



Rethinking hell from a classical Pentecostal perspective: Some ethical considerations

Marius Nel

North-West University
Potchefstroom, South Africa
marius.nel@nwu.ac.za

Abstract

The traditional view of hell as everlasting punishment for sinners remains a significant element of classical Pentecostal proclamation. However, the issue of hell has become contentious in contemporary times, for several ethical reasons, leading to the development of alternative ways in which hell is interpreted. On the one hand some argue for terminal punishment or conditional immortality, on the other hand for a universalism where all are saved. It is argued that to end the stalemate when “proof-texts” are used to justify one position, Pentecostals should utilise their distinctive hermeneutic to reconsider the view of hell because of the ethical challenges of their traditional view. In encountering the Spirit in the biblical text, the reader learns to reflect Christ’s interest in and concern for non-believers.

Keywords

*Classical Pentecostalism; eschatology; hell; ethics; eternal punishment*¹

Introduction

Classical Pentecostals are characterised by an interest in eschatological matters because of their historical expectation of the imminent second coming of Christ that has not abated. Their interest led to diverse eschatological and dispensational schemes, sometimes at the expense of an emphasis on the fundamentals of their faith, in attempting to work out

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some form of historical chronology (Hunter 2002:45).² Early Pentecostals were driven by their eschatological expectations to take the gospel to the ends of the world as quickly as possible, expecting that successful missions would hasten the second coming of Christ. At times their ethics was also informed and determined by their aberrant eschatological schemes that led to fear-based behaviour and preaching in the light of the imminence of the end of the world. Proclamation of the gospel was also characterised by an emphasis on hell as the destination of the unsaved and many converts were driven into the church by a fearful depiction of the horrors of suffering awaiting sinners in the eternal damnation of hell.³ “Motivation for mission and evangelism, in other words, was found in the many souls who would be lost eternally apart from hearing the gospel” (Yong 2005:245).⁴ Hell, as everlasting torment in Tertullian, the *Didache*, Dante, Jonathan Edwards and countless other preachers, was used by Pentecostals as a stun gun to instil terror in the hearts of sinners, driving them to the altar of repentance and conversion.⁵

Contemporary times see that some believers are questioning the traditional view of hell as the eternal punishment of sinners; some theologians even speak of a groundswell of support for alternative, less uncomfortable views of hell (Walls 2016:136). Yong (2005:114) asks the uncomfortable question to Reformed theology’s satisfaction theory that if Jesus’ life and death pay

2 Among them, the development of the concept of “latter rain”, emphasis on the role of Israel in eschatology, premillennialism, and dispensationalism.

3 “Hell” is a translation of the Greek Gehenna and Hebrew *ge-hinnom* (valley of Hinnom), a valley near Jerusalem that became notorious for the practice of sacrificing children to Molech (2 Chron 28:3; 33:6). The New Testament utilises it as a metaphor (Thiessen 2008:373) or symbol for the place where sinners will be sent for their just punishment. It is called a place of darkness (Mt 25:30; 2 Pet 2:17) as well as a place of fire (Mt 5:22; 13:30–50), which creates problems for literalists to reconcile.

4 However, Yong adds that from a Lukan perspective, important for Pentecostal theology, mission is never connected to the fear of hellfire and brimstone but to the empowering work of the Spirit.

5 Hollenweger (2015:255) finds in a survey of the reasons for conversion in the Third World that people usually become converted either because of a healing of themselves or a friend or family member, a dream or vision or because they have a friend who is a Christian. Not one single instance was found where somebody was saved on the basis of arguments or a sermon, and certainly not a hell-fire sermon. The sermon presumably has other functions: to those who have already experienced salvation, it gives a language and provides a narrative community in which they can articulate their newly found freedom.

the penalty for all sin, how can further punishment be exacted to sinners, consisting of condemning them to an eternal hell, without undermining Jesus' substitutionary atonement's efficacy.⁶

Prominent theologians like Karl Barth, C.S. Lewis, John R.W. Stott, and N.T. Wright in like manner subscribe to the existence of hell, but they describe it in non-traditional ways. Although no significant works on the doctrine of hell were produced for over one hundred years before the 1960s, since then, interest has picked up (Kärkkäinen 2017:185). Especially the annihilationist view of hell grew in popularity among Evangelicals, although Christian universalism is also gaining ground. Even the Roman Catholic view of purgatory is receiving attention due to the ecumenical contact between Evangelicals and especially Pentecostals, and Catholics.

