

# ETERNAL PUNISHMENT?

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*The focus of this paper will be upon the question mark of the title! My intention is to concentrate upon the growing debate amongst Evangelicals concerning whether or not the unrighteous will consciously suffer under the wrath of God forever. I am not, therefore, going to present a broad overview of the biblical teaching concerning the doctrine of Eternal Punishment (then the title would need no question mark). Such material is readily available in any standard Systematic Theology.*

**KEYWORDS:** immortality, annihilationism, conditionalism, soul, punishment, death, destruction, hell, wrath, torment, justice, judgement

## Tentative Beginnings

Over the past two or three decades especially, Evangelicals have raised tentative questions concerning the traditional orthodox belief that the lost will suffer endless, conscious punishment. In 1974 the IVP published John Wenham's book *The Goodness of God* (reprinted in 1985 with the new title of *The Enigma of Evil*). This book is a serious attempt to address "the moral difficulties of the Bible". In it, Wenham devoted one chapter of fifteen pages to the subject of hell. He presented the case for Conditional Immortality as an 'alternative'<sup>2</sup> to the traditional doctrine in the space of only three pages and stresses that his 'summary of the debate . . . provides no basis for decision on so grave and complex an issue'<sup>3</sup>. In 1988 John Stott, in the book *Essentials*, admitted that he preferred Annihilationism to the orthodox Evangelical position. However, he stated that he was 'hesitant to have written these things'<sup>4</sup> and that he held this position 'tentatively'<sup>5</sup>.

## Increasing Boldness

It would now seem that with the passage of time and the growing numbers of Evangelicals swinging to an Annihilationist position (both privately and in print) courage has risen and the element of the tentative has disappeared. The gloves have been taken off. In 1991, at the Fourth Edinburgh Conference on Christian Dogmatics, John Wenham declared, 'I believe that endless torment is a hideous and unscriptural doctrine which has been a terrible burden on the mind of the church for many centuries and a terrible blot on her presentation of the gospel. I should indeed be happy if, before I die, I could help in sweeping it away.'<sup>6</sup> It is evident that the mood has changed. We therefore, need to get back to the Scriptures to be absolutely sure that the ground we are standing on is the solid rock of God's Word.

## Awesome Issue

Before we move to look more closely at the issues involved in this debate I need to comment upon the seriousness of it. The subject before us is extremely awesome and weighty.

We are talking about the final state of countless thousands of people. We are talking about what should be an essential element of our gospel preaching. We are talking about the final vindication of the name and righteousness of God. I agree strongly with Wenham: 'Whichever side you are on, it is a dreadful thing to be on the wrong side of the issue.'<sup>7</sup> We need, therefore, to move forward with sober minds and humble hearts, looking to the God of Scripture to thoroughly equip us for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16, 17).

## Definitions

There is confusion amongst Evangelicals concerning the terms 'Annihilationism' and 'Conditional Immortality'. J.I. Packer says that the view that the ultimate end of the unsaved is non-existence 'may be called either Annihilationism or Conditionalism'<sup>8</sup>. Such a statement is confusing since there are important differences in the two views. However, this misleading over-simplification is understandable since firstly, each view is in no way homogeneous, having several strands of opinion. Secondly, there is quite a degree of overlap between Annihilationism and Conditionalism and, thirdly, to all intents and purposes, the eventual end of the wicked is believed to be the same irrespective of whether you are an Annihilationist or a Conditionalist i.e. the wicked, one day, will not exist. Consequently, to attempt to use the terminology with precision is rather like trying to walk through a heavily loaded minefield. I will therefore, attempt to tread carefully, whilst asking you not to explode if I put one toe out of place!

Annihilationism, is fundamentally a question of eschatology (the doctrine of the 'last things') whilst Conditional Immortality is one of anthropology (the doctrine of man). This helps us to see immediately that Annihilationists and Conditionalists approach the same question of what happens to man after his physical death from different angles. It also illuminates why they can come to the same conclusions whilst using different arguments.

## Annihilationism

Annihilationism is the view that some or all human souls will cease to exist after death. It can be broadly divided into four forms:

1. Immediate annihilation of everyone at death;
2. Immediate annihilation of the wicked at death;
3. Immediate annihilation of the wicked after being raised from death on the Judgment Day;

4. Eventual annihilation of the wicked after a period of suffering following the Judgment Day.

**Conditional Immortality**

Conditional Immortality, on the other hand, is the view that man is naturally mortal and that immortality is a gift which God gives through the gospel of Jesus Christ. It can be broadly divided into three forms which correspond to the latter three forms of Annihilationism. To use the jargon invented by Kendall S. Harmon (a doctoral student in Theology at Oxford) these could be labelled as:

- 2. Conditionalist uniresurrectionism (i.e. the resurrection of only the righteous);
- 3. Conditionalist immediate extinctionism (i.e. resurrection of all, followed by the immediate extinction of the wicked);

4. Conditionalist eventual extinctionism (i.e. resurrection of all, followed by the extinction of the wicked after a period of suffering).

