Thinking About Hell

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[0:00] Warm welcome. Very good to be here this morning. I've changed the title a little bit. It was originally Doctrines of Hell. Now it's thinking about hell, softening things up a little bit. It will be a warm discussion.

So, let's pray. God, we know that you're a God of perfect justice and infinite mercy. And we know that understanding hell fits into that.

It fits into who you are. So as we enter into conversation with Christians past and present, we pray that you grant us an opportunity to learn things, but also to approach this topic critically, and to let the Scriptures and what they teach be our chief and primary guide.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Forewarning, I'm going to have to slip out. Really, probably 10 will be the absolute latest, because we've got a community group commissioning service at St. Peter's.

I've got to zip back downtown and do a bit of prep for that. Are you doing promotion for Fireside again? Yeah, and come visit. Yeah, come visit the Fireside if you get stuck in trafficking, can't get here one day, for example.

[1:05] Christian doctrines of hell are and have been subject to a lot of controversy and confusion, and that applies both outside and inside the church.

At the same time, as George Hunzinger says, the doctrine of hell is one which has always had its uses. These uses include, but are not limited to, deterrence, motivation, and even departure.

Let me explain that. So in the first place, adherents to the doctrine of hell have long noted its profitability as a moral deterrent. Even non-Christian moral philosophers admit this use.

The belief in hell has a, quote, demonstrated capacity to shape human behavior. In the second place, in addition to deterrence, the doctrine of hell has motivated.

It has spurred repentance and conversion. It's been a factor and a force in historic missionary movements as conscientious believers ventured forth to minimize the perdition of other humans.

[2:09] Now, to be sure, hell as a motivator of Christian life can be a bit problematic. One may wonder if hell avoidance is an upright and appropriate motivation. Is hell avoidance, with its inevitable self-seeking and high anxiety, finally compatible with joy and gratitude and obedience and the desire to share in something exceedingly positive?

Fair question. In the third place, the doctrine of hell has shown itself to be useful for departure. Specifically, it has become a reason for departure from the church.

For sophisticated, late scientific, modern people like you and I, the notion of hell is unpalatable, to say the least. And where belief in real hell is maintained on biblical terms, one expects people to exit the church.

People don't like hell. It's a topic that heats us up. It's a theme of Christian teaching, biblical teaching, that begs to be covered with a lot of milk and sugar. Perhaps for this reason, the doctrine of hell, as D.P. Walker has noted, has been in steady decline since the 17th century.

In mainline churches, this decline has meant that, quote, hell has disappeared and nobody noticed. That's how historian Martin Marty puts it. But the story doesn't end there.

[3:29] It seems that hell is making a resurgence in the church. Of late, it has been featured in magazines and films, and as has often been the case, more than one view has surfaced.

In more biblically committed churches, hell has not only not been actively eschewed, but is also maintained in a traditional understanding on biblical terms. This is the case both in the Roman Catholic Church as well as conservative Protestant churches.

Given the waning influence of mainline Christianity, it's likely that a more biblical and traditional view of hell is not going to be vanishing without a trace anytime soon. While certain Christians continue to speak about the reality of hell in traditional terms, others abjure.

Consider the recent film Hellbound, or Rob Bell's best-selling book Love Wins. These viewpoints do not altogether excise the doctrine of hell from a Christian vision of life, but they do conceive of it in markedly different ways.

In light of this resurgent interest in hell, I think the time is ripe to survey some of the historical and divergent Christian views on this subject.

[4:40] So along these lines, we're going to put on this morning the gloves of historical theologian. We're going to succinctly peruse four ways that Christians have affirmed, conceived, and formulated the doctrine of hell.

Now, note the language that I've used here is very intentional. We're talking not about biblical teaching on hell, but we're talking about Christian views of hell, which may be more or less biblical, as you'll see along the way.

By and large, this task is going to be descriptive. The four views of hell are going to be mapped, and I'm going to try to unpack them with reference to both an ancient and a modern exponent of these four views.

At certain intervals along the way, my reflections are also going to encompass a little bit of comparative and evaluative commentary. This evaluation will highlight both the influence and use of Scripture on different Christian views of hell, as well as the imprint, potentially, of other non-biblical ideas.

