

# OBSERVED AVERSION TO RAISING HELL IN PASTORAL CARE: THE CONFLICT BETWEEN DOCTRINE AND PRACTICE

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## *Abstract*

This paper explores complexities in the relationship between beliefs about hell and the practice of Christian pastoral care by clergy. It tests the hypotheses that observed aversion to raising the topic will be greater the more inclusive the minister's doctrine; that sensitivities are a strong motivation for the carer to seek a doctrinal 'loophole' to avoid it; and that inability to reconcile one's beliefs about hell with aversion to raising the subject does not mean that a minister will necessarily follow through on the implications of his/her doctrine. The data is derived from a postal survey of clergy in Scotland, conducted across the Trinitarian denominations. It is concluded that a model of applied-theology is ameliorated even by its proponents in the context of hell and pastoral care.

*Key Words:* eschatology, evangelicalism, Scotland, care, hell

## INTRODUCTION

Facing a person who is dying when you believe that those who are not Christians go to torment in hell is a challenge to how one offers pastoral care. You may be clear in your own mind that biblical teaching is unequivocal – the lost are lost to an eternity without Christ which includes mental and physical torment. Your responsibility as a witness to Christ is one of proclaiming His salvation from a terrible fate; you are to summon all people to repentance and faith in the Redeemer. Yet, something holds you back. You are averse to raising such a painful topic at a time when someone is uniquely vulnerable – do you add to their stress or, on other occasions, do you disturb their settled acceptance of their pending death?

Or perhaps you are preparing to conduct the funeral of someone who made no profession of Christian faith. On numerous occasions you have preached evangelistic sermons from your pulpit in which you have exhorted such people to turn to the Saviour for escape from the fearful prospect of hell. The chance of redemption has passed for this person but what about

the relatives and friends that are present? Do you reassure the mourners that the deceased has passed from death to life eternal? Or do you remain true to your beliefs and imply (implicitly or explicitly) a lost eternity of torment for the deceased and potentially for the hearers, even if it means adding grief upon grief?

These dilemmas are not reserved for moments of bereavement; they lie latent in a wide range of pastoral situations. On hearing the story of a person's struggle to arrive at an ethically sound decision, for example, do you warn them that the easy alternative will only take them further down the 'wide road that leads to destruction'? As a pastor you feel the responsibility to warn of hell's dangers for those who refuse such a great salvation. You know the deterrent value of hell from your own experience. Yet, at the same time you are hesitant to try and secure someone's compliance with a Christian moral stance as a response to the threat of hell. Can you offer them only the "good" side of the Good News or should you present the "bad" side too?

For Christian pastoral carers who do not hold to a view of hell as the outcome for the lost, these will not be dilemmas that feature on the horizon. Perhaps they are viewed as indicators of a religious pathology around which intervention might be offered so that pastoral carer and client might find a more healthy spirituality? However, for a substantial minority, it is in the context of terminal illness, funerals of 'non-Christians' and ethical counselling that the doctrine of hell, and particularly hell-torment, takes on exceptional significance.

This study aims to explore the complex relationship between beliefs about hell and the practice of Christian pastoral care by clergy.

#### THE NATURE OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

We can usefully identify three principal ways of understanding the nature of doctrinal beliefs, viz., propositional, experiential-expressivist and cultural-linguistic. A propositional outlook considers doctrine to be of the form of first order propositions asserting ontological truth. In our context this means that hell is real, although beyond our world. The Bible teaches its existence, albeit in terms that some believers consider more metaphorical than others. This is in contrast to the experiential-expressivist perspective which interprets doctrines as "noninformative and nondiscursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes or existential orientations" (Lindbeck, 1984: 16). The experiential-expressivist (commonly the 'liberal' outlook)

might draw on the language of hell to articulate the common human experience of exclusion in social relationships, perhaps extending this to the existential alienation that some feel from the Divine. In turn, both propositionalist and experiential-expressivist epistemologies differ from the cultural-linguistic approach to doctrine which understands it as the rules or grammar that govern and inform the way sacred narrative is told and used (Lindbeck, 1984, chapter 4). In this context a cultural-linguistic view might interpret the narratives of hell as ways of holding community boundaries as a distinctively acting people and as enabling the Christian community to speak of God's 'No' to evil (Stoddart, 2001).

#### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DOCTRINE AND PRACTICE

There are many ways to relate Christian doctrine and practice but for our purposes we will focus primarily upon only two, viz., applied-theology and praxis-reflection. The applied-theology method takes theological principles generated in other disciplines such as biblical exegesis or systematic theology and applies them to pastoral practice. This model of authoritative source applied to a situation or subject was predominant in the 19th Century teaching of theology in the universities as a result of Schleiermacher's seminal influence (Schleiermacher, 1811). This linear approach can be adopted by those holding either propositionalist or experiential-expressivist views of doctrine. It is problematic on a number of counts. It neglects the responsibility of the pastoral practitioner for the content of the message favouring instead merely the techniques required to effectively communicate it (Forrester, 1990). A person on the receiving end of the message about hell has, in this model, no access to the dogmatists and exegetes of his or her community of faith. A pastor may hear someone's personal experience of pain and be sympathetic. However, as applied-theologians such experience cannot be allowed to alter the message derived from its authoritative source. As a model it is retrospective rather than forward-looking at what is unfolding in the world (Swinton, 1996). In its 20th Century development in an experiential-expressivist context it became increasingly focussed on the techniques of applying principles of care but controlled by auxiliary disciplines. Whilst this embraced much insight from psychology and the social sciences it tended to sever the connection with its theological roots (Farley, 1983: 128-146).

The issue of truth claims with regard to discourse in the public arena has particularly exercised practical theologians. Attempts to recast the

answers of faith in the light of the questions being aired in the public domain (particularly existential questions) were developed by a correlational method (Tillich, 1951). Theological formations were re-appraised but the way of seeing the world remained isolated from critique until the development of a mutually critical correlational model (Tracey, 1983). Models of 'practical reason' (what should we do?) have built on these foundations (Browning, 1996) but tend to adhere to the Enlightenment's turning point of commonly agreed principles of Reason. Critics consider this a delusion favouring transformative action as a philosophical and social pivot (Chopp, 1987 & Graham, 1996).

