

POST-MORTEM EVANGELISM: A RESPONSE TO R.R. COOK

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Summary

Robert Cook has recently presented an examination of the notion of post-mortem evangelism as found in the writings of Clark Pinnock, an examination which declared Pinnock's position to be internally consistent. This article questions both Pinnock's position and Cook's analysis, on the grounds that it appears impossible to make sense of what it means for a sinner to choose hell. It is also suggested that this is part of a larger failure on the part of theodicy to understand the radical nature of evil.

I. Introduction

In a recent article,¹ Robert Cook evaluated the post-mortem evangelism position held by Clark Pinnock together with his rejection of universalism, and found Pinnock's position rationally consistent. Such a view, however innovative and on the fringes of evangelicalism, can have its attractions. The idea that those who have not heard the gospel in this life will in fact get a chance in the next, can be emotionally and spiritually encouraging. However, as attractive as it may be, a major problem remains—that is, the question of choice.

This paper is not intended to deal with the exegesis of the biblical texts which are used to support the doctrine of post-mortem evangelism. As Cook suggests, such intriguing work must be left to other scholars. Rather the following discussion is concerned with the internal consistency of Cook's paper. It sets out to show that Cook's analysis of Pinnock's position overlooks a point of vital consideration,

¹'Is Universalism an Implication of the Notion of Post-Mortem Evangelism', *TynB* 45 (1994) 395-409.

a point that strikes not only at the heart of Pinnock's concept of post-mortem evangelism, but also at the heart of similar attempts to understand the fall and the nature of sin.

II. The Problem of Choice

The major problem with Cook's paper, and the problem that he claims to put to rest, is that of the sinner's choice of hell. Cook presents this dilemma in the following way:

Given the maximum opportunity for turning to God that post-mortem evangelism would offer, and given the self-evident auto-destructive folly of rejecting a salvation that leads to fullness of life and joy for evermore, why conceivably would any sensible creature choose hell? (p.397)

This was the problem that Hick realised, and played off against.² God would not have to twist anyone's arm to get them into heaven, for, in the end, no-one in their right minds would choose anything but! As Robinson put it, *In the End, God*.

In describing the situation, Cook helpfully isolates five possible cases in which human wills would turn from God: unconvinced intellect, weak will, impotent will, perverse will, and cantankerous will. All these we can find beautifully described in C.S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce*. From the academic who could not believe in hell (a sin of the mind rather than an excuse), to the men and women who would not believe in heaven, Lewis portrays all manner of rebellious wills. Yet the problem, however well described, still remains. Can sense be made of the idea of a person condemning themselves to eternal hell by choosing to reject God?

This paper is not initially addressing the issue whether someone chooses to reject God 'temporarily' by sinning. We observe this phenomenon throughout our lives, and the lives of those around us. Both history and the Bible bear witness to the dramatic implications of people 'temporarily' rejecting God. Here we are

²John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (London: Macmillan, 1985) 242-61.

initially concerned with the choice to *eternally* reject God.³ Neither is this paper concerned with the possibility of choice, and whether or not human beings possess freedom such that they can reject God. What is at issue is the claim made by a number of theologians who attack universalism. This claim may be summarised as follows: *Given the choice between eternal life with God, and eternal death in hell, a person may in fact freely choose eternal death. This person is both rational, and fully aware of the consequences of his or her choice. These consequences are eternal and irreversible.* This claim is at the basis of Pinnock's work, and is the claim which Robert Cook accepts as 'rationally consistent' (p. 409) in his paper.

The assumption underlying Pinnock's work involves the belief that all human beings will be treated fairly with respect to their eternal destiny. This belief is the basis for his concept of post-mortem evangelism. If this were not so, millions of people would die never hearing the gospel, and so being condemned to hell as a result of their ignorance. To be condemned because you do not know something is not fair. Therefore, God provides everyone with an opportunity to hear the gospel, and for some this occurs after their earthly lives are over.