So, for example, when we look at how Christians have talked about hell, we're also going to look at what has funded their thought on hell. I'll hold these preliminary marks in mind. Without further ado, let's commence on our overview.

[5:53] And the four views to be cited are as follow. Number one, the eternal punishment view. Number two, the universal salvation view. Number three, the annihilationist view. And number four, what has been called the reverent agnostic view of hell.

One, two, three, four. We'll begin with eternal punishment, sometimes called the traditional or severe view of hell. No one has had a stronger influence on this particular view of hell than St. Augustine of Hippo.

The patterns of biblical interpretation and the mode of reasoning that he developed in his thought about hell have shaped the basis for the church's thought on hell ever since. Augustine's views are expressed in the Athanasian Creed of the 5th century, cited there in Latin and English.

They were officially adopted again at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, whose statements say this, quote, those rejected will receive eternal punishment with the devil, close quote.

Further to this, the Augustinian doctrine of hell became normative for the confessional standards of the Protestant Reformation in the Protestant churches, as instructed by both Luther and Calvin.

[7:05] Contemporary exponents of an Augustinian view with some modifications, of course, include Pope Benedict, Cardinal Ratzinger, Sinclair Ferguson, noted Reformed theologian, our own J.I. Packer has written on this, and even C.S. Lewis, if you've read The Great Divorce.

Lewis's thought is diverse, but in that book you get something like this. Again, those contemporary views are part of the Augustinian perspective with modification. Augustinian definition of hell, his doctrine of hell, is comprised of seven basic components.

I want to trace these, and then we're going to hold them in mind because they'll provide points of comparison with the subsequent three views that we're going to look at. So, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven. Number one, hell is actual.

Not all humans are saved. Of those who are not saved, Augustinian says this, quote, their eternal damnation is a matter of certainty. For Augustinian, the reality of hell is not a theoretical possibility.

It is a reality, he surmises, that awaits the majority of the human race. Rather audacious claim, but that's what Augustinian says. Number two, hell is severe. There is no greater torment.

[8:24] Hell is an experience of, quote, supreme unhappiness. The torments of hell, moreover, will be, quote, unintermitted or perpetual. In these statements, Augustinian appeals to Jesus' own teaching on hell.

It is Jesus himself whom, quote, the Gospels depict as uttering the most severe warnings about eternal punishment. Implicit in Augustinian's thought about the severity of hell are the notions of negative pain and positive pain.

Negative pain refers to the loss of God on the part of a human. The damned have forfeited the great goodness for which they were created. Positive pain corresponds to this loss.

The intensity of torment is in proportion to the great goodness which has been lost. Negative and positive pain implicit in Augustinian's film. Number three, hell is endless. Those in hell never perish.

Their torment affords no escape. Because they are not permitted to die, Augustinian says that for them, death itself dies not. This is a state whereby though the soul is not deriving its life from God anymore, it nonetheless survives.

[9:37] Number four, hell is penal. It is a penalty for sin appointed by God. Faith in Christ is the only remedy for sin. Therefore, hell is a penalty for those who lack this faith. Along these lines, hell is a form of retribution rather than remedy or remediation.

It is not meant to lead to repentance since the time for repentance has passed. Number five, hell is just. Hell is a punishment that is commensurate with an offense committed by a particular person.

For Augustine, no other punishment would be fitting or adequate to the wickedness of sin against God. So whoever is condemned to hell has no reason to complain except of his or her own demerit.

Hell brings balance to the universe ensuring that the wicked get their comeuppance. Author Anne Rice captures this point well. Quote, Heaven would be hell in no time at all if every cruel, selfish, and vicious soul went to heaven.

Beneath this view is the assumption that even if no single member of the human race were redeemed by God and brought to heaven, there would still be no valid basis for questioning the justice of God.

[10:48] Number six, hell is ordained by God. It is not merely an impersonal consequence for sin. In addition, hell is not simply something that humans experience as a result of misusing their freedom.

In other words, God consigns people to hell. Anything that is carried out is something that God willed. This is a robust commitment to the sovereignty of God. Typifies Augustinian thought as well as Calvinist theology.

It comes down to this. Grace alone is what separates the redeemed from the lost. And number seven, hell is inscrutable. This means that the inner logic of God's dealings with sinful humans is beyond our capacity to fathom.

