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The Glory of God's Justice and the Glory of God's Grace: Contemporary reflections on the doctrine of Hell in the teaching of Jonathan Edwards

This is the first occasion on which the Evangelical Quarterly *has had the privilege of publishing the annual Drew Lecture in Immortality which was delivered in Spurgeon's College, London, on 12th November, 1992; the lecturer was appropriately Dr Colwell who is now the tutor in Applied Theology in the College.*

There can surely be little doubt that, when John Drew inaugurated this annual lectureship on the theme of 'immortality', the 'instruction, assurance and inspiration' concerning the 'Soul's destiny' which he had in mind were intended to relate to the glories of heaven rather than to the horrors of hell. I certainly cannot claim to have read every lecture delivered under this benefice but, judging from the list of titles, the intentions of John Drew have been so interpreted by most if not all of those who have been granted the honour of addressing this theme. Rev. Dr. N. Micklem spoke in 1951 on 'The Hope and *Menace* of Immortality' (my emphasis). Rev. Dr. Norman Snaith spoke on 'Justice and Immortality' in 1963. In 1966 Rev. Dr. H. Cunliffe-Jones spoke on 'God's Judgment of the Individual after death' while Prof. I. Howard Marshall addressed the theme of 'Universalism' in 1987.[1] But only in 1960 do we find any mention of 'hell' in the heading of a Drew Lecture when Archbishop A.M. Ramsey spoke on the theme of 'Heaven and Hell'.

[1] Published as 'Does the New Testament Teach Universal Salvation?' in T. A. Hart and D. P. Thimell (ed.), *Christ in Our Place: The Humanity of God in Christ for the Reconciliation of the World. Essays presented to Professor James Torrance* (Exeter: Paternoster/Allison Park: Pickwick, 1989, 313–328).

This apparent concentration on the hope of heaven is to be expected. Who but a captive audience, obliged to attend such a lecture, would gladly endure a forty-five minute exposition of eternal torments? The theme of hell is not only thoroughly disagreeable, it is also profoundly painful and disturbing. As the writer of Hebrews states: 'It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' (Hebrews 10:31).[2] The prospect of a 'raging fire that will consume the enemies of God' is truly 'fearful' (Hebrews 10:27) but the possibility that such torment is unending is an unspeakable horror beyond contemplation.

Consequently it is hardly surprising that some have resolutely refused to contemplate it, either denying the prospect of divine punishment by proposing that all men and women will ultimately be saved, or denying the unending duration of that punishment by questioning what is perceived to be the traditional teaching of the Church concerning the soul's immortality. While the terms 'conditionalism' and 'annihilationism' may not be quite synonymous the ideas represented by these labels arrive at a similar conclusion: that men and women are created with the possibility of being immortal but that the fulfilment of this potential remains dependent upon God's grace operating through faith; that those who finally lack this gift of eternal life are therefore under threat, not of unending punishment, but of the termination of their existence. It is at this point, where a traditional understanding of God's judgment is perceived to depend upon a traditional understanding of immortality, that the theme of hell impinges directly upon the purposes of this lectureship.

Neither has this questioning of a traditional conception of God's judgment been restricted to those who (deservedly or otherwise) have gained a reputation for challenging other aspects of the Church's tradition and teaching. In a paper read at Rutherford House in the summer of 1991 no less a pillar of evangelical orthodoxy than John Wenham offered a spirited and characteristically irenic defence of his belief in 'conditional immortality', tracing this commitment to the influence of Basil Atkinson.[3] Previously L. E.

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[2] With the exception of direct quotations from Jonathan Edwards all biblical quotations are taken from the *New International Version* (Copyright 1978 by New York International Bible Society).

[3] John W. Wenham, 'The Case for Conditional Immortality' in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell: Papers presented at the Fourth Edinburgh Conference in Christian Dogmatics, 1991*, ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1993), 161–191. Wenham had previously outlined this view in his book *The Enigma of Evil* (IVP, Leicester, 1983) and refers to two unpublished works on the theme by B. F. C. Atkinson, *Life and Immortality* (privately printed

Froom had presented the 'conditionalist' case in his book *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers*[4] and Edward Fudge had argued the issue more concisely in his work *The Fire that Consumes.*[5] Moreover John Stott, Philip Hughes and Michael Green have each written in support of the 'annihilationist' or 'conditionalist' view, albeit with differing degrees of tentativeness.[6] Confronted by such prominent and influential challengers a reappraisal of the theme of hell as unending punishment cannot be wholly out of place in any contemporary consideration of the soul's immortality.

In the course of his debate with John Stott under the title '*Essentials*' David Edwards refers to the 'notorious sermon' on the theme of 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God' preached by Jonathan Edwards in 1741 and promoting what he considers to be an 'unchristian picture of God as the Eternal Torturer'.[7] Inasmuch as Jonathan Edwards has become the *bête noire* for so many of those who would challenge a traditional conception of hell there is arguably a case for focusing a reappraisal of the theme on the manner in which it is expounded within his writings. If the traditional understanding of hell as unending punishment can be defended here it can probably be defended anywhere.

