

EXEGETICAL, THEOLOGICAL, AND PASTORAL CONCERNS

regarding things that Peter Hiatt has said or written

Dear Friends,

I understand that many have expressed concerns over things they've heard about me or things that I've said. I hope that this summary would clarify some of those things. I discuss these issues in greater detail in the paper I pulled together titled, "An Adventure in Taking Scripture Literally." That paper is really a collection of notes, and not well written, however it is divided into eleven sections and the end of each section has a summary statement in red. If the things I discuss below raise further questions, you might want to investigate that paper beginning with the summary statements, remembering that the paper is a collection of notes and NOT a doctrinal statement.

I also hope you remember that this paper is not a doctrinal statement, but a summary of a whole bunch of theological conjecture. (This is not my "objections to the Westminster Confession of Faith"). This paper does represent something of a paradigm shift for some, involving biblical exegesis and even more our perception of space and time. So I hope you would hang on to Jesus and Scripture, but let your mind roam a bit. Since Einstein's theory of Relativity, we've had to re-examine notions like "forever" and "eternal." I think it's utterly thrilling to find that this makes us more biblical, not less biblical. Nonetheless it's a bit unnerving, so Jesus, I pray that we would cling to you, believe The Word, and "fear not!"

I will try to summarize my thoughts along the lines of three loose designations: "Exegetical Concerns," "Theological/Confessional Concerns," and "Pastoral Concerns."

EXEGETICAL CONCERNS:

I. HELL

I'm concerned that the church has used this one term to describe at least two very different realities (Hades and The Fire) and perhaps the place where those two realities come together (Gehenna).

A. HADES/SHEOL:

I suspect that Hades is temporal. Scripture indicates that it will come to an End. Hades may very well and probably does last "forever," yet even "forever" (temporality as we know it, "chronos") comes to an End.

It is my understanding that “Hades” is the normative Greek translation of the Hebrew word, “Sheol.” In the Old Testament, Sheol is the realm of the dead...basically all dead (Psalm 89:48). People like Samuel and Jonah come up from Sheol. God raises things from Sheol (1 Samuel 2:6). The Psalmist speaks of his soul being brought up from Sheol (Psalm 30:3) or being “entangled” by the “cords of Sheol” (18:5). Job wants to hide from God’s wrath in Sheol (Job 14:3). However in Deuteronomy (32:22), God reveals that the fire of his anger burns *even* to the depths of Sheol. God’s fiery wrath does not appear to be the same thing as Sheol. Indeed Sheol is considered a place to hide from God’s fiery wrath.

In the New Testament Jesus speaks of a place of “outer darkness” into which “sons of the kingdom” are cast. He also speaks of “The Son of Man” three days and three nights in the heart of the earth as Jonah was in the belly of the whale (Sheol- Jonah 2:2). He prophesies that the gates of Hades will not be able to withstand His Church. When Christ dies on the cross, graves are opened in Jerusalem. Ezekiel had prophesied that God would raise “the whole house of Israel” (Ezekiel 37:11).

Ephesians 4:8 and 1 Peter 3:19 both seem to speak of Jesus descending and preaching in Hades. We state this in the Apostle’s Creed. According to 2 Peter and Jude, angels appear to be kept in this place until the “judgment of the great day.” Hades is at least a temporal reality. That is, it is a place in the flow of chronological time. In Revelation 20:13, “Death and Hades” are “thrown into the Lake of Fire.” It seems that Hades CANNOT be the same thing as The Lake of Fire, if in fact God casts Hades into the Lake of Fire. Revelation 21:4 then states that, “death shall be no more.” It does not explicitly state that “Hades” will be no more, yet it seems understood by the text. And if it does exist after, outside of, or beyond this temporal experience it must not be a place of “death” for “death is no more.” Scripture seems to indicate that Hades comes to an End in The Lake of Fire. It may be that even “temporality” (“*chronos*”—time as we experience it now) comes to an End in The Lake of Fire. As the Angel states in Rev. 10:6, “Time (*chronos*) shall be no more.”