We cannot grasp how it is fair for God to save some but not others when all people are equally sinful. We can't fully grasp that. We cannot understand how eternal suffering is proportional to the actual offense of human sin.

We cannot grasp that fully. Such understanding, such ability to make sense of that exceeds the capacity of the human mind. And so in the end, and this is a hallmark of the Augustinian view, we have to accept the doctrine of hell on the basis of scriptural authority rather than rational intelligibility.

[12:07] Now in terms of its formulation, it's important to note that Augustine's view, hermeneutically speaking, with regard to how he handles and interprets scripture, assigns pride of place to Matthew 25, 31 through 46.

People generally familiar with what the passage of text is there? Sheep and goats. Sheep and goats. A text about the return of the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, the day of judgment, right?

There are, of course, those who have disputed the pride of place that Augustine gives to that particular text in his doctrine of hell. For example, scholar John Wynnum, on whose book I learned New Testament Greek, The Essentials of New Testament Greek, Cambridge scholar, I believe, and fathered an excellent New Testament and Old Testament scholar.

John Wynnum calculates that there are 264 references to the fate of the lost in the New Testament. One wonders why some of these other references are not more fully integrated into Augustine's view.

I should also note that modern exponents of this Augustinian view of hell have tended to modify one aspect of Augustine's legacy. They've given greater emphasis, as French theologian Henry Blocher notes, to human freedom.

[13:28] This has been an apologetic strategy. The result of that is to say that humans send themselves to hell. The door to hell is locked on the inside. This is what you'll find, for example, if you listen to New York Pastor Tim Keller talk about hell.

That's a modification to the Augustinian view. More emphasis on human freedom. Right? And so, in that modification, what we detect is a little bit of variance with Augustine's insistence that hell is divinely ordained and also inscrutable.

Challenging that, modifying that a little bit. The universal salvation view of hell. In the patristic context, this view can be dubbed a minority report.

Its prominent ancient exponent and defender is Origen. Origen's vision of hell is situated within his belief in let me see if I can apocatastasis.

Apocatastasis. Or the final restoration of all things. Attractive as Origen's ideas of apocatastasis may be they were condemned in 543 by the Council of Constantinople along with some other aspects of Origen's thought which were declared heretical.

[14:49] Now, in sketching Origen's view of hell, it helps to juxtapose it with Augustine's thought. To begin, we should highlight a similarity. First, as with Augustine, Origen sees hell as actual.

Everyone must pass through divine judgment but as a purifying experience. The fire of God consumes human sins and purifies humans.

This process is very severe, says Origen, and it will be more severe for some than for others. Unlike St. Augustine, as you can see already, the fires of divine judgment are not retributive but rather remedial.

They're not retributive but rather remedial. Hell is a form of extraordinarily unpleasant and bitter medicine. The wrath of God in Origen's doctrine is not vindictive so much as corrective.

That hell is considered remedial means that it is not unending. And so there's another point of differentiation with Augustine. Origen's thought therefore intimates that all humans will eventually be saved.

[15:58] Behind this conviction, theologically speaking, is a strong sense of Christ's goodness. For Origen, this goodness equates to Christ's work to conquer and subdue all of his enemies, restoring them together with all of creation.

Jesus weeps for our sins and cannot cease to weep while we remain in iniquity. His sorrow, says Origen, shows that God wants to, quote, make good that which is wrong. And God will never cease in his salvific or saving efforts and to all resistance to his will is overcome.

In another contrast with St. Augustine, Origen does not assign the same type of sovereignty to divine grace in his conception of hell.

This enables Origen to focus on the sanctification of the human will via the experience of hell as a means of preparing for eternal life. Augustine's emphasis on divine grace is very much at play in his theology of election or predestination, which gives rise to his conviction that hell is unavoidable for some humans.

It's no secret, if you know anything about Origen, that his thought is animated to some perhaps large extent by the Platonist philosophies of his period. And this certainly imprints his views of hell.

[17:19] Origen's idea of the end of all things, apocatestasis, that idea of the end of all things is being equated with their return to perfect harmony is a very Platonic type of idea.

It's basically appropriating a scheme whereby preexistent souls acquire human bodies as a result of following into sin and disorder, and then through trials of purgation and grace after death, of which hell is a part, those same souls are restored to their original position.

This Platonic scheme is known as the parabola of descent and ascent. The parabola of descent and ascent. And it's clearly operative in Origen's doctrine of hell.