Proof-texts can be provided for all the views held about hell – the traditional, universalist and annihilationist views as well as purgatory. In the past the debate on hell has often gotten bogged down in proof-texting (Parry 2016:92).⁷ Pentecostals as conservative readers of the Bible have always been supporting the traditional view of hell, justified by referring to verses about hell found in the Bible that “clearly” point to hell as a destination of sinners for everlasting punishment. Parry's (2016:92) conclusion is valid, that merely showing that a specific passage seems at face value to support a specific view of hell will not settle the issue. What is needed is that supporters of each view should attend to those passages that run counter to their viewpoint, as highlighted by proponents of alternative views. It is argued that Pentecostals should revisit their view of hell for several ethical reasons, based on their distinctive hermeneutics. In interpreting the Bible in theologically sensitive discussions of several issues in the past among Pentecostals, such as divine healing, whether divorce should be allowed,

6 Yong (2005:114) knows that later Reformed theology did develop the idea of limited atonement, implying that Christ died only for the elect. However, he argues that such a doctrinal position does not do justice to or adequately account for the claim found in 1 John 2:2 and 1 Timothy 4:10 that Christ “is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world”.

7 For instance, proof for hell as eternal torment is found in Matthew 25:45, 2 Thessalonians 1:6–9 and Revelation 14:11; 20:10–15. Support for the view of hell as annihilation of life is found in Matthew 7:13; 10:28, John 3:16, Romans 6:23 and Hebrews 10:39 while proof texts provided to argue the case for universalism are Romans 5:18; 11:32, 1 Corinthians 15:22, Philippians 2:11 and Colossians 1:20.

women be readmitted to the ministry, and how the church should react to people with diverse sexual orientations, their hermeneutic helped them to overcome the stalemate when texts seemingly contradicting each other and interpreted in different ways bogged down the discourse.

In the article such a hermeneutical angle will be sketched in broad lines before it is applied to the issue of hell in terms of some ethical considerations. First, however, it is important to provide an overview of the current theological discussion on hell and the alternative views is presents before some ethical considerations of the theological concept will be discussed.

1. Contemporary theological consideration of hell

1.1 Traditional view of eternal punishment

For the 110 years of its existence, Pentecostals accepted the traditional view of hell, in line with the Christian tradition of the first nineteen centuries of Christianity's existence. The classical way the Christian tradition understood hell is that it is the way chosen by God to be glorified, through the just punishment of the unrighteous. Hell's purpose is not remedial or restorative, such as the Roman Catholic doctrine of the purgatory suggests for the righteous who have sinned; it is rather retributive. Hell exists to re-establish God's righteous rule by holding sinners accountable for their rebellion against God (Thiessen 2008:373). Burk (2016:11) describes the characteristics of the final state of the damned as a final separation from the presence of God in the irrevocable separation of the wicked from the righteous that occurs at the last judgment.⁸ Hell as the wicked's destination consists of an unending experience where the punishments of hell will be consciously experienced as a torture chamber marked by eternal fire that will let loose torment of unprecedented dimensions without annihilation

8 Symbols for the final condition of the wicked in the New Testament consist of a separation from God (Lk 13:25, 28; 2 Thess 1:9); outer darkness (Mt 22:13; 2 Pet 2:4, 17; Jude 6, 13); unquenchable fire (Mt 18:8; Mk 9:43, 45, 48; 2 Pet 3:7; Jude 7); everlasting torment (Rev 14:10–11); punishment (Mt 25:46); destruction or perdition (ruin) (2 Thess 1:8–9; Phil 3:18–19; Mt 7:13; Rom 9:22; 2 Pet 3:7); where the worm dies not (Mk 9:44); wrath of God (Rom 2:5, 8–9; 1 Thess 1:10); retribution (punishment proportionate to the evil) (2 Cor 11:14–15; 2 Tim 4:14; Rev 18:6; 22:12); and second death (Rev 20:14; 21:8) (Duffield & Van Cleave 1983:550–551).

of the damned (Pentecost 1958:471).⁹ That it is just retribution implies that the punishment is a recompense for the evil of the damned. The other two features of hell are destruction and exclusion, defining the New Testament view of hell (Thiessen 2008:373). Küng (1984:136–137) argues that the ideal of punitive, retributive justice underlies the traditional view. Orthodox predestinarians following Augustine, Luther, and Calvin (Inst. III.23.7) uniformly agreed that God predestines some people to hell in God’s “awesome decree” (*decretum horrible*) while others are elected to the joys of heaven.

