

A Review of Three Books on Eternal Lostness
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The noted American church historian Martin Marty commented decades ago that "hell has vanished and no one noticed." That situation has changed. Several Evangelicals have not only noticed hell's disappearance, but have responded biblically with well-reasoned pleas to return to the clear teachings of Scripture about eternal lostness.

For this review we examined three books. Francis Chan's response to Rob Bell's recent attack on hell in his *Love Wins* (2011), co-authored by Preston Sprinkle, is entitled *Erasing Hell: What God Said About Eternity, and the Things We've Made Up* (David C. Cook, 2011).¹ The second book reviewed, edited by Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, is entitled *Is Hell for Real or Does Everyone Go to Heaven?* (Zondervan, 2011). The longest of the three books reviewed is Sharon L. Baker's *Razing Hell: Rethinking Everything You've Been Taught about God's Wrath and Judgment* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

First, a few comments about Chan's *Erasing Hell*. The author of *Crazy Love* and *Forgotten God* deserves our thanks for tackling this topic and for speaking clearly against Bell's "alternative" view to eternal lostness. There are many attractive features to Chan's treatment, especially his pastoral concern that we work to keep people from going to hell. The chapter titles are self-explanatory: Chapter One asks "Does Everyone Go to Heaven?" Chapter Two poses the question, "Has Hell

¹ Several other books have responded to Bell's viewpoint, such as *Christ Alone: An Evangelical Response to Rob Bell's "Love Wins"* (Edenridge Press LLC, 2011) and *God Wins: Heaven, Hell, and Why the Good News Is Better Than Love Wins* (Tyndale House Publishers, 2011). I have also produced a modest-length response in my *Farewell, Rob Bell: A Biblical Response to Love Wins* (Theomedian Resources, 2011).

Changed? Or Have We?" Chapter Three deals with "What Jesus Actually Said about Hell."² Chapter Four raises the issue of "What Jesus' Followers Said about Hell." Chapter Five asks, "What Does This Have to Do with Me?" Chapter Six provocatively queries, "What If God . . . ?" Chapter Seven challenges the reader with the words "Don't Be Overwhelmed." There is then a ten-page Appendix on "Frequently Asked Questions," followed by a modest bibliography.

There is much to like in Chan's work. His pastoral heart causes the reader to really care about the lost. He reminds us that "Hell is the backdrop that reveals the profound and unbelievable grace of the cross." (p. 148).

I have a couple of concerns with Chan's book. He states in Chapter Four that "Paul . . . doesn't speak unambiguously about the duration of [God's] wrath." (111). I believe 2 Thessalonians 1:9 challenges this perspective.

Chan argues that ". . . 'hell' itself is reserved for the wicked *after* judgment day. In other words, no one is in hell right now. They may be in hades (see Luke 16), but hades, like sheol, is where the wicked await their judgment. Hades is not hell." (157). I would respond that hades is *temporary hell* where the wicked experience punishment in an disembodied condition, awaiting the resurrection. Gehenna is *permanent hell* (= "the lake of fire") into which the resurrected wicked will be cast after the judgment.

My last concern with Chan's book is that I believe he gives a bit too much support for an annihilationist perspective. He himself does not advocate annihilationism (the view that the wicked will be put out of existence at God's judgment), but appears to leave the door open for Evangelicals to lean toward

² Chan states in this chapter that universalists deny any punishment for the wicked, which isn't exactly true. Some acknowledge *temporary* punishment before ultimate redemption.

annihilationism (as did the late John R.W. Stott). Chan says, "On several occasions, Jesus said things that may suggest a never-ending punishment, though these passages in themselves are inconclusive." (81). And, "In almost every passage where Jesus mentions hell, He doesn't explicitly say that it will last forever." (81). Chan does say, however, in referring to Revelation 20, that "when Jesus says that unbelievers will go to the same place and suffer the same punishment [see Mt. 25:41], it logically follows that their punishment will also never end." (86). Chan admits, "While I lean heavily on the side that says it is everlasting, I am not ready to claim that with complete certainty." (86). He concludes this chapter by saying, "Don't get so lost in deciphering that you forget to tremble." (87). I believe that annihilationism compromises several biblical doctrines and should not be viewed as an alternative position for those who hold to the authority of Scripture.