It's a presupposition that impacts his handling of certain biblical texts. In particular, it means that Origen treats those texts, some texts with which Augustine himself engages, in a metaphysically allegorizing manner.

And that's quite different from Augustine who tends to take the text in a more literal sense. In our own time, Origen's vision of hell is paralleled by the late Cambridge scholar and Church of England bishop, J.A.T. Robinson.

[18:35] Robinson, according to one scholar, is an uninhibited proponent of universal salvation. This is what Robinson says, for example, May we not imagine a love so strong that ultimately no one will be able to restrain himself or herself from free and grateful surrender.

As with Origen, Robinson conjectures that in the end, God will use his infinite love to overcome all human pride and independence without unmaking people or casting them into endless separation.

This very same pattern more recently is expressed in the book Love Wins by Rob Bell. It came out a few years ago. Now, in articulating his views, Robinson directly assaults the Augustinian inheritance.

He demands a reconsideration of how God's justice relates to God's love. Against Augustine, Robinson argues that God's justice can't be understood as something over and independent of God's love.

God's justice, rather, is nothing more than the sternness of God's love. For this reason, God's justice cannot conflict with God's love. Encapsulating his own brand of the universalist view, Robinson cites Origen.

[19:48] quote, Christ remains on the cross so long as one sinner remains in hell. Robinson's view, of course, has no shortage of critics. It gives special attention and undertakes special pleading to certain New Testament texts that have a universalist tenor.

And it overlooks those that don't. That's where he gives hermeneutical primacy. It also seems to be infused with an idealism that is not the same thing as the hopeful realism of Scripture.

As it stands, Robinson's theologizing on hell is perhaps indicted by Reinhold Niebuhr's ringing revilement of liberal Protestantism. It proclaims a God without wrath brought men without sin and women into a kingdom without judgment through ministries of a Christ without a cross.

Optic idealism. Now, in closing, and to reiterate, in both Origen and G.A.T. Robinson, we witness an interpretive practice, a way of handling the Scripture that stands at odds with St. Augustine's precedent.

Whereas Augustine remains closer to the shore, Origen and Robinson launch much further out to sea. Augustine looks at the trees. Origen focuses on the forest.

[21:12] Augustine sees the rank undergrowth in the woods. Origen focuses on the towering peaks of divine love. There is clearly an impasse between these two views.

The third view to consider is called the annihilationist view of hell. Retribution tempered by clemency.

This view can be dubbed as a cautious modification of the traditional Augustinian doctrine. It agrees with the Augustinian inheritance on every point but one.

Hell is affirmed as being actual, as being severe, as being penal, as being just, as being divinely ordained, and inscrutable.

But it is not affirmed as endless. It is not affirmed as endless. As with Origen's outlook, the punishment of hell is limited.

[22:14] It has a terminus. However, and this is key to understanding the annihilationist view, the reality of hell is not limited by the prospect of full restoration of all things.

Rather, it is limited by the terminus of annihilation. Does that make sense? The wicked are not restored by God's purifying fires.

Rather, they are judged, terrified, and in the end destroyed or unmade. When all is done and said, those in hell will be snuffed out permanently.

They will be undone. Apart from God, humans are condemned to extinction rather than endless agony. Apart from God, humans are condemned to extinction rather than endless agony.

This extinction is a final, irrevocable sentence. Now, there is no distinguished theologian in the early church that is strongly associated with annihilationism.

[23:20] However, one does discover glimpses of this viewpoint in Justin Martyr, Ignatius of Antioch, and even some adumbrations in St. Irenaeus of Lyons.

A less well-known theologian from the period, however, does stand as a more comprehensive early exponent. His name is Aronobius, Aronobius, Aronobius, from the 4th century.

Now, Aronobius' thoughts suggest that those who do not know God will in the end undergo annihilation, though it will not be sudden. Instead, he says it will be a grievous and protracted punishment.

In this posture, he is rejecting the Platonic idea of the immortality of souls. Right? He's rejecting the Platonic idea of the immortality of souls.

Right? Now, while the annihilationist view is not widespread in the patristic period, the first three or four hundred years of the church, it did evidently have some adherence.

