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How Concerned Should I Be about My Spouse Believing in Annihilationism?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about how concerned one should be and what to do about a spouse who now believes in annihilationism and how to navigate differences in doctrine with those who take strong stands on their distinctives.

* My wife has changed her view on Hell to annihilationism, and I feel betrayed and worried for her and how she'll influence our kids. How should I think about this and deal with it?

* How do you navigate differences in doctrine with those who take strong stands on their distinctives?

Transcript

This is the hashtag, S-T-R-Ask podcast. I'm Amy Hall, and I'm here with Greg Koukl, and we're here to answer your questions. Hopefully you'll send them.

We'd love to have new questions. We haven't been getting too many new questions lately, so if you have questions, send them in. Alright, Greg, on the last episode, we were talking about, uh, you know, you were arguing against universalism, and actually had another question that's hell related.

So we're gonna take that one now. This one comes from Fred. My wife has changed her view on hell to annihilationism, very convinced.

I feel betrayed and worried for her direction and also how she would influence our kids. Confused between seeing her as a danger and a victim I should love. How do I think and deal with it? Well, I can see how this would be really disconcerting.

And I have a couple of thoughts. One has to do with the whole issue of biblical education and the family. I'm just gonna sidestep that for now because this is already complicated for... Fred.

Fred. Okay. I think that annihilationism is false.

I don't think it's biblically supported. And Tim Barnett and I wrote a series of three solid grounds titled, Hell-interrupted. One, two, three.

Dealing with these various mischaracterizations of hell from scripture and annihilationism is one of them. Now, also universalism. Now, those are two very different things but they're both distortions of the biblical view.

Universalism, I think, is dangerous because it takes away the motivation, it can undermine the motivation for evangelism and the great commission. And it can give people who are headed for judgment, false hope. Okay? So that's dangerous.

It's false and it's dangerous. We dealt with one version of that or one way of justifying that in the last STRS. This is another error but I do not think it's dangerous.

I think it's heterodox. In other words, it's not orthodox, it's not appropriate, it's not sound biblically but it is not dangerous. As it turned out, John Stott, who wrote the Cross of Christ, a magnificent book on the work of the Cross, a classic.

He, from what I understand before he died in 2005, he was toying with the idea of universalism. And there are quite a number of inevigimical circles who have argued this way, that I'm sorry, not universalism but annihilationism. And I do think it has a, I think it's heterodox.

I also think it has a bad impact on a negative impact on evangelism because if we're worried about people being lost, well, what does that mean? Will they disappear? Well, that's what atheists believe. Atheists believe that and they're not troubled by that. So if people are just going to disappear, then belief against God has no real consequence in one's life, long-term, no eternal consequence.

So what's the big deal? If a person doesn't become a Christian, then they just disappear. And disappearing is their punishment, all right? Annihilationism. And that is, I mean, that doesn't make sense to me.

The way I just characterize it, it gives you an idea. Wait a minute. This is what atheists believe.

How is that a punishment? They don't think they're getting punished because they're going to disappear. And so we go into detail on some of these things in that piece, hell-interrupted, one through three, Tim and I do. But, and incidentally, if you don't read that, the principle that we apply here, since there's a lot of different ways that God's judgment is characterized, especially a distinction between the Old Testament and the New Testament, it does appear that people are destroyed in the Old Testament and that's taken as annihilated because they disappear.

Now, there's an explanation for why that's the way it is in the Old Testament and Tim and I talk about that. But our point is the final word is the last word. Or maybe we said the last word is the final word, but the point is, the way the whole account ends tells us the most detail about what the final disposition of the damned turns out to be.

And we have statements of Jesus, then we have the book of Revelation that is unequivocal in my view in describing the circumstances of those who are judged and found wanting by God. So that's kind of our motif when we deal with a lot of these passages. So this is some of the reasoning why I think this is a heterodox view.

But if my wife believed in annihilationism, I would just, I'd have a talk with her, I'd discuss the passages, and maybe Fred, you want to read what Tim and I wrote and you could read that with your wife and see if she's responsive. If she's not, then there's not much you can do about it, but I don't think it in the in the long run, it has any significant negative impact on her or her spiritual life. I think people adopt this, people who are, I don't want to simply be dismissive and say, well, this is the reason people do that without giving a rationale why they're mistaken.

That's, if I do that, that way that's the wrong order. See us list called that Bolvarism. First you have to show that a person is wrong before it's useful to say why he's wrong and a lot of people get that and, oh, here's why they're saying that.

