

# Editorial

## Death

Death has, by common consent, taken the place of sex as the taboo subject of the twentieth century. This has been only marginally less true for Christians than for society at large. Change is however evident. As the later Victorians discovered the reality, the complexity and the joy of sex, the later Elizabethans seem to be discovering the reality and the complexity, if not the joy, of death. At any rate there has been a positive plethora of books on the subject tumbling off the presses in the last few years.

We have therefore devoted the main articles in this issue to aspects of this theme. The questions are of course numerous, but perhaps handily, at any rate in terms of our contributors, divide themselves into two. How should Christians face death? What happens after death?

It is salutary to have attention drawn by Professor Sykes to the eschewing in the *Alternative Service Book* burial services of references to the wrath of God. It is fascinating to explore further the tension, which David Sceats describes, between the Puritan understanding of death both as a punishment and a blessing. It is indeed the same tension which Sykes finds to be fundamentally Pauline and which is resolved, in Perkin's words, 'by the vertue of the death of Christ', so that death 'ceaseth to be a plague and a punishment, and of a curse is made a blessing and is become unto us . . . a little wicket or doore whereby we passe out of this world and enter into heaven' (cited by Sceats below). There is no doubt that the church, particularly through the hospice movement, has brought a sense of reality, proportion and dignity into the experience of dying, but there is much more than can be done to underscore the Christian understanding that faith and hope transcend the agony of the event.

The question of what happens after death, particularly to the non-Christian, is of course fundamental. Alan Fairhurst's article helpfully reviews the historical developments. One has only to look back to the sermons of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century to measure the change. That the unbeliever faced eternal punishment, graphically portrayed in terms of flames and torment, was part of the certainty of the orthodoxy of the period. Jonathan Edward's sermon 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God' is probably the best known, though by no means the most graphic of such. Charles Wesley puts in verse form the contemplation which should occupy the unconverted child:

While they enjoy his heavenly love  
Must I in torment dwell?

And howl, (while they sing hymns above,  
And blow the flames of hell?)

(J. Ernest, Rattenbury, *The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley's Hymns*, Epworth, London 1941, p.78)

The decline of such convictions so that they are now held by a minority of Christians, and preached, in such terms, by none, is due to a whole host of factors. One at least that affected evangelicals profoundly in the nineteenth century was the difficulty involved in preaching a God of love and holding, at the same time, that he condemned millions who had never heard the gospel message, to a 'Christless eternity'.

There was much movement of views as the century advanced and this, as Fairhurst reminds us, was not confined to those who followed F. D. Maurice or F. W. Farrar. T. R. Birks, the secretary of the Evangelical Alliance, had a decidedly individualistic eschatological interpretation, which he was able to propagate without losing his position (G. Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians*, Clarendon, Oxford 1974, pp.124-9). E. A. Litton, a well-respected evangelical theologian, was prepared to be speculatively unorthodox on this issue, somewhat to the chagrin of his twentieth-century evangelical editor (cf. E. A. Litton, *Introduction to Dogmatic Theology*, ed. P. E. Hughes, new ed. James Clarke and Co., London 1960 [1882 and 1892] footnotes to pp.549-78).

Among evangelicals there has probably been less speculation in the twentieth century. Stephen Travis reminds us that two mid-twentieth-century books on conditional immortality—probably the most widely held view amongst nineteenth-century evangelicals who dissented from traditional orthodoxy—had to be published privately because of a suspicion of heresy (Stephen M. Travis, *Christian Hope and the Future of Man*, IVP, Leicester 1980, p.136, note 52). Travis's book, however, itself indicates a freer climate. While he argues strongly against universalism, he confesses 'considerable agnosticism' about the fate of, among others, the followers of non-Christian religions (ibid. p.123); he is prepared to postulate 'that people who lived before Christ, or after Christ but in non-Christian cultures, may find salvation through him on account of their trusting response to what they know of God' (ibid. p.132); he seems to favour, very marginally, conditional immortality (ibid. p.135); and he prefers to see heaven and hell in terms of a relationship to God than of reward and punishment (ibid. p.121). The difference from an earlier age is instructive. The categories of judgement and separation are common, but pictures of 'the perishing heathen' and of fire-roasting through eternity would be out of place.

The themes then which emerge from the articles may serve to remind, on the one hand, those who have perhaps rather uncritically accepted the assumptions of the age, that judgement and punishment

are biblical themes which cannot and should not be avoided in thinking about death. They should, on the other, remind those who think in terms of an unchanging theological tradition that the understanding of the content and reality of that tradition does change. It is a good example of the point Dr Thiselton has made on a far wider canvas, namely, that 'timeless truth' can be an unhelpful concept. Biblical truth, he stresses, is contingent and is grasped as it is seen in relation to particular events (A. C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*, Paternoster, Exeter 1980, pp.95-101). Ebeling concludes: 'The same word can be said to another time only by being said differently' (quoted in *ibid.* p.99).

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