The Rationale of Hell

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Dr. Gerstner was a stalwart champion of the cause of reformed theology and, in particular, the teachings of Jonathan Edwards. This article is taken from his book, *Jonathan Edwards on Heaven and Hell*, Baker Book House, 1980, pp. 79-90.

“*Sin against God in God’s idea is infinite, and the punishment is infinite.*”

The basic proof for hell is the Bible. We have shown in our “Jonathan Edwards and the Bible”¹ how he argues that it is rational to believe that the Bible is the revelation of God. We need not re-examine the biblical evidence that hell is true since it is a part of our entire discussion above and below. Edwards also argued rationally that if there is a God he would reveal himself and that the Bible is the only such revelation. Likewise, if God intended to judge the world he would reveal that fact and so the Bible does.

The rationalization for hell is in terms of harmony or proportion. “According to thy fear (terribleness) so is thy wrath.”² Because of this proportion the suffering of offenders must be infinite as is the majesty of the offended one. Even present suffering is in proportion to the manifestation of the divine majesty.

As God’s favour is infinitely desirable so it is a part of his infinite awful majesty that his displeasure is infinitely dreadful which it would not be if it were contrary to the perfection of his nature to punish eternally. If God’s majesty were not infinite and his displeasure were not infinitely dreadful he would be less glorious.³

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¹ Tenth: An Evangelical Quarterly 9, 4 (October, 1979), 2-71.
² Ps. 90:11.
³ Mnn stresses the infinite dement of sin.
An offense against an infinite being is greater than any finite degree of badness and is therefore an infinite degree of badness. If one adds greatness to a being he adds greatness to an offense against him. Thus he adds infinite badness since the offense is against an infinite being.

Here a criticism arises: a finite person does not have a complete idea of the infinite excellence and therefore cannot be guilty of infinite offense. Edwards answers that “eternal punishment is just in the same respects infinite as the crime, and in no other.” So, the crime is infinite though not in the one committing it; and the punishment is accordingly administered: “it is itself infinite, but is never suffered infinitely. Indeed if the soul was capable of having at once a full and complete idea of the eternity of misery, then it would properly be infinite suffering.” The soul being incapable of this, “eternity is suffered as an infinite God is offended, that is, according to the comprehension of the mind. . . . Sin against God in God’s idea is infinite, and the punishment is infinite no otherwise but in the idea of God. . . .”

There are rational arguments for hell as well. Some lie in plain view — namely, the pain and suffering of men in this present world. This itself shows that God is “not averse to have them suffer.” If God were, Edwards seems to be supposing, he would not have so ordained. He could have prevented suffering and he could terminate it, if he pleased. Empirical facts settle one point indisputably: God and creature-pain are not mutually exclusive. The usual form of the problem of evil (evil proves that God is either not omnipotent or not good) is false. God is omnipotently good and he ordains evil. It is therefore good that there should be evil. This theodicy is a foundation for the possibility of hell, which, when justice and wisdom are added, becomes the necessity for hell.

That brings us to the argument for hell from moral government. “Wicked men have no reason to doubt the truth of anything that is said in the word of God, concerning the future punishment of the ungodly, or to suspect whether it be true.” God made this world and must regulate it, as a moral creator would, according to some rule by which it must ultimately be judged and sentenced.

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4 Mnn.
5 M44.
6 For example, somewhere Edwards observes that if one man’s sin could bring ruin to the whole world it is not inconceivable that a man’s sin could ruin himself eternally. Cf. also M572. Also in the sermon on Exod. 9:12-16 (3) Edwards uses such expressions as “not inconceivable,” “certainly true,” “rational.”
7 The conclusion of the sermon lecture on Rom. 1:20 (“The being and attributes of God are clearly to be seen by the works of creation” (p. 1) (June 1743, Aug. 1756) is interesting because it follows Edwards’s fullest rational demonstration of the existence of God and warns sinners that there is no rational foundation for their hoping to escape the eternal wrath threatened in the Bible.
8 Hickman, II, 485f.
While Edwards does not usually populate hell with named individuals, as Dante does, he is quite specific about Antiochus Epiphanes, who persecuted the Jewish church in the intertestamental period. Acting apparently on his own moral inclinations, Edwards would not have wanted Antiochus ever to be delivered from his endless, indescribable tortures of body and soul because of what he did to the bodies of men. Some of the brutal Roman Catholic persecutors seemed to Edwards to deserve endless suffering: “the extremity of hell torments don’t seem too much for them.” He defends himself: it is our insensitivity to sin that prevents our realizing how hell-deserving sin is. Our “devilish dispositions” make sin not appear “horrid.” Is Edwards speaking for himself? Does he really think and feel in his own heart that Antiochus and certain popes should endlessly suffer for sins that ended long ago, or is he unconsciously returning to his role as defender of the ways of God? We think that for Edwards these were one and the same.