What is clear from these definitions is that Conditional Immortality opens the door for Annihilationism, except in the form of universal Annihilationism<sup>9</sup>. Those who describe themselves as Evangelicals who do not believe in the orthodox position of endless, conscious punishment for the wicked (e.g. B.F.C. Atkinson, J.W. Wenham, J.R. Stott, P.E. Hughes) appear to agree that all mankind will be raised on the Judgment Day, will be punished and then annihilated (forms 3 and 4 in Table 1).

There does not appear to be a consensus on the question of whether the punishment will be instantaneous or over a period, or to put it another way, whether they will be annihilated immediately or eventually. This is probably due to the fact that their main aim is to be *against* the idea of *endless* punishment and consequently they fail to state positively what they actually stand for.

**TABLE 1. DEFINITIONS:  
ANNIHILATIONISM AND CONDITIONAL  
IMMORTALITY**

*Annihilationism*

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 1. Immediate annihilation of everyone at death                                 | 2. Immediate annihilation of the wicked at death  |
| 3. Immediate annihilation of the wicked after being raised on the Judgment Day | 4. Eventual annihilation of the wicked after a period of suffering following the Judgment Day |

*Conditional Immortality*

- |   |  |
|---|--|
|   | 2. Conditionalist uniresurrectionism     |
| 3. Conditionalist immediate extinctionism | 4. Conditionalist eventual extinctionism |

***The Overlap of Conditional Immortality and Conditionals***

**The Way Forward**

One writer has outlined succinctly the way forward for Evangelicals on both sides of this debate. He says 'It will involve the following: 1. the elimination of all unjustified presuppositions; 2. a new openness to the Biblical data; 3. a willingness to embrace and apply Biblical convictions and presuppositions to the question; 4. if necessary, a willingness to move freely of the traditional orthodoxy.'<sup>10</sup> I will attempt to follow these guidelines as I now examine the Scriptures to see if there is any justification in turning from the traditional doctrine of Endless Punishment to some form of Annihilationism. I shall approach it from both the anthropological and eschatological perspectives in order to deal with the issues raised by those who emphasize the Conditionalist or the Annihilationist arguments respectively. In practice, Evangelicals tend to deal with both aspects anyway.

**The Soul – Its Nature and Duration**

Basil Atkinson, who has been an enormous influence for the Conditionalist position (John Wenham having recently admitted that he was won to Conditionalism by Atkinson's teaching<sup>11</sup>), begins his book on this subject *Life and Immortality* with this statement: 'As we cannot understand what the Bible reveals about immortality and a future life until we discover the nature of death, so we cannot understand what it teaches about the meaning of death until we first obtain a clear idea of the nature of man.'<sup>12</sup> The ensuing first chapter is an extremely detailed analysis of 'The Nature of Man' which forms Atkinson's basic rationale for Conditional Immortality. It gives particular attention to the doctrine of the Soul in the Old and New Testaments, majoring on the relevant Hebrew and Greek words. By looking at the recurrent use of the Hebrew nephesh in Genesis 1 and 2 (1:20, 21, 24, 30; 2:7) he asserts, 'We have now found that the Scripture conclusively teaches that a human being is a soul in the same sense in which an animal, a bird, or even a fish,

is a soul.<sup>13</sup> This is the kind of logic which abounds in what anyone would describe as a tedious book: having shown the meaning in some (or even in many) texts, usually quite correctly, he extrapolates to conclude that this meaning holds true in all texts. It should be noted that this conclusion is reached on page 4 of a 29 page chapter which concludes very little more on page 29 than it did on page 4! He takes his conclusion, based on a few verses, *assumes* it as the basis of his further studies and concludes that his original conclusion was correct!! This approach is surely faulty for two reasons: firstly, because of the cyclical logic and secondly, because it doesn't adequately allow for the flexibility of language.