Morgan and Peterson's book *Is Hell for Real or Does Everyone Go to Heaven?* features essays by Al Mohler, Jr., J.I. Packer, and others on the critical questions about eternal lostness. Timothy Keller's appendix, "Preaching Hell in a Tolerant Age," is worth the price of the book. At only 88 pages, *Is Hell for Real* provides Scriptural responses to the issues raised about eternal lostness. The five chapters plus Keller's essay are excellent for small group discussion. *Is Hell for Real* is highly recommended.

The rest of this review will deal with Sharon Baker's broadside (*Razing Hell*) against the traditional view of eternal lostness (called "eternal conscious punishment"). The book's cover includes Brian McLaren's endorsement of Baker's thesis: "What I tried to do in my book *The Last Word and the Word After That*, Sharon Baker has done in *Razing Hell* -- with more brevity, more levity, and probably with more clarity and accessibility too. Highly recommended."

As readers of the *Emmaus Journal* will know, I am deeply grieved by the abandonment of theological orthodoxy by McLaren.³ Needless to say, his endorsement immediately raised red flags for me before I ever began reading Baker's book.

However, there are several issues for which I would commend Dr. Baker. I am grateful for her writing style which includes interspersing her conversations with her students amidst her theological discussion. This feature makes her explanations very practical and her theological points easy to follow. Second, it is quite understandable that, as the Coordinator of the Peace and Conflict Studies Programs at her Christian university, Dr. Baker desires to advocate for peace and against violence, against all forms of violence (especially as she sees reflected in the traditional view of eternal conscious punishment). She charges traditional Christians with beginning with a violent view of God and, therefore, coming out with a violent view of the fate of the lost at the end of time.

May I suggest that any of us can bring a frame of reference to the biblical text, forcing it into our preconceived notions. A pacifistic, anti-retributive view of God's judgment seems to be exactly what Dr. Baker has done here herself.

I will briefly mention six issues that trouble me in Baker's book and then conclude with a few challenges.

Issue #1: I am troubled by her attacks on the traditional view of hell. Although she says that she is "not trying to take hell away from [my students] -- and I'm not, honest" (52), she uses expressions like the traditional view is a "stubbornly imbedded Christian doctrine" (ix) and refers to it as "the hell

³ See my series of articles entitled "Whatever Happened to Heresy?," especially the last article which raises serious questions about McLaren's theological journey.

myth" (66). She says that our tradition has "betrayed us" on this doctrine (154) and has given us a distorted image of God (154).⁴ She calls the traditional view "the unmitigated evil of a divinely ordained place of eternal punishment" (67) and prays that God would "deliver us from this doctrine of death!" (67).⁵ She argues that the traditional view of hell "should stir our hearts to abhorrence, plague our minds with questions about its legitimacy, and awaken in us a sense of injustice." (xiii).

Further, she says that the traditional view "should be such bad news to us that it should so disturb our sense of justice and raise so many theological red flags in our minds that we attempt to reinterpret it, to turn the bad news of hell into the good news of salvation . . ." (18). We must dispose of ". . . an image of a vindictive God who can't forgive without gain" (42).

She asks, "Where do we get these kinds of ideas, that God cannot look upon sin, or that God's justice is chiefly retributive, or the existence of an eternal hell? They become such a part of our belief system that we think they are scriptural." (82).

The traditional doctrine of hell is terribly unfair, she argues. She refers to ". . . the God who deems it necessary to send the majority of humanity, beloved humanity, created in God's image, to burn there forever just because people found themselves raised in the wrong faith or had never heard of Jesus, this book is for you." (xiii). She attacks the very idea of eternal

⁴ This is similar to Rob Bell's charge that the traditional view has "hijacked the Jesus story" and is a "toxic" substitute for the supposedly better gospel he presents in *Love Wins*.

