

Eternal Damnation

(De damnatione aeterna)

In a measure the conscience of natural man still convinces him that damnation awaits men after this life because of their sins. This knowledge belongs to the sphere of the Law, and the Law is still active in natural man not only as norm, but also as condemning judge. Rom. 2:15: "Which show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness and their thoughts the meanwhile accusing or else excusing one another." Accordingly, belief in a Hades with its punishments after this life prevails among the heathen.⁷¹

Holy Scripture teaches the truth of an eternal damnation so clearly and emphatically that one cannot deny it without at the same time rejecting the authority of Scripture. Scripture parallels the eternal salvation of the believers and the eternal damnation of the unbelievers. Whoever therefore denies the one must, to be consistent, deny the other. Matt. 25:46: "These shall go away into everlasting punishment [εἰς κόλασιν αἰώνιον], but the righteous into life eternal [εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον]." We find the same juxtaposition and antithesis in other passages of Scripture, e. g., John 3:36, etc. This parallelism proves that the term "eternity" in the sense of limited duration, as sometimes used in Holy Writ (Ex. 12:14, 24; 21:6; etc.), is inapplicable here. We must take the predicate "eternal" in its proper, or strict, sense, in the sense of *sine fine*, in all Scripture texts which use it to describe the duration of the penalties of the wicked in yonder life (2 Thess. 1:9: "everlasting destruction"; Matt. 18:8: "everlasting fire"; Mark 3:29: "eternal damnation"). The Apology, too, so defines it: "Christ shall appear, and shall raise up all the dead, and shall give to the godly eternal life and eternal joys, but shall condemn the ungodly to be punished with the devil without end (*sine fine*)" (*Trigl.* 335, XVII, 66).

⁷¹ In connection with Rom. 1:32 Philippi quotes from Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, lines 259—265:

You will see whoever else of the mortals has sinned,
Committed a crime against the deity, against the guest,
Against the dear parents.
Everyone has there his due reward;
For Hades is the great judge of mortals
Below the earth,
He sees and records everything in his heart.

Similarly, the Augustana: "They condemn the Anabaptists, who think that there will be an end [*finem*] to the punishments of condemned men and devils" (*Trigl.* 51, XVII, 4).

The objections raised in all ages to the endlessness of the infernal punishment are understandable; for the thought of a never-ending agony of rational beings, fully realizing their distressing plight, is so appalling that it exceeds comprehension. "*Mein ganz erschrocknes Herz erbebt, dass mir die Zung' am Gaumen klebt*" (*Gesangb.* 434, 1). But all objections are based on the false principle that it is proper and reasonable to make our human sentiments and judgments the measure of God's essence and activity. This is the case in particular with those who contend that an everlasting punishment of a part of mankind does not agree with the unity of God's world plan ("dualism"), or that it is compatible neither with divine love nor with divine justice, who accordingly want to substitute for eternal damnation eventual salvation by gradual improvement in the next life or an immediate or later annihilation of the wicked.⁷² Against such views we must maintain the general principle that God's essence, attributes, and actions exceed our comprehension,⁷³ that we can therefore not know *a priori*, but only from God's revelation in His Word, what agrees, or conflicts, with God's essence and attributes.

The *nature (forma)* of eternal damnation consists in eternal banishment from the sight of God, or, in other words, in being forever excluded from communion with God. To the doomed Christ says, Matt. 25:41: "Depart from Me [*πορεύεσθε ἀπ' ἐμοῦ*];" and Matt. 8:12 we read: "They shall be cast out [*ἐκβληθήσονται*] into outer darkness."

⁷² Quotations in Guenther, *Symb.*, 4th ed., pp. 420—423. On "conditional damnation" Bretschneider (*Syst. Entwicklung*, 3d ed., p. 847 f.) says: "By eternity of the punishments of hell our old theologians understood an uninterrupted continuation of punishments in intensity as well as duration and an everlasting confinement of the damned in the eternally unchangeable place of torment. . . . The numerous criticisms of this ecclesiastical conception, however, induced more recent theologians to assume the possibility and probability of an improvement of the damned and with it an improvement of their state. They drop the absolute eternity of infernal punishments and either assume a conditional eternity, that is, if the damned would never reform, hence declare the punishments eternal only in the case of such as will never let the punishments improve them; or they regard them as only relatively eternal, that is, in this respect eternal, that the damned forever lag behind the perfection and blessedness of the pious, even though they reform and become happier, so that, because of their irremovable retardation in virtue and bliss, they always feel the eternity of their punishment."

⁷³ 1 Tim. 6:16: "dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto"; Rom. 11:33-34: "How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out! . . . Who hath been His counselor?"