For some contemporary believers, the traditional view has become objectionable because eternal punishment contradicts the view of God as good and filled with compassion for all people; it pictures God rather as a tyrant who punishes people for eternity when they have sinned temporally (Ralston & Ralston 2019:142). “... our view of God is at stake in our view of hell” (Stackhouse 2016:35). It also seems to contradict God’s justice because infinite punishment for finite sins is not proportionate to the sin in question. “A finite being, with only finite time and power, can do only finite harm and, therefore, deserves only finite punishment” (Walls 2016:48). It is also argued that eternal punishment that is punitive and not remedial does not have any apparent value (Bavinck 2008:704); it does not correct or discipline but keeps on punishing without any respite.

1.2 Annihilation, terminal punishment, or conditional immortality

This view that initially became known through the support of the Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses (and Charles Parham of the early Pentecostal revival in Los Angeles [Hunter 2002:50]), sees hell as the natural result of an individual’s decision to reject God and the good. The decision implies a separation from God as the source of life, implying destruction of life.¹⁰ God does not punish those who suffer in hell; their suffering is instead the result of their own decision not to reconcile with

9 It might be that the early church’s view of hell might have been coloured by their experiences of persecution and oppression by Jews and the Roman authorities and their need to explain how the righteousness of God would be manifested to believers martyred for their faith.

10 It should be kept in mind that not all “sinners” are “bad”; in many instances, non-believers act in good ways, at times even showing the way for “believers”.

God. God honours their decision (Thiessen 2008:373). “It is not God who sends people to hell. It is people who demand that God leave them alone so they may go their own way and attempt to fulfil their own desires who send themselves to hell” (Menzies 1993:21). While the Bible depicts hell as a fire, it holds that “fire” is related to the functions of testing or judging, with the fire burning away what is not of value and purifying something of anything that is not of lasting value. Many scholars refer to hell also as a garbage dump (e.g., Pinnock 1996:135); however, the first evidence that the valley of Gehenna outside Jerusalem served as a dump dates from a thousand years after Christ (Burk 2016:74). As an anachronism, it depicts hell as the place where evil is removed and destroyed, by the symbols of fire and worms. The symbols of judgment are deathless and illustrate God’s holy antipathy toward sin, but the corpses themselves are dead and finished (Stackhouse 2016:38). The existence of hell demonstrates that God keeps God’s word and that evil does not have any place in God’s good order.¹¹

Hell exists as a destination for punishment of sins that can only be atoned for by suffering and death that is limited because the atonement for sins will eventually end.¹² It does not refer to the present state of those who died as unrighteous. They are in what is referred to as Hades, a place of suffering according to Jesus’ parable of Lazarus and the dead man (Lk 16:23; see also 1 Pet 3:19) (Duffield & Van Cleave 1983:515). It takes the translation of “eternal” (Heb. *ôlâm*; Gr. *aiônion*) not only as “having continual existence forever” in quantitative terms (when it is used in terms of God’s existence) but also as “of the age to come” (when it is used in terms of humankind) in qualitative terms. The implication is that each reference in Scripture should be investigated to determine what it is that is supposed to last forever, the object or event described or its implications (Fudge 1982:29). It should

11 Texts utilised by annihilationists to support their view include Psalm 37; Malachi 4:1–3; Matthew 3:10, 12; 5:30; 10:28; Romans 6:23; 1 Corinthians 3:17; Galatians 6:8; Philippians 1:28; 3:19; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Hebrews 10:39; 2 Peter 2:1, 3, 6; 3:7; Judas 7 and Revelation 20:14–15.

12 It is an important question to ask, how hell can be characterised by death and be eternal at the same time. A position paper of the Assemblies of God (The General Council of the Assemblies of God 2017) explains it as follows: Jesus already identified Gehenna or hell as a second death (Mt 10:28; Lk 12:4–5). It refers, not to the physical death of the body but to death of a different order and kind. Physical death consists of the separation from the body and the environment of life; the second death is a final and eternal separation from God and from the life to be enjoyed in the new creation.

also be considered that a prominent part of eschatological language is apocalyptic in nature that is typically extravagant, poetical, and allusive, representing fundamental historical truths symbolically (Yong 2005:96; Lewis 2010:38). It is not possible to settle the question of the duration of the punishment from the term *aiōnion*, implying that punishment (*kolasin*) cannot be taken as everlasting (Parry 2016:41). A further argument consists in its difference from the traditional view of immortality of the soul that is taken for granted, as though people are intrinsically immortal. Annihilationism asserts that this concept was taken over from Christians' Greek heritage (Fudge 1982:66–67). “Immortality is something we must get, not something we already have” (Stackhouse 2016:65).¹³ It also does not accept the essentially deductive argument of Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas and others that because God's majesty and honour are of infinite value, sins against them deserve punishment that is likewise eternal. The argument continues that God insists on such infinite punishment because God created the world for the purpose of exalting the glory of God's name (Isa 42:8; 43:7). It implies that God is primarily pursuing God's own glory, a dangerously narrow view of God's purposes in the world that an egotistical God insists that God get God's due (Stackhouse 2016:35–36).