B. THE FIRE:

I suspect that “The Fire” (including: the lake of fire, the pillar of fire, the fire on Sodom, the burning bush, the fire in the temple, the fire that ignites Gehenna, the fire in Daniel’s fiery furnace, and the fire of Pentecost) is Eternal and in some way divinity Himself. By Eternal I mean beyond temporality and without End, because It/He is the End.

In Old Testament theophanies, God often appears as fire. “God IS a consuming fire” (Deuteronomy 4:24). In Scripture fire seems to belong to God in a special way. In Numbers 3 the sons of Aaron offer, “unauthorized fire” before the Lord and suffer punishment. In Rev. 13, the false prophet must be “allowed” to bring fire down from heaven. God “answers by fire” (1 Kings 18:24). Fire comes from heaven to consume the sacrifices. In 2 Chronicles 7 fire comes down and consumes the sacrifices in the temple and fills the temple with glory. The fire was to be kept burning in the temple at all times. The sinners in Zion wonder, “Who can dwell with the consuming fire?” (Isaiah 33:14). Yet in Acts 2, the fire descends and fills the new temple - the Church, and instead of

“consuming” the sacrifices in pain the fire fills the living sacrifices with joy, in fact the very Spirit of God.

God is a consuming fire. His Word is “like fire” (Jeremiah 23:29) The Angel of Yahweh, Son of Man appears as fire. Yet Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are not burned by this fire as are the Babylonians. The whole earth will be consumed with God’s fire (Zephaniah 3:8). Yet one day the Lord himself will be a wall of fire around Jerusalem and “the glory” in her midst (Zechariah 2:5). Glory is closely associated with fire. In biblical times, before the days of Thomas Edison, light was also closely associated with fire. God is light and “a fire.”

Jesus came to baptize with fire. He transfigures into one who looks like he’s on fire. In the Revelation his eyes are like a “flame of fire.” In Luke 12 Jesus states that he came to cast fire on the earth and that he wished it were already kindled. In Acts 2 the fire falls and is experienced ecstatically. Paul tells us that in being kind we heap “burning coals” on the heads of our enemies, as if Love is Fire (Song of Solomon 8:6). He also speaks of persons being saved, “as through fire.” Peter teaches that our faith is refined like gold as through fire. In Mark 9:49, Jesus states that we will all be salted with fire. It seems that the same fire can consume some, purify others and even fill some with ecstatic joy.

In Matthew 25 Jesus speaks of “eternal fire” and “eternal punishment” that is analogous to “eternal life.” The life is God’s and the fire is God’s. I think these five statements are true: God is Light. God is Holy. God is Fire. God is Love. God is one. I don’t think God changes. However, our experience of him does. I don’t think He’s 25% light, 25% holy, 25% fire and 25% steadfast love. I don’t think he’s “merciful to a point” and then is no longer “steadfast love.” He is 100% Light, 100% Holy, 100% Fire, and 100% Steadfast Love, Mercy, Grace, *Hesed*. Jesus himself is our Judgment.

In the Revelation the Lake of Fire is often referred to as the Lake of Fire and Brimstone. In the Old Testament “brimstone” falls from the heavens and the breath of Yahweh is like brimstone (Isaiah 30:33). In the Revelation the Greek word for “brimstone” is “theion.” I am NO language scholar but it is my understanding that “theion” can also be translated as “divine being” (Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains). Perhaps this lake is the “Lake of Fire and Divinity” or “Lake of Fire that is Divinity” (if the “kai” is epexegetical), or “Lake of Fire that burns with Divinity” (Rev. 19:20). Some would certainly disagree, but whatever the case, it seems that “theion” is closely tied to “Theos.” Of course the fire is eternal if the fire is in some sense divinity. The fire has no end because it is the End.

Torment for darkness is to be exposed to the Light. Torment for death is to be exposed to Life. Torment for lies is to be exposed to Truth. Torment for death is to be exposed to Life. Torment for any impurity is to be exposed to the Consuming Fire. Because the agent of torment is eternal, it does not mean the experience of torment is unending. Sodom and Gomorrah underwent “the punishment of Eternal Fire” (Jude 7). This does not mean that Sodom and Gomorrah continually and without end experience the torment of Eternal Fire.

C. GEHENNA:

It appears to me that Gehenna is the place where death (Hades) and impurity (sin) is consumed by the fire.