To be fair, Atkinson sees a little variety in shades of meaning with regard to soul (e.g. self, emotions, mind) and says that 'though we expect a word to be used in a figurative sense it is impossible that it could sometimes carry a meaning completely contradictory to its normal sense'<sup>14</sup>. That seems reasonable enough. But, we must ask this question: is the notion of the soul as an immortal part of a person which can exist both integrally with and separately from the body contradictory to or complementary with the idea of the soul as embracing the person with thoughts and feelings? Surely it is not contradictory but complementary. This kind of reasoning would lead Atkinson into enormous difficulties if he used it in examining references to heaven. The heaven of Acts 1:10 ('they looked steadfastly towards heaven as he went up') is completely different from the heaven of Luke 11:2 ('Our Father in heaven'). What this shows is that there is no reason why the soul cannot refer to the mind/emotions *and* to a part of the person which is immortal.

When John Wenham's paper on 'The Case for Conditional Immortality' was published in 1992 one might have expected a stronger argument against the immortality of the soul. This was the first time in eighteen years that Wenham had gone into print on the subject, since his initial brief comments in his book *The Goodness of God*. In the paper he complains that those who have attempted to reply to his original comments have failed to do so for this reason: 'While not answering the Conditionalist arguments with any seriousness, these writers do of course state their own case. They set out certain well-known texts and claim that their meaning is "obvious"<sup>15</sup>.' It is a very real shame that Dr Eryl Davies' book *An Angry God?* is not in the list Wenham considers (it was possibly published after Wenham had written his paper). Dr Davies treats the Conditionalist arguments with seriousness and gives a thorough presentation of the orthodox doctrine of endless conscious punishment. Bearing that in mind, I would otherwise have to say that I have some sympathy with Wenham's complaint. However, when Wenham comes to his section on the Immortality of the Soul, he falls into the same trap. He gives only one page to the subject! He uses the 'obvious' technique by saying that 'From Genesis 3 onwards man looks mortal indeed', refers to three verses (1 Timothy 6:16; Romans 2:7; 2 Timothy 1:10) and rests his case!<sup>16</sup> There is no dialogue with traditionalists' arguments and no reasoning through important texts which would not appear to be in his favour (e.g. Luke 12:19, 20; Matthew 10:28; Ecclesiastes 3:19 – 21). Wenham complains that the traditionalists' main argument is (to quote Shedd

and others) 'everywhere assumed'<sup>17</sup> in Scripture. This is a gross overstatement. If this paper of Wenham's represents one of the most advanced and developed presentations of the case for Conditional Immortality (which it would purport to do) we should have grave misgivings if this is all that can be mustered on the side of those who argue that immortality is conditional.

Having now looked at the arguments presented by the Conditionalists and seen the weakness, inconsistencies and inconclusiveness of them, we need now to look at the Scriptures themselves and survey what they teach about the nature and duration of the soul.

We could spend a lot of time looking at numerous texts which imply that the soul is an immortal part of the person, but few would be conclusive. If we are honest, many could be read as if the soul is a synonym for life, the heart or the mind. It must also be remembered that, in the context of the current debate, it is no use to look at Scriptures which speak of the immortality of the righteous. The Conditionalist does not question that.

### Luke 12:19-20

One passage that, when read in a straightforward way, appears to be conclusive is Luke 12:19,20: 'And I will say to my soul "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years . . ." But God said to him "You fool. This night your soul will be required of you"'. This triple use of the Greek word *psyche* in two consecutive verses would appear to lead us to the conclusion that it refers to an inner part of man which survives death. This is because it is something within the man which he addresses, and something which God requires. No hint is given that the *psyche* will ever cease to be. This is the soul. If you translate it as life, self, mind etc, the verses become non-sensical. The only way to avoid this conclusion is to translate it in two different ways: self (twice in v.19) and life (v.20). It appears to be an extremely unnatural use of language to use the same word three times in the same breath and mean two different things by it. This is what Atkinson does (along with the NIV). He also separates his comment on v.19 from that on v.20 by a page and consequently draws no attention to the problem<sup>18</sup>.

### Matthew 10:38

Another key text is Matthew 10:38, 'Do not fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in Hell.' This is totally against Atkinson's assertion that 'We have seen that the nephesh [soul] dies when the body . . . dies'<sup>19</sup>. But Jesus says that it is possible in this world to kill the body, but not the soul. How does Atkinson deal with this verse? 'In this text we find the contrast between soul and body which sometimes occurs in the New Testament, though very seldom in the Old . . . Our text here taken in isolation is easily capable of implying the survival of the soul after the death of the body . . . But a careful study of the meaning of the word "soul" in the original language of the Old Testament, and also as we shall see of the New, shows that it is always con-

nected with a human being who is alive on earth and that it dies or is destroyed when death comes to him in the way that is so familiar to our experience. When we bear this in mind, the meaning of the Lord's words here becomes clear. To kill the body here means to take the present life on earth. But this does not kill the soul or the person himself. It only puts him to sleep. He is finally destroyed in the second death, when his person or self is killed for ever<sup>20</sup>. When compared with his earlier statement quoted above (i.e. 'we have seen that nephesh [soul] dies when the body dies. '), I think you will agree with me: Houdini would have been proud of him!! The contradiction is self-evident.