If this were in fact the case, most of us would not have a hard choice. Given the clear alternatives, 'God's-love' or 'not-God's-love,' knowing that God was all-loving and wanted only the best for us, we would choose God. (For the sake of this argument we must leave aside the issue of whether such a choice is essentially selfish and therefore morally wrong.) If we found ourselves in this situation, we would enquire about the rationality or intelligence of someone who chose to go to hell! There could be no apparent motive for choosing to be separated from God, knowing that we would be less happy in hell than in heaven. Even Satan's cry, 'better to reign in hell than serve in

³Although, as we shall see, this discussion soon returns us to the issue of what it means to reject God in any situation, whether 'temporally' or 'eternally.' This argument also ignores the issue of whether there is any difference between 'temporarily' rejecting God, and rejecting God eternally, but the terms are used here for convenience.

heaven,⁴ would make no sense. Knowing the eternal consequences of either serving or reigning, the option to serve would certainly be the most attractive.

Nevertheless, those that defend hell in this way do not wish to concentrate the destiny of our souls onto one single act or decision. Therefore, our destinies are determined not necessarily by a single response, but by the whole person we have become throughout life (and after-life). The choices we make along the way form our character, and it is on the basis of that character that we ultimately determine our own destinies.⁵ Therefore, if I have constantly performed evil acts, becoming so degenerate that I no longer know how to do good acts, it is highly likely that I will choose to reject God and so be in hell. On this model it is much easier to understand the words that Milton puts into Satan's mouth. Here is a character who, from the very beginning, has chosen the evil path. Progressing along this path, his character degenerates to the extent that it ultimately can do nothing but choose evil.

Discussion of this whole line of thought must be focused on the nature of this evil choice. In order that God may deal with our eternal destinies fairly, the person involved must be making a rational decision. If it is irrational, then God could cure them of this irrationality, and so prevent them from making any wrong choice. Such a person must also know the consequences of his or her choice, otherwise we may say that their choice was not one which had been properly made.

By talking of character-formation Cook and others have in effect hidden the issue at hand. Because a person may form their evil character by consistently choosing evil, it may be understandable that when presented with the choice of hell or heaven, they reject God and so choose hell, wishing to remain under self-rule. They may even be rational, and in full knowledge of their fate. However, consider this person at an earlier stage in life. Imagine that they are faced with their very first choice between good or evil. For this choice to be fair, they

⁴J.Milton, *Paradise Lost*.

⁵See Cook, 'Universalism', 404-5.

must know the results of their choices. Therefore, if their choice of evil will lead them to choose evil the next time, and then subsequently choose evil at most times in their life, ultimately resulting in their choice of hell, they must be fully aware of this fact. If they are not aware of this fact, and they then travel down this road to hell, they presumably end up choosing hell because of the character they formed throughout life, resulting from an initial decision that was not fully informed. If they wish to get out of this choice for hell, they cannot, because they have been so conditioned by the choices they made previously in life that they ‘cannot’ choose otherwise. Such a position would not be considered fair by Pinnock and those who share his position.

Therefore, in their initial choice of evil, the person must be aware of where the road they choose may end up. Thus, whether we talk of a final decision, or a culmination of a person’s choices throughout life, the same problem concerning the motive for an evil choice remains. What possible motive exists for a person to choose the road that leads to hell, rather than the road that leads to heaven? Whether the choice is made at the beginning of life (prior to the formation of our characters), or at the end of life (or, according to Pinnock, in the after-life), no motive is apparent that would make sense of that choice.

III. ‘The Trouble with “X”’

Such a problem can be illustrated from one of this century’s most able defenders of the doctrine of hell, C.S. Lewis. In a short essay entitled ‘The Trouble With “X”...’, Lewis paints a picture of a person within whom there is a certain fatal flaw which, given the chance, will cause the person to enter into a degenerative spiral similar to that imagined by Cook and others:

You see clearly enough that nothing, not even God with all his power, can make 'X' really happy as long as 'X' remains envious, self-centred, and spiteful. Be sure there is something inside you which, unless it is altered, will put it out of God's power to prevent your being eternally miserable. While that something remains there can be no Heaven for you, just as there can be no sweet smells for a man with a cold in the nose, and no music for a man who is deaf. It's not a question of God 'sending' us to Hell. In each of us there is something growing up which will of itself *be hell* unless it is snipped in the bud. The matter is serious: let us put ourselves in His hands at once -this very day, this hour.⁶