In Isaiah 30:33 we read that, “the breath of the Lord, like a stream of brimstone, kindles” Tophet. Tophet is in the Valley of the Sons of Hinnom, which is Gehenna. This valley surrounds two sides of Jerusalem, yet Zechariah prophesied that one day the Lord would himself be a wall of fire around the city. The valley of Hinnom contains the Potter’s Field, which Jeremiah prophesied in, regarding the destruction and ultimate redemption of Jerusalem. The Potter’s Field was later purchased with the “blood money” Judas received and returned to the temple. It was purchased with Jesus’ Blood, then used as a burial place for gentiles. Jeremiah prophesies that when Jerusalem is rebuilt, this valley of “dead bodies” will be included within the city itself (Jeremiah 31:40).

In ancient times great abominations were committed in this valley. It’s my understanding that in Jesus’ day it was probably used as a trash dump. Perhaps Gehenna is like the ultimate trash dump and disposal service. Before entering the New Jerusalem all must pass through the fire of Gehenna. We pass through judgment in Christ. “Now is the Judgment of this world” (John 12). His Spirit is fire. He baptizes with fire. The world is judged by fire. God himself is the wall of fire around the heavenly city. The only way into the city is through Christ. Everything else will be destroyed.

Jesus said, “better to cut off the hand that causes you to sin etc., than to be thrown into Gehenna with it”. At the cross I am judged. I surrender my sin. Jesus cuts it out of me and bears it to destruction on my behalf. My sin hurts Jesus. Sin is devoured by the very substance of God—like dark is destroyed by light; like lies are destroyed by truth; like “unlove” is devoured by Love.

II. POSSIBLE SALVATION FOR ALL:

A. I CANNOT AFFIRM THAT IT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR GOD TO REDEEM ALL.

Scripture states that this is God’s desire (1 Tim. 2:1-6, 2 Peter 3:8-10). Jesus tells us that with God, “all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26). Paul tells us that God, “works all things according to the council of his will” (Eph. 1:11). In numerous places Scripture certainly seems to say that God will redeem all. This obviously seems to conflict with other texts, but even if the conflicts are insurmountable, how could I, or any believer, ever affirm that God desires the impossible?

B. I BELIEVE IT IS POSSIBLE THAT GOD MAY REDEEM ALL.

If a person cannot affirm that it is impossible for God to redeem all, than that person is affirming that it may be possible for God to redeem all. It seems that most would agree with this statement; however, I seem to have raised special concern because I see this possibility as a real possibility. I think I have added to the concern because I have critically addressed some of the exegesis of certain scriptures that people have used to argue that eventual redemption for all is an impossible possibility. Below I have listed some of the “biblical considerations” which make it easier for me to see “eventual redemption for all” as a real possibility. Even if all these “considerations” are wrong or

misguided, I still could not affirm that it is impossible for God to accomplish something that he expressly wills. If it is possible for God to redeem all, and He wills it to redeem all, then it seems to me that He may redeem all.

1. JESUS PREACHES IN HADES: Scripture rather strongly indicates that Jesus preached in Hades and led a host of captives free. He came to seek and to save the “lost.” The Greek translated “lost” is “apollumi” also translated “perished” and “destroyed.” I don’t see good biblical reason to say that Jesus can no longer save the “lost” in Hades. The story of Dives and Lazarus indicates that there is a chasm that none can cross; however, Jesus appears to have crossed it or leveled it in his death and resurrection.

2. DESTROYED THINGS THAT COME BACK: In Scripture, destroyed and damned things sometimes come back. Sodom is the premiere example of the destructive power of God’s fiery judgment; however, Ezekiel prophesies that “Sodom and her daughters will return to their former state” (Ezekiel 16: 55). Ezekiel doesn’t just prophesy this about Sodom but also Samaria and Jerusalem. Jerusalem will be destroyed like Sodom, yet God will restore her as well. God is not simply restoring a city when he restores Jerusalem. The New Jerusalem is made up of redeemed people. Jeremiah prophesied in the Potter’s field that Jerusalem would be broken like a shattered pot, broken so that she could not be mended (Jeremiah 19:11). Yet we know God is an astounding potter who does wondrous things with “earthen vessels” like us and he’s certainly not through with Jerusalem. In Ezekiel 37, Israel is “clean cut off” a valley of dry bones. However, the bones come to life. Those bones are “the whole house of Israel.” In Galatians 2:20, Paul writes, “It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.” What happened to the old Paul? He was destroyed, and yet he lives.