It is certainly not difficult to understand why modern readers find cause for offence in Edwards' language. In the course of this 'notorious sermon' on the fate of the wicked Edwards writes:

> The wrath of God burns against them, their damnation does not slumber; the pit is prepared, the fire is made ready, the furnace is now hot, ready to receive them; the flames do now rage and glow. The glittering sword is whet, and held over them, and the pit hath opened its mouth under them.[8]

Neither does Edwards leave any room for doubt that the horror of

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and undated) and H. E. Guillebaud, *The Righteous Judge* (privately printed, 1964). Photocopies of both these works are obtainable from B. L. Bateson, 26 Summershard, South Petherton, Somerset, TA13 5DP.

[4] L. E. Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers* (Review and Herald Publishing Ass., Washington, D.C., 1966).

[5] Edward Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes: The Biblical Case for Conditional Immortality* (Revised Edition), revising editor, Peter Cousins (Carlisle UK, Paternoster Press, 1994); original edition (Providential Press, Houston, 1982).

[6] D. L. Edwards & J. R. W. Stott, *Essentials: A liberal-evangelical dialogue* (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1988), 313ff.; P. E. Hughes, *The True Image* (Eerdmann, Grand Rapids, 1989); E. M. B. Green, *Evangelism through the Local Church* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1990), 69f.

[7] David L. Edwards, *op. cit.*, 291f.

[8] Jonathan Edwards, 'Sinners in the hands of an angry God', *Works*, II, ed. Edward Hickman (Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1974). 8; cf. similar passages in the

this torment in unending: '. . . justice calls aloud for an infinite punishment of their sins.'[9] But the manner in which Edwards graphically portrays this unrelenting prospect is truly terrifying:

> When you look forward, you shall see a long forever, a boundless duration before you, which will swallow up your thoughts, and amaze your soul; and you will absolutely despair of ever having any deliverance, any end, any mitigation, any rest at all. You will know certainly that you must wear out long ages, millions of millions of ages, in wrestling and conflicting with this almighty merciless vengeance; and then when you have so done, when so many ages have actually been spent by you in this manner, you will know that all is but a point to what remains. So that your punishment will indeed be infinite.[10]

Again in a sermon preached on the text of Romans 2 8f. Edwards re-enforces the utter hopelessness of the reprobate:

> In this condition they shall remain throughout the never-ending ages of eternity. . . They will dwell in a fire that shall never be quenched, and here they must wear out eternity. Here they must wear out one thousand years after another, and that without end. There is no reckoning up the millions of years or millions of ages; all arithmetic here fails, no rules of multiplication can reach the amount, for there is no end. They shall have nothing to do to pass away their eternity, but to conflict with those torments; this will be their work for ever and ever; God shall have no other use or employment for them; this is the way that they must answer the end of their being. . . Time will seem long to them, every moment shall seem long to them, but they shall never have done with the ages of their torment.[11]

But notwithstanding the desperate hopelessness conveyed by Edwards' language one must ask whether, in essence, he is describing anything more horrific than that which we find in the synoptic gospels on the lips of Jesus himself. Moreover one must recognize that, both in his conception of hell and in his expression of its torments, Edwards was no more than an imaginative and eloquent representative of the common view of his time, which itself had been the common conception of hell in the major expressions of the Christian Church and was certainly the characteristic view of the Puritan tradition. Prof. J. I. Packer refers to Edwards as a 'Puritan born out of due time'[12] and, if this assessment is valid, then the glib

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sermon 'Sinners in Zion Tenderly Warned', *Works*, II, 201ff.; and a sermon on Acts 16:29f., *Works*, II, 817ff.

[9] Edwards, 'Sinners in the hands of an angry God', *Works*, II, 8.

[10] *ibid.*, 11.

[11] Edwards, 'The Portion of the Wicked', *Works*, II, 883.

[12] J. I. Packer, *Among God's Giants: Aspects of Puritan Christianity* (Kingsway, Eastbourne, 1991), 409.

dismissal of Edwards as a fanatical 'bogey man', frightening children with threatenings of hell fire, is simply inadequate. Any balanced appreciation of Jonathan Edwards must recognize him not only as typical of the Puritan tradition but also as an extraordinarily able and thoughtful exponent of that tradition. Indeed the irony of the common caricature of Edwards is that it runs parallel with what can only be described as a renaissance of interest in Edwards both as a philosopher and as a theologian of remarkable perception.

Born in East Windsor, Connecticut, on 5th October 1703, Jonathan Edwards was brought up as the son of a Christian pastor and, in the autumn of 1716, enrolled as a student at what was to become Yale. Following a period as a supply preacher in New York he was finally awarded his Master's Degree in 1723 and was elected tutor at Yale in May 1724. In 1727 he joined Solomon Stoddard, his maternal grandfather, as co-pastor of the flourishing Church at Northampton, Massachusetts, where he remained until in 1750, after an unhappy period of dispute with certain prominent families in the town concerning matters of Church discipline, he was dismissed from the pastorate. His removal to what was then the frontier mission station of Stockbridge enabled him to embark on what was perhaps his most effective period of writing, resulting in 1754 with the publication in Boston of *A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of that Freedom of Will, which is supposed to be essential to moral agency, virtue and vice, reward and punishment, praise and blame*[13] and four years later with the publication (also in Boston) of *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended; Evidences of its Truth Produced, and Arguments to the Contrary Answered. . .*[14] Invited in 1757 to become President of the newly formed Princeton College he was inoculated against smallpox, contracted a severe fever, and died on 22nd March 1758, leaving behind merely in volumes of notes and memoirs the elements of that which, had it not been for his untimely death, would have issued in publications that would have established him as unquestionably a leading thinker of his generation. With reference to this tragedy the Lutheran theologian Prof. Robert Jenson remarks: 'It is as if America had been given its Hegel and had not noticed'.[15]