1.3 Universalist view

This is the view that all people everywhere and of all ages will in the end be reconciled with God through Christ. It is not an entirely new viewpoint; it stood in the early church alongside eternal punishment and annihilation as a viable option.¹⁴ As stated, the discourse on hell often gets bogged down in proof-texting, with each view presenting the verses that support

13 Finger (1985:158–161) is correct in arguing that the problem of eternal conscious torment can be attributed to the erroneous idea of the immortality of the soul, which represents in his words a “Hellenistic intrusion into the gospel”.

14 Origen (c.184–c.254) opted for this view and influenced many other early theologians such as Bardaisan of Edessa (154–222), Clement of Alexandria (c.150–c.215), Theognostus (c.210–c.270), Pierius (†309), Gregory the Wonderworker (c.213–c.270), Pamphilus (†309), Methodius of Olympus (†c.311), Eusebius (c.260–c.340), Athanasius (296–373), Didymus the Blind (†c.398), Basil of Caesarea (c.329–379), Gregory of Nyssa (c.335–c.395), Gregory of Nazianzen (c.329–c.390), Evagrius Pontocus (345–399), the Areopagite (sixth century), Maximus the Confessor (c.580–662), Isaac of Nineveh (†700) and John Scotus Eriugena (c.815–c.877). Even Augustine (354–430) initially supported it though he later rejected it in strong terms (Parry 2016:92).

it. Eventually an alternative Pentecostal hermeneutic will be utilised to solve the problem of which “set” of texts should be chosen. The universalist view is sometimes argued from a similar perspective, that to get past the impasse hell should be seen from an alternative hermeneutic, of the context of the Christ-centred biblical metanarrative.¹⁵ Then Christ serves as the norm for interpreting the Bible, starting from the event of atonement on the cross and the reconciliation it provides for all sinners who accept the gospel. It ends in the *ekklesia*, established when the Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost and the disciples spoke in tongues as a sign of the nations worshipping God alongside Israel (e.g., Isa. 2:1–4; 11:10–12; 18:7; 60:1–16; 61:5–6; 66:12, 18, 23; Parry 2016:99). This is the first instalment of the kingdom that has already come and will finally realise when all nations are reconciled with God, required by the characteristics of God as essentially good and just (Ralston & Ralston 2019:42). Everyone’s doctrine of hell betrays a doctrine of God and the Bible; in universalism, hell does not fit into the plotline of the Bible and the context of God as love (1 Jn 4:8, 16). Hell, as eternal torment makes the gospel ends in a tragic partial failure for God (Parry 2016:99).

Universalism does not suspend the free will given by God to humankind. Because people are free God cannot ensure that they will accept the gospel; what God does is to work in various ways to increase humans’ awareness of their predicament due to their disobedience toward their Creator. This view extends God’s gracious convincing to hell, until non-believers are fully convinced of the truth and they will not desire to reject God anymore (see Kronen & Reitan 2011:152–177 for full discussion).¹⁶

15 Mouw (2014:70) warns timely that widespread rejection of the “tyranny of metanarrative” among postmodernists implies that “epistemic humility” should accompany all confident expressions of “epistemic hope”.

16 Moltmann’s proposal (as developed in 1969; 1995; 1999) of a universalist view is interesting because he bases it on his view of time, that the decision of God to save humans and their decision about the gospel do not exist on the same level. The one exists on the level of eternity, the other in time. His later thought was a response to the report of the Church of England’s Doctrine Commission, *The Mystery of Salvation* (1995).

2. Ethical considerations of hell

After sketching alternative views of hell, it is necessary to consider why such alternative views have become necessary and significant. The way Pentecostals interpreted the doctrine of hell in the past, and the traditional view of hell as such, raises significant moral and judicial problems because of its view of God acting in ways that clearly contradicts God's goodness and offends contemporary humans' moral sense.¹⁷

Christian theology emphasises God's goodwill as revealed in the incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus that culminated in the outpouring of his Spirit on the church. If hell implies that God torments people everlastingly because of their failure to accept the offer of Christ as their Saviour, it depicts God as a bloodthirsty, merciless monster, according to human moral sentiment and intuition (Pinnock 1996:136). It implies that sinners would have to pay back everything they owed, depicting God as the ultimate harsh judge without any mercy, a vindictive and sadistic punisher. Flew (1966:56–57) argues that if Christians believe that God created some people with the only intention to torture them in hell forever, they might as well give up the effort to defend Christianity. Edwards and Stott (1988:314) conclude, "I find the concept intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterizing their feelings or cracking under the strain."