Well, they still could be right. You're a Christian because you were born in America. Well, maybe, but Christianity could still be true regardless of the reasons that I have been influenced by it to believe it.

But what I've done is, and we do in that article, hell interrupted, is we show why this way of thinking is mistaken. Okay. Then it's fair to ask the question, why do people, good people who love the Lord believe that in a lot of cases.

And this is, this is, what's the right word here? This is demonstrable. These are people with really tender hearts. And, and, and that drives them to try to find a solution than eternal damnation.

And this was a difficulty for Tim and I when we were writing our piece, in fact, I think of the first part of the first segment, I said, you know, it's kind of hard to be the apologist for eternal damnation, suffering because we don't like this idea any more than anybody else. The question isn't what we like. The question is what is taught.

And I am not even comfortable, not just emotionally, but in a certain sense, rationally with the idea. I can make a defense for it. Eternal punishment and some of the challenges that are against it, but still it's, it's got to seem to almost everybody like a bit much forever and ever.

Nevertheless, this seems what the Bible teaches. And some people, they just, they can't

countenance this. And so consequently they're looking for an alternative that they can rationalize for themselves as the case because the other one is too emotionally difficult.

I'm sympathetic to that. It's just that that's not the right way to determine our doctrine. So it may not be in every case, but in a lot of cases, people who reject eternal damnation and opt rather for annihilationism, which they see as a type of judgment for sin.

I think that these people are not only mistaken, but they were also influenced by emotions that are laudable, soft heart. I get it. That doesn't change the facts.

So Fred, if your wife has a soft heart, God bless her. That's great. That it seems to me to be interfering with her doctrine here is unfortunate, but it's not tragic in this case.

Other cases, it's tragic, not this one. Yeah, I agree with you, Greg, that this is not such a big deal. I want to make a couple distinctions between universalism and annihilationism and why I see if she were a universalist, I would have a lot of concern, but not if she's an annihilationist.

And the first reason is that annihilationism, I mean, it's not about how judgment is good. An annihilationist doesn't deny God's judgment. It doesn't say that God's judgment is wrong or bad.

It accepts the fact that judgment is good and that God will judge. It just has a different amount of time. So it's not that.

So that's a huge difference between the two. Secondly, I do think a lot of people are convinced by what they see in scripture. I'm not sure it has to do necessarily with what their emotions are.

Some of them are physicalists, which means I think they think that affects their view. So that could be one kind of a presupposition that's playing into this for some people. In other words, they reject the idea that there is a soul that survives the death of the body.

And what soul goes to heaven is a recreation that God makes at the resurrection of those who are resurrected to eternal life. And so he just doesn't resurrect or he doesn't remake this part of the problem of the view, but he doesn't remake a duplicate soul or a duplicate person body, I guess, in their view to go to hell. So that could be something that's playing into it.

But I do think the reasons people give one reason they give is that this is the only way for God to completely execute justice, for justice to be finished, to be completed, to be done. Whereas on a view where hell continues forever, that's never completed. So they could be motivated by a desire for complete justice.

And I do think they offer Bible verses. So for example, with universalism, a lot of times

you'll hear people arguing from philosophical ideas or ideas about what makes God good or what doesn't make God good. Whereas with annihilationists, I do think they make biblical arguments.

And as you noted, there are people that I absolutely respect who were annihilationists or are now. And so I think those are major differences why I would be concerned. So I don't think I don't think you need to be concerned that she's a danger.

As far, another thing is I have not seen, whereas people who become universalists, I tend to see a slide in a lot of other areas into unbiblical places. And I think that's because they're starting from a place of arguing from what they think God should do rather than scripture. So I see them go into a lot of other different progressive ideas.

But I don't see that happening with annihilationists. I don't see them running from annihilationism to all sorts of heresies or other ideas about God that are false. So for all those reasons, I wouldn't see her as a danger as to how you should deal with it in terms of your kids.

I don't think there's anything wrong with just saying, hey, we disagree about this. And here's why. And that's it.

I mean, I don't think you need to make too much of a big deal about it. In fact, I would concentrate on the things you agree with, which is God's judgment of evil and the goodness of that and his righteousness and all those things you can agree on, that the time that it lasts is something that we discover from scripture. It's not something that is required by reasoning or, you know, any, if that makes sense.

A appeal to the nature of reality or something. Yeah. Yeah.