R.T. France, commenting on the same verse, stresses that soul also means 'life' and says, 'The intention is not to separate man into two parts, "body" and "soul", but to point out that there is more to man than his animal existence . . . "Soul" and "body" are again not two separable parts of man; each alone, and both together can be used to indicate that whole person<sup>21</sup>. ' If 'soul' and 'body' are in no way separable (as France states), how can the one be killed without the other? That is Jesus' assertion: 'Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul'. And how can the body be killed without the life being killed unless that life is deposited within some element of man's constitution other than the body? Matthew 10:28 must lead us to the conclusion that there is a part of man which survives death i.e. the soul. (What it means to 'destroy the soul', in Matthew 10:28 will have to wait until the eschatological aspect of this subject is considered.)

### Ecclesiastes 3:19-21

When Eryl Davies addresses the question "Is the Soul Immortal?" in his book *An Angry God?*, he makes very helpful reference to Ecclesiastes 3:19 – 21. 'Verse 19 teaches that there are similarities between men and beasts but nowhere is this seen more clearly than in their death (v.20). However, verse 21 draws attention to an important dissimilarity between humans and animals, namely, the fact that "the spirit of man . . . goeth upward and the spirit of the beast . . . goeth downward to the earth". We will not press the statement too far except to note man's spirit, unlike that of the animal, is directed beyond the grave with the strong implication of continuity and life<sup>22</sup>.'

### Three Key Texts

We must now turn to three key New Testament texts which refer directly to immortality. these verses state that God 'alone has immortality' (1 Timothy 6:16); those who do good 'seek for . . . immortality' (Romans 2:7); immortality has been 'brought to light through the gospel' (2 Timothy 1:10). From these, the Conditionalists' argument is that if only God is immortal, all creatures must be mortal and that immortality is promised only to believers, leaving unbelievers as mortal and therefore liable to extinction at death or at some time after death. An examination of these verses shows that the word 'immortality' (translated from the Greek *athanasia* and *aphtharsia* literally meaning 'no death' and 'no corruption' respectively) is being used to speak of something far

higher than what is often meant by immortality i.e. 'endless existence'.

As William Hendriksen concludes in his comments on 1 Timothy 6:16, 'For the believer immortality is therefore a redemptive concept. It is everlasting salvation. For God it is eternal blessedness. But while the believer has received immortality as one receives a drink of water from a fountain, God has it. It belongs to His very being. He is himself the Fountain<sup>23</sup>.'

### Immortality

This has led to Eryl Davies concluding that 'rather than using the term immortality it is more precise to refer to the soul's continuity and survival after death'<sup>24</sup>. While basically agreeing with that, I think we must be willing to recognize that language is not always precise and scientific and we must therefore work with it as given. For instance, when Jesus Christ asserted that 'the Father has life in himself' (John 5:26; cf 1 John 5:11) he meant far more than the life which Paul spoke of when he said that God 'gives to all life, breath, and all things' (Acts 17:25). But we continue to speak of 'life' in both contexts. I am, therefore, a little reluctant to make this modification as suggested by Dr Davies. An important reason for my reluctance is that it would seem that a major flaw in the reasoning of the Conditionalists is their attempt to use language in a rigid and scientific way. An example of this would be Basil Atkinson's treatment of Matthew 6:25: 'Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink . . . Is not life more than food . . .?' Because the Greek for life is *psyche* and can also be translated soul, he concludes that the association of *psyche*/life/soul 'with food and drink . . . shows that it [*psyche*] does not survive the body'<sup>25</sup>. The only way that such a conclusion can be valid is to assume that everywhere the word *psyche* appears it must mean precisely the same thing. Such an assumption is false. If it was true, the process of translating the Bible from the original languages into English would be much simpler. Although Atkinson makes this assumption and uses it in his reasoning in many places in his book, he is not consistent in the application of it when the same word *psyche* occurs three times in two consecutive verses, viz. Luke 12:19-20 (as seen earlier). One can only wonder if this is because to do so would not support his case in these verses.

