

Purgatory Revisited

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Published in
Perspectives

A Journal of Reformed Thought
January 1988, pp. 4-7

In the fall term of 1983, Hans Küng, the noted Roman Catholic theologian gave a series of lectures at the University of Michigan entitled *Eternal Life?* It was an investigation of life after death as a medical, philosophical, and theological problem. He faced squarely and straightforwardly all the difficult questions surrounding the subject, dealing with ancient and contemporary issues, the question in the history of religions, the modern denial of anything beyond death, and the near-death experiences recorded in recent years. He dealt with biblical material, the question of resurrection, the resurrection of Jesus, and the church's teaching on judgment, heaven, and hell. The lectures were subsequently published under the title *Eternal Life?* By virtue of a sabbatical granted me by the Christ Community congregation, I was able to hear the lectures and to participate with Küng in a seminar.

I came away with two striking realizations: first, that there was intense interest in these questions of death and dying, of life after death, of heaven and hell on the campus of a large secular university. The lectures had to be moved from the largest lecture hall available to the Rackham Auditorium. Secondly, I realized how little these vital questions were probed in the church, how little reflection I had personally given to them in my ministry, and how comfortably and uncritically we in the church have accepted traditional answers.

Once awakened to the questions that are not nearly so simply answered as once I had thought, and also to the deeply existential interest of today's people, both secular and religious, I began to open again questions on which I had come to premature closure. For me, the greatest surprise came in a new appreciation for the teaching of purgatory, which was resolutely rejected at the time of the Reformation and which has received little serious reflection in the Protestant tradition.

This is quite understandable since the sharp reaction of the Reformers was precipitated by the Roman teaching and practice in regard to indulgences,

intercessory prayers, and masses for the dead. The abuses at this point are well documented; Luther's protest was justified, as Küng would testify. Calvin railed against the teaching of purgatory as "a deadly fiction of Satan, which nullifies the cross of Christ, inflicts unbearable contempt upon God's mercy, and overturns and destroys our faith." (*Institutes*, 3.5.6) Certainly there was enough abusive practice to make such strong reaction necessary. When the abuses have been exposed and the questionable teaching surrounding the state of the dead rejected, however, have we finished with the subject?

The Roman Catholic church traditionally taught that people who died at peace with the church but who were not perfect (which included just about everybody) had to undergo a penal and purifying suffering before they could be translated to heaven. Purgatory was an intermediate realm and the purgation process was mild or severe and of short or long duration, depending on the moral condition of each individual.

Traditionally, evangelicals have taught that those who in life embrace Jesus Christ by faith are saved by the grace of God and those who reject Christ are condemned eternally. One's historical existence is the time in which a decision regarding Jesus Christ must be made and with the drawing of the last breath the issue is determined irreversibly and eternally.

A little sober reflection shows us that the matter is not quite that simple. Even if those who are exposed to the gospel are judged on their acceptance or rejection of Christ, what about those who never heard? What about those who die in infancy? What about the mentally impaired? More questions arise: What about those who have been terribly wounded by the church? What about those who have been abused as children and are never able to trust? What about those whose only exposure to the gospel has been of a garbled and distorted nature? It would seem that we must begin to make some exceptions; some qualifications are necessary.

Reflecting on the traditional teaching of evangelical faith, a further question arises: Do we imagine that the transformation necessary to complete in us the work of grace will happen in an instant at the moment of death? In his discussion of the resurrection at Christ's coming, Paul does speak of those remaining alive as being changed "in a flash," and in the First Letter of John we read that we shall be like him because we shall see him as he is. But are we to understand instantaneous perfection by these statements, something totally foreign to the process of sanctification, which is our experience on this side of death?

Obviously, the first thing we must admit is that we are dealing with a subject beyond our knowledge. And throughout this discussion we must be aware, as well, that we can speak only in temporal categories and think only of a succession of moments, while we recognize death as the break between time and eternity. Into the philosophical discussion of the relation between the two we cannot enter but the distinction must not be lost.

We must admit, too, as is recognized by both Protestant and Roman Catholic biblical theologians today that there is a paucity of biblical material to which to refer. The thrust of Scripture is the imperative to repent and believe, and the stress is on the urgency of decision. Yet there are indications that there is something more.