So although you might say it has to do with the severity of the crime or our ability to pay for it, some of those things do play into it. But it's a matter of scripture. And so I think that there's nothing wrong with being open with your kids about your differences on this because I think it's, again, I don't think it's the same level as universalism.

Yeah. I agree. That's good.

Okay. Now on the heels of that, let's go to a question from Dan. There are so many Christian denominations, and I know your teaching is non-denominational.

How do you navigate the differences in doctrine with those who take strong stands on their distinctions? Do you have a kind of hierarchy of importance such as absolutes, convictions, negotiable, freedom, et cetera? Well, that's a hard one to answer because it all depends on who you talk to. If you neither Amy or I affirm pedal baptism, which is infant baptism, right? Okay. But we have Lutherans on our team here that this is part of their system.

And they have strong convictions that this is correct. Now, of course, they don't despair just because we disagree on this particular point, but it ties into a larger doctrinal point of view or doctrinal system. It's not just a stray piece.

It's part of their theological system. So it seems to fit together for them in a coherent way. So for them, that's going to have a lot more significance than for us because we don't hold the view.

Okay. And if somebody does hold the view, I'm not going to fuss about it, but I think that for those who hold the view strongly, they think it's a lot more important than those who don't hold the view. So it a lot depends on these things on who you're going to talk to.

I think C.S. Lewis put it this way. And I think this Lewis's advice needs to be qualified. He said, basically mere Christianity gets you into the building and you're in the hallway with a lot of rooms with open doors, and the rooms represent these different options like Roman Catholicism or, oh, for goodness sake, the British, the Episcopal Church.

The Anglican Church? Thank you. Those were his choices because one of the biggest influences in his life was J.R.R. Tolkien. Tolkien was a Roman Catholic and a very committed Roman Catholic.

So he was very disappointed that Lewis didn't follow. But in Lewis's view, these are all these options. Now in my view, some of these options aren't real options because the distinctions are beyond the pale and important issues like justification.

Other ones, there aren't those kinds of distinctions. So what you have to decide down is what, in your understanding of scripture, are the important things. And historically, the important things have been, in theological way, the person of Christ and the nature of God.

Okay. Well, I can put it more broadly, the person and the work of Christ. Okay.

And that's the work of the cross. Now this touches on the question of justification and what does justification entail and how is justification accomplished? And here you have, I think, a significant difference between Roman Catholicism and probably the other Greek Orthodox and all of those other groups, Russian Orthodox and Antioch and Orthodox and Coptic Egyptian in that these are claims about, they may claim about an organization being their organization from God and therefore somehow association with that organization is critical to salvation. Which seems to me to begin undermining the doctrine of justification.

And when you look at the details, certainly with Roman Catholicism, I don't think their understanding of justification is sound. Okay. And so that's not an option for me.

And I'm not saying that no Roman Catholics are saved because there's a lot of

Protestants who have a flawed understanding of justification. And insofar as it's flawed, I wouldn't want you to adopt that either. The question here is about denominations and what you have to do is look at the denomination and what the denomination is holding, not what individuals in the denomination happen to believe.

And Roman Catholicism at the Council of Trent has anatomized the idea that faith alone saves. I'm just saying. And this is a, you know, push back on Martin Luther.

So there are some options. I'm just using that as an example. There are some options that are not options by view.

And then you have the rest. So some of those rooms aren't going to work to follow Lewis's illustration. But I think as a general illustration, it's a good one.

It's a fair one. You can be a genuine Christian in multiple denominations, even though you might disagree about secondary issues. It's not to say that those secondary issues aren't as significant or important.

But, but they are not vital. And so you're going to have these distinctions. Incidentally, there is a thing that makes them Christian denominations.

The adjective Christian means that there's a certain foundational element that's critical and it's not just Jesus. People say, well, Romans are Christian. Why would they believe in Jesus? I say, was, are Muslims Christian? No, of course not.

Well, they believe in Jesus too. There's more about Jesus in the Quran than there is about Muhammad. But that doesn't mean they're Christians.

Christians is a set of doctrines, not just a kind of a broad belief of some sort in Jesus. And it turns out that your LDS friends, or I should say the LDS church, doesn't hold to any of those doctrines that are distinctively Christian. And so they deny them as to Joseph Smith.

It doesn't mean they're bad people or even wrong necessarily. It just means that they don't fall into the category of Christian. For those denominations that fall into the category of Christian, it's because they hold to a certain set of core convictions that are foundational to Christianity.