⁵ Perhaps Baker should have said, "I am trying to take away the traditional view of hell from my students -- and replace it with what I believe is a better view."

punishment, asking, "Is eternal punishment for temporal sin just?" (17).⁶ Torture, she says, is a crime in our culture (but not in the traditional view of hell). In our culture the punishment must fit the crime. In the traditional view of hell there is no possibility of parole (20). The traditional view is "mean-spirited . . . [and] metes out eternal torment to those unfortunate enough to find themselves on the wrong side of faith." (21)

Not only is the traditional view unjust, but it provides a poor motive for receiving the gospel. She writes, "If we receive Jesus as Savior because we want to escape the eternal fires of hell, we miss the entire point of the good news." (xiv).⁷

She especially attacks the idea that it is only in this life that one can choose salvation. She contends that ". . . no one is ever beyond grace" (107) and asks, "Why would God's work of salvation end just because someone's body dies? The work of Jesus must still be effective after the end of time or even after time runs out." (123).⁸

Although she says she has no intention of doing away with hell -- she says she has too much respect for the Bible to do that (xiv) -- she suggests, "Maybe the theories of justified violence implicit in the myth need to be rejected, rethought, and rearticulated so

⁶ But a sin is judged not by the time it took to commit it, but the severity of the transgression. What could be a greater crime than the rejection of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and His atoning work?

⁷ I guess I fall into that category, for I accepted Christ as a teenager specifically because I did not want to go to hell.

⁸ "The fact that God so strongly desires to gift us with divine grace makes it very hard to believe that the death of the body would put anyone beyond grace, beyond God's eternal grace, out of God's reach forever. If God exists outside of time, as we traditionally believe, why would grace exist only within time?" (146). The issue is not what is hard for us to believe, but what does God's Word teach?

that hell's victims await not a theology of hell but a theology of hope." (67).

Needless to say, she is no fan of Jonathan Edwards and his sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Edwards described hell, she says, "with diabolical flourish" (7).

Baker is quite aware that her view is very different than the traditional doctrine. She asks, "Do we have to believe in eternal punishment, everlasting torture in a place in which evil perpetually coexists with God's eternal, holy kingdom? Are we heretics if we find hell hard to believe? I don't think so." (10).⁹ She argues that we won't fall into heresy if we "develop theological and biblical ways of thinking that are more consistent with our image of God as a loving creator who desires to liberate us from sin and evil." (xii-xiii).

Issue #2: I am troubled with Baker's contention that the traditional view presents a very poor image of God, an image which must be replaced with a better one.

Baker describes one of her students as asking, "What kind of God would send my sweet old grandma to suffer in hell forever?" (4). The traditional view sets forth God as a punitive father, "finding endless torture an agreeable way to achieve justice" (15). To view God as loving and His justice as retributive means that "we have a God with a split personality." (90).

If one holds onto the traditional view, this produces a certain kind of God (32).

"Many others have gone before us who just couldn't harmonize the knowledge of the love of God through

⁹ One must ask the question, is it really up to the revisionists to decide what is outside the bounds of orthodox theology?

Jesus with the image of God as a merciless judge who sends billions of people to hell." (xiii).

Baker takes off her gloves and (like the late Clark Pinnock) declares, ". . . our traditional views of hell cast God as worse [than Hitler], as one who tortures and puts billions and billions of people through a second death, not for a few days . . . Their only offense? Not confessing Jesus as Savior. . . . But for a temporary error, shall they endure endless torture and torment? We call this God's justice?" (148).¹⁰

The traditional view, says Baker, diminishes God's power to redeem all humanity (149). Such views "do not bring God glory; they usurp God's glory by diminishing God's power!" (149). Further, "Our traditional views of hell as a place of eternal punishment where unbelievers dwell in undying flames contradict this image of God." (xiv).

"The first part of the book discusses the image of God that leads us, or even allows us, to believe in an eternal hell." (xiv). We must "adjust our minds to the image of God as nonviolent." (xv).¹¹

The traditional view does great damage, argues Baker, to the truth of God's will. She writes, "Yet by holding on to the doctrine of eternal hell, we in essence hold to the belief that in the end God's will to save all people goes unfulfilled, which puts God's power and goodness in doubt." (12).¹² Such a view also

¹⁰ As I've tried to show in my *Farewell, Rob Bell*, unbelief is no temporary "error," but rather spiritual mutiny.