For example, Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 3 of the necessity of care in building the superstructure of the church which is founded on Jesus Christ. He points to two kinds of builders: one builds with wood, hay, and stubble; the other builds with precious stones, gold, and silver. The work of the first is consumed by the testing fire; the work of the second stands the test. He then wrote:

If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. (Cor. 3:14-15)

The latter person will enter the life beyond, having lost everything. He will be secure in God's eternal presence, yet with nothing to show for his earthly life. Paul seems to indicate that there is, beyond death or through death, an encounter with God in which one's life is tested. The issue is not salvation or condemnation; the issue is whether we bring into God's presence something or nothing. Does not this passage indicate that Paul thought in terms of encounter with God and perhaps a continuing process beyond death? If it is a matter simply of being saved or lost as we enter the moment of death, that is, entering a status of salvation or condemnation, and that is all there is, then why be concerned about what one brings to death's moment—a fruitful life or a barren life?

The apostle seems to suggest that at death there is not only break and discontinuity between our time and God's eternity, but also continuity between this life and the life beyond death. We bring something (or nothing) with us, and whatever lies beyond is influenced and determined by what we bring (or fail to bring).

In Luke's gospel, Jesus calls us to be watchful and ready for the end. He is encouraging loyal, faithful stewardship of life (Luke 12:35ff). He then speaks of two servants, one who knew the master's wishes, but failed to fulfill them, and the other who also did not comply with those wishes, but did not know them. The first was flogged severely, the second less severely. We must not attempt to push this vivid language of Jesus too far. Yet it seems that Jesus was saying that the judgment will vary in light of individual circumstances—a gradation of judgment on the basis of the individual life being examined.

If at the moment of death the encounter with God will be very personal, individual, and discriminating, and if the sentences will vary, does this point to a process beyond death's moment?

The traditional understanding of these texts is that, in the case of the Lucan passage, there is gradation of punishment—yet to be lost, eternally condemned, is to remain in a state spoken of as hell—separation from God. In the case of the passage from Paul, the understanding has been that the “saved” enter into heaven, or union with God, but some with greater, and others with lesser capacity to experience the joy of salvation.

Let us push those conventional interpretations. I entitled this essay “Purgatory Revisited” not simply to get attention. Surely in a day when Roman Catholic theology itself is very self-critical and is engaged in a serious encounter with Scripture, I am not about to suggest we reinstate a teaching that has been thoroughly sifted and carefully redefined in contemporary Roman Catholic thought. Yet, I am suggesting that behind the teaching of purgatory there was a significant insight, even if the practical application of that insight led to disastrous results. That insight is simply that God is not through with us at our death. I am raising for reflection this question: “Is the issue of our lives irreversibly settled at the moment of our last breath?”

This question is meant in no way to detract from the strong call to decision, the seriousness of choices in this life, or the urgency of the gospel call. However, is it not possible that in the experience of death itself, understood as an encounter with God, there is the possibility of something of eternal significance occurring?

In *Christian Faith*, Hendrikus Berkhof, discussing the idea of the judgment of works done by believers in their earthly lives, writes:

In Protestant theology, this viewpoint is almost completely pushed aside by the accent on grace. In Roman Catholic piety it is (or used to be) very prominent in connection with the veneration of saints and purgatory. The Roman Catholic Church assumes correctly that believers differ greatly in regard to their progress and fruitfulness....

So the idea of a judgment according to one's deeds leads of itself to the consideration of a process of purification, called purgatory in the Roman Catholic tradition....The Reformation broke with that doctrine because of its moralistic conception of salvation and its detrimental effect on the practice of piety (indulgences, intercessory prayers and masses for the dead). It imagined a sudden, radical transformation after the judgment, usually without giving it further theological reflection and without connecting it with the struggle for sanctification on earth. Meanwhile Roman Catholic thinking, too, has become much more reserved. Typical of the modern Roman Catholic conceptions is the idea of “ripening”...which K. Rahner develops in “The Life of the Dead”(*Christian Faith*, Revised, p. 493).

Referring to the text discussed above, 1 Corinthians 3:15, Berkhof asserts that

that statement does suggest that Paul thought of more than an abrupt recreation of man; salvation is accompanied by a painful becoming aware of one's own failures on earth. The difficulties here are more an open question for theological reflection than a subject for back and forth theological denouncement. The matter of making inferences from faith about what lies beyond death is fraught with far too many difficulties. One can state with Bavinck: "After death there is no more sanctification, one enters upon a state of complete sanctity...for death is the greatest leap someone can make, a sudden transposition of the believer into Christ's presence, and thereby a complete destruction of the outward man and a complete renewal of the inner man" (CD IV, no. 650, under 4). But one can also ask with G. J. Heering: "Does this change instantaneously, when God shows mercy to the repentant soul and takes it to himself?...Life is called a training school, but perhaps there is a higher training school above" (*De menselijke ziel*, 1955, pp. 190,192). (p. 494).