[24:18] We know this because of the fact that both Augustine and another guy called Tertullian, both of whom are well-known theologians from that period, devote time to refuting this conception. Closer to our own time, the annihilationist view has gained articulation and traction.

High-profile exponents include John Wenham, who I mentioned earlier, the very acclaimed New Testament scholar who trained many, many other New Testament scholars, F.F.

Bruce, and of course, someone that we all know here, John Stott. As with St. Augustine, all of these exponents and others champion a close, literal, and careful reading of the text.

And it is this practice that has led to them to call for a revision of the Augustinian legacy. In this sense, we can say that they all operate thoroughly within the sola scriptura principle of the Protestant Reformation.

If you're going to revise a doctrine, it needs to be under the authority of Scripture. It needs to be driven. The revision needs to be inspired, driven, and shaped by the testimony of Scripture. John Stott, most notably, has provided a vigorous and concise case for annihilationism.

[25:40] It's a biblical case. I want to go over now some of the chief points that he's laid out. Number one, the New Testament does speak of hell in a literal and real sense. We must therefore understand hell in a literal and real way, unpopular as it may be, both outside of us and inside of us.

Number two, the New Testament contains, quote, no hint of the possibility of a later reprieve or amnesty. There's nothing mentioned explicitly along these lines.

There's no indication of universal restoration or salvation as a result of some purification with which hell is associated. Number three, the New Testament uses the language of destruction, the Greek apolumi, in reference to hell.

That's a word that appears in a number of prominent texts about hell in the New Testament. That term suggests a terminus, that hell has a terminus. Something must be destroyed. It would be strange otherwise that that word was used.

In this point, John Stott contends against the Augustinian legacy and the notion of being perpetually burned without being consumed. On the one hand, Stott says humans naturally associate fire with pain because we've all been burned.

[27:00] We've all gotten too close or touched the stove or something, touched a hot pot. However, the main function of fire is not to inflict pain but to destroy.

That's the purpose, that's the end purpose of fire. Immolation, incineration, that's what fire does. In other words, it would be odd if what was thrown into a fire didn't get destroyed.

This is what Stott says. Fire destroys, that's what it does. Therefore, this is indicative of the nature and end of hell. Again, Stott's logic. All of this, of course, implies that humans do not have an indestructible or immortal soul.

Stott rejects that idea as being too platonic. Over at Regent College, Rick Watts has made a similar case, the idea of an immortal soul that every human automatically has.

He says that's a very common idea. We speak about souls a lot in the church, but he says there's not a strong biblical basis for that idea. immortality rather is a gift of grace rather than an irrevocable property of the soul.

[28:10] Number four, in further advancing his argument, John Stott critiques what is called a logic transfer between our ideas of heaven and our ideas of hell. Just because eternal life is conscious, it doesn't follow that hell is too.

They can be very different. So the key traits or characteristics of eternal life can't automatically be applied to hell. Number five, Stott also builds his case by appeal to the requirements of justice, again here also making a biblical argument.

Annihilation makes better sense, he says, in the context of the biblical vision of justice. God will judge his people according to what they have done. The penalty will be commensurate with the evil committed.

This is reflected in the Old Testament law, for example, an eye for an eye. Augustine's view, the Augustinian view, says Stott, seems to abandon this biblical conception of justice, and it therefore leads to ugly disproportion.

Such disproportion, says Stott, seems out of sync with the various teachings on justice that are found in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. And all of this, as some of you may have already discerned, Stott is rejecting Augustine's appeal to the utter inscrutability of hell.

[29:33] Like the justice of hell is we can't fathom it. Stott says actually we can fathom it, right, based on things that the scriptures say. It's not utterly inscrutable. I'd like to draw out something here as we look at annihilationism in its contemporary form.

Stott's annihilationism maintains, as with classical Christian ideas of hell, that all humans are perishing. That's a very biblical idea. Unless we eat from the tree of life, we're all perishing.

That's our default. That's our given upon birth. No one is born not perishing. God answers that need, that problem in Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life.

Christ disrupts our given reality, as it were, the reality of perishing. Inversely, without Christ, we continue to perish. Apart from grace, this perishing will come to fruition on the backside of hell with annihilation.

You following? Critics of annihilationism, and their charges apply both to Augustine's view, and they apply both to Stott's view as well as Augustine's view, because they do have some things in common.