From a liberationist perspective such transformative praxis, gained through reflection on action, is not a 'degraded embodiment' of a pure theory but the 'very matrix of all authentic knowledge, and the decisive proof of that knowledge's value' (Gutiérrez, 1980: 19). Knowledge is located in practice, not however in flattening out the deep strata of pluriform experiences by universalising a supposed common human experience (as in models dependent upon Enlightenment Reason) (Chopp, 1987). It is the rich diversity of people's interaction with each other and with God that is the primary focus of a praxis-reflection model, particularly with a liberationist emphasis.

Praxis-reflection can take many forms in its spiral of action-reflection-action. We can usefully illustrate its process through one example. Groome's model of shared praxis begins by naming or expressing the action (Groome, 1991). This is a prelude to critical reflection in the form of social analysis including elements of one's own and one's society's biography. Having explored experience in these dimensions one turns to the Christian narrative finding the themes, stories and doctrines that have (or might) mould one's action. In bringing critical reflection on action and the Christian story into a dialectical relationship the next movement in the spiral can take place. One identifies what can be affirmed and challenged in present praxis. Equally important, one locates what is of value and what is problematic in the Christian story. The outflow of the process is in one's response: decisions of action can be made as well as determinations to be a different sort of person. The spiral then continues in expressing this new praxis and reflecting upon it.

How radical is one's questioning of praxis and doctrine in this type of cycle will largely depend on epistemological assumptions and social context. For example, Thomas Groome's own profession as a religious educator within the Roman Catholic tradition appears to curtail too radical a questioning of the Christian story in contrast to the postmodern flexibility

of an Elaine Graham. Nevertheless, the basic components of a praxis-reflection model hold true across a wide range of perspectives (Woodward & Pattison, 1999; Ballard & Pritchard, 1996; Lartey, 1997).

#### THE APPLIED-THEOLOGY MODEL IN CONTEMPORARY USAGE

The applied-theology model is the assumed methodology in a recent report on the doctrine of hell from within the conservative evangelical community in the United Kingdom (Evangelical Alliance, 2000). A particularly hard-line approach, following this same model, has been expounded by John Blanchard, an influential preacher and author in England. For Blanchard, the morality of eschatological exclusion is not the primary issue; of principal concern is the authority of the Bible, 'our touchstone is not what will fit neatly into the thinking of "any reasonable person", but what God has revealed in his Word' (Blanchard, 1993: 111). His monograph receives the endorsement of James Packer, a doyen of many evangelical readers. The very real tension inherent in an applied-theological model between doctrinal source and human experience surfaces in the evangelical John Stott's dialogue with the liberal David Edwards. Stott writes:

emotionally I find the concept [of hell torment] intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterising their feelings or cracking under the strain. But our emotions are a fluctuating, unreliable guide to truth and must not be exalted to the place of supreme authority in determining it. As a committed Evangelical, my question must be – and is – not what does my heart tell me, but what does God's word say? (Edwards with Stott, 1988: 314-315)

The question 'What does God's word say?' is not answered by a monolithic response from the conservative evangelical community. For example, a belief in conditional immortality (annihilation unless God raises a person to postmortem life) has been proposed as faithful to the biblical material (see, for example, Powys, 1998; Fudge, 1994; Pinnock, 1996). What concerns us in this study is the way in which the tension between a belief in hell and pastoral practice is played out in the clergy's experience.

We will identify the nature of this relationship, discuss the aversion to raising hell within the context of pastoral care that emerges, and seek to test the hypotheses that emerge from this discussion using data from a survey of 346 Christian leaders from a range of denominations in Scotland. In particular, we attempt to test three propositions regarding beliefs and pastoral practice with regard to the subject of hell. We will consider a cluster of beliefs that can best be termed 'inclusive' because they throw

the net of a good life-beyond-death wide. At its most inclusive this might be a universal salvation. In contrast, an 'exclusive' outlook restricts the good postmortem existence (traditionally known as 'bliss') to a much more limited sub-set of humanity. In this context it is the sub-set of 'the saved' or 'believers' that forms the most restrictive or exclusive category. When coupled with understandings of hell as actual physical torment it is both exclusive and forbiddingly dark or tenebrous.

#### OUR HYPOTHESES

First, we hypothesise that, on average, observed aversion to raising the topic of hell will be greater the more inclusive the minister's doctrine. This is the same as saying that there will be an overall positive (upward sloping) relationship between aversion and inclusivity (though the relationship may not be linear due to our second hypothesis). As one might expect, our results strongly confirm this hypothesis.

Second, we hypothesise that the sensitivities surrounding the discussion of hell provide a strong motivation for the individual pastoral carer to seek (consciously or subconsciously) a doctrinal "loophole" in his/her beliefs on hell that will allow them to avoid raising the subject in pastoral contexts, the potential for which becomes disproportionately more difficult the more tenebrous are their beliefs about hell. This hypothesis suggests that, on average, there will be concavity in the relationship between observed aversion to raising hell (OARH) in pastoral situations and the extent to which one's beliefs on the matter are eschatologically inclusive. Using both bivariate analysis and a variety of multiple regression techniques, we find strong evidence to support this hypothesis.

Third, inability to reconcile one's beliefs about hell with aversion to raising the subject in pastoral situations does not mean that one will necessarily follow through on the implications of one's doctrine. Here unmeasured factors, such as personality and particular social pressures of certain pastoral locations, come into play. And indeed, the more tenebrous one's beliefs about hell, the greater is the scope for such factors to forge a moral or emotional dilemma. Since these factors are intrinsically idiosyncratic they will (by definition) vary from person to person, and so it is proposed that personal differences will have a greater role to play the more tenebrous one's beliefs. Differences in personality and congregation amongst eschatological *inclusivists* are unlikely to result in much difference in the propensity to raise the subject of hell since the logic of one's beliefs does

not require the discussion of the subject anyway. As such, whilst on average one might expect aversion scores to rise with inclusivity (hypothesis I) and to do so at a decreasing rate (hypothesis II), one would also expect the *variance* in pastoral practice, amongst pastors of similar beliefs, to decline the more eschatologically inclusive are those beliefs with respect to the subject of hell. We test this in both a bivariate context (using both Levene's (1960) and Brown and Forsyth's (1974) tests for equality of variance) and in a multiple regression setting (using a range of tests for heteroskedasticity). In both contexts, the variable nature of the standard deviation of OARH is unequivocal (the null of constant variance is rejected in each case with probabilities of false rejection never rising above one in ten thousand).

