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A Necessary Terror: The Doctrine of Spiritual Condemnation

In describing the desolation of a soul in damnation, Charles Williams provides a chilling illustration: “He was drawn, steadily, everlastingly, inward and down through the bottomless circles of the void” (*Descent Into Hell* 222). Of all of the Christian doctrines, the idea of spiritual condemnation is one of the most discomfoting. Spiritual condemnation is the eternal condition of being without joy, goodness, or God. The Bible speaks of darkness, weeping, and gnashing of teeth when depicting this state of agony and despair. To many skeptics, spiritual condemnation seems like an unbelievable concept, which can be disregarded as a delusion or as a mere psychological flaw to be overcome through man’s mental prowess and willpower. Even many Christians tend to believe that spiritual condemnation cannot be possible because it would be contrary to God’s loving nature. Furthermore, many Christians view the doctrine of spiritual condemnation as too unnecessary, discomfoting, and unimportant to preach. However, although the Christian doctrine of spiritual condemnation seems unbelievable and unnecessary, the belief in the natural consequence for the rejection of God’s moral law is essential, because such rejection separates men from reality, goodness, and God Himself.

To determine the worth of the Christian doctrine of spiritual condemnation, Christian doctrine as a whole must align with the standards for true, accurate doctrine. Firstly, every person has an immediate obligation to be loyal to the world, simply by being alive. Being loyal to the world means being willing to love it regardless of flaws or merits, as “the man who will

improve the place is the man who loves it without a reason” (Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* 69). Additionally, however, a person loyal to the world must also view it with both “fiercer delight and fiercer discontent” (Chesterton 71), being “ready to smash the universe for the sake of itself” (Chesterton 71). A loyal man must hate the world’s flaws because he loves the world so much. Thus, a believable doctrine must incorporate a balanced love and hate for the world. Secondly, the world is complex and confusing, but it maintains its complexities with rationality. A true doctrine must account for the unexpected oddities in the world, while still maintaining a sense of reason. Finally, the world requires progress to be made but according to certain standards. Real progress must consist of unchanging, properly proportioned ideals, aimed toward a Utopia. Thus, a true doctrine must cause a person to both love and hate the world, to expect the unexpected through reason, and to aim for real progress.

In the test for true doctrine, only Christian creeds answer the dilemma correctly. Christian doctrine dictates that because the world has fallen into sin, man should hate the world for its flaws. However, man must also be willing to love the world that God has given him. Christian doctrine states the existence of a creator, and thus “its plan suits the secret irregularities, and expects the unexpected” (Chesterton 82). Finally, Christian doctrine supports real progress by supplying unchanging, balanced ideals, based on the Utopia of Heaven. When analyzed logically, “ ‘Christianity has compelled the mind of man, not because it is the most cheering view of human existence, but because it is truest to the facts’ ” (Sayers, “Creed or Chaos” 63). Critics of Christianity cannot claim that Christian doctrinal statements are based on wishful thinking and not on plausible, observable facts. Thus, by aligning with the world’s requirements for a reasonable doctrine, Christian creeds are accurate and believable.

According to Christian doctrine, God has created an inescapable, universal moral law, which exists and governs all men. Although many would attempt to refute the existence of a standard for right and wrong, no one denies such standards during conflicts and arguments. During a quarrel, the person arguing is “trying to show that the other man is in the wrong” (Lewis, *Mere Christianity* 4) and automatically demands to receive his or her own rights, indirectly referring to a rule for right behavior that others are expected to know and follow. Through the universal demand for fairness, the moral law is made evident among men, as “human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it” (*Mere* 8). The moral law is the standard that men cannot ignore or control, which directs them toward what is right and good. In regards to the imperative, necessary nature of the moral law, C.S. Lewis says, “If the universe is not governed by an absolute goodness, then all our efforts are in the long run hopeless. [...] We cannot do without it...” (*Mere* 31). All men have centered their lives on God’s moral law, and no man can simply ignore or deny the existence of this standard.

However, when men reject God’s moral law through rebellious decisions, they bring themselves toward spiritual condemnation. Once a person seeks to live apart from the moral law, sin will corrupt him until he cannot be distinguished as a person apart from the sin (Lewis, *The Great Divorce* 77). By corrupting a person’s character, sin causes contamination for the past and damnation for the future. When people rebel against the moral law, it affects their entire lives, as “damnation will spread back and back into their past and contaminate the pleasure of the sin” (*Divorce* 69). Rebellion against the moral law affects a person completely, polluting one’s past, present, and future. Because past actions heavily influence the choices of the present and the decisions of the future, “both Heaven and Hell are retroactive...*all* of one’s life will eventually

be known to be one or the other” (Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy* 195). The consequences of the future, whether good or bad, will be recognized throughout the course of one’s entire life.

Pursuing sinful behavior means identifying oneself in the present, the future, and the past with opposition to God and His moral law.