¹¹ This appears to be Baker's fundamental, operating assumption: a non-violent God. She begins with that mindset and reinterprets all the texts which present God as using violence for His purposes.

¹² This is precisely the point made by Rob Bell in his chapter entitled "Does God Get What God Wants?"

compromises the work of Christ. She says, "Jesus' life, death, and resurrection were limited, not effective enough to save everyone without condition." (12).

She sees a major problem with the traditional view. She asks, "Do you see the contradiction? God's good purpose and will is to redeem the world. God has the power to do so. Yet God goes against the divine will to save all and creates, preserves, and populates a place of punishment where the wicked and the unrepentant dwell, unredeemed, unreconciled, and unrestored for all eternity." (12). She quotes I Timothy 2:4 several times (God "wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth"), arguing that "After all, if God's will triumphs in the end, forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration will rule out the need for eternal punishment in hell." (106).¹³

Issue #3: I am troubled by what Baker offers as a more biblical theodicy.

A "theodicy" is a defense of God's justice in the face of evil's reality. Baker argues that "traditional theories of hell not only keep evil in eternal existence; they also keep the cycle of violence in motion for all eternity." (16). Only by getting rid of the traditional view will we end the cycle of violence (16).¹⁴ "Only through the total obliteration of all evil and violence will the work of Christ find its full effectiveness so that the peace, reconciliation, and restoration God desires for all creation will forever be ours, and everyone's." (xvi). This must lead her to either universalism (all without exception will be

¹³ If this is true, then how does one explain the texts that present an eternal bifurcation (division) between the righteous and the wicked (Ps. 1, Mt. 25, and Rev. 20 being a few examples)?

¹⁴ Does not the incarceration of violent criminals end their cycle of violence toward society as a whole?

saved) or annihilationism (the wicked will be put out of existence at God's judgment).

Sounding much like Ellen G. White (prophetess of Seventh Day Adventism) who says God produces a "clean universe" by annihilating the wicked, Baker writes, "Those who perpetuate the hell myth also perpetuate the existence of eternal evil and suffering in God's ostensibly redeemed universe." (66). She asks, "Can hell exist with God's kingdom of love?" (124) and insists that ". . . hell is not eternal, only love is." (124). Taking a shot at the famed Puritan theologian, Baker says, "Although Jonathan Edwards says that God's wrath toward you burns like fire, I say that God's love toward you burns like fire. May none of us abandon hope." (124).¹⁵

Baker believes that she has a better theodicy. She writes, "We also want a solution that keeps the hope of redemption alive for loved ones gone before us, that does not allow wickedness to exist eternally in another place, but that instead completely resolves the problem of evil by extinguishing it once and for all." (10).¹⁶ "Actually, the traditional theory of hell doesn't explain how God deals with evil; it exacerbates evil by keeping the wicked perpetually in existence. If hell exists eternally, so does evil . . . as a theodicy, hell does not adequately solve the problem of evil." (12)¹⁷

¹⁵ Jesus' parables present several scenarios in which the door is finally shut (Lk. 13:25), or it is too late for the unprepared virgins (Mt. 25:10), etc.

¹⁶ When Jesus says to the religious leaders of Israel, "If you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins" (John 8), He implies that one's earthly death ends all opportunities for redemption.

¹⁷ Do we "exacerbate evil by keeping the wicked perpetually in existence" when we incarcerate them, perhaps for life?

Not to abandon the traditional view, Baker says, calls God's power and love into question. She asks, "What does the eternal existence of the wicked and their evil say about God's power? God's love? God's compassion? The efficacy of Christ's atonement? If we hold to the belief in an eternal hell, we also hold to the belief that God's power is not powerful enough to rid the new heavens and new earth of wickedness and evil completely." (14).¹⁸

The traditional view is a less hopeful alternative, she says. "Hell seems to rule out hope -- hope for redemption and hope for the total elimination of evil." (13). "Can't God keep the possibility for redemption open? Or is there some law above God that places a time limit on grace -- or worse, an eternal limit?" (13)¹⁹ "*Eternally beyond grace!* Does that sound like God to you?" (13). Baker says, "Loss of hope for all eternity doesn't sound like the God of Jesus Christ who desires for all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (13-14).