In another context Berkhof writes:

God is serious about the responsibility of our decision, but he is even more serious about the responsibility of his love. The darkness of rejection and God-forsakenness cannot and may not be argued away, but no more can and may it be eternalized. For God's sake we hope that hell will be a form of purification (p. 536, *Christian Faith*, Revised).

That word "purification" is one used by Küng. In the published lectures, *Eternal Life?*, Küng treats the idea of purgatory in his discussion of the question whether hell is eternal.

Some theologians, however, argue that it is not God who damns man by a verdict imposed from outside. They are human beings themselves, by sins committed with inward freedom, who damn themselves. The responsibility lies not with God but with man. And by death this self-damnation and distance from God (not a place, but a human condition) becomes definitive. *Definitive?* Do not the psalms say that God rules over the realm of the dead? What is supposed to become definitive here, contrary to the will of an all-merciful and almighty God? Why should God, who is infinitely good, want to perpetuate enmity instead of removing it and in practice to share his rule forever with some kind of anti-God? Why should he have nothing more to say at this point and consequently render forever impossible a purification, cleansing, liberation, enlightenment, of guilt-laden man? (*Eternal Life?*, p. 137)

Then he refers specifically to purgatory.

Purification, cleansing, liberation, enlightenment Here perhaps may lie—I want merely to prompt a few reflections—the particle of truth, the real core, of the problematic idea of purgatory, which has been translated in

German from the Middle Ages onward with the unfortunate designation of *Fegefeuer* (“winnowing fire”). This may be the true core, but it remains true only if the idea is not reified.

[A]s no human being is entirely bad, neither is anyone entirely good. Any human being, even the best, falls short of what he might be, fails to meet his own demands and norms and thus never wholly realizes himself. For if he is to be fully himself, even the “saint” needs completion, not after death, but in death itself. And, in view of so much unpunished guilt in the world, a number of people wonder—not entirely wrongly—if dying unto God, the absolutely final reality, can be one and the same for all: the same for criminals and their victims, for mass murderers and the mass of the murdered; for those who have struggled a whole life long to fulfill God’s will, true helpers of their fellow human beings, and for those who for a whole life long have only carried out their own will and at the same time shut out others?...[H]ow this...purification, cleansing, follows is not left to the speculation or calculation of human curiosity, but remains a matter for God as merciful judge, is God’s all-embracing final act of grace. (pp. 137)

The key idea Küng stresses is the shattering effect of the encounter with God. We die not into nothingness; we die unto God. Küng cites Karl Barth:

Man as such, therefore, has no beyond. Nor does he need one, for God is his beyond. Man’s beyond is that God as his Creator, Covenant-partner, Judge and Saviour, was and is and will be his true Counterpart in life, and finally and exclusive (sic) and totally in death (*Church Dogmatics* Vol. III, 2, pp. 632-33).

Küng also cites a Roman Catholic theologian, Greshake:

From this standpoint we can understand what was pointed out earlier, that God himself, the encounter with him, is purgatory. But this means that we need not fall back on a special place or still less on a special time or special event to grasp the meaning of purgatory. Still less do we need to work out crude ideas about the “poor” souls. Instead we can understand what the Church teaches and has taught from the earliest times as an element in the encounter with God in death....[W]e should avoid any talk of fire and speak instead of purifying and cleansing as an element of the encounter with God. At the same time what should be particularly clear is that purgatory is not—as it often seems to be in popular piety—a “demihell” which God has erected in order to punish the person who is not entirely bad, but also not entirely good. Purgatory is not a demihell but an element of the encounter with God: that is, the encounter of the unfinished person, still immature in his love, with the holy, infinite, loving God; an encounter which is profoundly humiliating; painful and therefore purifying (cited, *Eternal Life?*, p. 139 from *Starker als der Tod*, pp. 92f.).

Küng concludes,

That is to say that since it is a question of dying into the dimensions of God, where space and time are dissolved into eternity, nothing can be discovered, either about place and time or about the character of this purifying, sanctifying consummation (p. 139).