Once men have rejected the moral law, they must rely on their own personal senses of morality, which leads to delusions contrary to reality and absolutes. By denying the moral law for self-centered purposes, men lose their standards for right behavior and truth. Williams depicts this by telling of a man who seeks fulfillment through escaping from reality, writing, “he need not resent the grossness of the world; enough, if by flight, he rejected it. He had his own medicament for all trouble, and distaste and oblivion for everything else” (*Descent* 141). As evidenced by Williams’ illustration, self-centeredness leads to distaste for facts, as reality only serves to contradict self-centered feelings. Thus, men are repelled by the illumination of truth and are attracted to the darkness of moral relativity, showing that “people [love] the darkness rather than the light because their works [are] evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed” (John 3:19-20). Denial of the moral law leads to the denial of truth and causes the acceptance of delusion. Eventually, if people disregard any power outside of humanity, there can be no absolute judge for right or wrong behavior. When men believe that “it is man—or a being made by man—who will finally ascend the throne of the universe” (Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* 176), men have fully relinquished their understanding of absolute truth. Apart from the authority of God and His moral law, man is no more than an animal, following only his instincts and desires. Although many believe that mankind can endure through its own willpower and determination, only the influence of an ultimate authority apart from men can provide the basis for truth and morality

that is necessary to survive. After rebelling against the moral law, man must exchange his knowledge of reality and absolutes for a self-centered mindset, completely reliant on instincts.

Finally, once a person has denied the moral law and consequently detached himself from reality and humanity, he must complete his entrance into spiritual condemnation by becoming separated from God, the source of all goodness. By rejecting the moral law, man rejects God's authority and purpose for humanity. Throughout the process of spiritual condemnation, God does not act in cruelty or contradict His loving nature. In describing the judgment of spiritual condemnation, Dorothy Sayers says:

The true nature of judgment becomes startlingly clear and rational. It is the inevitable consequence of man's attempt to regulate life and society on a system that runs counter to the facts of his own nature. In the physical sphere, typhus and cholera are a judgment on dirty living and not because God shows an arbitrary favoritism to nice, clean people, but because of an essential element in the physical structure of the universe... We must not say that such behavior is wrong because it does not pay, but rather that it does not pay because it is wrong. As T.S. Eliot says: 'A wrong attitude toward nature implies, somewhere, a wrong nature toward God, and the consequence is an inevitable doom.' ("Creed" 65-66)

Contrary to the claims of many critics, spiritual condemnation is not a harsh, malicious punishment, proclaimed by an uncaring God. Instead, the judgment of spiritual condemnation is simply the natural consequence of a life lived in opposition to the design of God's creation and moral law. God has created men to follow His rules, and deviation from those rules results in an inability to function as a part of God's creation. Man's rejection of the moral law is the rejection of God Himself.

Because the Christian doctrine of spiritual condemnation is true, belief in this doctrine is essential, both for answering heresies and for addressing everyday problems. Although many suppose that doctrine was invented arbitrarily by theologians, “most [dogmas] were hammered out under pressure of urgent practical necessity to provide an answer to heresy. And heresy is...the expression of opinion of the untutored average man, trying to grapple with the problems of the universe at the point where they begin to interfere with daily life and thought” (“Creed” 57). Doctrine is not solely for elite intellectuals; it is also for the average person to use against his troubles and the heresies in his mind that come from them. Belief in the Christian doctrine of spiritual condemnation enables people to make correct choices in regards to future consequences. When people solve their everyday problems, they will answer with either doctrine or heresy; thus, “good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy must be answered” (Lewis, “Learning in Wartime” 58). Without Christian doctrine, man’s only recourse is to follow heresies, which lead to flawed standards and dangerous lifestyles. Thus, if men do not receive the doctrine of spiritual condemnation, they cannot maintain an accurate perspective for making right decisions for the future. Christian doctrine is necessary for countering and correcting erroneous beliefs.

Though often perceived as unnecessary or unbelievable, belief in the Christian doctrine of spiritual condemnation is vital for a healthy relationship with God and others, as rebellion against God perverts man’s sense of morality, truth, and self. Only Christian doctrine correctly identifies and answers the world’s dilemmas by declaring the existence of sin, God, and Heaven. The existence of God and His moral law cannot be escaped or ignored by any person. However, whenever a person chooses to reject the moral law, he has made a choice that affects his character and his eternity. Rejection of the moral law inevitably leads to a self-centered mindset,

which denies reality. Once a person denies reality, he denies absolutes and goodness, causing him to ultimately lose his humanity. Finally, by rejecting the moral law, man sets himself against and apart from God, the source of all goodness and man's purpose for existence. When confronted with the terrifying reality of spiritual condemnation, every person must choose to live according to the rules that God ordained, as to do otherwise will lead to separation from morality, reality, and God Himself.

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