Interestingly, even when we control for other possible determinants of pastoral practice (such as age, denomination, geographical location within Scotland, gender, size of congregation or urban/rural location of congregation), these results hold true. The strength of our findings is reinforced by the fact that most of these factors do not have a statistically significant effect on OARH, even when interaction effects are examined.

No previous studies, to our knowledge, have explored eschatological beliefs and their relationship to the pastoral practice of Christian clergy. The nearest similar study dealt only with doctrinal beliefs and focussed on the conservative evangelical constituency in the United Kingdom (Evangelical Alliance, 2000). Opinion polls give a very broad brush picture suggesting that 28 per cent of people in Britain hold a belief in hell – but with no indication as to what the nature of hell might be (*The Sunday Telegraph*, 28 May 2000). In a study of trends in religious belief it was found that whilst belief in God has declined amongst the British population by 6 percentage points since the 1970s, belief in hell has risen by 4 percentage points (Gill, Hadaway and Marler, 1998).

#### PREMISES AND SPECIFIC HYPOTHESES

The empirical investigation rests on two premises. Premise One is that no minister relishes the prospect of raising the subject of hell in pastoral situations. Whilst there may be anecdotal stories to the contrary, particularly with regard to more general ecclesiastical settings (such as the following alleged quote from the sermon of a Presbyterian minister on the Isle of Lewis):

And when you're down in the fiery pit, weeping and gnashing your teeth it will be no good looking up to Heaven and pleading 'Lord, we didna ken, we didna ken.' God will look down from his heavenly throne and reply: 'Well, ye ken noo.'

(Jeffrey, 1995: 87)

it seems unlikely that this will persist in the particular pastoral settings considered in the data. Premise two is that there will be a distribution of emotional aversion corresponding to the (unobserved) distribution of personality types. We assume that this distribution is similar for different personality types (that there may, in reality, be a degree of correlation between personality type and belief does not substantially alter the interpretation of the findings given the strength of the results). Whilst the emotional and personality make-up of the respondents is not observed, what *is* observed is the extent to which aversion is reflected in pastoral practice. This observed aversion (OARH), however, is the product of both sensibility and belief.

We would expect average aversion to broaching the subject of hell to rise with inclusivity (hypothesis I). Second, those who reject a propositional understanding of doctrine or who hold to alternative propositions concerning existence beyond death will find discussion of hell to be inconsequential – in the sense that future suffering is not at stake. Urgency and/or a weight of responsibility to warn of the real dangers of hell is greater when the future state is darker in the beliefs of the pastoral carer. There is disproportionately less doctrinal 'wriggle room' at this tenebrous end of the continuum of eschatological beliefs, and so not only will aversion fall (rise) with exclusivity (inclusivity) it will do so at an increasing (decreasing) rate. This is hypothesis II.

Whilst there may be less cognitive "wriggle room" at the tenebrous end of the doctrinal spectrum, there may also be greater potential for conflict between beliefs and the minister's own emotional inclination/personality type. We would therefore expect the standard deviation of the observed aversion amongst ministers to be greater the more tenebrous the doctrinal position. This gives rise to our third hypothesis. Where the applied-theology model is drawing on inclusivist propositions we would expect little variance in the pastoral practice of ministers who share this outlook. This would be equally true of those who are not dealing in propositional truth. This decline in variance (hypothesis III) is not to be misunderstood to suggest lack of *variety* in pastoral practice. Rather, it is a reduction in variance between beliefs and practice.



## DATA

A survey by postal questionnaire of 750 randomly selected clergy ministering in Scotland was undertaken in the autumn of 1998. Only Trinitarian denominations consisting of more than twenty congregations were included in the sample. Useable returns numbered 346. Because denominational outlooks are fluid the sample was not selected in proportion to denominational membership – this was a study of clergy, not denominational practice. The survey was composed of 23 statements of beliefs (relating to human nature, Christ's resurrection and return, judgement and heaven and hell). A further 18 statements related to practice in pastoral contexts such as terminal illness, a funeral, counselling and exclusion from the Lord's Supper. Demographic questions on denomination, locality, age, gender, ordination, and congregational size were included.

A composite measure of beliefs about hell (hellbel) was constructed from the responses to the following four statements (the lower the value, the more tenebrous is a respondent's understanding of what lies ahead for the 'lost'):

- "There will be further opportunities beyond death for any 'lost' to alter their destiny (scores reversed to conform to direction of composite measure)."
- "Some humans will be eternally separated from God."
- "The fate of the lost is to suffer eternal mental anguish in hell."
- "The fate of the lost is to experience eternal physical torment in hell."

Response was indicated on a five-point Likert scale ('1' strongly agree, '5' strongly disagree) and the composite score was constructed as a simple linear sum of these four variables. In addition, a composite measure of aversion to raising hell was constructed from responses to four statements of pastoral practice:

- When conducting the funeral of a person who did not identify with the Christian faith . . .
  - "I make a statement about the possibility of their lostness."
  - "I mention hell as a prospect for the impenitent."
  - "I mention the Last Judgement as a warning."
- When counselling someone on a problem which includes an ethical dimension . . .
  - "I use the threat of hell as a challenge to obedience to Christ."

Response was again indicated on a four-point Likert scale ('1' always, '2' often, '3' sometimes, '4' never) and the Observed Aversion to Raising Hell composite score (OARH) was constructed as the linear sum of the responses to the four statements on pastoral practice.

Categories of age, denomination, geographical region, gender, type of locality (e.g. rural) and size of congregation were used to provide demographic variables. Simple summary statistics are given below in Table 1 for each of these variables. We report the coefficient of variation ("CoV"  $3 = \text{standard deviation as a proportion of the mean}$ ) rather than the standard deviation or variance because it allows the variability of variables measured in different units to be compared. We include size in both the continuous and categorical lists because, for the sake of parsimony, we include the category number for size (1 to 4) in the regressions rather than individual category dummies (which were also attempted in analysis but not reported as they provided no improvement in the regression fit and were not statistically significant).

