

Men Outside the New Race

by Olin Alfred Curtis

The speaker attempts to harmonize the doctrine of eternal punishment with a complete Christian conception of God, emphasizing the importance of moral responsibility and the concept of involuntary service.

Scripture: Matthew 10:28, Matthew 25:46, Romans 2:5, 2 Thessalonians 1:9, Revelation 14:11

Topics: "Eternal Punishment", "Gods Holiness"

Description

Olin Alfred Curtis delves into the challenging concept of eternal punishment for the wicked, expressing personal struggles and the need to reconcile this doctrine with a Christian theodicy. Rejecting views of restoration, agnosticism, and annihilation, he emphasizes the necessity of conscious, eternal punishment to uphold the moral urgency of the New Testament. Curtis presents a speculative solution, proposing that in the final universe, lost individuals will serve God involuntarily out of fear, devoid of moral meaning, as a consequence of their rebellion. He argues that this eternal punishment, intrinsic to sin, is a reflection of God's holiness and love, ultimately contributing to the manifestation of God's moral concern and the entirety of His redemptive plan.

Transcript

The idea of the endless conscious suffering of the wicked is the most unwelcome thought ever suggested to my mind. My whole soul revolts against it. There is no sacrifice I would not willingly make to get rid of it. It is the horror of all horrors. Such is the attitude of my mind to the question. But against my wish, and all the feelings of my soul, I am constrained to believe that God sees it differently, and with infinitely greater capacity to know what is best and proper, and with infinitely greater love and tenderness than any of his holiest children can claim, has incorporated the dreadful fact of permanent conscious suffering as a possibility in his plan.

-- Randolph S. Foster, *Beyond the Grave*, pp. 130, 131.

Rejected Views. The theory of second probation I have already rejected in our study of the intermediate state; and I am obliged also to reject three additional views concerning those who die in a personal attitude of moral antagonism to righteousness. The first of these views is the restoration of the wicked by a coercive process. The essence of this view was popularly expressed by this remark: "If God desire to save men and cannot, he is not God." After all I have said in regard to the moral person and God's dealing with him, it surely is unnecessary to uncover the crude, false thinking which underlies this remark, or to show why we should instantly reject the idea of any sort of coerced sainthood. The second view may be fairly

called the agnostic view. For it amounts to saying that we cannot come to any positive conclusion, and the whole matter would better be left in the vague. When handled with apparent piety and unapparent ingenuity this view seems to be the high-water mark of Christian reserve; but it is practically a most dangerous hesitation, for it serves to encourage those germinal feelings which soon grow into some phase of universalism. Indeed, I have usually found that in theology an agnostic position is a wayside inn where men rest a bit on their way to extreme liberalism. The third view is the annihilation of the wicked. This view is taught in several different ways and in several different relations to the basal philosophy; but its most powerful setting forth is in the theory of "conditional immortality" as held by that growing group of men represented by Edward White. That White's book, *Life in Christ*, is one of the real books of modern times, actually throbbing with an earnest message to men, I am even eager to admit. But I cannot accept the message. There is much temptation to take up the exegesis, but I will leave that work to the biblical scholars. My own main objections to the theory of annihilation, however it may be grounded and elaborated, are just two: First, it is entirely lacking in that ethical quality which belongs to every truly Christian doctrine. Wherever we land in our theories, we simply should not, will not, land in a bog of moral mitigation. And to me this view is worse than mitigation. Preach annihilation to a sinner, and you preach with his own inclination. In his highest personal state the sinner would dread annihilation, but in his more usual individual state he would crave it. The statement will be contradicted by many, but I am very sure that this theory of annihilation is even less ethical than is the theory of second probation. Proclaimed generally in the church, it would rot the moral fiber of the message of the gospel. v Second, the theory of annihilation is impossible in theodicy. That God in his omniscience would create men only to throw them away at last, a useless waste, "as rubbish in the void," is to me inconceivable from any standpoint possible in theodicy.

The harsh theory of an eternity of torture in physical flame was surely hard enough to deal with in theodicy. But one could discover at least the possibility of a moral value in the torture. For it was barely conceivable that the structure of the final universe required an endless objective record of the sinner's dreadful rejection of God's mercy. Annihilation, though, I cannot relate to theodicy in any way whatever. Once I tried to see if it might not be morally utilized through the memory of the saints in their eternal life, but soon in earnest thinking the point became finical and impossible.