[30:50] The critics lament that this view is too biblicist and not evangelical enough. It's interesting to pit those two things against each other, but that's what they say.

In other words, they say the Augustinian view and the annihilationist view, which both affirm the reality of hell, right? They focus too much on Jesus as teacher rather than Jesus as savior.

Again, interesting to pit those two things against one another, right? As a result, they say, divine justice is considered more from the standpoint of human fairness rather than from a more deeply evangelical standpoint, such as is found in Robinson's and Origen's thought, right?

Again, we can see here there are some big questions linked to how divine justice and divine and mercy fit together. First three views, eternal damnation, universal salvation, and annihilationist.

Everybody got those? I know this is heavy and this is heavy content. Everyone doing okay? Let's just take a few seconds to... And then we'll move to the fourth view.

[32:01] Yeah? You said that saying, I understood when you said the word evangelical, I've never heard of that. What does that... What's that definition of that? You say a biblicalist versus evangelical.

Yeah, so a biblicalist view is saying when they formulate the doctrine of hell, they're kind of taking a literal reading of certain texts at face value. And the evangelical view, as it's used by the people who make that critique, because you've got to look at the big story of scripture.

A story that's sort of represented by John 3.16, for example. For God so loved the world that he came, that all, right? And you've got to read every other text in light of that. You've got to read the whole of scripture in light of the gospel, right?

That's what they mean by an evangelical view. And they would say sometimes that view means that reading all of scripture through that lens will adjust the way that you handle particular text, such as Matthew 25.

Does that make sense? I don't think it's a very helpful distinction to make personally, but I'm just representing the view of the critics. Okay. All right. Reverend Agnosticism.

[33:09] Our final view has many ancient and a few modern exponents, but a very high-profile modern exponent.

In the context of the ancient church and the Greek-speaking world, when the question of universal salvation arose, there were many people who responded with what's called holy silence.

They might say something like, can't answer that, it's above my pay grade. Above my pay grade. Clement of Alexandria, among others, held this view.

People who held a hope of universal salvation, but were very reticent to speak of it as a certain or probable outcome. chief exponent of this reverent agnosticism is a man called Maximus the Confessor, who lived in the 6th and 7th centuries AD.

Maximus confessed that God loves all people equally and that the cross affects complete salvation of the human race. This is called unlimited atonement. He nonetheless noted problems, certain problems of scriptural interpretation, that kind of push against that hope.

[34:23] He said because of those texts and the problems that, you know, the tensions that are there, the best response, the best thing to do is to say nothing. Right? These tensions are best honored by silence when it comes to the subject of salvation's ultimate scope.

Right? In a nutshell, if a choice between all are saved and none are saved is forced, Maximus would answer none of the above. In the 20th century, Karl Barth issues this same answer.

Now, if you're familiar with Barth's thought on this subject, you might know that sometimes he has lumped in with the universal salvation view. That's how he's sometimes characterized, but I think that's actually a misrepresentation.

I think he's better situated here with the referent agnosticism. Barth leaves the question, universal salvation open, but not in a neutral manner.

Right? While he refuses to preach universal salvation, he does tilt towards universalist hope. Like Origen, Barth finds it difficult to see how God will not fully triumph in his grace, through his grace, in the end.

[35:32] Like Augustine, however, he has a chastened sense that human sin is profoundly inscrutable and does carry serious and real consequences. less like Augustine, Barth does not find a clear picture of these matters in Scripture.

Yet more like Augustine, Barth is a greater respecter of the freedom and power of divine grace than he is of the crippled will of humanity. This is what funds his holy silence.

Now, lest Barth's view be misapprehended and falsely linked to Origen's view, for example, we must note that Barth is explicit in his rejection of Origen's notion of apocatastasis.

He finds Origen's hopeful determination on this subject overly abstract and insufficiently moored to divine revelation in Scripture. Among other problems, Origen's conception, and the same with J.A.T.

Robinson, miscalculates the nature and potential of human freedom in a fallen world. For Barth, true freedom in humans only exists so far as humans receive it and exercise it in obedience to God.

[36:41] In other words, without God, humans are only free to continue in sin. And that's not true freedom. We can hear Martin Luther right there, can't we? The bondage of the will. In this stance, Barth hopes for universal salvation, while yet reminding that if it indeed is to actualize, it can only be a matter of the unexpected work of grace.