Table 1. *Summary Statistics*

Variable	Category	Mean or %	Median	CoV	N
<b>Pseudo Continuous Variables:</b>					
Aversion to raising the subject of hell	–	14.08	15	0.03	328
Hell	–	11.10	11	0.19	327
Size of Congregation	–	2.10	2	0.27	334
<b>Categorical Variables:</b>					
Age					337
	<35	9.20%	–	–	31
	36-45	27.60%	–	–	93
	46-55	34.12%	–	–	115
	56-65	22.85%	–	–	77
	>65	6.23%	–	–	21
Size					334
	<100	37.43%	–	–	125
	100-200	31.44%	–	–	105
	200-300	14.67%	–	–	49
	>300	16.47%	–	–	55
Other Presbyterian	Yes	5.20%	–	–	346
Pentecostal/Charismatic	Yes	3.76%	–	–	346
Highlands & Islands	Yes	15.32%	–	–	346
Male	Yes	89.60%	–	–	346
Rural	Yes	24.57%	–	–	346

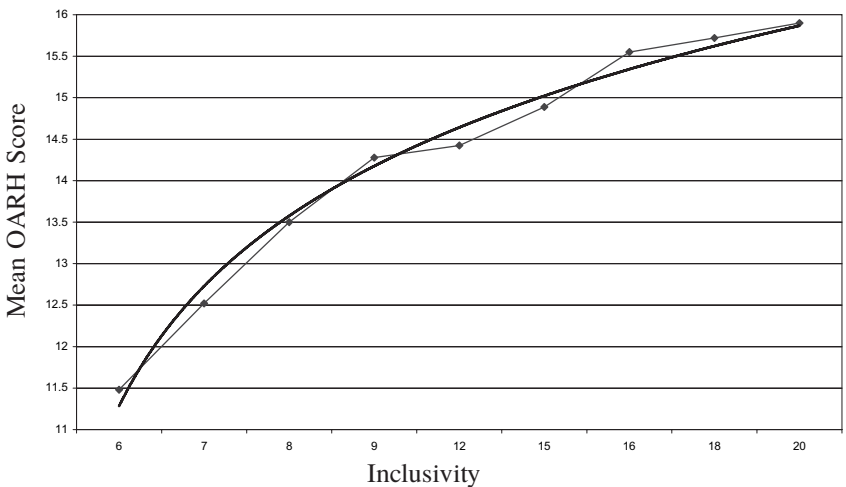
CoV = Coefficient of Variation

## RESULTS

*Bivariate Analysis*

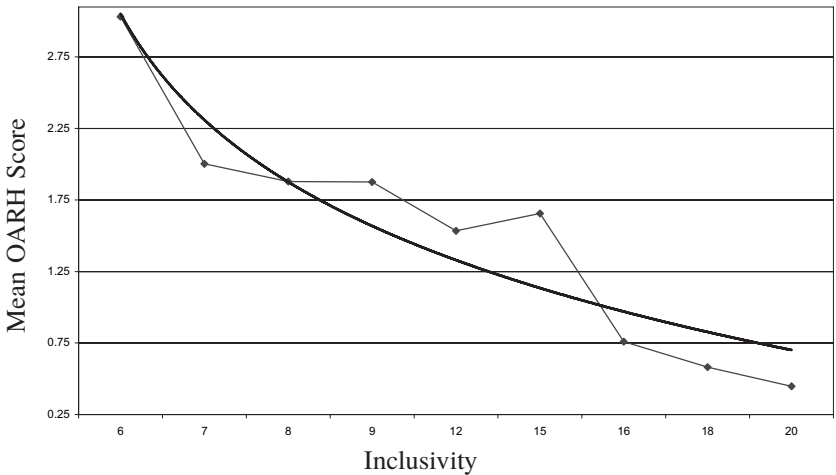
Consider first a simple bivariate plot of average aversion against doctrinal inclusivity (Figure 1). For the purpose of constructing this figure (and also Figure 2) we group the composite beliefs categories in such a way as to ensure at least 20 observations in each bin to ensure that the means are reasonably robust. Support for hypotheses 1 and 2 is immediately evident since average aversion appears to rise with inclusivity (hypothesis I) but at a diminishing rate (hypothesis II – as shown by the concave nature of the curve, highlighted by the logarithmic trend line). So whilst observed aversion to raising the subject of hell tends to follow the corollary of belief, it does so in a non-linear way. This non-linearity, we argue, arises because doctrinal “wriggle-room” also rises with inclusivity. So *convergence* towards the pastoral practice of the inclusivist will gather pace as one moves progressively along the inclusivity continuum, because for each step towards inclusivity one has the luxury of greater *intellectual* freedom to avoid raising the subject of hell. A simple one tail t-test of equality of means assuming heterogeneous variances (see below) confirms this (sig. = 0.0000; based on halving the sample according to beliefs).

Figure 1. *Mean OARH Score by Grouped Category of Belief in Hell with Logarithmic Trend Line*



Hypothesis III suggests that, as one moves along the inclusivity spectrum, there will not only be a decline in doctrinal/cognitive conflict with avoiding the subject of hell, but also less emotional conflict. If there is a roughly similar distribution of personality types across different belief scores, then there will be much greater scope for emotional conflict the more tenebrous one's doctrine of hell. Thus, we would expect the standard deviation of OARH to be lower for higher inclusivity scores and this is confirmed both graphically (Figure 2) and from applications of Levene's (1960) and Brown and Forsyth's (1974) tests for equality of variance (based on splitting the sample in half according to belief scores, the chances of incorrectly rejecting the null of homogenous variance of aversion are less than one in one billion).