A Purely Personal Problem. It may be that constantly I should have reminded you of the limited claim behind all my theological discussion. For pedagogical reasons the method of presentation changes here and there; and now and then the tone becomes almost one of authority; but all the time there is taking place only one thing, namely, a personal testimony as to what is essential in theology to enable a man to see the Christian faith as a redemptional total. I claim merely that to apprehend the Christian system consistently I myself need thus and thus to interpret and relate Christian doctrines. Now, in our consideration of the future condition of the wicked, there are very peculiar and important reasons why I should ask you to keep my moderate claim clearly in mind.

My own personal problem, then, I will give you frankly and exactly. I have no problem whatever as to the general content of the Christian doctrine. Not one word have I to say in depreciation of the sincerity and ability of such men as John Frederick Denison Maurice. I simply say that for me the New Testament teaches persistently the endless punishment of all men who die in personal hostility to righteousness. The case does not rest with the meaning of the one word **aionios** -- whether it is a quantitative or a qualitative word. I think that it is (precisely like our own word *eternal*) sometimes quantitative and sometimes qualitative, and sometimes both at one stroke; and so its meaning in any given place is to be determined

by the context, or by using larger exegetical principles. But I have no great interest in the discussion of this word. No Christian doctrine depends upon the significance of a word; or even upon the significance of an isolated text. Every Christian doctrine eventuates! It is a whole trend of Scripture come to necessary issue. When we further ask whether this endless punishment is a conscious punishment or not, my answer is this: To protect the tremendous moral urgency of the New Testament, that awful voice of warning, I require the feature of consciousness just as much as I require the feature of endlessness. The content of the doctrine, as I must hold it, is this: For all the wicked who die obdurate there will be a divine punishment which will be realized by them consciously and everlastingly.

My problem, the problem which for many years has been not only in my mind, but also on my heart, is to harmonize this awful doctrine of eternal punishment with our complete Christian conception of God. In other words, my problem is to place the doctrine in a Christian theodicy.

The Problem Met. With diffidence, because I well know that many Christian ideas and feelings I have not utilized, I will briefly indicate in what way it has been necessary for me to meet the problem. And when I say "necessary for me to meet the problem" I mean both that I had to meet the problem, and that I had to meet it in this precise manner. Some of the safest thinkers we have in the Christian church do not believe that it is wise to try to push an inch further than the content of the New Testament doctrine. I fully appreciate their discretion; but I must see a doctrine touch some possibility in theodicy or I cannot rest. I cannot carry about in my Christian life a bundle of mysteries which seem to hide an antagonism in doctrine. And I speak out only to help men who are constituted as I am myself. No, there is yet another motive for utterance; for I am hoping sooner or later to get some important indications at this difficult point from the range of Christian consciousness about me.

In speculation I have met my problem in the following way:

1. Our stopping place, the point beyond which theodicy does not require us to go, is the idea that, under the law of expression, there is to be a vast final universe, which shall absolutely manifest the holiness of God as culminating in moral love. That is, the final arrangement of all persons and all things must plainly evince the facts that the structural finality in God is holiness, that his personal relation to this holiness is one of intense and unyielding concern, and that his infinite love itself is but the supreme phase of this moral concern.
2. In this final universe there are to be, just as really as there are in this world, two kinds of service -- a voluntary service given by the creature in freedom, and an involuntary service yielded by the creature under compulsion.
3. Like the angels themselves, all men are created for this final universe. In the plan of their destiny the divinely fixed fact is that they must live forever, that they must, whether or no, become a part of the final universe, and make an endless contribution in service. Are you holding this crucial thought? Within God's ideal, and having no item contingent upon personal freedom, he has an inner plan, a primary teleology, which will be accomplished entire; and all men are as fast in this inner plan as the Stanser Horn is fast in the Alps. In our usual thinking about a man we ignore this primary design; we quietly assume that when God created the man his only aim was to obtain a saint. And then when the man in his personal freedom refuses to become a saint the result appears to us to be a complete defeat of the Creator. Now, I insist that in creation the idea of service is more fundamental than the idea of a certain kind of service. The saint may be; the servant must be. God will have service -- there can be no failure here; the final universe shall

be a universe of service; and every man is made primarily to take a task in the eternities and endlessly to serve the great ends of holiness.