It is a fact that some passages in the New Testament depict hell literally in terms of the most terrible destruction conceivable that awaits the impenitent wicked. When it is combined with an interpretation of "eternal" as "everlasting", it makes hell a hard topic to justify in terms of morality, especially when the damned include one's loved ones (Crockett 1996:270). For that reason, it is critical that every version of the doctrine of hell should be subjected to a moral test. At the same time, it should also be evaluated at the hands of the principles of justice. If it offends humankind's sense of natural justice because it depicts God's judgment of sinners as unjust when

17 The same is true when significant parts of the Old Testament depict God as a vengeful and violent avenger who cools God's revenge on God's enemies. Schwager (1987:60) reckons that there are approximately a thousand passages in the Hebrew Bible where God's anger about sinners and their punishment is described in violent terms, with punishment consisting of destruction and death and God's order that Israel should take revenge on their enemies in the same violent terms. For a full discussion, see Nel (2018).

God passes judgment on their finite disobedience by dooming them to everlasting conscious torments, it raises questions that need to be answered (Adams 1975:433–447). Can a doctrine of hell as everlasting torment with no hope of escape or remittance be accepted as a just action on God’s part? Can anyone ever deserve to be sentenced to everlasting torment? To argue that sinning against God’s majesty and glory deserves such punishment casts a shadow on God’s just character that cannot be defended.¹⁸

Even when measured against the standards of justice described in the Old Testament as retributive (*ius talionis*; Ex 21:24), no finite set of deeds that individual sinners may have done could justify a sentence that holds infinite and everlasting consequences in terms of the torment of punishment. The Mosaic law limits the vengeance of unlimited retaliation. From a pronouncement such as Matthew 5:38–39 (“you have heard it said ... but I tell you”), it is clear that Christian believers are called to an even higher standard of justice, demonstrated in the life of Jesus who died in the place of humankind. Gospel ethics makes the traditional view of hell inconceivable (Yoder 1971), going far beyond the standard of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. It exhibits a vindictiveness out of keeping with the love of God as revealed in the death of Jesus (Pinnock 1996:138).

A related moral problem is with the portrayal of the eternal punishment of sinners in hell in terms of the delight those in heaven experience when they observe the miseries of sinners suffering in torment in hell (see discussion in Rowell 1974:72–84; Pinnock 1996:142). It is argued that although the traditional view of hell may be a cause of embarrassment for Christians, it will ultimately become a “source of joy and praise for the saints” when they witness God’s goodness and justice as demonstrated in the two destinations of the righteous and sinners (Burk 2016:11).

A related problem is with those people through the ages who have not heard the gospel. If the implication is that God would doom them to eternal torment for their non-voluntary disobedience to the gospel call to convert, it changes God into a heartless tyrant (Swinburne 1989:181). What about dedicated adherents of other religions who live impeccable moral lives but

18 Augustine was the first to use this justification. Anselm of Canterbury (1033/4–1109) among others used the same argument (Stackhouse 2016:67).

were not exposed to Christianity at any stage, holding implications for pluralism? In this regard, Oden (1992:452) argues that people who have not had the opportunity to hear the gospel will be judged with consideration of the fact that they did not reject (and could not have rejected) the gospel. He (Oden 1992:452) writes that there is insufficient scriptural authority to assert that these people will be sentenced “peremptorily and immediately” to suffer everlastingly. Only those who had plausible opportunity of choice would be condemned if they rejected the joys of communion with God.

3. A Pentecostal hermeneutic

It is argued that Pentecostals should reconsider their view of hell for hermeneutical reasons. In the past, several theological issues confronted Pentecostal churches that required careful navigation because all sides in the different debates demanded that they honour the biblical tradition in their appeal to “proof-texts”. Such issues included women that could minister until Pentecostals accepted a new Evangelical hermeneutic, divorce and homosexuality. For instance, in the case of women in ministry, because early Pentecostals derived ministry from the gifts of the Spirit, they left room for women because in their experience they found that the Spirit endowed many women with leadership and ministry gifts. However, eventually women were disqualified from the preaching and teaching ministry except to children, other women, and prison inmates (Robeck 2006:75). Another instance is the case for divorce that can be based on Mark 10:1–11 that states that divorce and remarriage are forbidden in all cases without any exceptions. However, Matthew 19:1–9 admits one exception, of sexual immorality and 1 Corinthians 7:15 adds another exception, of desertion. The impasse was resolved in most instances by employing a new hermeneutic developed since the 1990s in Pentecostalism.