3. THE OLD MAN AND NEW MAN: Scripture indicates that I have an “old man” (like old Paul) and a “new man.” Perhaps I am “wheat” and a “tare.” Perhaps I am a “vessel of wrath” and a “vessel of mercy.” I was once a child of wrath “like the rest of mankind” (Eph. 2:3). Is my Earthen Vessel destroyed while I remain, such that I am destroyed and yet saved? Does my earthen vessel form the mold which gets filled by the liquid gold of God’s Mercy, such that my old self of sin is replaced by the love that is God’s very life poured into me? Is the new me, the inverse of an obverse—that is the old empty me—full of self and sin? Does the form of God’s Grace take the unique form of my sin, such that one day I will look like me but be solid gold?

In Isaiah 66:23 “all flesh” comes to the New Jerusalem to worship. In verse 24 they all go out and look on the “dead bodies of the men that have rebelled.” When we study Isaiah we realize that he clearly states that all people including all Israel have rebelled. Therefore, “all flesh” look into Gehenna and see “all bodies.” Whose bodies are “all flesh” looking at, if not their own?

When we take an honest look at Matthew 25 and our Lord’s description of Judgment, we each must confess that we are both sheep and goat, or else we do terrible violence to the text. Who has never “visited a sick person” or never neglected to “visit a sick person?” Christ’s word makes us realize we are sheep and goat. It cuts us (*krisis*) in two. We must cry out for mercy, for we realize that part of us must go into the eternal fire, while part of us is a fragrant offering (gift). We look to the throne and behold “a lamb

standing as if it had been slain.” Jesus describes Judgment in Matt. 25, then the next sentence reads, “When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples, ‘You know that after two days the Passover is coming and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified.’”

I don’t believe that Jesus is telling a simple story of some sheep and goats. He taps into thousands of years of complex temple sacrifices even as he looks at the temple prophesying its destruction and revealing that he will rebuild it in three days, fulfilling all the ceremonial law. Every good work in me is Him: the fragrant offering, the sacrificial lamb. He pays for every sin in me. He is my sin offering (Numbers 28—one male goat) and my scapegoat. He is my Passover lamb (to be taken from the sheep or the goats). He is my sheep and He is my goat. He is my Judgment.

4. TIME AND ETERNITY: “Aion” (forever, age etc.) and “Aionios” (of the age, eternal, forever) appear to be very difficult words to translate out of the Greek. Even if we translate them correctly we don’t even know what our translation means. Is “eternal” the same as “forever” or the opposite of “forever”? I don’t think most people have even considered what Einstein’s laws of relativity imply, let alone the eternal nature of God who spoke space and time into existence. We speak about “eternal” things and things that “last forever” but have not specified our terms.

I suspect that “aionios” can loosely be translated “eternal” (as in “timeless”) and that “aion” can be translated “age” or “ever” (as in “all time”). Eternal things can’t end because they are not bound by time (chronological time). Perhaps I should say they can’t end, because they are the End. Jesus is The End. I AM is The End. The Fire is The End. “World without end” is the world full of Jesus who will “fill all things” (Eph. 4:10) and is himself The End.

The “ages,” the “evers,” and the “aions” do come to an end (The End). Hebrews 9:26, “But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages (aion) to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.” 1 Cor. 10:11, makes it clear that, “the end of the ages (aion) has come” upon us. At the Cross, the Eternal Judgment of God invaded time. I suspect that there is one judgment and that judgment is the cross of Christ (John 12:31). We may encounter it in time, at the end of our time, or at the end of all time, but no one gets to the Father or to the eternal city except through Christ and His Cross. Eph. 1:9-10, “... the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth”. Col. 1:19-20, “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”

We have developed unbiblical (dare I say, absurd) eschatological systems because we have tried to adapt scripture to the space-time cosmology of modernism. I think this has been a tremendous failure and a disservice to the text. Ironically, this modern world is no longer modern and physicists are saying that a modernistic view of space and time is no longer valid scientifically. We live in an age where we can take the cosmology of scripture quite literally and be entirely scientific in doing so. However, to do so we must re-examine our old modern ways of thinking, taking extra care with words like eternity, forever, never, and always.