Figure 2. *Standard Deviation of OARH Score by Grouped Category of Belief in Hell with Logarithmic Trend Line*



### *Multiple Regression Analysis*

The question we seek to answer here is whether the patterns (particularly the apparent concavity and heteroskedasticity in the relationship between aversion to raising the subject of hell and eschatological inclusivity) observed in the bivariate setting, will hold true in a multiple regression context. Regression (1) in Table 2 is a simple ordinary least squares regression of observed aversion to raising hell on our inclusivity measure, and

the square of the inclusivity measure. If our hypothesis holds true, the coefficient on the squared term will be negative. This is indeed the case, and is statistically significant – there is less than half a per cent chance of false rejection of the null hypothesis of a zero coefficient (the significance levels reported for the OLS regressions are based on Davidson and MacKinnon (1993) ‘HC3’ robust standard errors – see the section on heteroskedasticity in Appendix 2 below). The linear term for beliefs is also statistically significant and has a positive sign as expected. Simulation reveals that the curve is monotonic over the relevant range of values of inclusivity and depicts an overall positive relationship between aversion and inclusivity (Figure 3).

Table 2. *Regression Results: Models of Observed Aversion to Raising the Subject of Hell*

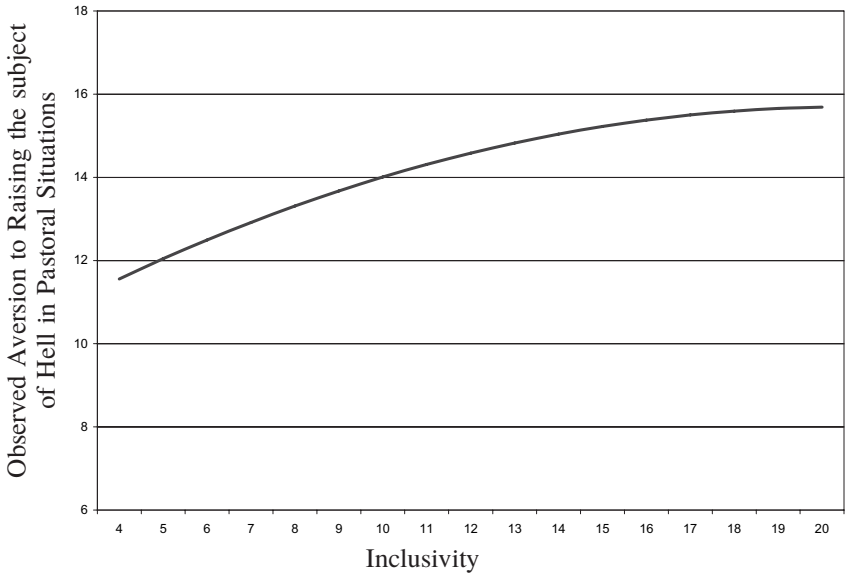
	(1) OLS	(2) OLS	(3) OLS	(4) Ordered Logit	(5) OLS with Predicted Beliefs in Hell
Constant	9.327 (0.000)	10.613 (0.000)	10.345 (0.000)	– –	0.930 (0.000)
inclusivity of beliefs about hell	0.618 (0.000)	0.464 (0.001)	0.459 (0.002)	– –	0.054 (0.643)
squared values of inclusivity of beliefs in hell	-0.015 (0.004)	-0.010 (0.057)	-0.010 (0.082)	– –	-0.048 (0.054)
Age < 36 years	–	-0.816 (0.068)	-0.810 (0.074)	– –	– –
Other Presbyterian	–	-2.168 (0.000)	-2.112 (0.000)	– –	– –
Pentecostal/Charismatic	–	-2.222 (0.009)	-2.221 (0.010)	– –	– –
Highlands & Islands	–	–	-0.085 (0.798)	– –	– –
Male	–	–	0.267 (0.483)	– –	– –
Rural	–	–	-0.041 (0.885)	– –	– –
Size of Congregation	–	–	0.019 (0.865)	– –	– –
Inclusivity of beliefs in hell:	–	–	–	–	–
very low	–	–	–	0.449 (0.161)	–
quite low	–	–	–	1.619 (0.000)	–
medium	–	–	–	1.839 (0.000)	–

Table 2 (cont.)

	(1) OLS	(2) OLS	(3) OLS	(4) Ordered Logit	(5) OLS with Predicted Beliefs in Hell
quite high	–	–	–	3.137 (0.000)	–
very high	–	–	–	4.683 (0.000)	–
n	313	313	303	313	329
Adj R2	0.3711	0.4434	0.448	–	0.2289
Wald Chi Square test ( $H_0$ : all coeffs. = 0)	–	–	–	101.17 (0.000)	–

Figures in brackets are estimated significance values; for regression slopes, these are based on robust standard errors.

Figure 3. *Estimated Relationship Between Aversion and Beliefs*  
Based on Estimated Coefficients from Regression (1)



The question remains, however, as to whether these findings hold true when considered in a multiple-determinant context. In particular, will the coefficient on the squared term still be negative and statistically significant when we consider also denomination and age? Regression (2) includes dummy variables (a binary variable equal to one if the observation has the characteristic of interest, and equal to zero otherwise) for whether the minister was less than 36 years old, whether he/she described themselves as “other Presbyterian”, and whether he/she was Pentecostal/Charismatic. Of these, the age dummy proved to be the least statistically significant (including age as a continuous variable resulted in an even lower significance level, as did inclusion of dummy variables for other age brackets). Note, though, that the inclusion of these variables reduces the significance of the squared term on beliefs. We conclude, however, that this effect emerges as a result of multicollinearity (a regression of beliefs on the dummy explanatory variables finds statistically significant correlations, confirmed by an examination of variance inflation factors, eigenvalues, and condition indices). Since the various elaborate solutions to multicollinearity create more problems than they solve (Greene 1993) we shall be content with omitting the dummy variables and returning to our original regression (i.e. regression (1)) as the most appropriate model of the relationship between belief and practice.

Various other attempts were made to include additional explanatory variables into the model, but these tended to contain high levels of multicollinearity and low significance levels on the new variables. Regression (3) is typical of those estimated and reveals that factors that may have been considered as possible determinants of pastoral practice (the “Highlands & Islands effect”, gender, whether the church is urban or rural and size of congregation) prove to have no statistically significant effect in the model. Various interaction effects were also explored (such as the interactions of beliefs about hell and beliefs about resurrection; interactions with age) but all these proved to be insignificant.