Man is made for God, that is, for communion with God. Now, as living in communion with God is supreme joy and delight for man (Matt. 17:4, the prelude: "It is good for us to be here"), so banishment from God's face involves the most unbearable suffering of body and soul. In describing the state of damnation, Scripture uses a variety of terms, but all of them express intense agony of body and soul: "tribulation and anguish" (Rom. 2:9), "being in torments" (Luke 16:23), "tormented in this flame" (Luke 16:24), "the fire that never shall be quenched; where their worm dieth not" (Mark 9:43-44), "there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Matt. 8:12; 13:50; etc.) To illustrate the terrible agony setting in with this banishment from the sight of God, the dogmaticians point to the agony of a fish removed from its element. But there is this difference: the fish which is removed from its element soon dies, whereas the man who is banished from communion with God must by God's judgment live on, "is guilty of eternal judgment [$\xi\nu\omicron\chi\acute{o}\varsigma \acute{\epsilon}\sigma\tau\iota\nu \alpha\iota\omega\nu\acute{\iota}\omicron\upsilon \kappa\rho\acute{\iota}\sigma\epsilon\omega\varsigma$]," Mark 3:29.

A number of questions still need to be discussed. To begin with, Is hell-fire physical or hyperphysical fire? Gerhard (*Loci*, "*De inferno*," § 69) recommends deferring judgment ($\acute{\epsilon}\pi\acute{\epsilon}\chi\epsilon\iota\nu$, restraint), though personally he favors (*magis propendemus*) the immaterial interpretation. Quenstedt (*Syst.* I, 820 ff.) sides more definitely with the hyperphysical conception, giving as his reason: "Scripture usually speaks of the things of the future world in terms belonging to this life, as it, e. g., describes the joys of the celestial life as a wedding and a banquet, Matt. 8:11; Luke 22:30." Therefore Quenstedt interprets the fire of hell as figurative for extreme agony. "This opinion is confirmed by Is. 66:24: 'Their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched.' Now, as the nature of the worm, so is also the nature of the fire. 'Fire' is metaphorical designation of excruciating pain." (*Ibid.*, 823.) As a rule our old theologians conclude their presentation with the remark: "It is wiser to be concerned about escaping this eternal fire by true repentance than to engage in an unprofitable argument as to the nature of this fire." (Gerhard, *loc. cit.*) One thing is sure, hell contains no atheists, because the damned actually experience God as the righteous Judge. There is no more room in hell for the lie that there is no God.

Can ceaseless sinning be predicated of the damned? Since the damned remain morally responsible beings, subject to God's Law, and yet are wicked, there is unending sinning on their part. The claim that the punishments of hell are intended to be remedial or restorative

(hypothetical damnation) is just as unscriptural as the claim that these punishments are a means of annihilation. — But to the question whether God will suffer the damned continually to blaspheme Him by outward acts some of our old Lutheran theologians do not risk an affirmative answer. The words Rev. 16:11: "They blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores," are correctly referred by these teachers to the conduct of the wicked while on earth. In describing the state of the damned in body and soul, it is a good rule for us not to draw on our imagination, but to employ the language of Scripture.

Degrees of torment, determined by the nature of the sins to be punished, are plainly taught in the Bible. Matt. 11:22: "It shall be more tolerable [ἀνεκτότερον] for Tyre and Sidon at the Day of Judgment than for you." The severest punishment follows on the rejection of the Gospel by those to whom it had been preached in rich measure, as Christ testifies in regard to Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum (Matt. 11:16-24).

As to the *location* of hell, it is best to refrain from trying to define it geographically or otherwise. For this reason our theologians simply speak of hell as a "somewhere," *ποῦ inferni sive damnatorum*. They decline to conceive of this *ποῦ* as a definite physical locality because there is no Scripture proof for such a locality. Quenstedt (I, 810) says: "Where this *ποῦ* is, is uncertain. Some say it is within the universe, yes, definitely at the center of the earth, as do the Papists; others say that it is outside the universe, and this seems probable." Positively we can only say that hell is where God pours out His endless righteous wrath on the condemned by banishing them forever from His face.⁷⁴ Here, too, our theologians, following the lead of some Church Fathers, give the discussion a practical turn by saying that we should concern ourselves not so much with determining the place of hell as rather with escaping it. Quenstedt: "Chrysostom states correctly: 'We search not where it is, but how we may flee it.'"