Issue #4: I am troubled by Baker's rejection of retributive justice and her substitution of what she calls restorative justice. Baker acknowledges that retribution is taught in the Scriptures (193), but says it is not the most common sense of God's justice (xv). We falsely base our ideas of divine forgiveness on our ideas about divine justice as retributive. (xv). We should, she argues, look at divine justice as redemptive and restorative, not as retributive (xv).

¹⁸ Baker does not present her view as one simply worthy of consideration, but as a theological *rescue* to the traditional view which compromises God's character and the very atoning work of Christ.

¹⁹ The question, of course, is not what God *can* do. The question is: What does Scripture say God *will* do? Has God in the Scriptures promised eternal opportunities for redemption?

She asks, "How does eternal damnation, burning forever in unquenchable fire, redeem and restore?" (93).²⁰

Practically, this impacts Baker's view of forgiveness. She asks, "Does forgiveness require punishment first, then forgiveness?" (xv). She boldly states that "John the evangelist and Paul the apostle support the idea that God forgives without condition, without our making things right first." (97). She sees forgiveness leading to repentance (rather than the reverse) (98). She insists that "Forgiveness doesn't come *after* repentance; it *leads to* repentance." (99), adding that ". . . God's forgiveness is not contingent upon our response" (101).²¹ Baker argues that "In a display of divine reconciling justice, God forgives us -- God just up and forgives us as a gift that we only need to open." (100). She agrees with Chalke in his book *The Lost Message of Jesus* when he says, "When it comes to the God of the Bible, there is only one kind of sin in the world -- forgiven sin." (109 in Chalke, 100 in Baker). Baker insists that God has forgiven everyone's sins -- "Even those who don't know Jesus and won't on this side of heaven (or hell)" (101). We must choose to receive that forgiveness for reconciliation with God (101).

Baker insists that the New Testament emphasizes reconciliation more than retribution (17). She defines "genuine forgiveness" as that "which lets an offender go free without charge." (40). In the retributive view, we've got to "pay up" to receive forgiveness (40). To the question, "Does true forgiveness require a prior condition on the part of the one forgiven?" (41), Baker's answer is obviously "no!"

²⁰ The answer, of course, is that it doesn't nor is it intended to. Eternal damnation is the *alternative* to redemption and restoration.

²¹ A simple reading of John's gospel indicates that belief and repentance are *preconditions* to salvation.

Baker defines "retributive justice" as "any form of justice that puts things right through punishment or payback . . ." (81). She opts for "restorative or reconciling justice" which requires forgiveness (81). "I believe that the Bible, especially surrounding the life and teachings of Jesus, sheds light on a different kind of justice, more in line with a God of love." (81). She candidly admits, "If God resorts to retributive justice as the prominent way of dealing with sinners, then the traditional views of hell make sense. But if God seeks to reconcile with sinners through restorative justice, then we must rethink our views of hell." (81). Frankly, she acknowledges, "I am not sure we can harmonize the retributive form of justice inherent in hell with the restorative nature of God's love." (90).

Issue #5: I am troubled by Baker's view of the Old and New Testaments in conflict with each other. She says that "We receive most of our images of God as violent and retributive from the Old Testament, whereas the New Testament typically portrays God as peace-loving and reconciling" (21) and offering restorative forgiveness (30). Baker does not hesitate to criticize the Old Testament for its many examples of outrageous retribution and wrath. Uzzah, for example, is executed for "an honest mistake" (28).²² She castigates God (!) for destroying "all the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah without a fair trial" (22), for not giving them a chance to repent and change their ways (32). She calls these actions in the Old Testament "heinous, criminal acts" (22) and says, "We watch without flinching as God commits horrendous acts of genocide, deception, and execution." (23). She characterizes the

²² I would highly recommend Baker watch R.C. Sproul's explanation of this event in his series "The Holiness of God."