### *Heteroskedasticity*

Hypothesis III stated that there would be more variability in the relationship between beliefs and practice the more tenebrous the belief in hell. Testing this proposition in the context of multiple regression amounted to testing the null hypothesis of “homoskedasticity” (constant variance of the error term) against the alternative hypothesis of “heteroskedasticity” (non-constant variance of the error term, also referred to as a “non-scalar error covariance matrix”). Examination of the scatter plots of residuals

made it patently clear that heteroskedasticity was a defining feature of our models and, in particular, that the variance of the error term that it declined with inclusivity. Unsurprisingly a battery of heteroskedasticity tests unanimously and unambiguously rejected the null of homoskedasticity (for example, when applied to regression (1), the Breusch-Pagan (1979) test for heteroskedasticity resulted in a Chi2(1) value of 80.65 [sig. = 0.0000] and the Szroeter's (1978) test for heteroskedasticity resulted in a Chi2(1) value of 80.55 [sig. = 0.0000].

#### DISCUSSION

We have found that there exists a dissonance between beliefs and pastoral practice in the area of Christian eschatology. There are clergy who believe in a tenebrous outcome for 'the lost' and who articulate this in their pastoral practice with overt reference to hell's dangers. For these, there exists resonance between their belief and their practice. Naturally, those whose theological framework does not include hell (in its dark and forbidding form of separation or torment) do not draw on it within their pastoral practice. In other words, it does not appear on their horizon. Of interest to us has been those who although believing in a hell (of some shade of darkness) indicate that they do not speak of its dangers when pastoral contexts seen through the eyes of applied-theology suggest it might be relevant. It is this aversion that has been the focus of our study.

We have found that effect of beliefs on pastoral practice diminishes as beliefs become more eschatologically inclusive. Again, where there is no danger of eternal (or even temporary) suffering in hell for any 'lost' the very category 'the lost' loses its potency. It is amongst those who hold to a belief in hell suffering but who hold back from discussing it who are of particular interest. They are people amongst whom there is more variance between their beliefs and pastoral practice than those who either have no aversion to raising the subject of hell or who do not consider it a relevant issue. These findings raise some vexing issues.

#### *Eschatological threat has a long pedigree*

There are some who will utilise eschatological threat within the context of pastoral care. This should not be surprising when we recall the strength of this theme (and arguably this approach) in the biblical witness. There exists, for the early Christians, a group of people who are 'the enemies of the cross of Christ' (Philippians 3:18). In contradistinction, the believers,



sharing in Christ's sufferings, are 'children [. . .] heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ' (Romans 8:17). In a litany of human depravation Paul indicates the wrath that the unrepentant are storing up against themselves for that day when God's judgment of all will be revealed (Romans 2:5). The unveiling of God's eschatological wrath is presented as being against those who practice idolatry, sexual impurity, homosexuality, envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice, gossip, slander, God-hating, insolence, arrogance, boastfulness, disobedience towards parents, senselessness, faithlessness, heartlessness, ruthlessness and the approving of such practices (Romans 1:24-32). In addition to matters of sexual propriety, eschatological judgment comes upon obscenity, foolish talk and coarse joking (Ephesians 5:4). In the face of enticements to sin Christians are to recall that those following proscribed behaviour will be required to give an account of themselves to God who is the judge of both the living and the dead (1 Peter 4:5). However, the believers are not to be complacent because ahead of those who continue to sin after having come to the knowledge of God there lies 'a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God' (Hebrews 10:27). Even those who have sought to work faithfully in God's service will find their contribution subject to the testing fire of 'the Day' (1 Corinthians 3:13f). To fail to respect the dignity of fellow participants at the Lord's Supper is to eat and drink judgment upon oneself (1 Corinthians 11:28-29). On the contrary, within the eschatological judgment there exists a role for faithful believers – they will judge the world and the angels (1 Corinthians 6:2-3). In an overall context of rejecting the lifestyle associated with unbelief in the gospel, the description of eschatological wrath against the enemies of the gospel is used to encourage the Thessalonian believers who are being persecuted: 'God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well' (2 Thessalonians 1:6-7). Those who do not know God and who disobey the gospel of Christ are to be punished at the coming of Christ (2 Thessalonians 1:8) but, additionally, there is a suggestion that the eschatological judgment has *already* begun; perhaps imposed by the civil authorities as God's agents (1 Thessalonians 2:16; Romans 13:4).

That Jesus might score low on aversion and high on eschatological exclusiveness should give us significant pause for thought. His warnings to the villages of Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum are cases in point (Matthew 11:20-24). Interpreters seeking 'God's word' with these texts as their conceptual background will find ample affirmation for their applied-theological method in using hell as a threat. Nevertheless, more sophisticated

exegetical considerations might offer a significantly different picture of Jesus' beliefs and pastoral practice that would not support the eschatological framework of hell suffering (cf. Powys, 1998).

Hell as a threat could be considered consistent with an approach to pastoral care such as that of nouthetic counselling in which the biblical text is a resource for confronting a person's behaviour (cf. its principal exponent Adams, 1970). Whilst we can respect the integrity of a pastoral carer who genuinely believes that some (even many) people are in serious eschatological danger and duly warns them, the potential for manipulation and abusive use of the pastoral relationship abounds. Further research into the effects of raising hell with people *in extremis* will need to be undertaken if the perspective of those on the receiving end of such pastoral care can be heard.

*The applied-theology model is ameliorated even by its proponents*

Mitigating factors generate aversion to maintaining a theological model which is otherwise presented as applying biblical truth to human experience. It would be very unusual for a Christian minister to hold to a belief in hell-torment on grounds other than their reading of the biblical witness. Although this survey has not invited clergy to classify themselves under theological labels it is safe to assume that it is the applied-theology model that dominates where the biblical text is read in terms of hell-torment. Our investigation suggests that the model is not widely sustained in the eschatological dimension of pastoral practice. Observed aversion to raising hell appears to destabilise this theological model when eternal suffering is at stake. The Evangelical Alliance report tacitly recognises this process in the particular case of caring for people who are dying:

Where such people lack Christian faith, discussion of judgment and hell should be balanced by commendation of the hope of heaven for all who believe. Even here, however, every effort must be made to avoid exploitation and coercion, lest any commitment turn out to have been built on the sand of emotion rather than the rock of genuine conviction (Evangelical Alliance, 2000: 119).