### Summary

So, on the nature and duration of the soul we have seen (i) the weakness of the arguments used by those who believe that immortality is given to the soul only upon condition of obedience to the gospel; (ii) that there is biblical evidence to show that the souls of both the righteous and the wicked survive death (NB these verses do *not* automatically infer eternal survival); (iii) that some verses point towards the endless existence of the souls of believers and unbelievers; (iv) that the souls of the righteous eternally enjoy something infinitely greater than mere survival, described as 'immortality'.

Beyond this, John Blanchard is wise to state, 'If it can be

shown from Scripture that man has one of only two destinies, that the righteous will enjoy endless bliss in heaven and that the wicked will endure endless punishment in hell, then the doctrine of man's immortality (using the word in its widest sense) will be established regardless of the presence or absence of any direct Biblical statement on the subject<sup>26</sup>. This then, naturally moves us from the anthropological to the eschatological aspect of this study.

## The Punishment of the Lost – Its Nature and Duration

In this section I will deal with the four arguments that John Stott raises as those which he believes point in the direction of Annihilationism. I do this, firstly, because these four arguments comprehensively cover the issues of relevance to the nature and duration of the punishment of the wicked and secondly, because it is the writing of Stott which has been and will be most influential amongst Evangelicals in the United Kingdom. The four arguments 'relate to language, imagery, justice and universalism'<sup>27</sup>.

### 1. Language

What does the language of the following verses tell us about the nature and duration of the punishment of the unsaved: 'the wages of sin is death'; 'fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell'; 'the way of the ungodly shall perish'; 'these shall be punished with everlasting destruction' (Romans 6:23; Matthew 10:28; Psalm 1:6; 2 Thessalonians 1:9)? Upon our understanding of these few simple words hangs our understanding of eternal punishment.

#### Death

Atkinson states 'Death is a basic word with a simple meaning. The words "to die", "death", "dead" in Hebrew and Greek as in English mean simply the deprivation or extinction of life'<sup>28</sup>. Stott takes the next logical step, 'If to kill is to deprive the body of life, hell would seem to be the deprivation of both physical and spiritual life, that is, an extinction of being'<sup>29</sup>. The Annihilationists' view that punishment will immediately or eventually lead to annihilation is based on their view of death. But is it a biblical one?

We are first introduced to the concept of death in Genesis 2:17: 'for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.' However, Adam and Eve's death (in the sense that Atkinson and Stott take it) is not recorded for many years. So what happened? Their fellowship with God was broken (3:8), guilt fell on them (3:10) and they were excluded from the garden of Eden and the tree of life (3:23,24). That is how they died 'in the day' they ate of the forbidden fruit. Death is not annihilation but separation. Henri Blocher at the Fourth Edinburgh Conference said, 'The biblical idea of death does not involve non-existence, but, indeed, the loss of life. Life is ability to act and to project, life is sharing in exchanges; total death is isolation, paralysis'<sup>30</sup>. Death then is entrance into a totally different order of existence from that which went before, a severance of what once belonged together. The Annihilationists' view of death seems to have more in common with secular atheistic philosophy than with Scripture.

What we see from Genesis 3 is that spiritual death is the

separation of the soul from God. This is supported by comparing Ephesians 2:1, 'dead in trespasses and sins' with Ephesians 4:18, 'alienated from the life of God'. Matthew 10:28, 'Do not fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul', shows that physical death is the separation of the soul from the body. What then does the use of the language of death in connection with the final state of the last tell us about that final state? Revelation 20:14 describes hell as 'the second death'. In Matthew 10:28 Jesus, having spoken of killing the body but not the soul, describes hell as the place where both soul and body will be destroyed. The second death, then, is the separation of the soul and body from God. This is just how Jesus described it: 'Depart from me . . . Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and cast him into outer darkness' (Matthew 7:23; 22:13).

The language of death, therefore, causes no problem to the doctrine of endless, conscious punishment but rather points towards it.

#### Perishing and Destruction

What then of perishing and destruction? John Stott puts it this way, 'It would seem strange . . . if the people who are said to suffer destruction are in fact not destroyed; and . . . it is "difficult to imagine a perpetually inconclusive process of perishing"<sup>31</sup>. The assumption Stott is making is that destruction is to be equated with extinction and annihilation. Atkinson goes into great detail to prove the point<sup>32</sup>. In summary, he argues from verses like Matthew 9:17 'and the wineskins are ruined' (Greek *apollumi*, literally to perish) and concludes that to perish is to become extinct. But the question must be, have the wineskins totally ceased to be or have they become irreparably damaged, unable to fulfil their original function? The answer is obviously the latter. To put it another way, this is consistent with what we have seen of the biblical view of death: the wineskin has entered into a totally different order of existence from that which it held before.