Considering the nature of time and eternity (perhaps, “chronos” and “kairos”) it becomes apparent that some things will last “forever” yet not be “eternal.” It seems that one may suffer in “Hell” (Hades) forever (all time), yet be redeemed in eternity. We each suffer on earth some time and yet are redeemed in eternity. The “Jerusalem above IS our mother” and we are seated with him in the “heavenly places,” even though now, in time, we also suffer in this “body of death.”

5. THE INCLUSIVE PASSAGES: In numerous passages, Scripture seems to say that “all” will be redeemed. In numerous passages, Scripture also seems to say that some won’t be redeemed. In light of the considerations above and through the process of studying these texts more carefully, I’ve found that it’s easier for me to understand the “exclusive passages” in light of the “inclusive passages” than the other way around. I realize that this is the opposite of American Evangelicalism. I find the “inclusive passages” difficult to explain in light of the “exclusive passages” because of exegetical and hermeneutical principles to which I think we all subscribe.

There are too many “inclusive texts” to consider them all here, but the ones that are most convincing to me are those that come at central points of theological discourse, are affirmed with declaratory statements like “truly I say,” are affirmed by the theological context, and are affirmed by linguistic context. Like I said, I am not a language scholar; however, I do have access to many language tools.

These are a few of the “inclusive texts” that I have the hardest time seeing in an “exclusive” sense:

-Isaiah 45:22-23 (and parallel passages: Romans 14:11, Philippians 2:10)

22 “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.

23 By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: ‘To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.’

The context is clearly salvation and not forced submission. This is affirmed by the New Testament Parallels.

-John 12:30-32

30 Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not mine.

31 Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out.

32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

As the next verse explains, Jesus is here speaking of his crucifixion. I consider this to be a key verse for understanding judgment and God’s redemptive purposes. If the “all” (*panta*) in verse 32, doesn’t mean “all” it must mean something else. I can’t figure out what that “something else” would be. This is a problem with numerous similar texts containing “all” or “every.”

-Romans 5:15-19

15 But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many.

16 And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification.

17 If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

18 Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.

19 For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

This appears to be a central theological statement for Paul as it is repeated in Corinthians 15. The "alls" and the "manys" are in parallel and amplified by the "much more." Karl Barth wrote Christ and Adam as an exegesis of this text. I would not know how to disagree with the exegetical arguments in that book.

-Romans 11:32

32 For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.

This text seems to be the absolute pinnacle of Paul's theology in Romans.

-1 Corinthians 15:22

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

This text repeats Romans 5. The "all" who die in Adam are the "all" who are made alive in Christ. I have a hard time understanding how "all" wouldn't mean "all." I've wondered if some don't die in Adam, such that some would not be made alive in Christ, such that some might be mere vessels of wrath made for destruction and without a soul. This may raise all sorts of anthropological problems and exegetical issues, but I see few other ways around "all" meaning "all."

-Colossians 1:15-20

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

16 For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.

17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

18 And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

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.

The “alls” are in Parallel here. If I try to make them say anything other than “all,” I am entirely out of Orthodox Christian tradition.

-1 Timothy 4:9-11

9 The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance.

10 For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.

11 Command and teach these things.

-Revelation 5:11-14

11 Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands,

12 saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!”

13 And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”

14 And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

I have wondered if this “all” might only be the “all” alive at that time, however this hardly fits the context of the opening of the seven sealed scroll. And furthermore they praise the lamb that was slain and join the elders who praise the lamb because he “ransomed people for God” (v.9). These creatures seem to be aware that the lamb ransomed them. Even if it is only those alive at “this time,” it seems clear that “Hades” has ceased to exist.

