

Bonda, Jan 1998 – The one purpose of God: An answer to the doctrine of eternal punishment (trans by Bruinsma, Reinder). Originally published as: Het ene doel van God 1993)

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 278 Pages. Price: Unknown

Reviewer: Prof I W C van Wyk

Jan Bonda (1918-1997) was a Dutch Reformed pastor who served several churches in the Netherlands. His books include *Het heil van de velen* (The salvation of the many), published in 1989.

Bonda asks the question: "What is God like?" According to him, the church tradition teaches us that God has two separate goals. He has predestined a small percentage of humankind to salvation, to eternal life. The rest of humanity has been predestined to eternal damnation. Since it is his will that many will be lost, we have no option but to acquiesce. Bonda argues that it cannot be God's will that we passively accept the perdition of our fellow human beings. According to him, being called by God means being called not to acquiesce in the perdition of our fellow human beings. This he discovers in the story of Abraham and his intercession for Sodom, in the story of Moses and his intercession for Israel, and in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son.

After establishing this fundamental truth, Bonda asks his next question: "What does Scripture teach regarding God's purpose for humanity?" What is the meaning of the preaching of God's judgement, and how does it relate to this purpose? Does it agree with our calling to refuse to acquiesce? Bonda searches for an answer in Romans. In this letter he discovers the message of salvation for all people. Through the death of Jesus Christ all humanity (including all past generations) will receive "justification of life"; "many will be made righteous" (Rm 5:18-19). Bonda is convinced that Paul teaches that the redemption in Christ includes humanity in its entirety. He therefore finds it a pity, that the church through the centuries has insisted that only a small portion of humanity will be saved. The reason for this wrong teaching, according to Bonda, is that the church has ignored very important aspects of the message of the Bible. He argues that the church has ignored the fact that the Bible teaches that all people will eventually be saved. He disagrees with the teaching of the church that at the final judgement certain people will be condemned forever. According to him, the last judgement is the beginning of the great deliverance. He says: "Under Christ's kingly rule God's children ... will lead lost humanity back to God. All whoever died will be made alive in Christ, and at last God will be all in all So there will be salvation for those who died in a state of unbelief; salvation after the judgement. There will be salvation for those who rejected the gospel. The majority of the Jewish people did that, but all Israel will be saved." Bonda insists that God's judgement, or God's punishment, should be understood differently from the traditional viewpoint. According to him, God's judgement and punishment do not have in mind the destruction of evildoers, but their redemption and healing and their return to God. The idea of an eternal punishment is therefore for him totally unacceptable. God's punishment is, according to him, always directed toward salvation. It cannot therefore be accepted that a certain part of humanity will be lost forever. In the end all will be saved. All will be saved including Israel. According to Bonda, God still wants to save the world through Israel. The church cannot replace Israel. The church must and can only work with Israel in its midst. One of the consequences is that Israel's election to be God's chosen people cannot be undermined by the existence of the church. The church must accept Israel as the older brother, and this older brother must be taken up in the church. Only when Israel becomes part of the church can the second coming of Christ be expected.

Bonda is convinced that, because Christianity is rooted in the Old Testament, Jews can help Christians to come to a better understanding of biblical themes. One of these themes is the idea of "hell".

Boekbesprekings / Book Reviews

According to Bonda's Jewish friends, "Gehinnom" is like purgatory, the front porch of Paradise. The stay in "Gehinnom" could not exceed twelve months. To remain in line with this thinking, Christian theology must therefore reject the doctrine of eternal punishment, and embrace the idea of the salvation of all (including the Jews).

This book is a further contribution to a long debate throughout the centuries. For hundreds of years the church debated the choice between salvation for all on the one hand and eternal punishment on the other hand. This debate still continues in various forms. The question whether God is only a God of love, or also a God of righteousness, is a dimension of the same debate. The question whether there is salvation outside the church, yes: outside Jesus Christ, is another dimensions of this debate. So we could go on and on and show that many debates in theology have got to do with this problem.

Has Bonda made an original contribution to this debate? I don't think so. No really new perspectives have been brought forward. Has he made a responsible contribution? I don't think so. The exegetic parts do not give the impression that he took note of the huge and massive research of the last decades on the Pauline letters. Is it a worthwhile book to read? Yes. You will definitely learn a lot by reading this book. You will also be stimulated to rethink your own viewpoints on this matter. Will this book change trends in dogmatics? I don't think so. The research was done in order to substantiate a preconceived idea.