Genesis flood as God returning violence for violence (32), mocking how “. . . . we [decorate] our children’s bedrooms, the places where we hope they spend their nights in peaceful slumber, with a story describing the murder of nearly the entire human and animal population! She describes God’s act of judgment as “a large-scale mass murder committed by God!” (23).²³

We “seem oblivious to the gruesome violence of God in our Scriptures” (23) because we hold to “the myth of redemptive violence” (26). Baker asks, “If we hold God to a higher standard, how can we approve of evil that kills so many innocent people?” (26).

How does Baker solve this discrepancy between the Old and New Testaments? She uses a variety of *progressive revelation* as an answer. (27). Her argument is that the Old Testament “texts of terror” were part of that culture, a culture that saw God controlling all events, and that Israel saw themselves as God’s warriors on earth (52-53). The people of those times “. . . interpreted life . . . through the lens of their own worldview, the one held by the cultures around them.” (64).²⁴

Issue #6: I am troubled by Baker’s belief that the traditional view supports human violence. Baker argues that our violent behavior flows from our view of God as violent (38). She writes, “. . . we get our ideas of justified violence from the image of God we carry around with us, which we develop out of our traditional interpretations of the Old and New Testaments.” (63).

²³ Baker says, the God of the OT orders far more killing than does the God of the Qur’an! (60). She equates war with “cold-blooded murder” (63). One wonders how she reconciles this charge with the fact that the Ten Commandments, given by God, prohibit murder. In light of these statements, if Baker is wrong, how might she escape the charge of blasphemy?

²⁴ If Baker is right here, what impact does such a view have on the doctrine of inspiration regarding the Old Testament?

She refers to Jesus' reading of Isaiah 61 and His stopping His reading before the "vengeance" section. She dogmatically declares, ". . . by omitting vengeance, Jesus reveals to us the lens through which he interprets his Bible: the lens of peace and redemption rather than violence and vengeance." (59).²⁵ That seems to be quite a hermeneutical assumption. She writes, ". . . his omission of vengeance acts as a rejection of retributive justice and an acceptance of his commission to bring about the justice of reconciliation and restoration." (103).

A Response to Baker's Book:

As much as I commend Dr. Baker for wanting to find an alternative view to eternal conscious punishment, she must be challenged on several fronts.

First of all, her use of Scripture suggests that the Old Testament is not God's trustworthy Word, fully inspired and inerrant. She falls into the old liberal perspective that the Old and New Testaments present radically different pictures of God. She writes, "We receive most of our images of God as violent and retributive from the Old Testament, whereas the New Testament typically portrays God as peace-loving and reconciling." (21). One must ask, how could she hold to its full inspiration when it records what she describes as God's murderous actions?²⁶

Second, Baker glosses over texts which challenge her new view of hell. A number of passages teach that death ends all opportunities for conversion, that hell will be punitive (not redemptive), that none of God's

²⁵ Perhaps He stopped reading at that point because vengeance would characterize His second coming.

²⁶ If the Old Testament is not reliable, then perhaps we should derive our view of eternal lostness from Jesus. Baker writes, "Historically, we appeal to Jesus' sayings on Gehenna, eternal torment, and gnashing of teeth to build a doctrine of hell as a fiery place of eternal punishment. But should we?" (128).

attributes should be emphasized to the exclusion of the others (it is interesting that the only attribute of God that is repeated three times is His holiness), etc.²⁷

Third, Baker's new view of hell changes it from being a place of eternal separation from God, a place of weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth, into a redemptive experience with God's fiery love which will burn away the sinner's impurities to redeem what is left. Baker uses I Corinthians 3:15 (which has to do with a Christian who wastes his life) to say that hell is really God's burning up whatever is evil, wicked, or sinful, and then cleanses, purifies and refines what is left (113). She is fond of quoting the universalist George MacDonald to support her view of hell as God's purifying fire (116).²⁸ Baker says that those who reject God's yes end up in the lake of fire (which she understands as a place of annihilation) (117). "Far from being vindictive," she writes, "divine wrath is part of the reconciling activity of God as the fire of God burns away unrighteousness and leaves only the righteous parts of us behind." (122).²⁹ "They stand in the fiery presence of God and suffer the purifying flames of God's love." (122). She writes, ". . . we see divine wrath through a different lens, through a

²⁷ We have listed and discussed such verses in our book *The Other Side of the Good News: Confronting Contemporary Challenges to Jesus' Teaching on Hell* (Christian Focus, 2003) and in our recent *Farewell, Rob Bell*.