If a righteous God must punish wicked men, Edwards argues, this punishment must be eternal. Sin, he says, is enmity against the giver of all being. It is rational to suppose that this would incur the hatred of this great Being, and this Being’s hatred and wrath would be as infinite as he is. The sermon on Romans 3:19 enters somewhat thoroughly into this difficult theme. We will summarize this preaching because it catches up in one statement virtually all the lines of Edwards’s reasoning that show the necessity of eternal punishment.

Sereno Dwight wrote that the discourses that, beyond any others Edwards preached, had an immediate saving effect were several from Romans 3:19.

The sermon . . . literally stops the mouth of every reader, and compels him, as he stands before his Judge, to admit, if he does not feel, the justice of his sentence. I know not where to find, in any language, a discourse so well adapted to strip the impenitent sinner of every excuse, to convince him of his guilt, and to bring him low before the justice and holiness of God. According to the estimate of Mr. Edwards, it was far the most powerful and effectual of his discourses, and we scarcely know of any other sermon which has been favoured with equal success.

This is the only sermon on Romans which was published in Edwards’s lifetime (apart from those on Romans 4:5, which were, however, printed as the treatise on Justification by Faith). Its popular title is “The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners.” Edwards’s actual doctrine is: “Tis just with God eternally to cast off, and destroy sinners.”

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9 M527. “when I read some instances of the monstrous and amazing cruelty of some popish persecutors, I have such a sense of the horridness of what they did that the extremity of hell torments don’t seem too much for them.”
10 Dwight, I, 141, 142.
11 Dissertation on Various Important Subjects (Boston; printed and sold by S. Kneeland and T. Green, 1738), pp. l92f.
12 Ibid., p. 195.
The sermon begins with a review of the first part of the Epistle to the Romans. Edwards reminds us that his text was written to show that all men, Gentiles and Jews alike, stood condemned. The words of 3:19 sum it all up: “That every mouth may be stopped.” He moves to his doctrine which he develops by two considerations: man’s sinfulness and God’s sovereignty.

First, the “infinitely evil nature of all sin” is shown. This is argued by saying that “a crime is more or less heinous, according as we are under greater or lesser obligations to the contrary,” and the preacher maintains that “our obligation to love, honour, and obey any being, is in proportion to his loveliness, honourableness, and authority.” From this it is quickly apparent that there is an infinite obligation to obey God and that disobedience is infinitely heinous and, if infinitely heinous, deserves infinite punishment. In answer to an objection against such punishment on the ground of the certainty of sin, Edwards presents a principle that is a major thesis in his great work on *The Freedom of the Will*: “The light of nature teaches all mankind, that when an injury is voluntary, it is faulty, without any manner of consideration of what there might be previously to determine the futurition of that evil act of the will.”

The sovereignty of God in the punishment of sinners is considered next. First, God’s sovereignty relieved God of any obligation to keep men from sinning in the first creation. Second, it was also God’s right to determine whether every man should be tried individually or by a representative. After the Fall, God had a sovereign right to redeem or not to redeem, and to redeem whom he pleased if he pleased. The rest of the sermon, approximately three times the length of the development, is given over to a probing application which, it is not surprising, found many out. Much of it is an unfolding of the doctrine that “tis just with God eternally to cast off and destroy you.” After showing how proper it would be for God to destroy them since they have despised his mercy, (“there is something peculiarly heinous in sin against the mercy of God more than his other attributes”), he also accuses them of being unwilling to come even if they could. Edwards ends pastorally with great encouragement to the redeemed, arguing that it was a much greater thing that Christ died than that all the world should burn in hell.

