

Introduction

“It is interesting, though, that the fathers who rejected eternal conscious torment were the ones who spoke Koine Greek (i.e., New Testament Greek) as their native language, while it was primarily the Latin fathers (like Augustine, who admitted that he could not read Greek) who championed the eternal conscious torment view.”¹ - Steve Gregg (SCREEN)

LAST SUNDAY

- This quote does not prove anything, but it does help lead us in the direction necessary for any discussion on the doctrine of hell, and that is of being **honest** about our knowledge and/or lack of about it, and about the **potential** for error in our beliefs.

“**Eternal Conscious Torment (ECT)** is the belief that the wicked suffer unending physical and/or spiritual agony in hell after death, remaining conscious and aware of their punishment forever, as a just consequence for sin, rather than being destroyed or annihilated.” (SCREEN)

- For many—ECT—is a stumbling block, a wound, or a source of fear.
- Others find in it a solemn and necessary warning of God’s justice.
- I want to approach the ECT doctrine of hell not as a weapon, nor as a psychological tool, but as a **theological question** on the journey from Deconstruction to Reconstruction.
- As I said last week, any study or discussion of hell must address the **three element motif** of God’s character, the scope of His redemption, and text.
- It is imperative to understand that the **fathers were not uniform** about ECT.
- One of our **tendency** is to think because our current movement has had uniform statements about a view, that means it has been the uniform view throughout all of church history ... **we are too theologically near sighted**.
- The fathers debated ECT, prayed about it, wrestled with it, and **did not achieve uniformity** on the view.
- There remains both affirmations and critiques of ECT.

¹ Taken from a forum discussion about ECT, <https://theos.org/forum/viewtopic.php?t=5281>.

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- Our **goal** is not to settle the debate finally for every listener, but to allow Scripture and the historic church to guide us toward a deeper worship of God, a more honest reading of His Word, and a more Christ-shaped imagination.
- We want to be honest about challenging things that need to be challenged, aka “**deconstruction**” but not to the point of abandoning faith, but to **reconstructing** it as honest and sincere as we can in our walk with Jesus.

Transition

- I'll present ECT (and the other 2) against the motif of God's Character, the scope of redemption, and text.
 - And I'll acknowledge that it's impossible to do a deep dive in a 5 week series about this in depth, so this isn't that, for **many reasons**:
 - It's impossible to adequately represent all patristic opinions and views.
 - It's impossible to exegete every single scripture regarding, judgment, punishment, hell, and eternity in this series.
 - It's impossible to dive the depths of the magnitude of impact the great **philosophers** had on theology throughout the centuries.
 - Many Christians simply are not aware that Christian theology was profoundly shaped by Greek philosophy, primarily Platonism, Aristotelianism, [Aris-to-tel-ian-ism] and Neoplatonism, which provided frameworks for understanding the **soul** and reality - this is **undeniable**.
 - So this will be more than a **glimpse** but less than a true **deep exploration** of all things regarding the doctrine of hell, it is prayerfully a **seedbed** to help honest reflection, study, and further consideration.
 - Even in this, the message on ECT will be in two **parts**, the first today will address ECT against God's Character and the scope of redemption.
 - The next message will be devoted entirely to addressing ECT against the motif element of “the **text**.”
 - Following that I'll share about the other two main stream views of hell, Conditional Immortality / Annihilationism and Remedial Universalism.
- **God's Character**
 - The key issue here **depends** on one's view of God.

- Many Christians have a fragmented view of God stitched together from childhood stories, Sunday school, movies, sermons, songs, etc., that form a disjointed, incongruent, often **monstrous** view of God.
- The **problem** here is that **the text** says God never changes ...

Hebrews 13:8 ESV (SCREEN)

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”

- We call this the **Immutability of God** which means He is unchanging in His perfect character, will, promises, and nature.
- So if Jesus is fully God like He claims and, is in perfect sameness with the Father (purpose of the Apostles Creed), and His answer to Philip was ...

John 14:9 ESV (SCREEN)

“Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

- The **challenge** this presents:
 - We either behold the Father in Jesus—perfectly/sameness, **or** the answer to the Father, as represented in the OT, is **different in character** than Jesus.
 - This would never be admitted or affirmed because many simply have not wrestled with the tension of how their theology presents God’s character in the OT **out of alignment** with the character of Jesus in the NT.
 - For example, viewing God as a God of violence in the OT does not align with Jesus’ life, teachings, or example in anyway.
 - If God changed from the OT to the NT, then the view of immutability is **negated**, and many other serious theological issues arise.
 - For me, this and years of study, leaves me in a stance that we behold God perfectly and fully in Jesus, thus **Jesus is Perfect Theology**.
 - So, if you believe the Father is different in character than Jesus, that is a **different discussion**, but if you affirm the Trinitarian view of God:

“Does Eternal Conscious Torment Reflect the Character of God Revealed in Jesus?” (SCREEN)

- To engage that question honestly requires **qualification** about the character of God as revealed in Jesus, who ...
 - leaves the ninety-nine to find the one (Matthew 18:10-4)
 - forgives seventy times seven (Matthew 18:21-22)
 - desires mercy, not sacrifice (Matthew 9:13)
 - gives His life for the world (John 3:16)
- Those are obviously just a **few** among many many many examples of Jesus' compassion and **will** for all people to be saved.
 - Then there is the **total non-violence stance** of Jesus.
- I'm offering a glimpse but it is safe to say some early Christians **struggled** to reconcile the Divine Compassion of Jesus with the concept of ECT.
 - St. Gregory of Nyssa, one of the most respected theologians of the 4th century, argued that based on 1 Corinthians 13, an endless hell contradicts the nature of a God whose love, "never fails" (NIV).