²⁸ John Piper quotes George MacDonald as saying, "From all copies of Jonathan Edwards portrait of God, however faded by time, however softened by the use of less glaring pigments, I turn with loathing" (*Creation in Christ*, P. 81). Piper writes, "I was-stunned. George MacDonald loathed my God!" Piper further quotes MacDonald, "Such justice as Dante has keeps wickedness alive in its most terrible forms. The life of God goes forth to inform or at least give a home to victorious evil. Is He not defeated every time that one of those lost souls defies Him? God is triumphantly defeated, I say, throughout the hell of His vengeance. Although against evil, it is but the vain and wasted cruelty of a Tyrant." Piper says, "MacDonald ripped the heart out of the cross and he denied everlasting punishment."

²⁹ This is hardly a biblical view of the wrath of God. See my article "Warning a Wrath-Deserving World: Evangelicals and the Overhaul of Hell" (Emmaus Journal, vol. 2, 1993).

God of love, who desires more than anything else to have a restored relationship with all people. The wrath of God, rather than anger, is love that burns away the sin, purifying the sinner so that true reconciliation and restoration can take place." (122). "Although Jesus opened the way for salvation once and for all, it is truly finished, completely consummated, when all people, even all God's enemies, stand in the fiery presence of the God of second chances (and third and fourth and fifth, if you know what I mean), and experience the purifying power of God's burning love." (123-124). Her student "Brook" reacts to this viewpoint by saying, "Yes! Finally a hell I can live with!" (124).

Although Baker denies being a universalist (141, yet see her advocacy of universalism on 145), she says that God's goodness and His power ultimately saves all (146). She writes, "So when all is said and done, we all will dwell in the eternal fiery presence of God and be consumed by God's love. At one, at last." (166). As a result of Baker's explanation, her student Lisa becomes convinced her grandma is with God, not in hell (179).

Fourth, Baker's hermeneutics leave a great deal to be desired. Baker suggests that, in terms of the Old Testament, one must hold to either projection (the Israelites projected their view of reality upon God) or dictation (54). She struggles with the violence of the Old Testament and how to harmonize violence with the God who hates violence. She says we should view God as a God who redeems His people out of Egypt (56) (I would add the fact that He used violence to do it!). Her operating principle is that "We can still decide which

texts we will focus upon, which image of God we will use as a basis for our own behavior" (57).³⁰

We must learn to interpret Scripture through what Baker calls "the Jesus lens" (60). Baker writes, ". . . it's very hard to believe, hook, line, and sinker, that the God revealed to us through Jesus would ever agree to throw sinners into eternal punishment in the unquenchable fires of hell." (64).

Commenting about the Old Testament, she writes, "Instead of viewing God as the one who commands the killing of entire nations of people, including men, women, children, and animals, let's peer through the ministry of Jesus . . . Instead of interpreting God's wrath as violence loosed against enemies, let's hold Jesus up as our interpretive lens and conclude that God loves enemies as well as friends." (67). Citing I Timothy 2:4 (that God wants all to be saved), she says, "The bottomless pit is crossed out through the bottomless love of God. Now that is good news!" (67). "Look at the broader vision of the Bible . . ." (68), she says. If we do, we will go to the Old Testament and interpret it with "Jesus-colored lenses" (70).

She argues, "With the alternative image of God we have gained by looking through the Jesus lens, we really don't have much of a choice. We're going to have to rethink our ideas about divine justice and divine forgiveness. We'll especially have to rethink our notion of hell." (79).³¹

³⁰ This sounds very much like Philip Gulley's perspective of "weighing Scripture," deciding which biblical texts speak faithfully of God's character -- and which don't (see his *If Grace Is True . . . Why God Will Save Every Person*).

³¹ If I understand her correctly, this means that Jesus disagreed with much of the Old Testament, that His words take precedence over that previous revelation, and that the two testaments stand in opposition to one another. How, then, can the Old Testament be considered the Word of God?