Careful study of other texts show that destruction is not to be equated with annihilation. Let me give just two examples: 'Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture' (Jeremiah 23:1); 'Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died' (Romans 14:15). Both of these texts refer to serious, painful, harmful damage inflicted by one upon another. Neither the sheep nor the offended brother ceases to exist. However, their relationship with God and others has been seriously damaged. *Apollumi* is also used in the sense of 'lost': the lost sheep (Luke 15:4), the lost coin (Luke 15:9), the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matthew 10:6), the lost, whom Jesus came to seek and to save (Luke 19:10). None of these had been annihilated. Peter speaks of the days of Noah: 'the world that then existed perished, being flooded with water' (2 Peter 3:6). There is no suggestion that God annihilated the world and then created a new one. But the earth went through a catastrophic period of judgment – it perished.

Annihilationists also look at the Greek word *olethros* (literally 'to destroy'). This occurs only four times in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 5:5 the immoral man is to be delivered over to Satan 'for the destruction of the flesh'; in 1 Thessalonians 5:3 the final judgment of the wicked is in view: 'then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labour

pains upon a pregnant woman'; 2 Thessalonians 1:9 says that unbelievers 'shall be punished with everlasting destruction'; and 1 Timothy 6:9 states that harmful lusts 'drown men in destruction and perdition'. The nature of the destruction is most clearly defined in 1 Thessalonians 5:3. It is like the incredible pains of a woman in labour. She is not annihilated! The flesh (i.e. sinful nature) of the immoral man in 1 Corinthians 5 is not annihilated but dealt a severe blow, through godly sorrow and repentance. So, what is the 'everlasting destruction' of 2 Thessalonians 1:9 if it is not the everlasting experience of pain, torment and sorrow? Because this destruction is everlasting there is no possibility of change either by later annihilation or by post mortem conversion.

Let Henri Blocher summarise this section on Language for me: 'it remains unlikely that "death" and "destruction" in Biblical parlance should be construed as the extinction of existence . . . the language of Scripture . . . seems to insist on the durational, permanent character of the state of torment, and to exclude any later change, anything beyond the outcome of the last judgement. One can sense a paradox in the concept of permanence in destruction which the Bible itself expresses when it speaks of "second death", "undying worm", and tradition sharpens, e.g. in the words of Saint Gregory the Great: "a deathless death, and endless end, a ceaseless cessation, since the death lives, the end always begins, and cessation knows not how the cease"'.<sup>33</sup>

## 2. Imagery

The main concern of Annihilationists at this point is the imagery of fire used in Scripture to characterize hell. Stott states: 'The main function of fire is not to cause pain, but to secure destruction . . . it would be very odd if what is thrown into it proves indestructible.' The IVP Illustrated Bible Dictionary says, 'The fire of hell is unquenchable (Mark 9:43), eternal (Matthew 18:8) . . . However, the New Testament leaves the door open for the belief that while hell as a manifestation of God's implacable wrath against sin is unending, the existence of those who suffer in it may not be.'<sup>34</sup>

In Matthew 25:46 the Lord declares that the unrighteous 'will go away into everlasting punishment'. What is the nature and duration of that punishment? Jesus has already described it in verse 41: 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.' This shows that the everlasting punishment of the wicked is the everlasting fire and that the punishment is the same for the devil, his angels and all the wicked. Is it possible that while the fire of hell is eternal that those condemned to that fire will at some point be annihilated? Revelation 20:10 gives the answer with clarity: 'The devil . . . was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone . . . And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.' This verse shows that the punishment for the devil will be, firstly, conscious (because of the use of the word 'torment') and endless (because of the use of the phrase 'day and night forever and forever'). Linking it to the fire of Matthew 25:41, into which the devil, his angels and unbelievers are cast, shows that unbelievers also suffer conscious, endless punishment. It is hard to imagine how the Spirit of God through the Scriptures could have made a clearer case for endless, conscious punishment if these

verses are deemed inconclusive. It is everlasting, just as surely as life is everlasting for the redeemed. It explicitly involves torment day and night for ever and ever.

What do Annihilationists make of these verses? Atkinson makes much of the use of the word 'punishment' in Matthew 25:46. He says that if eternal conscious suffering was intended, Jesus would have had to have spoken of 'everlasting punishing'. He is saying that it is the effect of the punishment, not the process of it, which is being spoken of.<sup>35</sup> This approach is flawed for two reasons: (i) the division is an artificial one. As one writer has put it: 'A punishment that is not felt is not a punishment. Someone cannot be punished eternally unless that someone is there to receive the punishment . . . Once we have said the word "punishment" we have also said, at least by implication the word "conscious"'.<sup>36</sup>; (ii) he fails to link Matthew 25:46 with verse 41 and Revelation 20:10 (as discussed above).