'Exploitation and coercion' are intriguingly subjective criteria that are required to ameliorate the presentation of a tenebrous Gospel. The approach ought to be affirmed yet it throws the pastoral carer back onto his or her own perceptions of exploitation and coercion. The apparent straightforwardness of applying a biblical truth to a pastoral situation is unmasked. Certainly the goal is to ensure a 'valid conversion' but when the stakes are perceived to be so high (avoiding eternal loss or even torment) the

pastoral carer cannot take recourse to a strict linear model of application of authoritative source to contemporary situation.

The destabilising of the applied-theology model invites the question as to whether there are other aspects that are equally fragile. If the 'truth' of hell-torment is met with aversion then perhaps topics such as sexuality are being treated likewise, despite public assertions of 'faithfulness to the Bible'. Only further research into the views held by high aversion scoring clergy within applied-theology communities will ascertain whether it is a consistent effect on other matters. Nevertheless, negotiation and compromise over doctrine and practice are realities within communities of faith that often wish to present a contrary image of 'consistency'. We would suggest that the model of praxis-reflection is the one that actually operates.

### *The personal dynamics of praxis-reflection*

The nature of the mitigating factors ameliorating the applied-theology model remains unknown but may be the cause of considerable anxiety to those who find themselves with high levels of aversion but a tenebrous outlook for 'the lost'. We can only guess at what contributes in each person holding tenebrous beliefs about the fate of the 'lost' to their aversion to raising the topic in pastoral contexts. Personality traits disposing one to avoid conflict, anger or rejection may be significant for some ministers. If one's congregation shares one's eschatological beliefs it might be easier to use it as a resource in pastoral care but, where it is only the minister and few others who are hell-believers, acceptance in the community and perhaps even job security may feature strongly in a decision to initiate a discussion. It may be that the character of 'the lost' is significant in the amount of aversion on the part of a pastoral carer. Our survey did not specify the particular conduct, lifestyle or other aspects that characterise 'the lost' when viewed as individual people. Further research would be necessary to establish if certain groups of 'the lost' are treated with more or less aversion than others. Are, for example, 'the lost' who are elderly spinsters taking care of their neighbours, the subjects of greater aversion than 'the lost' who are inveterate drunks and social outcasts? The applied-theology model does not give scope for this type of penetrating question to be asked. On the other hand, a model of praxis-reflection demands just such interrogation of pastoral behaviour.

Until recently, tenebrous views of people's postmortem fate might have been considered a vestigial trace of a primitive or unsophisticated theology,

and worthy of little academic attention. However, the ascendancy of the Religious Right in the United States of America and the confidence this appears to have given to British evangelicalism requires such views of hell to be taken seriously. Where strident demands for recognition of these forms of Christian sensibilities are made it, is important that claims regarding the application of 'biblical truth' to contemporary social life are understood in the light of the faith community's own aversion to raising difficult issues. Facing advocates of 'biblical morality' with the real tensions with which their adherents juggle can only be a positive contribution to more sophisticated and honest debate.

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#### APPENDIX 1. ORDERED LOGIT MODEL

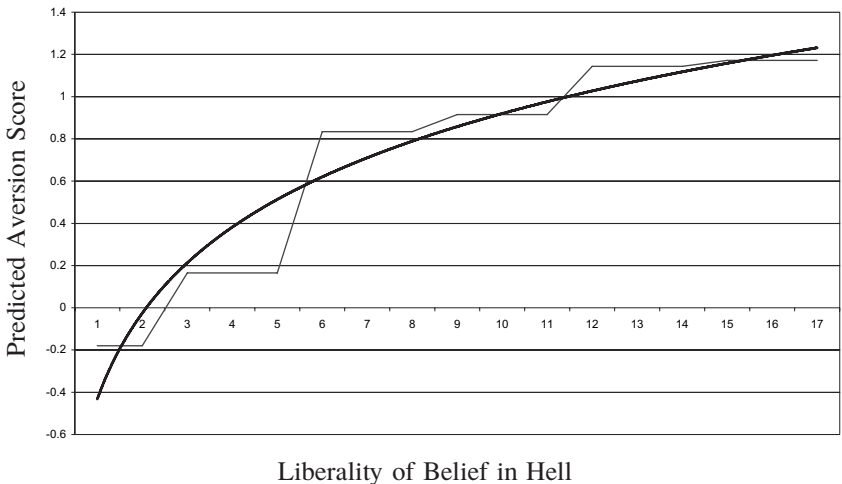
There is a potentially fundamental problem with both the bivariate analysis and multiple regression modelling described above. It arises from the fact that our original data was ordinal and not cardinal. We have assumed (as many empirical researchers tend to do) that the underlying boundaries that define the categories of response are equally spaced; that the difference between the "sometimes" and "often" category is the same as the distance between the "often" and "always" categories, for example (see Long 1997: 114ff). This assumption may not hold true in reality. The observed concavity in the relationship between beliefs and practice may be a statistical artefact – a bi-product of the Likert scales used in the questionnaire.

A technique particularly useful for the analysis of ordinal dependent variables is *ordered logit regression* (see Long 1997). Unlike ordinary least squares regression, the coefficients of the ordered logit model do not equate to the first partial derivatives and so derivation of the second derivatives

would not be trivial (see Greene, 1993). Put another way, observing the sign and significance of the coefficient on the squared term of the beliefs variable in a logit model would not be the most straightforward and transparent way of testing for concavity. Instead we enter beliefs about hell as a series of dummies (see regression (4) in Table 2); the baseline category is “teneborous beliefs in hell”, and the labels given to the remaining categories are described as “very low inclusivity”, “quite low inclusivity”, “medium inclusivity”, “quite high inclusivity”, and “very high inclusivity”. The ordered logit estimates the true scale of the underlying latent continuous dependent variable (in this case the degree of aversion) and then maps the observed categories for the dependent variable onto the latent variable by deriving estimates for the cutpoints for each of the categories. The model can then be used to estimate the probability that a pastor with a particular set of beliefs will fall into a particular category of aversion.