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If this is the rationale for hell, hell is the rationale for much of Edwards’s preaching, in spite of its appearing imprecatory. Speaking of the imprecations of the Bible, he observes:

We cannot think that those imprecations we find in the Psalms and Prophets, were out of their own hearts; for cursing is spoken of as a very dreadful sin in the Old Testament; and David, whom we hear oftener than any other praying for vengeance on his enemies, by the history of his life, was of a spirit very remote from spiteful and revengeful.... And some of the most terrible imprecations that we find in all the Old Testament, are in the New spoken of as prophetical, even those in the 109th Psalm; as in Acts 1:20. . . . They wish them ill, not as personal, but as public enemies to the church of God.

Apparently, therefore, although Edwards regarded himself as the spokesman of God in these sermons, he was still issuing warnings, in God’s name, of what would happen to the impenitent. He was not himself invoking judgment or issuing anathemas.

As a matter of fact, all the evidence tends to indicate that his fervent preaching of hell stemmed hardly more from his obedience to God than from his deep love to mankind. Believing in the reality of hell for the sinner, what would a benevolent man do but everything in his power to warn against such an awful retribution? Some of the exhortations of Edwards are the most drawn-out, pathetic appeals to the unconverted that can be found in the history of the Christian pulpit. This is not the spirit of sadism. Ironically, if Edwards, believing as he did, had been a sadist, he would never have said a word about perdition.

If it be granted that Edwards preached these minatory sermons because he believed that God appointed his preachers to warn men about perdition, we would still expect him to probe the purpose of God in this. And indeed he has much to say about the strategy of preaching perdition. In a word, his reasoning appears to be: hell is about all of spiritual reality that can affect most unconverted men. Self-interest, their motivating principle, would concern them to avoid such a doom. Natural men cannot see God’s excellency, but they can hear his thunders. One is reminded of a character in a Hemingway novel being asked if he ever thought of God and answering that he did sometimes when wakened in the middle of the night by a thunderstorm.

Most wicked men that have heard of hell have these internal uneasinesses, arising from the thoughts of their unsafeness. . . . They don’t manifest it outwardly. . . . Though other men cannot perceive it yet he himself feels it. . . . The most bold, and daring of sinners, are the most fearful and timorous upon a death-bed. How do they fear and tremble. How do they shrink back. How do their proud hearts tremble at the sight of his ghastly visage.24

24 Prov. 29:25, “They are safe that trust in God” (p. 2), before 1733, p. 12.
On the other hand, a principal means of being lost is thinking that there will be no punishment.\textsuperscript{25}

Many of Edwards’s sermons illustrate his use of this doctrine in evangelistic preaching. The sermon on Jude 13 (1) is an example: “The wicked in another world shall eternally be over-whelmed with the most dismal and perfect gloominess of mind.”\textsuperscript{26} This theme is followed by a searching application, after which the preacher has his people asking, “What shall we do?” His answer is “You must be born again.”\textsuperscript{27} Unlike most modern evangelists, who would either let the matter rest once they had advised men to be born again or would assure them, in Arminian fashion, that they would be born again if they would believe, Edwards tells his hearers to repair to God for the sovereign gift of the new birth. “In order to that [new birth] you must seek it in the first place.”\textsuperscript{28} Our evangelist does not believe that faith is a potentiality of corrupt natures. Until God gives the disposition to believe, men remain unbelieving. There is, therefore, nothing that men can do to produce regeneration. But they can seek God (and Edwards always encourages them) in order that God may, if it is his sovereign pleasure, bestow this gift upon them.

On other occasions, Edwards does not proceed from the fear of hell to the topic of the new birth. Rather, he sometimes dilates on the necessity of fleeing the wrath that is to come. Of course, there is only one main end in fleeing, and that is being born again. But in some sermons the preacher is intent merely on having his people flee. No doubt they understood what was involved in fleeing and why they were advised to do it.

