Presuppositions and Interpretations:
How Our Assumptions Affect Our Understanding of the Bible
Part 1 of 3

*All of us view the world through the grid of a lifetime of accumulated experiences. Whether
we’re aware of it or not, we interpret what we see and hear and read according to the framework we have developed. We all have certain presuppositions, and we tend to form our interpretations of the Bible on the basis of what we already believe. This series of posts will take a specific subject—eternal damnation—and explore how one particular source—the NIV Study Bible—interprets certain passages on the assumption that eternal damnation is a fact, often contrary to the plain sense of the verses. Part 1 discusses a number of verses from the epistles. Parts 2 and 3 will list other verses from the epistles as well as from John and Revelation, along with their NIV study notes and my comments on the verses and notes. These verses seem to present a different picture of God’s ultimate purposes and man’s final destiny, suggesting that there may be an alternate paradigm to account for the truths that have been revealed in Scripture. The challenge is to step back and scrutinize our assumptions to make sure that they are correct, so that the interpretations built upon them will also be true.*

Many years ago I was in a crowded grocery store on a busy Saturday afternoon. I was making my way toward the checkout area, where dozens of people were jostling for a place in one of the long, amorphous lines. A rather large woman with bulgy eyes and a grim, mean-looking face was pushing her carriage in my direction. Suddenly she crashed right into another carriage, and I thought, “What a jerk, trying to force her way into the line!” But a second later I regretted the thought. In a very kind voice, the woman apologized profusely to the other person. “Oh, I’m *so* sorry. I just had an operation on my eyes, and I can’t see very well.”

My assumption that she was mean and was trying to butt in line was dead wrong; the bulgy eyes, the determined look on her face, and the collision with another customer had an entirely different explanation—that she had had an operation on her eyes and could not see well and was trying to focus. Although it happened a long time ago, I have never forgotten that incident; it reminds me that the assumptions I make about a situation can lead to a completely wrong interpretation of it. If I stop to check my assumptions, I may find myself looking at the situation through an entirely different lens.

A much more powerful example of such a paradigm shift is recounted by Stephen Covey in his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People.* He was on a subway in New York on a Sunday morning when a man and his children boarded. The children were loud and annoying, but the father closed his eyes and did nothing. The irritation of the other passengers was mounting, and Covey finally asked the man if he might control his children a bit. The father lifted his gaze and said, “Oh, you’re right. I guess I should do something about it. We just came from the hospital where their mother died about an hour ago. I don’t know what to think, and I guess they don’t know how to handle it either” (pp. 30-31). As Covey learned the true nature of the situation, he experienced an instant shift in his attitude. He realized that his presuppositions had been wrong—he was seeing not bratty children with a negligent father, but rather a grieving family. The way he viewed the situation changed because his framework for understanding it changed.

We all bring presuppositions into every area of our belief systems. They come from what we have experienced and been taught from the time we were little children to the present. With respect to our Christian faith, it is a good thing to have strong convictions about what we believe, but we also need to be willing to take a hard look at our assumptions and to change if we have been wrong. It is a healthy exercise to allow our presuppositions to be challenged—if we are wrong, we want to bring our beliefs more in line with the truth; if we are right, then answering a challenge will only strengthen our convictions. Let’s examine our beliefs about mankind’s eternal destiny.

Throughout most of church history, the doctrine of eternal condemnation has been accepted by the majority of Christians as a fact taught in Scripture. However they describe the nature of hell and whoever they define as the inhabi­tants of hell, most Christians believe that some people are eternally separated from God. The separation may be everlasting conscious torment or a long period of punishment followed by annihilation, but there is agreement that the wicked will be sentenced to a place or a condition from which there is no escape. This essay is a call to re-examine our presuppositions regarding the doctrine of hell and to consider how they have influenced our interpretation of Scripture.

The annotators of the NIV Study Bible believe in eternal damnation, and their exegesis (and sometimes even the translation itself) reflects that belief. There are several passages where the notes say, in effect, “this verse doesn’t really mean what it seems to say, because the apparent meaning contradicts the position of eternal punishment, which we already know is true.” Let’s look at some of these verses. Instead of interpreting the verses to fit the position, maybe we need to change the position.

To illustrate, one such verse is 1 Timothy 2:4, which says that God our Savior “wants all men to
be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” The NIV note says, “God desires the salvation of all people. On the other hand, the Bible indicates that God chooses some (not all) people to be saved.” In support of this statement, 1 Peter 1:2 is cited: Peter is writing to “God’s elect . . . who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood.” But this verse does not say that the “elect” go to heaven and the rest do not; it says that the elect are chosen “for obedience to Jesus Christ.”

The note goes on to give two interpretations of the Timothy passage: “Some interpreters understand the passage to teach that God has chosen those whom he, in his foreknowledge, knew would believe when confronted with the gospel and enabled to believe. Other interpreters hold that, though human reasoning cannot resolve the seeming inconsistency, the Bible teaches both truths and thus there can be no actual contradiction. Certainly there is none in the mind of God.” The note does not even mention the possibility that God not only wishes that all men would be saved but will actually make it happen.

The passage continues, “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time” (vv. 5-6). Again Paul indicates that the work Jesus did on the cross was for *all* men. You could make a case that the phrase “a ransom for all men” means that the ransom works for *anybody* who comes to Christ, regardless of rank, race, or nationality. However, the plain sense of the verse is that Jesus’ sacrifice was intended for all human beings and fulfills God’s desire that all be saved.