There is a discernable tendency even amongst the most admiring of Jonathan Edwards' commentators either to be embarrassed by Edwards the Calvinist and impressed by Edwards the student of the

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[13] Edwards, *Works*, I, 1–93.
[14] Edwards, *Works*, I, 143–233.
[15] Robert W. Jenson, *America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards* (OUP, Oxford, 1988), 3.

Enlightenment and interpreter of Newton and Locke or, contrariwise, to be impressed by the former and embarrassed by the latter.[16] But, as Robert Jenson persuasively argues and demonstrates, Edwards' thought cannot be so conveniently divided: 'Edwards himself did not think he was doing aesthetics, metaphysics, speculative science, moral philosophy or psychology, as these disciplines are now known. He intended all his thinking as one unified project of specifically believing reflection. . .'[17] The totality of Edwards' diverse interests and writings, his essays in 'Natural Philosophy', his sermons, his accounts and analyses of the phenomena of religious experience, his theological treatises, springs from his inner and overwhelming sense of awe before the personal reality of God and the sheer beauty, harmony and majesty of all his ways and works. It is this all dominating preoccupation with the majesty and glory of God that underlies his expositions of the horrors of eternal punishment and the latter ought not to be considered other than in the context of the former.

The ambiguity inherent in the sub-title of this lecture may not have passed unnoticed. Is the reference to 'reflections' that were 'contemporary' to Edwards or 'contemporary' to ourselves? In a sermon dated April 1739 on the text from Matthew 25:46 'These shall go away into everlasting punishment' and headed 'The Eternity of Hell Torments' Edwards states that his aim is to respond to two opinions: the first being that '. . . the eternal death with which wicked men are threatened in Scripture, signifies no more than eternal annihilation; that God will punish their wickedness by eternally abolishing their being', and the second being that '. . . though the punishment of the wicked shall consist in sensible misery, yet it shall not be absolutely eternal; but only of a very long continuance'.[18] With characteristic perception the 'Preacher' observes:

> What has been will be again,
> what has been done will be done again;
> there is nothing new under the sun.' (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

There would seem to be only one issue of apparent substance raised by modern 'annihilationists' that is not anticipated by Edwards in the course of this single sermon, namely this central question regarding the nature of immortality. Maybe we ought not to

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[16] Compare Perry Miller's *Jonathan Edwards* (W. Sloane, New York, 1949) and Iain H. Murray's *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1987).

[17] Robert W. Jenson, *op. cit.*, viii.

[18] Edwards, 'The Eternity of Hell Torments', *Works*, II, 83.

be surprised that Edwards fails to address this question since it would appear to arise from a misunderstanding concerning the traditional teaching of the Church on this matter. When John Wenham speaks of immortality 'being inherent in God alone'[19] he seems to be implying that the Church has traditionally taught otherwise. Yet Augustine himself distinguishes between the soul's immortality and that of God himself 'who alone is immortal' (I Timothy 6:16).[20] Similarly Calvin, in his *Treatise on Free Will against Pighius*, argues that the soul is not immortal of itself, yet neither is it 'mortal by its nature' since the nature of the soul derives, not from 'the primary faculty' of its 'essence' but from that with which God has endowed it.[21] Commenting on this passage Francois Wendel observes:

> Not only is the soul created, but its immortality is a gift of God which he could withdraw from the soul if he wished; and the soul deprived of the divine support would perish just like the body and return to nothing.[22]

The mainstream of Christian thought has considered the soul to be immortal, not necessarily or independently, but contingently and dependently. Consequently, while Edwards is prepared to support his arguments for the soul's immortality with references from Socrates, Plato and Cicero, he nonetheless concedes that the life of the soul *could* cease through its 'abolition' by God. Edwards' central vision of creation as continually dependent upon God would render any 'independent' or 'necessary' understanding of the soul's immortality quite inconceivable.[23] But if this is the case, if the soul's immortality is contingent rather than necessary, then the soul's continuing punishment in hell is the outcome, not of God's passive acquiescence, but of God's active determination, continually maintaining the existence of the soul in judgment. Accordingly the distinction between the traditional teaching of the Church and the opinions of modern 'conditionalists' is not that the former perceives

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[19] John W. Wenham, *op. cit.*, 162.

[20] Augustine, 'The Nature of the Good' in *Earlier Writings*, selected and translated by John H. S. Burleigh (Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1953), 339.

[21] Quoted by François Wendel in *Calvin: The Origins and Development of his Thought*, trans. by Philip Mairet (Collins, London, 1963), 175.