To further attempt to avoid the obvious conclusion of these verses Atkinson directs attention to Revelation 14:9 – 11 where it states that, 'And the smoke of their torment ascends for ever and ever.' He concludes, 'The ascent of the smoke shows that the stroke of judgment is over.'<sup>37</sup> Stott makes the same assumption, 'It is not the torment itself but its "smoke" (symbol of the completed burning) which will be "for ever and ever"'.<sup>38</sup> They are assuming that smoke never rises from a fire until everything on the fire has been destroyed. In actual fact it is smoke that can often be seen from a fire *before* the flames. Such an argument therefore, must be described as fallacious. As the smoke rises eternally, the object being burnt must be burning eternally. Therefore this verse again indicates the eternal punishment of the lost.

I have now shown that the biblical use of imagery to describe hell, far from implying that punishment is temporal, adds further weight to other Bible teaching that punishment is eternal and will be suffered consciously. This fire is an eternal fire which is seen to torment endlessly.

One more thing needs to be said by way of conclusion of this section of imagery. Some Evangelicals conclude that as symbols are used, the reality will not be as awful as the symbols imply. When commenting on the 'flaming fire' of vengeance in 2 Thessalonians 1:8, William Hendriksen set the record straight: 'To speak about a "mere" symbol in such connections is never right. The reality which answers to the symbol is always far more terrible (or more glorious) than the symbol itself. Human language is stretched almost to breaking point in order to convey the terrible character of the coming of the Lord in relation to the wicked'.<sup>39</sup>

## 3. Justice

John Wenham is honest to his own concerns when he writes, 'My problem is, not that God punishes, but that the punishment traditionally ascribed to God [i.e. endless torment] seems neither to square with Scripture nor to be just . . . I cannot see that endless punishment is either loving or just . . . Unending torment speaks to me of sadism, not justice'.<sup>40</sup> John Stott considers that if the traditional doctrine of endless punishment is correct there would be 'a serious disproportion between sins consciously committed in time and torment consciously experienced throughout eternity'.<sup>41</sup>

The question really is this: is it possible to maintain the doctrine of everlasting conscious punishment of the wicked alongside the biblical doctrine of the justice of God? Two things need to be highlighted at this point: firstly, we need to remember that our minds are finite and, therefore, even if we were not able to fully reconcile endless punishment with the justice of God this would not allow us to discard or adjust our doctrine of hell when (as I have been showing) it is firmly based on Scripture. There must be a willingness to allow for the element of mystery. But, secondly, I maintain that the traditional view of eternal punishment is in no way guilty of militating against the justice of God. This I will now show by surveying the arguments used by the traditionalists in defence of this point.

W.G.T. Shedd, in his book *The Doctrine of Endless Punishment*, brings forward five arguments which we need to consider. Shedd's first argument is that 'endless punishment is rational, in the first place, because it is supported by the human conscience'.<sup>42</sup> In developing his theme he states, 'Natural religion, as well as revealed, teaches the despair of some men in the future life. Plato . . . Pinder . . . Plutarch describe the punishment of the incorrigibly wicked as eternal and hopeless'.<sup>43</sup> This is extremely weak ground to stand on because firstly, it is not biblical and secondly, many could be quoted with completely contrary views. Shedd has done the orthodox position a disservice by including this argument, but especially by placing it first in his list. Shedd's fifth argument uses the 'history of morals' where he tries to support the doctrine from the belief that societies with sound ethics believe in future retribution. I would not want to use this argument for the same reason.

'In the second place' Shedd writes, 'endless punishment is rational, because of the endlessness of sin'.<sup>44</sup> He argues that 'sin is actually being added to sin, in the future life, and the amount of guilt is accumulating'.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, according to Shedd, endless punishment is just because the wicked continue to sin in hell i.e. sin itself is endless in the unsaved. This view is supported by orthodox theologians such as Charles Hodge and A.H. Strong.<sup>46</sup> Dr Eryl Davies asserts that 'sinners continue to sin even in hell'.<sup>47</sup> Is this the biblical view of hell? Shedd supports it from Romans 2:5 . . . 'treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God'. But the verse states 'you are treasuring up . . .' not 'you will be treasuring up . . .' i.e. it refers to this life, not the next. The biblical view of hell is stated in 2 Corinthians 5:10: 'We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in *the body* according to what *he has done*.' Punishment is received for the sin of this life. I agree with Henri Blocher: 'Strikingly, those who affirm continuance in sin in the fate of the lost make the feeblest attempt at any Scriptural proof . . . Supporting reasons being so weak, we may observe that the thesis of sin continuing is found nowhere in Scripture'.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, in my view, this is an unhelpful argument to use, which has had detrimental effects upon the orthodox cause, allowing Annihilationists to caricature the traditional view of hell as a 'colony of devils'. (More will be said of relevance to this point under Stott's fourth argument for universalism).