Knowing the values of the cutpoints, allows us to take the mid-point score of each of these categories and multiply them by the predicted probabilities to derive a predicted aversion score for each category of belief. These values are plotted in Figure A1 along with an estimated trend line. It is clear from this figure that the evidence still favours concavity in the relationship between beliefs and practice.

Figure A1. *Ordered Logit Predicted Aversion Score with Estimated Trend Line*  
(Predicted Aversion Score is calculated at Midpoint Scores of Aversion Categories, where the bounds of these categories are those estimated by the Ordered Logit)



There is still an important ambiguity in the analysis, however, arising from the fact that the beliefs variable is also derived from a series of Likert scales, and so the scaling of the explanatory variable may yet distort our findings. For example, if the central categories of belief are actually wider (in terms of the underlying latent variable – see Long, 1997: 114ff) than the outer categories (unlikely), then the observed concavity would be an inevitable outcome (assuming categories of the dependent variable are fairly equally spaced). One solution is to use ordered logit to predict belief scores (based on a derived latent beliefs variable) and then enter these in either an OLS regression of aversion or an ordered logit regression of aversion. Since this is akin to deriving an instrumental variable (analogous to two stage least squares – see Greene 1997), using the predicted values of beliefs rather than actual values will have the added benefit of removing simultaneity bias from the regression (resulting from the possible existence of reverse causation – practice influencing belief).

As a result, we used an ordered logit regression of beliefs on a series of denominational dummies (other Presbyterian, Pentecostal/Charismatic, Roman Catholic, Baptist, Congregational, Methodist, and Salvation Army), area dummies (Highlands and Islands, Lothian, North East, Borders), size of congregation, age dummies, and years since ordination. Since this regression was for prediction purposes only, the particular coefficients are not of particular interest and the affect of multicollinearity was not relevant (since omitted variables cause bias, whereas inclusion of collinear variables does not, the loss of efficiency in parameter estimates is not relevant when prediction is in view and the general consensus is that it is better to include as many explanatory variables as possible in regressions used for predictive purposes – Greene 1993). We initially used the predicted beliefs variable and its squared values as the regressors in an OLS model of our previously obtained predicted aversion score. However, since the aversion score was derived from an ordered logit with beliefs as the explanatory variables (incidentally, this also confirmed the concavity hypothesis), the model suffered from circularity, so we reverted to using the original categorical aversion measure in our model (regression (5)). The results, reported in the final column of Table 2, show that the linear measure of beliefs is no longer statistically significant, but the squared term remains both negative and statistically valid at the 6% level of significance (and so concavity is again confirmed).

To confirm this result, we compute the average predicted aversion score for newly created categories of belief where the categories are equally spaced according to the estimated latent beliefs variable. The results are



plotted in Figure A2 and clearly define a concave relationship. However, the graph should be treated with a degree of caution, given that it suggests non-monotonicity (i.e. aversion actually starts to decline for higher values of the predicted inclusivity score). This finding is both counter-intuitive and not supported anywhere else in our analysis.

## APPENDIX 2. CORRECTED STANDARD ERRORS

Whilst the existence of heteroskedasticity supports our hypothesis about the nature of conflict between belief and practice, it also raises the problem of inconsistent standard errors. The use of weighted least squares to correct for heteroskedasticity is not necessary in many circumstances because heteroskedasticity does not actually bias coefficient estimates (it only affects the estimation of the standard errors) and because “using the wrong set of weights has two . . . consequences which may be less benign. First, the improperly weighted least squares estimator is inefficient. This might be a moot point if the correct weights are unknown, but the GLS standard errors will also be incorrect. The asymptotic covariance matrix of the estimator . . . may not resemble the usual estimator.” (Green, 1993: 407).

Using FGLS heteroskedastic estimation as an alternative to weighted least squares is also problematic: “if the form of the heteroscedasticity is known but involves unknown parameters, it remains uncertain whether FGLS corrections are better than OLS. Asymptotically, the comparison is clear, but in small or moderate-sized samples, the additional variation incorporated by the estimated variance parameters may offset the gains to GLS.” (Green, 1993: 407). The most appropriate course of action, therefore, is to correct the standard errors. White’s (1980) method has been widely applied and has now become the most popular method for dealing with heteroskedastic errors.

However, it has been found that when the sample size is small (say, less than 500), White’s standard errors, whilst a considerable improvement on OLS standard errors, are not always reliable. MacKinnon and White (1985) have since proposed three versions to be used when the sample size is small, and the third of these tests, which they call ‘HC3’, is the most reliable, particularly when heteroskedasticity is known to be present (which is the case here). As a result, all the significance levels calculated for the coefficients estimated in the OLS regressions reported in Table 2 are calculated using HC3 (comparable robust standard errors were used for the ordered logit regression).

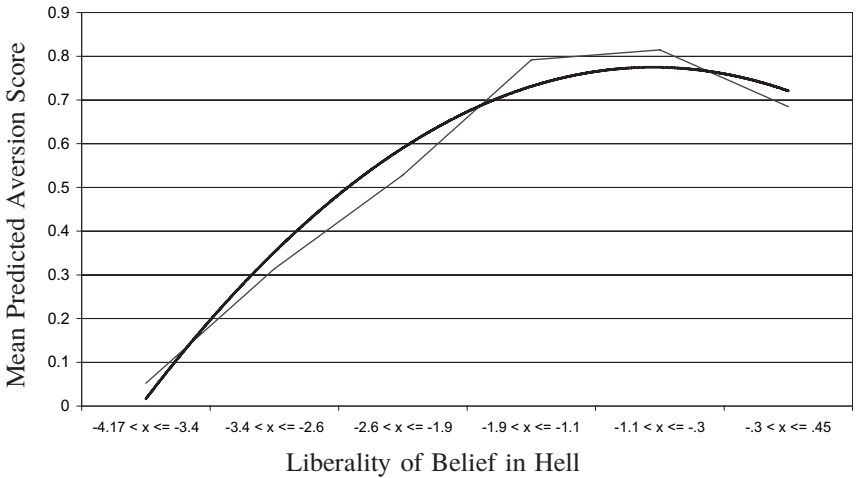


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Figure A2. *Mean Predicted Aversion Score By Equally Spaced Category of Belief with Trend Line*



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