-Revelation 21:5

5 And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

I am very uncomfortable arguing that “all things” really isn’t “all things,” especially when the resurrected Christ speaks it from the throne saying, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

6. INSCRUTABLE JUDGMENTS: Romans 11:33, “How unsearchable are his judgments and inscrutable his ways.” Paul writes this just after writing, “God has consigned all to disobedience that he may have mercy on all” and just before writing, “for from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.” If scripture is clear that I can’t understand his judgments, how can I conclude that God cannot save all people based on my understanding of his judgments? However, if scripture reveals, or seems to reveal, that He will redeem all people, I should at least

consider it possible, even if I don't understand how something could be destroyed, condemned, or judged and yet live.

Romans 11:33, demands that we embrace a certain degree of mystery in the biblical text. This is true in affirming the “inclusive texts,” yet also true in affirming the “exclusive texts.” I do not feel comfortable with a label like “Universalist” because I don't know what it means (sometimes it means just the opposite of everything I stand for). And I reject the label “Universalist” because “Universalists” seem to be dogmatic about an area demanding a higher degree of mystery than I am comfortable with and that dogmatic labels seem to allow. Karl Barth rejected the term because it seemed to imply that God must save “all” when in fact salvation is always God's gracious choice in Christ.

I have an extremely hard time understanding how to biblically support the idea that God would perpetually and without end torture a group of people in wrath (God's Wrath OR the experience of God's Wrath as wrath, comes to an end, *teleo*. – Rev. 15:1. Yet the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases). However, the notion that some are eventually annihilated seems to me to be a somewhat defensible option. If this is the case, perhaps some never did “die in Adam” and are not truly “things,” but mere shadows and lies—vessels of wrath prepared solely for destruction. Perhaps Judgment will reveal this. Perhaps not.

7. THE DIRECTION OF OUR HOPE: To me scripture seems abundantly clear on this point (1 Tim. 2:1-6, 2 Peter 3:8-10, etc.). If there are two possibilities in scripture regarding ultimate redemption and two possibilities in any one person's story regarding ultimate redemption, we are to always hope for and desire redemption. This means that I joyfully join the Lord in HIS work of redemption and that I rejoice at news that His Grace may be effectively extended to others.

THEOLOGICAL CONCERNS:

I. Scripture reveals that “God is one”. If God predestines some for unending torment due to no merit of their own, it would seem that God ultimately has two purposes: to exhibit mercy to some and no mercy to others. This is a difficult proposition on many levels, philosophical, exegetical and theological. A wonderful book on this topic is, The One Purpose of God, by Jan Bonda.

II. I am a Calvinist who has a hard time believing in “limited atonement.” The Scriptural evidence for an unlimited atonement seems fairly convincing to me (especially 1 John 2:2). Arguments for a “limited atonement” appear to be an effort to make sure that some folks are destroyed or tortured in Hell forever.

It seems to me that a great number of pastors in the EPC affirm an unlimited atonement. However, they seem to not have wrestled with what this means or they drop other key tenants of Calvinism and embrace Arminianism.

III. Some have expressed concern that I am out of accord with the Westminster confession of Faith. I would argue that perhaps the problem is that I am overly in accord with the WCF as adopted by the EPC.

The WCF (“An Authentic Modern Version”) states the following:

Chapter 9, Concerning Free Will:

3. Man fell into a state of sin by his disobedience and so completely lost his ability to will any spiritual good involving salvation. Consequently fallen man is by nature completely opposed to spiritual good, is dead in sin, and is unable by his own strength either to convert himself or to prepare himself for conversion.

4. When God converts a sinner and brings him into a state of grace, He frees him from his natural enslavement to sin. By God’s grace alone, freely given, sinful man is enabled to will and to do what is spiritually good. However, since the old sinful nature also remains, the believer cannot consistently or perfectly will to do what is good but also wills evil.

Chapter 10, Concerning Effectual Calling:

1. At the right time, appointed by Him, God **effectually calls** all those and only those whom He has predestined to life. He calls them by His word and Spirit out of their natural state of sin and death into grace and salvation through Jesus Christ. He enlightens their minds spiritually with a saving understanding of the things of God. He takes away their heart of stone and gives them a heart of flesh. He renews their wills and by His almighty power leads them to what is good. **And so He effectually draws them to Jesus Christ. But they come to Jesus voluntarily, having been made willing by God’s grace.**

2. This effectual call is freely made by God and is entirely an act of His special grace. It does not depend on anything God foreknew or foresaw about the person called, who is completely passive. God Himself gives life and renewal by the Holy Spirit. He thereby enables each person to answer His call and to accept the grace He offers and actually gives.