But there are limits to "the Jesus lens," apparently. She questions whether we ought to ". . . appeal to Jesus' sayings on Gehenna, eternal torment, and gnashing of teeth to build a doctrine of hell as a fiery place of eternal punishment. But should we?" (128). She argues that the real source of traditional hell are Persian religions like Zoroastrianism (128). Because details of hell differ [I presume she means fire vs. darkness], its descriptions can't be taken literally. "Hell cannot be all these things at the same time." (131). It appears that no matter what the biblical texts actually says, her response is: "I strongly believe that this 'reality' should harmonize with the character of God that we see revealed through Jesus and through the major themes of the Bible, such as God's mercy, love, faithfulness, and desire to reconcile with all creation." (131).

But wait a minute. Jesus in Matthew 25 speaks of those not knowing God being sent to hell, a real place. Revelation 20 speaks of the devil, the beast, and the false prophet being tormented day and night forever and ever. Jesus tells parables about being shut out from the kingdom, being tortured, being cast into outer darkness, weeping and wailing, etc.

Baker writes, "The Bible tells us that, in the end, God will abolish evil. . . . No more tears, no more death, no more pain, no more suffering, no more evil (Rev. 21:1-4)." (14) But that text is speaking of heaven and the people of God.

Baker starts with the premise that God is love and then works from there (causing her to reject the concept of retributive justice) (84). She argues, ". . . . where there's violence, justice is absent." (85). Justice and violence are opposites, she says. "If justice is

not present in violence, how then can we conceive of a God who executes justice through violence, especially the eternal violence of hell as we have traditionally thought it?" (85). I would ask the question, don't we violently put criminals into prison? Baker sees justice as mercy (rather than its opposite), writing, ". . . justice stimulates mercy, and mercy serves and establishes justice" (86). No, I would argue that mercy and justice are opposites.

Although she advocates our reading Scripture through "the Jesus lens," Baker says that Christ never goes into details about damnation or its torments (132). Jesus uses hyperbole, overstatement, and exaggeration, she says, and concludes that ". . . if the literal interpretation gives us very unusual results, we can figure that Jesus is using hyperbole or metaphor." (135). In discussing Matthew 25, she writes, "We can't build an entire doctrine around a parable . . . Jesus is talking metaphorically about the last judgment." (167). "This parable in Matthew says nothing about faith in Christ. It says nothing about receiving Jesus as Savior or off to hell you go." (168). "We have to think about the context . . ." (168). We certainly agree with her point about context. But she says the point of Matthew 25 is how to eliminate poverty (168). Baker says, the real issue is what parts of the tradition speak relevantly to the contemporary situation (154).

Fifth, Baker's understanding of the atoning work of Christ rejects the vicarious, penal view. Baker finds "something quite disturbing about our interpretations of the cross, in the way it portrays God." (28). She finds the view absurd that suggests God killed or allowed to be killed an innocent to atone for others (28). She exclaims, "A violent God punishes an innocent man for the world's sin!" (33). She

identifies herself with those scholars who say that the penal/satisfaction view of the atonement is not biblical (35). She argues that "God uses peaceful means to redeem humankind, including God's enemies." (58). Penal and satisfaction theories of the atonement champion divine violence and pervert our highest ideas of love (46), Baker asserts. When we look at the atonement through the lens of Jesus, retribution is replaced by restoration (89).

However, Mark Devers' article, "Nothing But the Blood" (*Christianity Today*, May 2006), surveys several views of the atoning work of Christ. Devers concludes, ". . . when we give attention and authority to all parts of the New Testament canon, substitution becomes the center and focus of the Bible's witness to the meaning of Christ's death, and the measure of God's redeeming love."

In conclusion, this reviewer believes that Baker's book suffers from several serious flaws. These are not issues of theological minutiae, but key questions about the gospel, the seriousness of death, the nature of Christ's atoning work, the doctrine of inspiration, and the character of God Himself. As a professor of theology in a respected Christian university, Dr. Baker has rejected several critical issues in Christian doctrine. Her work should not go unchallenged.