Spirituality among early Pentecostals was charismatic; they emphasised the participation of every believer because they accepted the prophethood and priesthood of every believer. It implies to them that each believer was endowed with unique empowerment and equipment for the edification of the body of Christ through the Spirit (1 Cor 14:26). They read the Bible with the purpose not to be informed but to experience Christ’s presence, empowering and allowing all believers to preach and witness (Sandidge

1987:141). According to Oliverio (2012:231–234), their ethos was built on four core interpretive assumptions: that the (Protestant) Bible was the sole and ultimate authority for belief and living that functioned dialogically with their experiences; their restorationist beliefs based on their experience of the outpouring of the Spirit as the “latter rain”; their four- or fivefold “Full Gospel” (Jesus as saviour, Spirit baptiser, sanctifier, healer and soon coming king) which formed a doctrinal grid to explain Scripture and experience (Menziez 1985:14); and a pragmatic, naive realism that constituted early Pentecostal rationality, integrated with an understanding of the primacy of the supernatural. Their hermeneutic can be characterised as oral, charismatic, largely ahistorical, and minimally contextual, literal in its interpretations, morally and spiritually absolutizing, pragmatic, and pastoral in nature (Nel 2019:80).

At the end of the Second World War it became imperative for Pentecostals to improve their social status. When their approach to conservative Evangelicals was successful (Jacobsen 1999:90–107), they responded by accepting many of the customs, including a professional pastorate that left no room for women in ministry and conservative Evangelicals’ fundamentalist-literalist way of reading the Bible (Nel 2019:54–55). It is no exaggeration to state that most classical Pentecostal pastors and members today read the Bible in this literalist-biblicistic manner (see research in Nel 2019:48–52).

Since the 1990s, Pentecostal scholars developed an alternative hermeneutic that was in some respects aligned with the way early Pentecostals interpreted the Bible. It is essentially pneumatic or charismatic in that it emphasises the Spirit’s illumination of the biblical text as a condition for the reader to understand the biblical text (Arrington 2012:16). This Bible reading method goes beyond the literal meaning of the text and relies on a personal experience of faith in an encounter with the Spirit as an essential element of the entire interpretive process. The direction of interpretation starts with these experiences from which the Bible is then read and applied. Experience and reading the Bible are in dialogue about the meaning of the text. It emphasises the submission of the mind to the Spirit’s guidance in order to exercise critical and analytical abilities in hearing the word of God in the text for the current situation. It necessitates reading of the Bible within the context of worship and prayer and a genuine openness to the

Spirit. And it is adamant that a relevant response to the transforming call of God's word is necessary (Arrington 2012:18; Cox 2016:217).

4. Implications of hell as ethical issue when considered by Pentecostal hermeneutic

It is suggested that the traditional view of hell causes challenges for contemporary believers (and non-believers) because of the moral and ethical unacceptableness of the depiction of God as the tyrant who condemns unrepentant believers to everlasting conscious torment. For that reason, classical Pentecostals should revisit and reconsider their historical acceptance of the traditional view of hell.

That Pentecostals are hesitant to discuss alternative views of hell is understandable, given the distrust in any theology that might undermine the authority of the Bible as the only norm for Christian life and practice, as it is reflected in the age-old traditions of the church.¹⁹ For that reason, it is hard to find many evangelical theologians willing to criticise the traditional view of hell. However, Pentecostals stand in a tradition where from the start they had rejected certain traditional doctrines such as infant baptism, cessationism with its rejection of glossolalia and miracles, doctrines of the total depravity of humankind, predestination and double predestination (of believers and non-believers) and God's sovereign reprobation of the wicked. It might be possible that Pentecostals' interpretation of the Bible in terms of hell that follows the tradition might be wrong since any reading of the Bible can be no more than subjective interpretation, requiring a preparedness to offer and consider correctives when it seems that a tradition may have gone wrong. It should be kept in mind that tradition, partly as a result of the Hellenised idea of the immortality of all souls, has determined the "traditional" view of hell as everlasting conscious torment that requires urgent reconsideration, as Pinnock (1996:136) argues.

As a conservative movement based on what it perceives the Bible teaches and especially as a deliberate attempt at restoration of the New

19 As demonstrated in the experience of, e.g., John Stott and Charles Pinnock when they published their views that did not align with the traditional view of hell; they were quickly branded as liberals (Hunter 2002:46).