[22] *ibid.*

[23] Edwards, 'Miscellaneous Observations', *Works*, II, 472 & 477f. For a full discussion of the concept of immortality in the New Testament see Murray J. Harris, *Raised Immortal: Resurrection and Immortality in the New Testament* (Marshall, Morgan & Scott, London, 1983). Harris maintains that, while the concept of immortality in the New Testament positively implies more than mere survival beyond death, its opposite is not necessarily 'non-existence' or 'the annihilation of the unrighteous by divine fiat' (198f.).

the soul to be independently immortal and therefore insusceptible to annihilation while the latter do not, but rather that both hold the soul's immortality to be dependent upon the positive and continuing determination of God, the former accepting that God actively maintains the soul in judgment, the latter recoiling from such a thought as obscene if not blasphemous. That is to say, any distinction between these two opinions concerning the nature of immortality is more apparent than real. There is a distinction between concepts of 'contingent immortality' and 'conditional immortality', but it is less a distinction related to the nature of immortality itself than it is a distinction related to the perceived purposes and character of God. The truly substantial distinctions between the two opinions concern the interpretation of biblical metaphors of judgment, the morality of a punishment that is unending, and the nature of God himself.

During the course of his sermon on Matthew 25:46 Edwards ponders the possibility that the word here translated 'everlasting' might mean something less than an unending punishment of the wicked. But for Edwards, as previously for Augustine, such a possibility is excluded by the juxtaposition of 'eternal punishment' and 'eternal life'.[24] In this respect Philip Hughes seems to evade the issue by conveniently changing the contrast from one between everlasting life and everlasting punishment to one between everlasting life and everlasting death.[25] Edward Fudge is somewhat more convincing in his contention that it is the result of the punishment, rather than the punishment itself, which is eternal: what is intended is eternal *punishment* rather than eternal *punishing*.[26] Yet while this may appear to be an attractive possibility in relation to this particular text one must ask whether it is sufficient as an interpretation of the various and horrific metaphors of final judgment that are specified within the New Testament. In the course of the same sermon, but referring to the text of Mark 9:44, Edwards comments:

> Now, it will not do to say, that the meaning is, Their worm shall live a *great while*, or that it shall be a great while before their fire is quenched. If ever the time comes that their worm shall *die*; if ever there shall be a *quenching* of the fire at all, then it is not true that their worm *dieth not*, and that the fire is *not quenched*. For if there be a dying of the worm, and a quenching of the fire, let it be at what time it will, nearer or further off, it is equally contrary to such a negation—*it dieth not, it is not quenched.*[27]

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[24] Edwards, *Works*, II, 86; cf. Augustine, *City of God*, 21 23.
[25] P. E. Hughes, *op. cit.*, 403.
[26] Edward Fudge, *op. cit.*, 120ff.; cf. 17, 153 & 207.
[27] Edwards, 'The Eternity of Hell Torments', *Works*, II, 86.

In a sermon preached on the text of Luke 17:32 and entitled 'The Folly of Looking Back in Fleeing out of Sodom' Edwards comments more generally on the biblical metaphors of judgment and notes that the 'reason why so many similitudes are used, is because none of them are sufficient. Any one does but partly and very imperfectly represent the truth, and therefore God makes use of many.'[28]

In fairness, Fudge, Wenham and others painstakingly grapple with other possible references for such metaphors. I can only confess that, for myself, I find their alternative interpretations ultimately unsatisfactory and unconvincing. Metaphors may be only metaphors but they must be significant of something and, when taken together, would seem to be indicative of a prospect unspeakably dreadful and unrelenting, a prospect vastly more terrifying than that of the oblivion which would be the consequence of annihilation. It is not that such metaphors must be taken literally but that the underlying sense of that which is unrelenting cannot be evaded. It is not to deny that there are many texts which admit to an annihilationist interpretation, but it is to recognize that there are some texts, albeit few texts, in which the element of unending duration cannot be denied without extreme hermeneutical contortions. Again in his sermon on 'The Eternity of Hell Torments' and commenting upon Jesus' words concerning Judas: 'It would be better for him if he had not been born' (Matthew 26:24), Edwards observes that this would seem 'plainly to teach us, that the punishment of the wicked is such that their existence, upon the whole, is worse than non-existence'. But this would not be the case if the punishment of the wicked consisted merely in their annihilation. In addition the 'wicked, in their punishment, are said to *weep, and wail, and gnash their teeth*'. This would seem to imply 'not only real existence, but life, knowledge, and activity'. The wicked are both 'sensible' of their punishment and 'affected' by it.[29] Edwards continues:

> Annihilation is not so great a calamity but that some men have undoubtedly chosen it, rather than a state of suffering even in this life. This was the case of Job, a good man. But if a good man in this world may suffer that which is worse than annihilation, doubtless the proper punishment of the wicked, in which God means to manifest his peculiar abhorrence of their wickedness, will be a calamity vastly greater still; and therefore cannot be annihilation. That must be a very mean and contemptible testimony of God's wrath towards those who have rebelled against his crown and dignity—broken his laws, and despised both his

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[28] Edwards, 'The Folly of Looking Back in Fleeing out of Sodom', *Works*, II, 66.
[29] Edwards, 'The Eternity of Hell Torments', *Works*, II, 85.