Later in the same book, Paul says “we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe” (4:10). Here the note says of *Savior of all,* “Obviously this does not mean that God saves every person from eternal punishment, for such universalism would contradict the clear testimony of Scripture. God is, however, the Savior of all in that he offers salvation to all and saves all who come to him.” Only if you have already concluded that God does *not* save everyone from eternal punishment is it “obvious” that the verse means that He does not save everyone from eternal punishment. Otherwise, the verse *does* seem to say that He saves all.

In the NIV, Titus 2:11 reads, “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.” The verse actually says, φχςθςθςOther translations properly put “to all men” (θς) with “brings salvation” (ς). For example, “The grace of God has appeared, *bringing salvation to all men*” (NASB). This verse does not provide strong evidence of ultimate salvation for all, no matter how it is translated. But by translating the verse as it does, the NIV avoids any need to comment on the verse, because the translation has already been fitted to the interpretation the NIV supports.

In Galatians 1:8 and again in 1:9, the Greek word *anathema* (θis translated “eternally condemned.” (“If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned.”) Anyone reading this verse would think that eternal condemnation is a fact of the Bible. However, the sense of “eternally” is not inherent in the word; the Greek word has pretty much the same sense as the word as we use it in English—one that is cursed, banned, reviled, denounced. There’s no need to give it the meaning of eternal damnation, as the NIV translation has done.

In Colossians 1:19-20, Paul says, “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” The note says of the phrase *reconcile to him-self all things,* “Does not mean that Christ by his death has saved all people. Scripture speaks of an eternal hell and makes clear that only believers are saved.” But the verse seems to say that the cross accomplishes the reconciliation of all things (—everything and everyone) to God. In order to conclude that this verse “does not mean that Christ by his death has saved all people,” you have to bring to it the presupposition that only some are saved and the rest go to an eternal hell. [For a fuller interpretation and exegesis of Colossians 1, see “Reconciliation: The Heart of God’s Grand Plan for the Universe,” also under Biblical Theology.]

The NIV translation of 2 Peter 3:9 says, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” The word translated “wanting” is the Greek ςAccording to The Analytical Greek Lexicon, the root word means “to be willing, disposed, to choose, be pleased, to will, decree, appoint.” The related noun η means “counsel, purpose, design, determination, decree.” Not only does the NIV translation weaken the sense of the word (“want” vs. “decree”), but the note skews the meaning of the verse: “God’s seeming delay in bringing about the consummation of all things is a result not of indifference but of patience in waiting for *all who will come to repentance*” [emphasis added]. In other words, He might not *want* anyone to perish, but His patience extends only to those who will come to repentance before they die.

Another example of translating and interpreting a verse to suit a predetermined belief that the unsaved die and go straight to hell is 1 Peter 4:6. Peter has been talking about the pagans who indulge in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, etc. Then he says, “But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to men in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit.” The note explains the phrase *was preached even to those who are now dead* this way: “The word ‘now’ does not occur in the Greek, but it is necessary to make it clear that the preaching was done not after these people had died, but while they were still alive. (There will be no opportunity for people to be saved after death; see Heb 9:27.)”

Adding the word *now* completely changes the sense of the verse. The Greek simply says ςθ, “to the dead the gospel was preached” or “the dead were evangelized” or “the dead were addressed with good tidings.” The verse seems to say that people who had already died were hearing the gospel, the “good news,” which suggests that they were getting an opportunity to respond to it. (If it was a proclamation of judgment, it wouldn’t be very good news for them.) But the NIV note says the verse can’t possibly mean that the preaching was done after the people died, because “there will be no opportunity for people to be saved after death.” Then it cites Hebrews 9:27 as proof that people cannot be saved after death: “Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.” But that verse simply says that you die and then face judgment; it never says there is no possibility of salvation after you die.

When Peter says the gospel was preached to the dead, perhaps he is referring in part to something he said just a few verses earlier: “For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built” (3:18-20). A different word is used for “preach”—ξ, which does not carry the idea of “good news” but simply to proclaim or announce. The NIV note gives three main interpretations: that Christ preached through Noah to the wicked generation of that time; that between His death and resurrection He preached to fallen angels; or that He went to the place of the dead and preached to Noah’s wicked contemporaries. “What he proclaimed may have been the gospel, or it may have been a declaration of victory for Christ and doom for his hearers.” The note then proceeds to give the problems with all three views.

There’s another possibility that the note doesn’t even mention. What about the idea that He was preaching the gospel to those who had died before His coming to earth and were in Hades, including those who disobeyed during the time of Noah? The NIV note for Matthew 16:18 defines Hades as “the Greek name for the place of departed spirits, generally equivalent to the Hebrew *Sheol*.” The word *Sheol* is often translated as “grave,” or it can mean the realm of the dead. What if these “spirits in prison” were those who had died without coming to faith and were stuck in the abode of the dead? And now the gospel is preached to these dead ones, “so that they might . . . live according to God in regard to the spirit.” Would Jesus offer up His life on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins—“Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God,” as Peter puts it—and then immediately go to the place of the dead and proclaim judgment, rubbing it in that they were doomed forever? Why couldn’t He be preaching the gospel, the good news, His victory over sin, release for the captives? After all, He is the one who has been anointed “to preach good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.” Are all those prisoners to be left in the darkness? Or might Jesus have died to set them free?

*Not one of these verses on its own can prove that God will eventually bring salvation to all. But as they are considered together, the evidence mounts. Parts 2 and 3 will present more than a dozen additional verses that call into question the traditional view of eternal condemnation.*

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