⁷⁴ Hutter (*Libri Conc. Explic.*, p. 945 ff.), after declining futile efforts to determine its place, says: "Purer and truly orthodox is the opinion that hell is by no means to be defined as some physical or bodily place or some other part of this universe, but is a certain spiritual, illocal, and entirely incorporeal division or "somewhere" (*ποῦ*) outside this universe, in which the tortures of perpetual divine wrath rave and rage now in the bodies, now in the souls of men. Just as, vice versa, heaven, or the place of the blessed, is not some bodily or physical place, nor any part of the sky, but a certain spiritual and illocal *ποῦ* or "somewhere" in which the elect are showered with everlasting happiness and ineffable joys. However, where this division "hell" is to be, yes, where it is already, we cannot definitely state, especially since Scripture itself says nothing certain on this matter."

The Cause of Eternal Damnation. — Holy Writ expressly declares that since Christ by His vicarious satisfaction is the Propitiation for the sins of the whole world, only faith can save and only unbelief can actually condemn sinners. John 3:36: "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life; and he that believeth not the Son [ὁ ἀπειθῶν τῷ υἱῷ] shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him"; Mark 16:16: "He that believeth not [ὁ ἀπιστήσας] shall be damned." Of course, all sins, original sin and actual sins, are indeed damnable in themselves (*natura sua, ut sic, meritoria*), and this truth must be urged against all who minimize sin; but in fact (*actu*) only unbelief results in damnation. This truth must be brought home to all who minimize the work of Christ, the complete reconciliation He brought about through His vicarious satisfaction. Quenstedt (I, 807): "Although all sins as such are *causa meritoria* of damnation, nevertheless the express, proper, immediate, and adequate cause of damnation is *finalis ἀπιστία*, or unbelief, which not only deserves, but in fact brings on eternal death and damnation, by virtue of the words Mark 16:16; John 3:18, 36." But where unbelief reigns, all other sins again assume their condemnatory character. This is what Scripture teaches when it names as causes of damnation, besides unbelief, also the other sins, e. g., Eph. 5:6: "Because of these things [adultery, filthiness, covetousness] cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience [marg., unbelief]." Cf. also Gal. 5:19-21; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; Rev. 22:15.

The purpose of this shocking doctrine of eternal damnation is to warn against unbelief and carnal security and thus to save from eternal damnation. When John the Baptist preaches: "His fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly purge His floor and gather His wheat into the garner; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire [πυρὶ ἀσβέστῳ]," this preaching of damnation is to serve his main message: "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:12, 2). When Christ points to the fact: "Many shall come from the east and west and shall sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, but the children of the Kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 8:11-12), He is thereby warning "the children of the Kingdom" against proceeding farther on the wrong way of the Law. When Christ admonishes that it would be better for a person to cut off his offending hand or foot than be cast into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched (Mark 9:43 ff.), He impressively reminds also believers of the necessity of merciless crucifixion of the

flesh in order to escape eternal destruction. The same purpose the statement concerning Judas is to serve: "It had been good for that man if he had not been born" (Matt. 26:24); likewise the statement about the "wicked servant" upon whom the Lord comes unawares with His judgment: "He shall cut him asunder and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 24:48-51). And when Paul writes: "But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath" (Rom. 2:5), this statement is, according to text and context, an admonition to repentance, and the aim of the Apostle is to save his readers from the wrath of the Last Day.

This purpose is thwarted by all theologians who treat the Scripture doctrine of eternal damnation as if it were debatable and subject to the expert opinion of theologians and consequently either deny eternal damnation outright or substitute for it doctrines that are "more worthy of God" and more in accord with "human consciousness," or "Christian consciousness." The annihilation of the wicked, "conditional damnation," the possibility of a probation after death, etc., are such substitutes. But a Christian theologian must insist that the doctrine of eternal damnation is not something submitted in Holy Scripture for human criticism, but eternal punishment is taught as an incontestable fact which the Christian Church should preach to the world as well as to Christians without reservation or apology. The "mercy theologians" (*miseriordes theologi*), as Quenstedt (*Syst.* I, 828) calls the deniers and critics of this Scripture doctrine, actually are most merciless. Instead of sounding the alarm against the menace of hell, they actually, as far as they are concerned, plunge men into eternal perdition.

Also the Calvinistic doctrine that God's will is twofold from the outset, that is, God from eternity willed to exhibit the glory of His grace in the case of some people and the glory of His punitive justice in the case of all the rest, thwarts the end God would attain through the Scriptural doctrine of eternal damnation. For the anti-Scriptural nature and the pernicious effects of this Calvinistic teaching, see Vol. II, 24ff.; 50; 508; Vol. III, 118ff. Of course, eternal damnation ultimately serves to demonstrate also the punitive justice of God. But such retribution overtakes only those who decline to avail themselves of the first and original will of grace that God for Christ's sake has toward all men. If it is objected that this distinction would impose the relation of time on the eternal God, we answer that our human conceptions are bound by time and space. See Vol. II, 36 ff.