vengeance and his grace—which is not so great a calamity as some of his true children have suffered in life.[30]

But the underlying question for those who would seek to interpret the biblical metaphors of judgment in terms of ultimate annihilation is whether the concept of a punishment that is unending can be considered as a just response to human sin. However grave human sinfulness may be, is not such unrelenting punishment out of all proportion to the crime? John Wenham writes:

> In my book *The Enigma of Evil* I try to grapple with all the moral difficulties of the Bible and many of the difficulties of Providence. My main theme is to show how God's judgments reflect the goodness of the God we adore. The one point at which I am so seriously perplexed that I have to devote a whole chapter to it is the subject of hell. My problem is, not that God punishes, but that the punishment traditionally ascribed to God seems neither to square with Scripture nor to be *just*. . . I know that no sinner is competent to judge the heinousness of sin, but I cannot see that endless punishment is either loving or just.[31]

With greater hesitation but to similar purpose John Stott also comments that, while not wishing to 'minimize the gravity of sin', he must question 'whether "eternal conscious torment" is compatible with the biblical revelation of divine justice'. The only means in which this could perhaps be comprehended would be if 'the impenitence of the lost also continues throughout eternity.'[32]

Yet, as both writers admit, we simply are not in a position to assess either the utter purity of divine holiness or the utter depravity of human sinfulness. We therefore ought not to pontificate on what is or what is not just. Seeking to demonstrate that such a punishment need not be considered as inconsistent with God's justice Edwards reasons that:

> If the evil of sin be infinite, as the punishment is, then it is manifest that the punishment is no more than proportionable to the sin punished, and is no more than sin deserves. And if the obligation to love, honour, and obey God be infinite, then sin which is the violation of this obligation, is a violation of infinite obligation, and so is an infinite evil. Again, if God be infinitely worthy of love, honour, and obedience, then our obligation to love, and honour, and obey him is infinitely great.—So that God being infinitely glorious, or infinitely worthy of our love, honour, and obedience; our obligation to love, honour, and obey him, and so to avoid all sin, is infinitely great. Again, our obligation to love, honour, and obey God being infinitely great, sin is the violation of infinite obligation, and so

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[30] *ibid.*
[31] John W. Wenham, *op. cit.*, 185.
[32] J. R. W. Stott, *op. cit.*, 318f.

> is an infinite evil. Once more, sin being an infinite evil, deserves an infinite punishment, an infinite punishment is no more than it deserves: therefore such punishment is just. . .[33]

Similarly in a sermon entitled 'The Future Punishment of the Wicked Unavoidable and Intolerable', preached on the text of Ezekiel 22:14, he argues that God does not see as we see with our 'polluted eyes'; in his sight our sins are 'infinitely abominable'. We ought not therefore to think it 'strange' that 'God should deal so severely' with us or that the wrath which we shall suffer 'should be so great'. As great as this wrath may be 'it is no greater than that love of God' which we have 'despised.'[34]

It is this infinite nature of human sinfulness before God's infinite holiness that seems to be overlooked by those who would question the justice of an infinite punishment. It is not that the gravity of human sin is so great that it requires countless ages of punishment for God's justice to be satisfied. It is rather that the gravity of human sinfulness is so great that God's justice can never be satisfied: '. . . there never will come that particular moment, when it can be said that now justice is satisfied'.[35] Even in endless torment the sinner '. . . shall *not suffer beyond what strict justice requires*. . .'.[36] In the final paragraph of his sermon on 'The Eternity of Hell Torments' Edwards observes:

> Those who are sent to hell never will have paid the whole of the debt which they owe to God, nor indeed a part which bears any proportion to the whole. They never will have paid a part which bears so great a proportion to the whole, as one mite to ten thousand talents. Justice therefore never can be actually satisfied in your damnation; but it is actually satisfied in Christ. Therefore he is accepted of the Father, and therefore all who believe are accepted and justified in him.[37]

Thus when John Wenham, arguing against the possibility of hell as endless punishment, notes that, even in the 'utter dereliction' of the Cross, Jesus 'did not suffer endless pain'[38] he merely confuses the issue. The sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, by whatever metaphors we seek to comprehend it, is sufficient as an atonement for the sin of the world, not by virtue of its duration, nor by virtue of the physical torture endured, but rather by virtue of the perfection of the one who there suffered. The infinite punishment of the sinner will never atone

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[33] Edwards, 'The Eternity of Hell Torments', *Works*, II, 83.
[34] Edwards, *Works*, II, 81.
[35] Edwards, 'The End for which God created the World' *Works*, I, 121.
[36] Edwards, 'Sinners in the hands of an angry God', *Works*, II, 10.
[37] Edwards, 'The Eternity of Hell Torments', *Works*, II, 89.
[38] John W. Wenham, *op. cit.*, 185.

for infinite sin. The death of the one who is infinitely pure can and does.