Chapter 35, Of the Gospel of the Love of God and Missions

1. God in infinite and perfect love, having provided in the covenant of grace, through the mediation and sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ a way of life and **salvation sufficient for and adapted to the whole lost race of man**, doth freely offer this salvation to all men in the gospel.

2. In the gospel God declares his love for the world and his desire that all men should be saved; reveals fully and clearly the only way of salvation; promises eternal life to all who truly repent and believe in Christ; invites and **commands all to embrace the offered mercy** and by this Spirit accompanying the word pleads with men to accept his gracious invitation.

I believe the statements quoted above to be biblically faithful and accurate. They affirm Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Irresistible Grace, Perseverance of the Saints, AND Unlimited atonement. Chapter 35 was not included in the original confession, but adopted at the start of the 20th century. The reason for its adoption seems

obvious: an aversion to Limited Atonement. And the reason that it wasn't included in the original confession seems obvious: that a doctrine of Unlimited Atonement and a doctrine of Effectual Calling together equal a doctrine of eventual redemption for all—God effectually calls and God calls (“commands”) all to receive the offered mercy. I’m saying that the WCF as received by the EPC appears to me to be more “inclusive,” not less “inclusive” than I.

I don't mean to sound belligerent, but I do not believe that we have given these matters enough attention.

IV. I realize that I'm just a guy that went to Fuller. I'm not a language scholar or a great theologian. I also realize that many would disagree with things I've suggested. Therefore it's been important to me to know that some well respected theological minds have honored Scripture and also argued in the same direction as myself. I have not raised these issues because of these theologians, but because of the Biblical text that I'm called to preach. Nonetheless it's been encouraging to know that things I've suggested have also been advocated by theologians like Jurgen Moltmann, Karl Barth, John Paul II, and William Barclay. I've also been encouraged by the fact that several of the early church fathers, who spoke the language of the New Testament as their mother tongue, argued in much the same direction: Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Gregory of Nyssa to name a few.

V. I believe that the EPC is in a unique position to investigate these theological issues. On the left many would gladly embrace these ideas but not hold to a high view of Scripture. On the right many hold to a high view of Scripture, but are so deeply committed to a cultural Christianity that they are unwilling to struggle significantly with the Biblical text. The EPC has a high view of Scripture and is not bound by an “American Arminian Cultural Christianity.” We are also not so committed to the thought forms of our predecessors, that we can no longer reform as they did, and taught us to do. We are “reformed and always reforming according to God's Word.”

PASTORAL CONCERNS:

Some have wondered why I have bothered to raise these issues and speak on them publicly in the position of pastor. I have done so for several reasons. Some of the reasons may have been bad. Here are a few that I consider to be good:

1. I want us to live to the praise of God's Glory revealed in Christ Jesus. I think we have underestimated the sufficiency and power of Christ's work of redemption on the cross. In American Evangelicalism we do this in the name of “free will,” which I believe then diminishes the sovereign and gracious choice of God. In this way we claim merit for our own redemption. We thus “serve” God out of a carnal sense of “responsibility” (which is to not serve God), rather than serving him as an act of worship, which is the “chief end of man.”

2. I want us to not idolize our selves and our “free will.” I am concerned that we American believers have come to view life as a great competition. We say that we are saved by grace, but what we mean is that we are saved by our “good choices” or the quality of our will. I don’t believe that we have “free will” until God grants us “free will” through his grace.

3. I want us to stop competing with each other and the world. When we view life as a competition and judgment as the finish line, when we compare ourselves to each other and measure ourselves against each other, when we judge each other and our selves, when we suspect that God grades on a curve, we need losers so that we can feel like winners. We need failures to define ourselves as successful. We need scapegoats. We already have a scapegoat. One has lost that we all might win. If I have any emotional stake in any other human being suffering in “Hell” other than Jesus, I probably do not understand the Gospel.

