partly saving and partly damning, but only as Saviour. This salvation comes through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and when this death and resurrection are celebrated, the christian believer is invited to look past the ambiguities and shadows of judgment and hell to the God who loves and is powerful to save himself and all men.

This is the message which a number of New Testament texts bring out strongly. One such passage is the great chapter on the resurrection in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Replying to the doubts of his christian converts, Paul can state unwaveringly: 'But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection from the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive'.⁴ The final picture of man's eternal destiny is a triumphant one.

Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death . . . When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to everyone.⁵

For Paul, 'death' is not merely bodily death, but includes the spiritual death of alienation from God. And Paul's idea of final salvation goes beyond men to the whole of the material universe:

³ Jon 4, 10-11.

⁴ I Cor 15, 20-22.

⁵ I Cor 15, 24-6, 28.

'creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God'.⁶

In case we might feel that Paul has not fully taken into account the power of evil to seduce and destroy, it might be useful to refer to another text. The beginning of Romans can scarcely be thought of as a pretty picture of human goodness. In the whole of christian literature there is hardly an account of human sin and depravity which is more devastating. Yet, once given the saving entry of God into human history in Jesus Christ, the scene is changed completely. For himself and his christians, Paul has no doubt that the love of God will triumph in their lives: he insists that nothing whatsoever can separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.⁷

But what about the non-christian? In a much discussed passage in the same letter, Paul seems to imply that those who follow their conscience can find final salvation, 'on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Jesus Christ'.⁸ But there are other texts where he speaks quite simply of general salvation: 'Then as one man's trespass led to condemnation, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men'.⁹ What is more significant, Paul brings together, in one powerful and audacious statement, the two contradictory themes, sin and salvation: 'For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all'.¹⁰ In the great doctrinal exposition of Romans, this is his final word, followed only by an outburst of wonder and praise. It must be taken seriously.

The multiplication of texts favourable to a point of view is not necessarily a valid theological argument; but there are in fact, elsewhere in the New Testament, indications of an optimistic understanding of the end of human history. In the pauline tradition, we read: 'For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross'.¹¹ Again in Ephesians: 'For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things to him, things in heaven and things on earth'.¹² What meaning can this peace, this reconciliation of all things have, if men

⁶ Cf Rom 8, 21.

⁹ Rom 5, 18.

¹² Eph 1, 10.

⁷ Cf Rom 8, 35-9.

¹⁰ Rom 11, 32.

⁸ Rom 2, 6-16.

¹¹ Col 1, 19-20.

persist forever alienated from other men and their God? Or if, by annihilation, the brotherhood of man is ruined for all eternity? The fourth gospel, in a remarkable passage, also links judgment and salvation together: 'Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself'.¹³ In johannine terms, 'being drawn to Jesus' means sharing eternal life. There is another passage often cited in this context 'First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men . . . This is good, and is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth'.¹⁴

We would seem then to have in the scriptures two streams of tradition, one which speaks of judgment, damnation and eternal fires, and one which at least encourages the hope that all men, despite sin and human weakness, will be saved. Where do we go from here? It will not do to cite simply the official documents of Church teaching, since the teaching of the Church relies on the exegesis of biblical texts prevalent at the time. If one wants an example of this sort of thing in the history of the Church, it would be instructive to follow the evolution in meaning of the well known doctrinal statement: 'Outside the Church there is no salvation'.

No, the only method available is to go back and have a hard look at the texts and to ask whether we have interpreted them aright. Basic to this discussion is the interpretation of eschatological statements. It is accepted in biblical circles today that such statements, about heaven, hell, final judgment, are not to be taken as literal predictions of the future. All references to this mysterious future must be symbolic. In fact, they bear primarily on man's present life, but open up, in symbolic terms, to God's future, which he still preserves as his secret.

Take, for example, the picture of the last judgment which we have already considered. Men are exhorted to visit prisoners, to care for the needy: this is fundamental to christian life. The man who is compassionate will enter into eternal life: the man completely lacking in compassion cannot share this life and will be rejected. The black and white picture must be understood symbolically. It does not mean that a certain number will enter into life and a certain number will go to eternal fire. What man is

¹³ Jn 12, 31-2.

¹⁴ 1 Tim 2, 1-4.

completely and perfectly compassionate, and what man is absolutely lacking in all compassion? Who can claim that they feed the hungry, visit prisons, care for the needy as they should – and this includes theologians and churchmen! And what right have we to exclude all compassion from the hearts of other men? No doubt, if God can find goodness even as small as a grain of mustard seed, he can build this into eternal life. Thus hell is a symbolic picture of where sin, of itself, leads to. Given God's grace and all-powerful mercy, we have no need to suppose that he will permit any of his children to end there.