However, Wenham raises a far more compelling issue when, with reference to God's ultimate reconciliation of all things to himself in Christ, he asks how it can be 'conceivable that there can be a section or realm of creation that does not belong to this fulness and by its very presence contradicts it'.[39] The same point is made by John Stott who, commenting on the texts which speak of this final restoration, states:

> These texts do not lead me to universalism, because of the many others which speak of the terrible and eternal reality of hell. But they do lead me to ask how God can in any meaningful sense be called 'everything to everybody' while an unspecified number of people still continue in rebellion against him and under his judgment. It would be easier to hold together the awful reality of hell and the universal reign of God if hell means destruction and the impenitent are no more.[40]

Such comments, when referred to the writings of Jonathan Edwards, bring us to the very heart of his understanding of the character and glory of God as expressed in the title of this lecture. For Edwards the God of the Bible is glorified as much in manifestations of his justice as in manifestations of his grace:

> The glory of God is the greatest good; it is that which is the chief end of the creation; it is of greater importance than any thing else. But this is one way wherein God will glorify himself, as in the eternal destruction of ungodly men he will glorify his justice.[41]

In Edwards' view the justice of God, in the same measure as the mercy of God, is a 'glorious attribute' which is fulfilled and made apparent in the 'everlasting destruction and ruin of the barren and unfruitful'.[42] The everlasting punishment of the wicked therefore, far from conflicting with the ultimate triumph of Christ, is actually an outcome and outworking of that triumph.[43] Again in the sermon entitled 'The Future punishment of the wicked unavoidable and intolerable' Edwards states:

> God will before all these get himself honour in your destruction; you shall be tormented in the presence of them all. Then all will see that God is a great God indeed; then all will see how dreadful a thing it is to sin against such a God, and to reject such a Saviour, such love and grace, as

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[39] John W. Wenham, *op. cit.*, 190.
[40] J. R. W. Stott, *op. cit.*, 319.
[41] Edwards, 'The Eternity of Hell Torments', *Works*, II, 87.
[42] Edwards, 'Wicked men useful in their destruction only', *Works*, II, 127.
[43] Edwards, 'A History of the Work of Redemption', *Works*, I, 619.

> you have rejected and despised. All will be filled with awe at the great sight, and all the saints and angels will look upon you, and adore that majesty, that mighty power, and that holiness and justice of God, which shall appear in your ineffable destruction and misery.[44]

Here we arrive at the most painful aspect of Edwards' thought, namely that the everlasting punishment of the wicked will be the cause of praise to God by saints and angels. It is God's purpose to demonstrate to 'angels and men, both how excellent his love is, and also how terrible his wrath is'.[45] In a discourse entitled 'The End of the Wicked Contemplated by the Righteous' and published posthumously in March 1773 Edwards clarifies that this rejoicing of the righteous over the fate of the wicked will not issue from gloating or any 'ill disposition'. Yet any form of grief on the part of the saints would be inconsistent with their state of perfect happiness. Here and now the saints have a duty to love the wicked and to seek their salvation. Here and now God deals with the wicked in patience and mercy. But it will not always be thus. In eternity God will have neither pity nor mercy for the damned and neither will the saints who will then see and feel as he sees and feels. They will know then that 'God has no love' to the wicked and they themselves will then 'love what God loves, and only that'. They will therefore join the angels who rejoice in the glorification of God's justice together with his power and majesty. Moreover, in seeing the misery of the wicked there will be increased within them a 'joyful sense of the *grace and love of God to them*'.[46]

Similarly in the sermon entitled 'Wicked men useful in their destruction only' Edwards writes:

> The glory of divine justice in the perdition of ungodly men, appears wonderful and glorious in the eyes of the saints and angels in heaven. . . The destruction of the unfruitful is of use, to give the saints a *greater sense* of their happiness, and of God's grace to them. . . When the saints in heaven shall look upon the damned in hell, it will serve to give them a greater sense of their own happiness. When they shall see how dreadful the anger of God is, it will make them the more prize his love. . . When they shall look upon the damned, and see their misery, how will heaven ring with the praises of God's justice towards the wicked, and his grace towards the saints![47]

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[44] Edwards, 'The Future punishment of the wicked unavoidable and intolerable', *Works*, II, 82.

[45] Edwards, 'Sinners in the hands of an angry God', *Works*, II, 10.

[46] Edwards, 'The End of the Wicked Contemplated by the Righteous', *Works*, II, 207ff.

[47] Edwards, 'Wicked men useful in their destruction only', *Works*, II, 127.

The theme is central to Edwards' understanding of hell and recurs in his sermon on Matthew 25:46:

> Hereby the saints will be made the more sensible how great their salvation is. When they shall see how great the misery is from which God hath saved them, and how great a difference he hath made between their state, and the state of others, who were by nature, and perhaps for a time by practice, no more sinful and ill-deserving than any, it will give them a greater sense of the wonderfulness of God's grace to them. Every time they look upon the damned, it will excite in them a lively and admiring sense of the grace of God, in making them so to differ.[48]

How can we continue with such language or contemplate such an obscene prospect? When we speak of the reprobate we are not merely contemplating a nameless mass who have committed horrendous crimes. We are thinking of friends, of family, of those who here and now we love, of those we long to lead to a knowledge of God's mercy. How can we possibly contemplate rejoicing before God when such as these suffer this relentless and horrific fate? Of course we cannot now tell how, in the light of glory, we will see and feel. Certainly we will then love what God loves and feel as he feels. But this only begs the question. Is this truly how God will then see and feel?