Testament church, Pentecostalism changes slowly and in a piecemeal fashion.²⁰ However, it has proved its ability to change, e.g., in terms of clothing, including the compulsory headgear that women used for many years when attending worship services, and its liturgy and musical tastes that despite differences between denominations accommodate diverse cultures, ensuring its impact and growth. The church government system also contributes to the rate of change that can be expected from different denominations. In presbyterian systems where members vote for change, it normally takes longer for changes to occur while in apostolic churches with gifted individuals, the process of change is simpler and more direct. The hell issue is of such importance and vested with so much emotional interest that it might even further contribute to the fragmentation that has been characterising the classical Pentecostal movement. However, it is critically necessary that Pentecostals navigate the indissoluble tension between the Scylla of the conservative position (of hell as the everlasting abode for sinners' punishment) and the Charybdis of liberalism (of, e.g., pluralism).

It is highly likely, as Kay and Hunt (2014:373) suggest, that this debate within Pentecostalism may follow the same trajectory as the debate on divorce, implying that Pentecostals may dispute progressive opinion (as conservative movements do) but eventually and slowly adjust their interpretation of Scripture until they accept a more liberal position, although it will still represent diverse nuances with several reservations as is the case with divorce.²¹

As in this case, and with women in ministry, the only way out of the impasse created when a fundamentalist-literalist approach to the Bible with opponents interpreting texts in various ways to suit their different viewpoints is to utilise another hermeneutical angle. Du Toit (in Bartlett

20 It is always a temptation for the church (and theologians) to “compel” biblical authors “to make statements” and “provide solutions” to problems that did not fall within the Bible’s frame of reference in an effort to succumb to the pressure to provide answers to today’s problems.

21 Today one finds Pentecostal members who are divorced and in many denominations the divorced are allowed to participate as deacons and elders and even minister to children, prisoners, the youth and in some cases to function as pastors of congregations, in spite of what the Bible (and Jesus) “clearly” teaches about divorce.

2017:82) in a discussion about homosexuality remarks that one of the basic problems in any theological and ecclesiastical discussion is the mixing of exegesis and hermeneutics. It is submitted that a clear distinction between exegesis and hermeneutic contains the solution to the ethical problems created by the traditional view of hell and that the new Pentecostal hermeneutic is suitable for doing so.

As stated, a Pentecostal hermeneutic utilises a pneumatological basis for interpreting the Bible; the Bible is not interpreted in biblicist-literalist fashion but in terms of the church's experience with the Spirit who reveals Jesus. They move to the text from their encounter with God to hear the word of God before they apply it to the current situation. The Spirit who inspired the Bible inspires current individual religious encounters and experiences with God. The direction changes from the-Bible-to-the-reader to the-reader-encountering-God-to-the-text. Grey (2011:154) sees the biblical text as the symbol that connects the experience of the reader and makes that experience intelligible when the specific historical event or experience in the text points to a universal truth or worldview through the inspiration of the Spirit working in the heart of readers who identify with the truth or worldview. Because the focus of the Spirit in encountering believers is exclusively on Christ, readers find the heart of Jesus in the text, also for non-believers in what biblical authors recorded about hell. The Spirit of truth teaches believers everything and reminds them of all that Jesus told his disciples (Jn 14:26). As Paraclete the Spirit will testify on Jesus' behalf (Jn 15:26); Spirit-filled believers are also filled with the attitude and approach of Jesus, learning to think and feel as he did. This demonstrates that "If your theology of hell is not compatible with God's love for the damned, then your theology of hell is wrong" (Parry 2016:102).

One instance of a Pentecostal systematician who rethinks what the coming judgment and punishment in hell might entail is Yong (2011:224), as part of ten theses that he develops as possible "Pentecostal sensibilities" that might enhance the proposed dialogue between science and Pentecostal theology. He thinks that recalcitrant, reprobate, and irredeemable persons would finally experience self-destruction as a "thermodynamically anticipated destiny" of the unrighteous that unravels as non-dissipative systems that close in upon themselves. Their personhood and spiritual identities would

disintegrate while entire social groups that embody unrighteousness would not find a home in the new heavens and the new earth.

