

IS HELL ETERNAL?

In May 2002 I stepped down as pastor of the Free Methodist Church I had served for 5 years, having become convinced through my study of God's Word that one day God will indeed save all of mankind. I am just finishing a book which should be published in 3-4 months on this subject. Many other books have been published, but most are very scholarly and difficult to read. The evidence is quite basic and can be studied by anyone serious about studying their Bible.

Clearly in Scripture an "aion" is a period of time, not eternity. Even the KJV and NIV translations will use words like "world" or "age" in some references, because from the context it is clear that the word cannot mean "eternal." The bias of the translator enters into his work. If he thinks from the context whatever is being referred to is eternal, it is translated as such. If he thinks from the context something less than eternal is being expressed, another word is chosen.

The Concordant Version is the only one I've found where the translation is consistent, and not subject to the bias of the translator. I say this because with the Concordant Version, the Keyword Concordance in the back can be used to look up any word used in the version. The reader is given the Greek which was used, and all other references where the same Greek word is used. You can look up all references for yourself to check the Concordant translation, and see for yourself.

Another word confused in most translations is "hell," which is used to translate the Hebrew "sheol" and the Greek "hades", "Gehenna", and "Tartarus." Here again, even the KJV and NIV will very often translate "sheol" something other than hell (like "grave") because the passage may say that the wicked and righteous alike are there. Since they reason that the righteous are not in hell, they use another word (like "grave"). Since they reason that the wicked are in hell, they translate the passage "hell."

Gehenna is only used by Christ, and is the Greek translation for the Hebrew "Valley of Hinnom", a valley outside of Jerusalem. Jesus was making reference to the time when the kingdom upon the earth becomes a reality (which we see happen in Revelation), and for certain serious violations the guilty are cast into Gehenna. Even in Jesus' day this place was a refuse dump where all kinds of things were burned.

In the book of Revelation, John reveals the things that will take place in the final ages, or eons. Look at the end of Revelation. Christ is upon the throne, the lake of fire is burning (with those not in the book of life found there), and the Jews are prominent. The Gentiles are blessed only through the Jews (as was the case throughout the Old Testament).

But a close look at Paul's writings (Romans through Philemon) show us that to Paul were revealed things that had been hidden in the past. Paul makes a number of references to "MY evangel" (or gospel). He stresses the fact that he received this evangel directly from God, through a revelation .. he was not simply taught the "evangel" (gospel) by men.

Colossians 1:25 tells us that Paul was granted the “administration of God” to “complete the word of God.”

It was not John (in Revelation) that COMPLETED the word of God; it was Paul.

Throughout the Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and most of Acts, the “evangel” (gospel) was going TO THE JEWS, not the Gentiles. But when the kingdom was rejected time and again, God eventually set aside the Jews for a time, and the word goes out to the Gentiles. The things Paul proclaimed had been hidden in the past, and not revealed until the time was right; until the Jews had been set aside (because of their rejection).

Now look at 1 Corinthians 15 and compare this with the end of Revelation.

In Revelation, Christ reigns upon the throne (21:5), but in 1 Cor 15:25 we read that Christ reigns UNTIL He places all enemies under his feet .. and when this is accomplished He subjects Himself to God.

In Revelation 21:8 the lake of fire (referred to as the second death) is burning. In 1 Cor 15:27 the “last enemy” (death) is abolished.

In Revelation 22:2 the leaves on the tree are for “the cure of the nations,” implying mortal bodies in need of these leaves to sustain health. 1 Cor 15:42-44 talks about incorruptible, spiritual bodies.

Throughout Revelation 21 and 22 we see many Jewish references, showing us that the Jews are prominent (12 tribes, 12 apostles, nations located outside the city). But Paul writes that the Gentiles are JOINT HEIRS; with no barrier between Jew and Greek.

There is a judgment. There is a lake of fire. But it is not eternal (but only for certain eons or ages as God sees fit), and it is for the purpose of bringing correction, not to torment as a punishment. Greek scholars will mostly agree that the Greek word used by Jesus to talk about punishment (“kolasis”) is always used as a kind of corrective discipline; a “pruning” for the good of the tree.

When the lake of fire accomplishes its purpose, and when every knee now bows before the Lord (1 Cor 15:25ff) Christ turns the throne over to God the Father, and God becomes All in all (His ultimate purpose; and the purpose of the ages).

Having said all of this, all of the “ALL” passages in Scripture now make sense, and it is no longer necessary to impose artificial restrictions on the “ALL” to make these passages fit into our theology. As in Adam ALL are dying; so also in Christ shall ALL live. (see 1 Cor 15:21-23). Look at Colossians 1:16-20 where ALL CREATION is set alongside ALL BEING RECONCILED. It is God’s will that all are saved (2 Tim 2:4) and we are told that God operates all things in accord with the counsel of His will (Eph 1:11). Why is it so hard for us to believe that God cannot overcome the rebellion of mankind to accomplish His will?

There are many, many “ALL” passages that make sense once we understand that the lake of fire is not eternal, and that eventually every knee will bow before Him.

If these things are so, does it matter if we go on sinning?

A recognition of “Universal Reconciliation” does not change how we are to live our lives. What changes is the gospel we proclaim. The work of the cross is much broader in scope than we once believed. God has found a way to bring all into subjection. He loves us, and will not abandon forever a single sheep.

Besides, whether the lake of fire is eternal, or for a very, very long time (the eons), we should do all in our power to save anyone from this place.

Is “The Salvation of All” a new teaching?

Many, if not most, of the “Church Fathers” in the first 5 centuries believed that punishment was actually “correction” and “aionian” was not eternal. Many talked about the ultimate salvation of all. It was not until the 5th century when Augustine decreed what most believe today; that hell is eternal. But Augustine was not familiar with the Greek.

Most would be surprised to learn of the many who believed in the ultimate salvation of all. William Law (well respected by John Wesley), George MacDonald (referred to by C.S. Lewis as his “master”), Hannah Whitall Smith (author of “The Christian’s Secret of a Happy Life”), Hannah Hurnard (author of “Hind’s Feet on High Places”), William Barclay (well respected Greek scholar and teacher, and author of the popular “Daily Bible Study” commentaries on the New Testament).

I apologize for the length of this note. As I said, I’ve just finished writing an entire book on the basics of the Salvation of All. I wanted to include enough of the actual evidence so you’re not simply believing what I say, but will search for yourself.

If any are interested in my book, “At the End of the Ages .. the Abolition of Hell” when it is published, drop me a note at bobevely@juno.com.

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December, 2002