A Lutheran theologian, Hans Schwarz, discusses the views of Ladislaus Boros (*The Mystery of Death*, p. 129), who suggests something similar—the significance of the final decision at the moment of death. Boros, he maintains,

decisively modifies the traditional concepts of purgatory and death. Boros agrees that the Church has only gradually developed the doctrine of purgatory. Though the Scriptural basis of purgatory may be obscure, the fact and the essential nature of purgatory are of such quality that it must be called a “truth of revelation.” However, through his hypothesis of a final decision, Boros seems to view purgatory as the “point” of intersection between life and death. Purgatory is no longer conceived of as a process of purification which can be measured similar to the days and years we live here on earth. According to Boros, “purgatory would be the passage, which we effect in our final decision, through the purifying fire of divine love. The encounter with Christ would be our purgatory.”...Boros replaces an untenable concept of purgatory with the idea of a confrontation with Christ in death...[H]e calls death “*man’s first completely personal act*” and, “*therefore, by reason of its very being, the place above all others for the awakening of consciousness, for freedom, for the encounter with God, for the final decision about eternal destiny.*” (*On The Way To The Future*, pp. 142f.).

It has been obvious to me as I have pursued this subject that those who have reflected on the biblical material, the whole context of Scripture, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, and the human person are very restrained in their conclusions and very cautious in their statements. There is in all serious inquirers into this question,

- a recognition of the serious nature of human decisions,
- an acknowledgment of the urgent need for repentance and faith,
- a reckoning with the reality of evil and human wickedness that demands response if there is any justice,
- a serious view of judgment as the exposure of our lives to the scrutiny of the God of truth.

All responsible biblical thinkers recognize that God takes us seriously; our wrong and guilt are not simply soft-pedaled, and our exposure to God’s light and truth will be painful, even while we are conscious of being embraced within a larger grace. Judgment will be experienced: No one will “get away” with anything.

If an eternal hell is questioned, it is not because passing through God's final examination is not a serious matter, and neither is it because there is no sense of the need for change and renewal of the person who through the earthly pilgrimage has become scarred and tainted, falling far short of God's intention.

Recognizing that one cannot simply move from the ambiguity, partial insight, fickleness, and unfaithfulness of one's human experience into the presence of the God of light and truth, there is the belief on the part of some that a purifying process will be necessary.

C. S. Lewis has dealt as creatively and profoundly as anyone with the questions of heaven, hell, and purgatory. In *The Great Divorce*, he records an imaginary conversation with the Christian writer, George MacDonald, on the outskirts of heaven. Lewis exclaims,

"But I don't understand. Is judgment not final? Is there really a way out of Hell into Heaven?"

"It depends on the way ye're using the words. If they leave that grey town behind it will not have been Hell. To any that leaves it, it is Purgatory. And perhaps ye had better not call this country Heaven. Not *Deep Heaven*, ye understand....[Y]e can call it the Valley of the Shadow of Life. And yet to those who stay here it will have been Heaven from the first. And ye can call those sad streets in the town yonder the Valley of the Shadow of Death: but to those who remain there they will have been Hell even from the beginning." (*The Great Divorce*, p. 63)

Lewis's fertile imagination is thought provoking; great caution is there; our curiosity will not be satisfied this side of death's portal. Yet, he clearly seems to be saying that the life processes and the significance of choice do not end at our death.

In his *Letters to Malcolm*, chapter 20, Lewis speaks clearly on the subject of purgatory:

Our souls *demand* Purgatory, don't they? Would it not break the heart if God said to us, "It is true, my son, that your breath smells and your rags drip with mud and slime, but we are charitable here and no one will upbraid you with these things, nor draw away from you. Enter into the joy"? Should we not reply, "With submission, sir, and if there is no objection, I'd *rather* be cleaned first." "It may hurt, you know."—"Even so, sir."

I assume that the process of purification will normally involve suffering. Partly from tradition; partly because most real good that has been done me in this life has involved it. But I don't think suffering is the purpose of the purgation. I can well believe that people neither much worse nor much

better than I will suffer less than I or more. “No nonsense about merit.” The treatment given will be the one required, whether it hurts little or much.

My favourite image on this matter comes from the dentist’s chair. I hope that when the tooth of life is drawn and I am “coming round,” a voice will say, “Rinse your mouth out with this.” *This* will be Purgatory.

I have raised questions for reflection more than coming to fixed conclusions about this subject veiled in mystery. But the questioning will prove fruitful if we open again for discussion a subject of intense existential interest, confident that the faithful and gracious covenant God will finally realize his eternal purpose for us who have been predestined to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ.

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