4. I want us to preach biblically. I am concerned that we no longer wrestle with the biblical text and therefore end up preaching societal convention. My understanding is that we are to be “reformed and always reforming” as the living Word leads us in expositing the written word. Expository preaching has forced me to wrestle with numerous texts that I would have otherwise dismissed.

5. I want us to be honest. I have faith that the Truth sets us free and that we can only arrive at the truth by being truthful. I do not believe I serve the Kingdom by hiding my questions, but by being honest. I also believe in the “Priesthood of all believers.” All believers are called to wrestle with The Word. I do not need to protect the church from The Word.

6. I don’t want people to go to Hell. By “Hell” I mean both Hades and Gehenna (where the rebellious are consumed by the eternal punishment and Fire). I know that no one’s salvation is dependent on me, yet I believe that God has called me to participate in the proclamation and plan of his redemption. In the Gospels it becomes very clear that those who are most in danger of being cast into outer darkness are the “Sons of the Kingdom,” those who struggle with the extent of God’s Mercy in Christ. I don’t want anyone to be cast into the outer darkness whether for three days or several million years. Furthermore I do not want them to be devoured by Fire on the Day of Judgment. I want all people to see the glory of God in Christ Jesus NOW, no matter how long “forever” is.

7. I want us to serve God out of Love rather than Fear. I am to preach the gospel as an act of worship, not because I arrogantly think that God needs me. I am to obey him out of Love, not because I’m afraid that He might torture me in Hell. To serve God out of dreadful fear is to serve God out of faithlessness. Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. Fear is the beginning of wisdom, but perfect love casts out fear. I want us to be perfected in love.

8. I want us to love our enemies. This is immensely hard, yet it appears that we only love Jesus as much as we love “the least of these.” By asking the question “What if they

all are saved?” we are forced to examine our hearts. I’m concerned that for some, possible redemption for all is viewed as terrible news, rather than gospel—great news. Are we hanging on to resentment, hatred, and un-forgiveness? Jesus said, “If you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your father in heaven forgive your trespasses (Matt. 6:15).”

9. I want us to trust the heart of our Heavenly Father. “Jesus from the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.” If someone were to tell one of my children that I had other children that I planned to torture in unspeakable torment forever and ever without end, it would create some serious doubt about my character in the heart of my child. It would also fill me with intense wrath for the person that said such a thing. However, if someone told my child that I had other children that I disciplined in Love (even severely), it would create an entirely different response in me, and my child. If scripture is not exceedingly clear about “unending conscious torment with the wrath of God,” we better not say such things. I know that it may be a way to “win” converts at evangelistic rallies, but I can think of nothing else that would infuriate me more as a father than to be misrepresented in such a way. Obviously, God is not determined by my anthropomorphic views of fatherhood; however, He calls himself “Father” for a reason. Perhaps “Hell” is not retributive, but remedial. That makes sense to a Father’s heart.

10. I want others to trust the heart of our Heavenly Father. I want them to trust Jesus. If I were to ask most unbelievers why they did not WANT to believe in the “Christian God,” I think the first answer given would probably be something like: “I can’t believe in a god that would eternally torture a junior high kid who died in a bicycle accident just because he didn’t say the sinners prayer or believe that God had forgiven him.” I’ve always explained God’s prerogative to do so in the way we evangelicals have been trained, but maybe we’ve been defending a picture of God that is not honoring to God and deceptive to unbelievers. God is a consuming fire. Yes he will discipline us severely at times. But Yes, He is always Love. And He always loves you more than you are even able to love yourself.

I realize that I am certainly not alone in the desires listed above. I realize that these are the desires of my brothers and sisters in pastoral ministry throughout the world. By raising these questions, I certainly don’t want to create division and fear but nurture a greater love in all of us for our Lord and His astounding Gospel of Grace.

I also do not want to generate apathy, but inspire genuine devotion from a heart of worship and love. I am absolutely opposed to any form of “liberalism” that diminishes the work of the cross or undercuts the authority of Scripture. I have never in my life had as much faith in the veracity of Scripture or the atoning work of Jesus my Lord upon his cross as I do now.

Thanks for putting up with me so far and thanks for being willing to wrestle with The Word.

Most Sincerely,
Peter Hiett