One of Barth's famous paradoxical statements. It can only be a matter of the unexpected. If you want to expect it, it can only be expected as a work of the unexpected work of grace. Sounds like Sir Humphrey on Yes Minister, if you've ever watched that show.

For Barth, the cross and resurrection themselves are not a sufficient basis for a doctrine of universal salvation. So in that sense, he does stand at odds with Origen and Robinson. Those two speak with dogmatic confidence about a topic that simply cannot enjoy that confidence based on the witness of Scripture.

On the other hand, while Barth insists that universal salvation, quote, cannot be deduced as a necessity, neither can it be excluded as a possibility. Universal salvation cannot be deduced as a necessity, but neither can it be excluded as a possibility.

Again, in this statement, we encounter Barth is a dialectical theologian, right? His theology is marked by a thesis and an antithesis, which seem to contradict one another. He's content to live with those tensions.

[38:09] In fact, he relishes them because he believes they are tensions that are reflected in the divine revelation, Holy Scripture itself. In terms of hell and the extent of its population, this leaves Barth in the end in a position of reverent agnosticism.

For his critics, it's coy universalism. But for Barth, it's reverent agnosticism. Herein, we conclude this brief survey of four Christian views of hell, ancient and modern.

I want to offer a few further readings for those who'd like to dig in a bit more. And we do have a few minutes for questions. We've got about five minutes for questions, if you have any. Thank you for this reception and for your time.

Before the questions, let me just let me show you these books real quick. So some good books that they'll introduce you to some of the different views. Evangelical Essentials, that's where you can find John Stott's view of annihilationism.

Very concise and lucid, as is everything that Stott writes. Absolutely brilliant, wasn't he? Henry Blochet, French theologian, Universalism and the Problem of Hell.

[39:17] We've got a good article for our own J.F. Packer, Evangelical Affirmations. Catholic perspective, which has a lot in common with our own traditional view, is from Ratzinger, also Pope Benedict.

And then this one, this is a good view here to give you a more in-depth discussion of four different views. They're not the same views that people have a different way of categorizing them, but that'll give you a good intro as well and further reading.

So now we'll take a few questions. Yes, sir. So, in the system of culture, I think one of the great ones you know about the that's right, yes. I think they're going to say that's right. That's right, yes.

Well, there's a debate about that, and not just one, but two. There were Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa. Both have been identified by different contemporary theologians as kind of leaning in a universalist way.

In fact, the verdict's sort of out. Depends on who you ask. Some would say they lean in a universalist way. Others would say they're more in that tradition of Maximus that confess their holy silence or reverent agnosticism.

[40:23] Having studied Gregory of Nyssa a bit more, I would say that there is a universalist, hope of universal salvation is a very detectable motif in his writings.

Yeah, good question. Okay, come back to you one sec. Yes, sir. On the topic of the immortality of the soul, can you say a little bit more about how the impact on the annihilationist views, so it seems inconsistent that the soul lives on past physical death and could go into eternal heaven, presence of God, but in the opposite pole, a person's soul could be annihilated and cease to exist.

It seems to be inconsistent around the nature of the soul that God would originally made or did originally made. Yes. So it seems to be in conflict with the nature of the soul.

Yes, that's a very insightful question. And there's still a lot of ironing out to be done on this subject. Contemporary theologians, especially those who are suspicious of what might be called the Hellenization of Christian theology, which is the influence of Greek philosophy and metaphysical concepts on it.

One of the most common critiques they make when they look back at any doctrine, really not just doctrines of hell, but a variety of doctrines, is that there are certain presuppositions at play in that theology that don't have a good biblical foundation.

[41:50] So one of them, for example, is divine impassibility, that God is not moved, doesn't experience emotions, things like that.

A lot of contemporary theologians look back at the patristic period and they say, they assume that God is impassible, but the Bible doesn't say that. In fact, the Old Testament seems to suggest the opposite.

It says God's a jealous God. Right? They say, oh, there's the Platonism. It's snuck in. The same thing when it comes to the immortality of the soul. Where does the Bible affirm the immortality of the soul?

You know, did Augustine get that idea from years of exegesis? Or did he get it from, you know, from years of being a student of certain brands of Platonism?