4. Although a man is created primarily for the final universe, and must render an endless service in the evincement of holiness, yet he is created a free moral person, and in his freedom he can and must decide the manner of his destiny. He can and must decide whether he will render his eternal service under compulsion, as a slave is driven to a burden; or in liberty and love, as a saint does the will of his Lord. The significance of this earthly probation lies not in that it determines whether a man is to have an eternal existence or not, but only in that it determines in which of the two possible categories of eternal service he is to exist.

5. Before I closely consider this conception of involuntary service I wish to prepare our hearts for the point by making a serious protest against the sweeping affirmation that a final universe, with lost men in it, is not only an idea obnoxious to Christian sentiment, but also an idea inconceivable in a Christian theodicy. For my own sake, to get my own point of departure, let me begin with the creation of men. What does their creation mean to God under the law of expression? In the creation of men God expresses more than his purpose to have service, he expresses his desire to have voluntary service. Whenever a man is born there is the manifestation of a thing deep in God, his ideal, his personal longing, so to speak. In the very make-up of a man (or any moral person, for that matter) there is trace of what we may dare to call the divine finality in ambition. Every time a new man comes into being fresh from God's will the event cries out, "God will have this particular man added to his final universe -- and -- God's desire, God's ideal, God's ambition is to have this man there as a free, loving, rejoicing saint." Thus, I hold that, whatever the outcome, whatever the man may do or become, the bare creation of him as a free moral person manifests the divine ideal and so must have for God the beginning of worth under the law of expression I do not say or intimate that such initial worth taken alone could become the motive for creation; but I urge the reality of the worth, nevertheless. I wish ever to begin with this emphasis upon the law of expression because it helps me to strike out a course of thinking free from that humanitarian utilitarianism which has poisoned so much of our theology. We all are inclined to believe (and sure to feel) that the ultimate test of any view is in its answer to this question: How much pleasure and profit will man get? We never think of God.

Dropping those intermediate connections which are not essential to our discussion, let us now try to look at the final universe from God's point of view. His final universe certainly will not be what he most profoundly wanted, it will not be his ideal realized. God wanted a final universe comprehending every moral person created; and all these created persons in a voluntary service of holy purport; and all this eternal service resplendent and enraptured with the holy vision of God. In such an ideal universe the involuntary service, all the tasks of compulsion as far as such tasks might be needful, would not be done by vitiated persons, but rather by automatic creatures, even as coercive service is furnished in this world by beast and bird. But God saw his ideal plan in wreck through the very freedom absolutely necessary to its actualization. There is no "felix culpa"! Sin has destroyed the possibility of our finest eternity. The final universe will be nothing but a second best, a drop down from the wish, an ideal mangled. Sin will not be triumphant, but sin has infringed the dream, has placed the glory of the outcome in everlasting check. You are not quite ready to say so; but there is a minor voice which can be heard in spite of our rejoicing; a voice which sounds louder as the soul deepens in moral love for God and men; a voice which silences at last all our easy, Unethical optimisms; a voice which will speak with a tender but moral emphasis through all the ages upon ages of human destiny: "This is not the universe God wanted!"

But, although the final universe will not be all God wanted, it will tell all he wanted. As an everlasting cosmic utterance it will be altogether sufficient. The mitigating minds in theodicy seem to think that God in his transcendent regard for his creatures has no inherent rights, that all he is and all he needs should be sacrificed regardless. Any speech which I am able to command is too clumsy for the task, the very word rights is entirely inadequate; but the false notion ought to be contradicted at once in some way, and so I will assert that God himself has rights. He has the right to come fairly out into cosmic fact. He has the right to manifest the whole range of his holy life. He has the right to fasten into the eternities his changeless hatred of sin. He has the right to have a final universe which shall forever declare the entirety of meaning in his moral love for men; that it was moral love; that it was moral love. God loved these lost men precisely as he loved those who are now his saints. He made them moral persons. He gave them freedom. He provided moral pressure in conscience. He gave them motive after motive toward righteousness. He sent his only Son to render possible their redemption. Their sin entered into Christ's infinite agony. God watched their wandering steps with his sleepless providence. Their faintest moral effort he met with instant help. Again and again, and yet again, he poured the power of the Holy Spirit upon their withering moral desire -- yes, until there was no moral desire. To save these lost men God the Omnipotent spent all the resources of the Triune Godhead; and the final universe should say so -- and it will say so!