But what of human freedom? It is often stated that the doctrine of an eternal hell is the only one which respects man's dignity: he can, if he wishes, choose to damn himself. This seems to me a strange concept of freedom. Surely Jesus was a man and he was free; yet there is no question in christian tradition that he could have been finally damned. In catholic teaching, there is place for a legitimate predestination of the just, although a parallel predestination to damnation is totally unacceptable. Thus, if men are finally saved, they are saved through God's grace and power, not through the correct use of their free will. How God works in man to bring about what he wants without taking his freedom away is a well-known theological problem. God's initiative and grace must be preserved whether we find a satisfactory answer to this problem or not. One thing is clear: God enters into the heart of man as creator and Lord; he acts from within in a way which is proper to himself. And, if God can act in this way in saving some men, why cannot he do the same for all?

But what do we say about those men who appear deeply and incurably wicked? Well-known historical figures could be cited at this point, depending on one's political and religious views. The simplest answer is to say that we do not know them; we do not know to what degree they were responsible, to what degree sick. Often they have been erected by human prejudice into emblems of evil. Nor need we take too seriously the pictures of utter human depravity found in the more gloomy pages of literature. By a strange and less admirable human kink, we find it easier to depict evil than good.

Possibly the greatest difficulty in re-interpreting the meaning of hell is to be found in the uneasy feelings of the good christian believer that such a radical change is not right, that the old belief was more secure, and that all is threatened when deeply-held

traditional views are changed. Such feelings must be respected. Yet, in fact, this development is not a radical or sudden change. Within the catholic Church, within the last three decades, there has been a considerable evolution. We have become far more modest in our claims to know the eschatological future. Even though for most scholars, the possibility of hell remains, the general picture of hope is brighter. But going beyond the theologians and scholars is the christian instinct of many believers, particularly thoughtful and sensitive young people who want to live their christian faith to the full. For many of these, the older understanding of hell, even in its mitigated form, is a non-doctrine. This is not necessarily a watering-down of the severe demands of revelation. It could well be a consequence of discovering the gospel as unconditional good news, the basis of celebration and joy even in the murk of human pain and sinfulness.

Again, through the strong control which the authority of the roman catholic Church has exercised over its scholars, development of theology has been slower here than in some other christian bodies. This is not necessarily bad. But it is true that catholic professors were insisting on the material nature of the fire of hell when most scholars of other christian traditions had long abandoned such ideas. When we look at protestant theology, we see that there has been within it quite a ferment for many years. *The Decline of Hell* provides an intensely interesting discussion of the debate in the seventeenth century.¹⁵ The controversy in England between F. W. Farrer and E. B. Pusey is well known. The former's *Eternal Hope* was countered by the latter's *What is of Faith as to Everlasting Punishment*. Among the great names of modern protestant theology, a significant number opt directly or indirectly for universal salvation. Karl Barth's interpretation of Romans (11,32), and his treatment of reconciliation in his *Church Dogmatics*, mark him as belonging to this group. Emil Brunner, though critical of Barth for his apparent universalism, ends up in his own *Eternal Hope* with a similar view. Paul Tillich's solution to the problem of salvation and judgment is presented in his *Systematic Theology*.¹⁶ It is clear that, from the background of his own philosophical thought, he adopts a fundamentally optimistic attitude to final human destiny.

In England, Bishop Robinson expressed the feelings and thoughts

¹⁵ Walker, D. P. (London, 1964).

¹⁶ Vol 3, *Life and the Spirit: History and the Kingdom of God*.

of many christians in his work, *In The End, God*.¹⁷ While not everything in this little work is clear or acceptable, its heart and general direction seem to be right.

One can well ask if this pretty firm direction among non-roman scholars has anything to say to the catholic Church. I think it has. What we are offered is not just easy salvation. Sooner or later the self-centred man, who has little concern for his brother, will have to experience a conversion of heart, both radical and painful. But it is suggested that the God of love and power, who works in the depths of his children's hearts, has shown us, through Jesus Christ, that he has no intention of letting the weakest or the least of them fall utterly from humanity into the power of evil. Yes, all will be well, all manner of things will be well. We, all of us, can rejoice in the good news without the torturing thought that it may not be good news for us personally. Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

¹⁷ London, 1968.