To those who protested against Edwards’s preaching in his own day he vindicated his “scare theology” in the following manner:

Some talk of it as an unreasonable thing to fright persons to heaven, but I think it is a reasonable thing to endeavour to fright persons away from hell. They stand upon its brink, and are just ready to fall into it, and are senseless of their danger. Is it not a reasonable thing to fright a person out of a house on fire?\textsuperscript{29}

Edwards never entertained the notion that anyone could be scared into heaven (but only into thinking about it and “seeking” for it). Constantly he speaks as in the sermon on Job 14:5: “There is no promise in the whole Word of God that prayings and cries that arise merely from fear and an expectation of punishment shall be heard especially if

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., pp. 12-14.
\textsuperscript{26} Jan. 1748-49, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., p. 17.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
they have been willfully negligent till then.” He goes further in the sermon on Luke 16:31, “Scripture Warnings Best Adapted to the Conversion of Sinners,” by pointing out that sinners are not scared into heaven but that total fear would make them all the more the children of hell. This is the reason he does not believe it would be salutary for men to have a preview of actual hell, as awakening as that might appear to be: “It would make them more like devils; and set them a blaspheming as the damned do. For while the hearts of men are filled with natural darkness, they cannot see the glory of the divine justice appearing in such extreme torments.”

This remark about the inadvisability of showing a sinner the actual hell, reveals, incidentally, that Edwards sought to avoid engendering a wrong kind of fear. The sermon on Jeremiah 5:21-22 affords a good discussion of the two varieties of fear. The doctrine is that “tis a sottish and unreasonable thing for men not to fear God and tremble at his presence.” In the course of defining what this fear is, Edwards finds occasion to reflect that “those that have a sinful fear of God fear God as evil, but a right fear fears him as great and excellent.” Thus there is a right and wrong fear of God. This wrong fear of God, fearing him as an evil and dreadful being, drives men from God. “A sinful fear makes men afraid to come to God.”

But, on the other hand, there is a proper fear of God, as the good and holy being that he is, and this right fear makes men afraid to go from him. If men fear God as they fear the devil, they flee from him, but if they fear him as the being he really is, they will flee to him. It is this wrong fear or “servile fear” which is cast out by love. But love does not cast out this dread of displeasing and offending God, for this holy fear does not only dread the fruits of God’s displeasure but the displeasure itself.

Putting the picture together, we get this Edwardsean rationale for the preaching of hell. First, God commands it and it is essential for a steward to be found faithful to his charge. But, second, God ordains such preaching because the sottish sinner is not interested in the fruits of the Spirit. Therefore, third, he must be shown the danger of his present condition and the impending doom that is hanging over his head. However, fourth, the actual sight of hell would be more than frail man could stand, so only the dim pictures found in the biblical warnings are suitable to awakening. But, fifth, awakening to a state of fear does not take a man out of his natural condition, and though he be desperately frightened, as the devils are, his most importunate prayers (if motivated merely by a sinful self-interest) still offend God, but not so much as their absence. Sixth,

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31 Luke 16:31, “The warnings of God’s Word are more fitted to obtain the ends of awakening sinners, and bringing them to repentance, than the rising of one from the dead to warn them,” nd., Hickman, 11,68.
32 Ibid., p. 70.
33 March 1738, p. 5.
34 Ibid., pp. 6, 7.
and this is the crucial point, in this awakened condition, operating only from self-interest, the sinner may (and the preacher encourages him) ask, “What must I do to be saved?” The answer to that question is not, “Be scared straight” but, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.” But, finally, true faith in Christ is not a mere desperate or nominal acceptance of him, as a ticket out of hell, but a genuine, affectionate trust in him for the very loveliness and excellency of his being. This true faith, to be sure, is not in man’s present disposition, but he may and must seek for a new birth from above.

It would be a great mistake, we note in conclusion, to suppose that Edwards preached hell and nothing but hell to unawakened sinners. While he thought that this was the doctrine most likely to awaken them from their corruptions, he also appealed to their love of pleasure. All men want to cultivate pleasure as well as avoid pain. They can be appealed to from either angle. There is no doubt that Edwards believed there was more likelihood of success awakening sottish sinners to their danger from where they were going than from what they were missing.