6. More closely now, what do we mean by this involuntary service? By using the word involuntary I do not intend to teach or suggest that lost men are crushed into mere "thinghood." They are, I believe, below the possibility of any moral action, or moral concern. Their conception of right and wrong is an intellection empty of all feeling. And they are, I think, also below the possibility of any real self-decision. They are creatures of fear. They are like persons in this life when personality is entirely overwhelmed by the bare sense of what we call "physical fear." The lost are in consciousness totally occupied, as far as they feel the urgency of motive, with a fear which has in it not one throb of moral meaning. Their personal rebellion is all gone, and they obey God swiftly; but they obey him not because they eagerly recognize a moral obligation in his command, they obey merely because they are afraid. As a frightened creature cowers at the rush and thunder of an avalanche, so the lost are afraid of God. Incapable of the vision of God, incapable of the love of God, incapable of any moral regard for God -- and yet doing God's behest under the slavery of torturing fear -- that is the eternal punishment; that is the worm which "dieth not"; that is the fire which is "not quenched." And do you not see that this awful condition is not an arbitrary infliction, but a punishment intrinsic to the nature of sin? God does not build an environment on purpose to torture the wicked. Hell (like heaven) is in the Bible made real to us by an objective scene, and those who need it may keep the scene; but the moral message is much more terrible than the superficial scene. The punishment of hell is the suffering of a man become entirely and eternally inorganic. The man was made to fear God; but the original fear had in it great moral possibility, possibility sweeping on, under the plan of redemption, even into the lofty rapture of moral love. The obdurate sinner, though, in his freedom, has emptied all moral quality out of his fear; and now the naked terror, beating alone in consciousness, drives him on forever.

My thought is that in the final universe there is a service of fear over against the service of love. Even this obedience of fear is obedience, and can be so placed and so used that God's holiness entire is expressed as it could not be expressed by the annihilation of the wicked; yes, and is expressed as it could not be expressed, if no one of these lost men had ever been created. It is the sum total of the final universe which will project into the eternities all that God is, all that he has done, and declare all that he longed to secure.

7. If you have fully caught the significance of my discussion you surely see that I have been indirectly trying to do several things: First, to meet the point of the restorationist, that, to evince the love of God, the

final universe must be made up entirely of righteous persons; second, to meet the point of the annihilationist, that the obdurate sinners must be blotted out of existence as having no longer any teleological worth; and, third, to modify Calvinism into a system of true moral freedom, and yet to keep the basal notion of divine decree. Instead of saying that God has decreed the whole destiny of a man, I say that the coercion covers only the one fact of everlasting service, and the man himself freely determines the kind of service he will render. It may be urged that under the attribute of omniscience my modification amounts only to a matter of words; but it amounts to a moral reality, for it fairly introduces the element of moral responsibility. According to my view, God is not causal to any ultimate condition of personal character. And, further, and in harmony with this view, the moral joy of everlasting sainthood is not an automatic outcome, but is a truly personal rejoicing won, with God's aid, by thorough ethical procedure. My thought can be crowded into a sentence: The rim of destiny is by God's decree, but the personal center of destiny is by man's choice.

8. I cannot close this discussion without lifting into notice another point, a point which I am anxious to lodge in your hearts and to leave there. These lost men are outside the new race. Their service of fear belongs to the final universe; but it belongs to the cosmic sweep of the kingdom, and has no possible place in the kingdom of Christ. They have lost their race. In the most wholesomely rigid thinking, they are no longer men. Every real man -- every moral person realizing the essential scope of manhood -- every real man will yield to Christ and enter the new race and love his Lord, and love all men forever. The final brotherhood will have lost only those who refused to be men complete.

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