We may not agree with John Hick when he comments that '. . . either we reject the doctrine that any creatures are doomed to hell, or we revise the doctrine of God'[49] but we must recognize that the ultimate issue here is not that of the nature of immortality, nor even that of the nature of hell, it is rather that of the nature of God himself. Can it be appropriate, in the light of the testimony of Scripture as a whole, and in the light of the Cross of Jesus in particular, to juxtapose the glory of God's justice and the glory of God's grace in quite this manner? In this matter also Edwards is representative of a Puritan tradition which, comprehending the Cross of Christ within a substitutionary model, tended in some respects to consider God's justice as primary. By understanding the dynamic of the Atonement in terms of the person of Christ rather than in terms of the degree of his sufferings Jonathan Edwards qualifies this tradition. But we must question whether he has qualified it radically enough. While the Cross of Jesus is certainly the outworking in human history both of God's justice and his mercy it is so in such a manner that the former is overwhelmed by the latter.

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[48] Edwards, 'The Eternity of Hell Torments', *Works*, II, 87; cf. similar comments in 'The Warnings of Scripture are in the best manner adapted to the awakening and conversion of sinners', *Works*, II, 69; & 'The Portion of the Righteous', *Works*, II, 902.

[49] J. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London, 1966), 378.

If God is in himself who he is in the gospel narrative then in eternity and in human history his mercy overwhelms his justice. Ultimately in all God's dealings with men and women 'mercy triumphs over judgment' (James 2:13). In the shadow of the Cross we are committed to wrestle with that which the Apostle Paul concludes in Romans 11:32: '. . . God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all'. This need not lead us to embrace universalism though perhaps we ought not to be surprised that Kenneth Morris, writing in the *Scottish Journal of Theology* in 1991, can trace the 'Puritan roots of American Universalism', especially as represented in the teachings of John Murray (1741–1815), Elhanan Winchester (1751–1797) and Hosea Ballou (1771–1852).[50]

At various points in the course of his *Church Dogmatics* Karl Barth speaks in terms of the 'No' of God's judgment and the 'Yes' of his grace. At no point is it his desire to lessen the dreadful gravity of this 'No', but it is a 'No' that has been totally overwhelmed by God's 'Yes'. The terrifying threat of the divine 'No' remains but it can never be an equal and opposing force to the divine 'Yes'. The authentic 'Yes' of the gospel can never be heard apart from the 'No', but the 'No' can certainly not be heard apart from the 'Yes' which overwhelms it.[51]

I certainly do not intend to imply a form of universalism. As I have argued elsewhere, I personally do not accept that Karl Barth was any more a universalist than was the Apostle Paul;[52] the very real threat of the divine 'No' remains. Mercy which can be counted upon in advance is no longer mercy. The Triune God remains the free Lord in all his ways and works. It is *his* mercy that overwhelms the 'No' of his judgment. In this we must concur with Jonathan Edwards when he states that it is 'the glory of the divine attribute of mercy, that it is free and sovereign in its exercises' and that it would be an 'unscriptural notion of the mercy of God, that he is merciful in such a

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[50] K. R. Morris, 'The Puritan Roots of American Universalism', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 44 (1991), 457–487.

[51] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vols. I–IV, Eng. trans. eds G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1956–75), II 2, 13; IV 1, 350 & 591ff.; IV 2, 237, 315ff. & 349.

[52] John E. Colwell, *Actuality and Provisionality: Eternity and Election in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Rutherford House, Edinburgh, 1989), 264ff.; also 'Proclamation as Event: Barth's supposed "universalism" in the context of his view of mission' in *Mission to the World: Essays to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the ordination of George Raymond Beasley-Murray to the Christian Ministry*, ed. Paul Beasley-Murray (Baptist Historical Society, 1991), 42–46; 'The Contemporaneity of the Divine Decision: Reflections on Barth's Denial of "Universalism" ' in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, 139–160; cf. J. D. Bettis, 'Is Karl Barth a Universalist?', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 20 (1967), 423–436.

sense that he cannot bear that penal justice should be executed'.[53] God has 'laid himself under *no obligation*, by any promise, to keep any natural man out of hell one moment. . .';[54] there is 'nothing that keeps wicked men at any one moment out of hell, but the mere pleasure of God'.[55] In an undated sermon on the text of Romans 9:18 Edwards observes that:

> Sinners are sometimes ready to flatter themselves, that though it may not be contrary to the justice of God to condemn them, yet it will not consist with the glory of his mercy. They think it will be dishonourable to God's mercy to cast them into hell, and have no pity or compassion upon them. They think it will be very hard and severe, and not becoming a God of infinite grace and tender compassion. But God can deny salvation to any natural person without any disparagement to his mercy and goodness. That, which is not contrary to God's justice, is not contrary to his mercy. If damnation be justice, then mercy may choose its own object. They mistake the nature of the mercy of God, who think that it is an attribute, which, in some cases, is contrary to justice.' [56]

However, later in the same sermon he also concludes:

> . . . God can bestow mercy upon you without the least prejudice to the honour of his holiness, which you have offended, or to the honour of his majesty, which you have insulted, or of his justice, which you have made your enemy, or of his truth, or of any of his attributes. Let you be what sinner you may, God can, if he pleases, greatly glorify himself in your salvation.[57]

God is never obliged to be merciful. Mercy remains his free prerogative. Consequently the threat of an eternal punishment remains a real threat. The ultimate salvation of all men and women cannot be counted upon as either necessary or assured. But God's mercy and God's justice do not stand in an unresolved and equal tension and, for this reason, the ultimate salvation of all men and women cannot be finally discounted but can remain the goal of our prayers and our hopes. Universalism in its various forms maintains that all men and women must necessarily be saved, that if this were not so God would not be truly loving or merciful. But the Triune God is bound by no such necessity. As Father, Son and Holy Spirit God is loving in himself without having to love, create, or save anyone. In response to the dreadful warnings of Scripture I cannot discount the possibility that there will be men and women, maybe even

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[53] Edwards, 'The Eternity of Hell Torments', *Works*, II, 83.
[54] Edwards, 'Sinners in the hands of an angry God', *Works*, II, 9.
[55] *ibid.*, 7.
[56] Edwards, 'God's Sovereignty in the Salvation of Men', *Works*, II, 851.
[57] *ibid.*, 854.

'multitudes' of men and women as Edwards suggests, who will fall into this fearsome fate. But neither, in the light of the gospel, am I permitted to discount the possibility that God could have mercy upon all if he so chose.

At this point Edwards objects that it would be impossible for God to declare 'that any thing *will be*, which he at the same time knows *will not be*'; that God has not only *threatened* an everlasting punishment of the wicked, he has actually *predicted* the same. To the counter-objection that God, through Jonah, threatened the destruction of Ninevah and later relented in mercy Edwards replies that this threat was '*conditional*', having the nature of a '*warning*' and not an 'absolute denunciation'. But of course there was no explicit conditionality in Jonah's threatenings against Ninevah (even though he himself suspected that such might be the case). Jonah's message sounds remarkably like a 'prediction' (Jonah 3:4), but it was a prediction that remained unfulfilled; it was a prediction that finally was qualified by the 'compassion' of God (Jonah 3:10). A threat is no threat at all without the possibility of its fulfilment. Mercy which can be presumed upon is no longer mercy. God's mercy remains *his* mercy. But equally his threatenings remain *his* threatenings.[58]

Moreover, if God's justice and God's grace do not coexist in eternal equilibrium then we cannot presume with Jonathan Edwards to ponder the righteous rejoicing with the angels concerning the fate of the reprobate. If any man or woman should ultimately fall into the fire of God's 'No' then even here that 'No' cannot be validly considered other than in the context of the 'Yes'. To use Karl Barth's words: '. . . it is the fire of His wrathful love and not His wrathful hate'.[59] In the light of the love of God in Christ I cannot comprehend how the fate of the lost could ever be anything other than a matter of grief, a grief which, along with the wounds of Christ, stands in eternity as testimony to the unrelenting love of God even for those who finally and fatally reject him.

All this is not to diminish the desperate gravity of the 'No' of God's judgment. It is rather to magnify the glory of the 'Yes' of his grace. It is to seek a valid means of accommodating the so-called 'universalistic' texts of the New Testament without lapsing into either universalism or annihilationism. Universalism assumes the 'No' to be abolished. Annihilationism assumes the 'No' to be diminished. Barth assumes the 'Yes' to be magnified without abolishing or even diminishing the 'No'.

With justification John Wenham observes that '*whichever side you*

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[58] Edwards, 'The Eternity of Hell Torments', *Works*, II, 86f.
[59] Karl Barth, *op. cit.*, III 2, 609.

are on, it is a dreadful thing to be on the wrong side in this issue'.[60] If the biblical metaphors of divine judgment can validly be understood in terms of the ultimate annihilation of the reprobate then to persist in speaking of hell as unending punishment is offensive, obscene and blasphemous. However, if these metaphors cannot, without 'special pleading' be understood in this way (and I for one remain unconvinced that they can be), then to belittle the fearsome gravity of this threatened divine 'No', albeit a 'No' that can only be heard in the context of the divine 'Yes' which overwhelms it, would be an inexcusable (though not unforgivable) breach of a grave responsibility. It is fitting, for the purposes of this paper, to allow a final word to Jonathan Edwards, though the truly final word on this issue will not be spoken by Jonathan Edwards, nor by any of his detractors:

> If there be really a hell of such dreadful and never-ending torments, as is generally supposed, of which multitudes are in great danger . . . then why is it not proper for those who have the care of souls to take great pains to make men sensible of it?[61]

Abstract

This article reviews Jonathan Edwards' conception of hell as unending punishment in response to those, both then and now, who would propose a conditionalist or annihilationist understanding. While Edwards' arguments against any form of annihilationism are impressive, his underlying conception of the doctrine of God, implicit in the manner in which he juxtaposes God's justice and God's grace, is questioned in the light of the significance of the Cross.

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[60] John W. Wenham, *op. cit.*, 190.
[61] Edwards, 'The Marks of a Work of the True Spirit', *Works*, II, 265.