And then you look at the secondary ones. And I don't know, maybe you have more to say about this, but what you think is vital is going to be somewhat subjective. I think the person in the work of Christ are the core issues.

Most everything else is secondary. Now, your view of scripture is not a theological issue as much as a practical one in my view, because the scripture doesn't teach solo scripture. It says what is authoritative and what isn't.

But it doesn't explicitly teach that. I do think it can be derived properly, but nevertheless, the problem is is when scripture on a practical basis, when solo scripture is denied, one of two things happen. Either then scripture loses its divine authority and that creates all kinds of problems.

Or other books with alleged divine authority are added and that creates problems theologically as well. Now, any might disagree with me on this, but I think that the solo scripture and the inspiration of scripture, that is really critical for practical reasons. And once one abandons that goes, you can go in two different faulty and maybe tragic directions.

But the person in the work of Christ are critical. How one views the second coming and all that other stuff or baptism? These are variations you have to draw your own conclusions on based on your own study. So it's a little bit unclear to me what we're navigating the differences for.

Are you asking, going to church with them? Are you asking about working with them in ministry? I think there are different answers to how you navigate these differences. But if we're just talking about, say, you know, as standard reason, we talk to a lot of Christians and a lot of different denominations. We go to churches, we interact with people.

So how do we deal with these differences in that situation? I would say what you said about solo scripture is probably the biggest thing. So I would say that I feel a kinship to any Christian who has the Bibles or ultimate authority. Because even in the case where they... And the Bible alone, do you mean? The Bible alone.

The ultimate authority. So even if I disagree with them, I know that we both have the same objective standard outside of us, outside of our theology, outside of our churches that we can appeal to. So I can work with somebody who has a different view on certain, you know, secondary issues because I know that I can appeal to the Bible.

It's not... There's a way to talk about these things with somebody who has an outside authority. Whereas with somebody who's maybe a progressive Christian, the problem is their authority is their own ideas about God or their own feelings or their own ideas about culture, whatever it is. And there's just no way to navigate those differences if you have no shared authority.

Right. So that makes it... You can't really work with them, plus I think they go way off in key areas. So that makes it difficult.

Even if you don't end up agreeing, you're still working for the same authority. Right, exactly. Now, I will say, and one thing that Dan says here, people who take strong stands on their distinctions, I do find it very difficult.

There are some people who have some distinction that they're all about that. That's their

thing. That's the thing they want to talk about all the time.

And I do find it hard to interact with people like that. Even if it's something I agree on because I think they're losing sight of the big picture. Now, this is something I didn't use to see very much because living in West Los Angeles, I think the church is there, have a good idea of what is central because they're surrounded by people who disagree.

And so they've had to make common cause with other churches. But as I've gone into ministry, what I've found is there's a lot more infighting that I ever realized. And I think it's because people get very comfortable.

And so then they get into the finer points of doctrine and they make that their thing. Okay, but just to clarify, were you choosing your word advisedly in fighting or were you using that as a broad term to say there's a lot more differences that some people might pick up? Yeah, yes, I'm not saying that they're fighting, but I mean they make it their thing. So this is this secondary doctrine is going to be what I'm all about that I'm going to argue with people about and who disagree with me on this.

So you got the rapture crowd that just is all totally into that. Yeah, there's a few different. Yeah, there are all sorts of different groups.

And I think this is because, yeah, there are around a lot of Christians. So what happens is they start talking about the differences. Yes, they start talking about the differences.

So I would just, I think it's important to discuss the differences. I think they're important. I love learning about the differences.

I love learning about why I believe what I believe. But if you're making that all you are, if you're making that the focus of everything you do rather than the bigger things about the gospel, Jesus, salvation, sin, all these, these things that are important for our fallen world, then I think you've lost sight. And it's very hard.

It's very hard to work with you in ministry if you've made one of these other things your most important thing. So I guess what it comes down to is it depends on what you're navigating it for because I certainly there are some churches I wouldn't go to just because I'm different enough from them, but I would still work with them even in ministry. Sure.

Well, I think that's it. Thank you, Fred. And thank you, Dan.

We appreciate hearing from you. Good question. Send us your question on X with the hashtag STRAsk or you can go to our website at str.org. We'd love to hear from you.

We'd love to get your questions and then we'll consider them for the show. This is Amy Hall and Greg Cogle for Stand to Reason.