"Being divine, goodness is stronger than evil... It is impossible that the divine purpose should be defeated." - Gregory of Nyssa (SCREEN)

- It is very important to note that St. Gregory **did not deny** judgment or fire; he denied that judgment would be the last word and that fire would be final.
 - He believed **God's character demanded** that divine love ultimately heal, not torment without end.
 - Many of the School of Alexandria (1st Christian school of higher learning 2nd - 4th centuries) also agreed:

"All men are Christ's, some by knowing Him, the rest not yet. He is the Savior, not of some and the rest not. For how is He Savior and Lord, if not the Savior and Lord of all?" - Clement of Alexandria (SCREEN)

- There were other fathers **who did affirm** ECT, although they **could not reconcile** the issue of God's Character and immutability.
 - Two were Tertullian and Augustine.

"We get our instructions for the faith from Christ... who has plainly taught the eternal nature of punishment for the wicked." - Tertullian (SCREEN)

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“As the eternal life of the saints will be without end, so also the eternal punishment of those condemned will have no end.” Augustine (SCREEN)

- In addition to the patristics, C.S. Lewis affirmed ECT but slightly different.

“The gates of hell are locked from the inside.” C.S. Lewis (SCREEN)

- His view was that God was allowing them to have what their sin nature wants, which ultimately leads to a **trajectory away** from God.
- Lewis, Augustine, and Tertullian obviously saw ECT as the necessary counterpart to eternal life, although they **could not adequately** answer the question of the Character of God.
- I think a lengthy quote from a contemporary today really helps us grasp the **“big picture problem”** of ECT against God’s Character.

“If the story really does end as Augustine and countless others over the centuries have claimed it must, with any beings consigned to eternal torment, and if this story then also entails that God freely and needlessly created the world knowing that this would be the result, then Christianity has no “evangel” — no “good news” — to impart. There is only the hideous truth of a monstrous deity presiding over an evil world whose very existence is an act of cruelty, meaninglessly embellished with the additional narrative detail - almost parodic in its triviality - of the arbitrary salvation of a few select souls who are not even in any special sense deserving of the privilege. This is in fact the ghastliest possible “dysangel,” the direst tidings — ever visited on a world already too much burdened by unmerited suffering.” David Bentley Hart

- **The Scope of Redemption**

- This element, though incredibly important, is much more concise.
- The NT speaks of redemption in cosmic terms:

1 Corinthians 15:22 ESV (SCREEN)

“**22** For as in Adam **all** die, so also in Christ shall **all** be made alive.”

- Irenaeus taught that Christ, as the "Second Adam," recapitulates **all humanity** by taking on human flesh to reverse Adam's disobedience.
- A **concise yet powerful question** the patristics **wrestled** with:
 - If Adam's fall included all humanity, can Christ's reconciliation only include **some**?
- Cosmic redemption means that it is not just people who are saved through redemption, it is the restoration of creation - of all things.

Ephesians 1:7-10 ESV (SCREEN)

"**7** In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, **8** which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight **9** making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ **10** as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite **all things** in Christ, **things in heaven and things on earth** in him."

Romans 8:22-23 ESV (SCREEN)

"**22** For we know that the **whole creation** has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. **23** And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

Colossians 1:19-20 ESV (SCREEN)

"**19** For in him **all** the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, **20** and through him to reconcile to himself **all things**, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross."

- Many church fathers viewed redemption as cosmic, not only the offer of salvation, but the ultimate triumph of Christ's redemption over all things, even to the redeeming of the **new** heavens and earth in Revelation.

Conclusion

- Far too often, Christian discussions, stances, arguments, etc. end up **revolving around** who goes to heaven and who ends up in hell.

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- Although I'm not suggesting hell is not serious and something every Christian should seriously consider, I am suggesting I think we have been asking the **wrong questions** or at least asking them in the wrong order of emphasis.
 - This is the purpose of **deconstruction** so that we can **reconstruct** better.
- It seems in my novice knowledge of Christian history, we made the gospel **more** about the afterlife, and **less** about the mission of the Church.
 - We drifted into **defending** a position about our destination instead of the **engaging** the mission of the church.
- The gospel is not a "get out of hell free," message.
 - It is an **invitation** to join God's work of bringing heaven and earth together.
 - The incarnation is not about **escaping**—it is about God **reconciling** heaven and earth in Christ.

Ephesians 1:7-10 ESV (SCREEN)

"7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, 8 which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight 9 making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ 10 as a plan for the fullness of time, to **unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth in him.**

- God's ultimate goal is not, nor has it ever been, **abandonment**—but just the opposite—Presence and renewal.
 - To be clear, Revelation does not end with us leaving earth into a celestial ball of energy, it ends with heaven coming down, a restored union of heaven and earth—just as it began in Genesis.

"Instead of, "Who is going to heaven or hell? Maybe we should ask, "How can I live now to participate in God's mission on earth?" (SCREEN)

- If we are committed to truly living out the mission of Jesus through the presence of the Holy Spirit, God will take care of that which is beyond it.
- Even if hell didn't exist, and I do believe it does, fulfillment is in living for Jesus so that one day we behold His Face in fullness.