Such an appeal is extremely powerful. We constantly observe how people degenerate, determining their characters by the choices they make everyday. However, is it credible to believe that even such a person, when confronted with the love of God, will not realise the folly of their ways and then turn to God? Lewis seems to believe that our characters can become so self-destructive that we can no longer 'hear' or 'see' the love of God. Although the ideas of 'seeing' and 'hearing' are used with caution, the picture drawn raises certain critical questions. For if people can no longer 'see' or 'hear' God and his love, does the self-choice, which Lewis is so keen to present, still remain? If persons become 'deaf' to God, then the implication is that something final has occurred. Does a person who knows the beauty of country smells choose to have a cold in the nose? Does someone who delights in the variations of tone and melody in music opt to become deaf? Thus, even someone like Lewis, who here and elsewhere presents us with many powerful dramatisations of the choice of evil, fails to make sense of the choice itself.

Thomas Talbott has arrived at universalism as a result of this line of questioning. Although this paper does not embrace his universalist conclusion, the following quotation, although lengthy, helpfully sums up the problem:

We all have some idea of what it means to fall into evil or to choose wrongly on a particular occasion. But what could it mean to say that some sinners are trying as hard as they can to damn themselves? ...The picture I get is something like this. Though a sinner, Belial,

⁶C.S. Lewis, 'The Trouble With "X"...', in W. Hooper (ed.), *God In The Dock* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1979) 78; first published in the *Bristol Diocesan Gazette* Vol. XXVII (August 1948) 3-6.

has learned, perhaps through bitter experience, that evil is always destructive, always contrary to his own interest as well as to the interest of others; and though he sees clearly that God is the ultimate source of all happiness and that disobedience can produce only greater and greater misery in his own life as well as in the life of others, Belial *freely* chooses eternal misery (or perhaps eternal oblivion) for himself nonetheless. The question that immediately arises here is: What could possibly qualify as a motive for such a choice? As long as any ignorance, or deception, or bondage to desire remains, it is open to God to transform a sinner without interfering with human freedom; but once all ignorance and deception and bondage to desire is removed, so that a person is truly 'free' to choose, there can no longer be any motive for choosing eternal misery for oneself.⁷

Jerry Walls has attempted to deal with this problem by arguing that, although sinners know that the choice of hell is not the best option available, they do in fact so choose because they opt to ignore what they do in fact know. This is not a deception that God could remove, for it is self-inflicted deception. For God to remove it would be to infringe the worthwhile freedom of human beings. It must be within the power of human beings to avoid the knowledge of the love of God:

If it is not within our power to avoid this knowledge, neither is it within our power to choose damnation. And if this choice is not within our power—as opposed to being psychologically possible for us—then we are not free with respect to it. Hence God cannot always remove our (self-imposed) deception without interfering with our freedom. If God allows us to retain libertarian freedom, some illusions may endure forever.⁸

⁷Talbott, 'The Doctrine Of Everlasting Punishment', *Faith And Philosophy* VII (Jan 1990) 37.

⁸J. Walls, *The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992) 133.

However, what is not clear is why a person should wish to ignore the reality of God in the first place, a reality which all will actually know. For one of the premises of Walls' whole book is that God's grace enables all humans, at some stage, to be fully informed about Christian faith and teaching (Pinnock holds a similar conviction). Why then do the damned start out on their course of self-deception? We may easily discern why a sinner may wish to remain in hell, but what possible motive exists for their initial choice of hell?