In earlier work, Yong (2005:96–97) presents a view *contra* the fundamentalist view that he finds prevalent in many Pentecostal circles. The apocalyptic expectation of the end of the existing order includes the destruction of all of creation; he suggests that such apocalyptic texts refer to God’s eschatological purification. He argues for continuity between the present and the next world, in contrast to the Talmudic tradition’s radical discontinuity (Kärkkäinen 2017:45),²² by referring to the paretological and eschatological (Hick 1994:399), because God values the embodied nature of what God created as sufficient to preserve them and, for that reason, intends to resurrect the human body. He agrees that God would save God’s people and vindicate their persecution and oppression by redeeming the creation that God evaluated as a “very good world” (Gen 1:31). In thinking in pneumatological terms about hell, the descent of Jesus into hell becomes an important consideration, even though Kärkkäinen (2013:358) acknowledges that the biblical basis is found only in two places in one biblical book, in 1 Peter 3:18–20; 4:6, explaining why contemporary theology relegates the ancient doctrine to the margins²³ Kärkkäinen (2013:358) argues that the descent should be linked to Christ’s suffering and death but also to his resurrection and ascension, and it represents the ultimate humiliation to Christ. Now death is swallowed up in victory (1 Cor 15:54), and Christ has triumphed over all dimensions, including hell, where death usually reigns.

The descent of Jesus into hell is the reason why God reconciles the universe and the ground for Christian confidence that everything will be brought

22 As demonstrated in Jewish theology’s sophisticated accounts of heaven with its several stages, from the messianic age on earth to the transcendent heavenly realm, and hell, detailed in the Babylonian Talmud’s sevenfold structure.

23 The fifth-century’s Apostles’ Creed refers to the descent of Christ into hell. Pelikan (1975:151) argues that it referred to the function that the Greek fathers had assigned to the death and resurrection of Christ, seen as the triumph celebrated by Christ over the devil and his legion. Fee (2011:128) argues that in Rev 9:1–12, the “shaft of the abyss” assumes a three-storied universe with the abyss (transliterated from the Greek) lying under its surface and serving as hell, the abode of the demonic forces in the underworld, where they are kept until they are thrown into a final hell, depicted in Revelation 20:10 as a lake of burning sulphur.

back again into God’s purpose for creating the world and restoring all things, as Moltmann (1995:251) explains (see discussion in Ansell 2013:35–48). That Christ descended into hell implies that even in one’s experience of hell, of “God-forsaken space”, Christ is there because he suffered the experience of hell for people. This includes one’s existential hell, in the terms borrowed by Moltmann from Luther, Calvin, Barth and Pannenberg, of disaster, death, damnation and a meaningless life, but also the biblical description of hell as an eternal destination. It is all gathered into God, and therefore includes salvation, joy, and divine life (Moltmann 1995:252).

An alternative way to rethink the concepts of hell and eternal damnation is to see hell and damnation in symbolic terms as a necessary consequence of an individual or group’s unrighteous behaviour and the consequent damage and construction their behaviour carries into the lives of the perpetrators as well as the victims of their unrighteousness. “Eternal” damnation is then viewed from the perspective that the term is utilised in the Old Testament. “Eternity” (*ôlām*) refers to the distant past or distant future or as an event that lasts very long, and it represents a period of time that either stretches into the far past or far future (McGuire-Moushon & Klippenstein 2014). The word essentially refers to a long period of time, but it can also refer to the event’s qualitative effects that last long. The unrighteousness of the sinner has consequences that last long and affect various people in diverse manners.²⁴ In the words of Coleman (2011:63), the tragedy of a sinful life is not the condemnation of going to hell; but the loss of what the human being was created to develop into, the image of God, the likeness of God’s holy love and communion with God.

Conclusion

Classical Pentecostals accept the traditional view of hell as the destination of non-believers’ everlasting conscious torment as punishment for not accepting the grace offered by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Several moral and

24 McGuire-Moushon & Klippenstein (2014) also argue that *ôlām* can be used to refer to as long as someone lives (Ex 21:6; Deut 15:17; 1 Sam 1:22; 27:12) or “forever” when it is used to describe the attributes of God (Ex 15:18; Ps 10:16; 45:6) and when, after the fall, humans were banished from Eden so that they would not take fruit from the tree of life and live forever (*ôlām*).

ethical problems were identified with this view that requires Pentecostals to revisit and reconsider their view. It was suggested that it is viable to do so when exegesis and hermeneutics are distinguished from each other, without neglecting proper exegetical investigation, and the issue of hell is viewed in terms of a distinctive Pentecostal hermeneutic that has been developed in the past years. The hermeneutical angle changes the direction in interpretation of the Bible, allowing readers to consider the meaning of biblical texts while encountering Christ through the Spirit. The Spirit focuses on revealing Christ, in contemporary experiences of encounters with God but also in interpreting the text. Readers can then expect to find their example in thinking about hell in terms of Jesus' attitude toward and treatment of unbelievers, requiring a reconsidering of the traditional view of hell.

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