And that's where that charge levels. So they say, okay, we take that out, right? We can't assume that because it's not a biblical assumption, right? That assumption, in Augustine's salt, this is how people would critique him.

[42:54] They would say, it leads him to posit hell as eternal, unending damnation because the soul can't be destroyed. It's immortal. That's how God made it. And if it's immortal, right, and it goes to hell, then that has to go on forever.

That's how the logic works. Do you see? Say, but wait a minute. Where did you get this idea that the soul is immortal? Right? You just sort of, you take that for granted, right? But that needs to be interrogated, right?

And that sort of dovetails with what the annihilationists say, like John Stott. He would say, John Stott rejects the idea of the automatic immortality of the soul. He'd say, some human souls become immortal by participation in the grace of God.

But that's the only thing that makes them immortal. It's not some innate principle that every soul possesses. Does that make sense? Yeah. Good question. Yes, sir. I'm wondering what the global Anglican communion officially, and you mentioned origin in Augustine.

What's the Anglican communion right now leaning above hell? And Augustine's opinion and origins, where do they lie right now? Like, I'm kind of a time right at the Archbishop of Canterbury and all that stuff.

[43:58] That's a good question. I don't know if there is an official position at the level of communion, because I don't know if, as you all know, our communion is, we're leery of overly defining things at a doctrinal level, which creates other problems.

So it depends on who you ask, really. Right? It depends on which. You could ask different theologians. J.A.T. Robinson, for example, was an Anglican bishop. Right? And so you know his answer, right?

Our own J.I. Packer is also an Anglican theologian at Canon. And you would get a very different answer than J.A.T. Robinson. So I think in the end, I don't know of an official position to which we're all sort of bound.

We don't really have a subscriptionist ethos. Even in our province, we don't have a subscriptionist ethos like the Presbyterians do at the Westminster Standards. The Roman Catholics would have a definite Absolutely they would, and they do.

Yeah. So. Yes, ma'am. I think. I just wonder what they do with Revelation 20 and 10. And we've just heard last week that we're not to change anything in Revelation.

[45:07] And this week we've heard that the ESV will never be, will not be, continue to be changed. But here it says, the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet were.

And they were tormented day and night, forever and ever. Revelation 20 and 10. That's interesting. Yeah, if I were to, if we, we could, could, for example, devote an entire session just to looking at John Stott's annihilationist view and actually entering into a detailed exegetical discussion on how he treats all of the relevant passages.

So it's a good question. I have not done that for today, however. Yeah. But I might go home and do it this afternoon. I'm just mindful of your time because I know you've been so gracious in double booking yourself this morning for us.

Let me, let me say something. So I have, you know, it's, this is just, this is a bit of historical theology. How have Christians thought about hell over the last 2,000 years, right? And you can see that there, really, there's nothing new under the sun, right?

Things that were there 1,500 years ago and then they still have contemporary modern exponents, right? But just because it's a view that, that sincere and faithful Christians have espoused, and I think that all of those who espouse these view are, you know, they were, they were serious Christians.

[46:23] They weren't, you know, they weren't demons dressed in white, you know, something like that, right? That's Paul's phrase. But the standard, you know, especially in a, in a reformed Protestant circle is, is the scriptures, right?

And so we, we stack them up, right? Now that doesn't mean that we can't look at, at views that are, let's say, I would say the Augustinian view and the annihilationist view make the best use of scripture.

I mean, it's pretty clear. It doesn't, it doesn't mean, however, that we can't look into the other views and say there's some good things here, right? So Augustine, I think, goes a bit too far when he speculates of how many people are going to end up in hell.

He kind of makes, you know, I think that's probably not a good judgment. That's, that's an inappropriate judgment for humans to make. I come from a Presbyterian background and have encountered people who operate that same way and make similar comments.

Against that, I say we look at, at the holy silence or even origins. And, and Stott himself actually does appropriate this in his annihilationist view that we should hope that God would save as many people as possible.

[47:36] That should be our driving hope. And we should not take some sort of twisted pleasure in, in the perdition of other people as Christians have from time to time been prone to do.

So I think that's one good thing we can take out of those, of those two of you. You know, at least there's something in our attitude that maybe is, is to be commended to us. Even if, if what they look for and long for is not sufficiently founded on the witness of Scripture.

So, all right. Thank you for your time. Very good to be here this morning. Thank you.