There are many others in recent discussions of hell who employ similar techniques. Jerry Walls himself builds on some of the work of Swinburne.⁹ Stephen Travis in his survey of eschatology includes a short chapter on judgement, and in particular articulates a reply to recent advocates of universalism. John Hick is here one of the primary subjects under scrutiny, and in reply Travis centres on these issues of choice and the evil motive involved:

...whereas the universalist claims that for all men *not* to be saved would be a defeat for God and is therefore unthinkable, the anti-universalist believes that God will go on respecting the freedom of those who resist him—even though it causes him the utmost anguish, and even though it means that his will is not fully recognized. Hick invites us to picture God as a divine psychiatrist guiding men to their true goal. But what of the man who refuses to go to the psychiatrist? Hick underplays man's 'bias' *against* God.¹⁰

It is perhaps this last statement that brings us to the hub of the problem, the problem which Cook's paper fails to address. The problem with Pinnock's position, entailed in his scheme of post-mortem evangelism, is that it fails to adequately assess the motive for choosing hell. Any explanation for such a motive must be found in

⁹See R Swinburne, 'A Theodicy Of Heaven And Hell', in A. Freddoso (ed.), *The Existence & Nature Of God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); also *Responsibility & Atonement* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989) 179-84.

¹⁰S Travis, *Christian Hope And The Future Of Man* (Leicester: IVP, 1980) 130.

human evil. Is it not the human bias against God, and the irrational nature of evil, that leads down the road to hell?

IV. The Fall and Theodicy

The difficulties that these theologians have concerning hell re-appear much more strikingly in considerations of the doctrine of the fall. Pinnock's model is of one where everyone will come face to face with the choice either of 'God's-love,' or 'not-God's-love.' Such a situation occurred with the pre-fallen human being standing before God. John Hick comments as follows:

The difficulty here is that when we think of a created being thus living face to face with infinite plenitude of being, limitlessly dynamic life and power, and unfathomable goodness and love, there seems to be an absurdity in the idea of his seeing rebellion as a possibility, and hence in its even constituting a temptation to him.¹¹

How can we explain the first human act of evil if we assume a pre-fallen idyllic state? And how can we explain a person rejecting God and choosing hell, even when they have come face to face with God who is the source of all happiness? Cook's paper briefly examines the difficulty that those such as Hick may have with the doctrine of the fall. He correctly points out that Hick's Irenaean theodicy passes this scheme by. Cook suggests that those who follow more Augustinian lines may find more help in J.N. Darby's saying: 'When we are hungry we are satisfied with the husks, but when we are famished we seek the Father.' Thus the pre-fallen human being becomes tempted by the immediate pleasure, only learning in the long-run where true happiness lies.¹² Nevertheless, why the temptation? What is the motive? This line of thought takes us on to even greater themes.

In the connected area of theodicy, some have alleged that theologians attempt to rationalize the inexplicability of evil with

¹¹J. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Macmillan, 1977) 278.

¹²Cook, 'Universalism', 402.

futility. In Ken Surin's survey of different attempts to justify God in the face of evil, his conclusion is that only a theodicy which includes the incarnation and the cross can offer any hope. In fact, the intelligibility of evil *per se* may either be irrelevant (to practical theodicies), or unanswerable (to theoretical theodicies).¹³

'Theodicy, it could be said, founders on the "mystery of iniquity".'¹⁴ In his paper Cook briefly passes this explanation by, when he quotes J. Sanders' claim that 'Sin does not make sense.'¹⁵ Cook objects that 'the philosopher will want to probe a little deeper.' However, for all of Cook's helpful probing and evaluation of what it means to reject the gospel, the problem remains. Can we make sense of what it means to choose evil, and ultimately to choose against God? More importantly, can we make sense of the motive to choose evil? In a very real sense, no. But this is not a failure to comprehend what it might mean for persons to choose everlasting destruction rather than everlasting glory. It is part of a larger failure to understand the destructive nature of and force behind evil, and why that evil is manifested in human choices of sin.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion to this examination of the issues raised by Cook's paper, we find that Pinnock's account of post-mortem evangelism which eschews universalism may not be rationally consistent. That is, it is hard to make sense of why the sinner would choose to be in her hell. Cook's paper fails to highlight this problem, and only pushes our questioning several steps backwards. Perhaps the solution is to agree with Surin and say that the greatest problem of evil, that is the choice to be in hell, similarly 'founders on the "mystery of iniquity".'

¹³Ken Surin, *Theology and The Problem Of Evil* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) 64-67

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁵Cook, 'Universalism', 403.