This leads to Shedd's fourth argument: endless punishment is reasonable because it is 'proved by the preference

of the wicked themselves'.<sup>49</sup> He believes that 'the impenitent spirit prefers hell to heaven'<sup>50</sup> and that "Milton correctly represents Satan as saying ' . . . in heaven much worse would be my state'<sup>51</sup>. He asserts, 'Sin ultimately assumes a fiendish form and degree. It is pure wickedness without regret or sorrow'.<sup>52</sup>

Yet the picture given by the Lord Jesus of the rich man 'being in torments in Hades' is one of longing to be in heaven or at least to know some of the comforts of heaven. 'He lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. Then he cried and said "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am tormented in this flame"' (Luke 16:23, 24). Abraham explains: 'Between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us' (v.26). This makes clear that one of the rich man's preferred options was to pass to heaven. There is nothing that vaguely suggests that he prefers hell to heaven. On the contrary, he would prefer heaven to hell. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of those who 'fall short of the grace of God' (Hebrews 12:15) i.e. the lost. He then presents a parallel between the eternity of the lost and Esau: 'he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears' (Hebrews 12:17). Part of the 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matthew 22:13) will be the longing that hell could be turned into heaven, with the realization that it cannot. Consequently, I believe this is another very unhelpful attempt to prove the justice of endless punishment. (Again, more will be said of relevance to this point under Stott's fourth argument for universalism.)

The one argument of Shedd's five to be supported is this: 'endless punishment is rational because sin is an infinite evil'.<sup>53</sup> The reason behind this is that sin is always against an infinite being, with infinite holiness i.e. God (cf Psalm 51:4, 'Against you, you only have I sinned . . .'). In the Scriptures, (as well as in most, if not all, judicial systems) the seriousness of a particular sin varies depending on the person sinned against. God's judgement of leprosy upon Miriam for the sin of criticism is understood only when we recognize that this sin was against Moses, the servant of God (Numbers 12). When David refused to kill Saul it was because he was 'the anointed of the Lord' (1 Samuel 24:6). Is it not this principle which lies behind the judgement of the Lord upon Judas, 'The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. It would be good for that man if he had not been born' (Matthew 26:24)? It was 'the Lord of glory' whom Judas was betraying. What needs to be recognized to understand the justice of God in punishing sin eternally is that every sin is a sin against him 'who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light' (1 Timothy 6:16). Or, to put it another way, we need to understand sin for what it is. Every sin is a sin against God, whose majesty and person are infinite. This makes every sin immeasurably evil. Therefore, justice demands that infinite evil must be punished with everlasting torment.

Before we move on, we need to recognize the fatal mistake in the reasoning of Annihilationists on this point. Their idea is that there will come a time when the wicked will have fully satisfied justice by a period of torment in hell and that

annihilation must then take place. But this actually proves too much. As John Blanchard has reasoned, 'If this was so, surely a God of justice would then welcome them into heaven rather than consign them to non-existence? The idea that sinners pay their dues and are then "rewarded" with annihilation is not merely improbable, it is immoral<sup>54</sup>.'

#### 4. Universalism

Under this heading, John Stott explains that while he is most certainly not a Universalist, those texts which tend to be used to support Universalism appear to him to be difficult to reconcile with the eternal existence of the impenitent in hell. This leads Stott to conclude that Annihilationism is the only solution.

Allow Henri Blocher to give the biblical perspective on these important verses: 'The theory of sin forever flourishing ignores the message of Christ's perfect victory over sin and all evil. "Every knee shall bow and every tongue confess . . ." (Phillipians 2:10), those of the lost included. It cannot mean mere outward hypocritical and forced agreement; what sense could there be in any outward show in the light of that Day, when all the secrets shall be exposed? (Romans 2:16) . . . Sinners are forced, then, to confess the truth, but they are forced by the truth itself, by its overwhelming evidence and spiritual authority; they can no longer refuse to see, they cannot think otherwise<sup>55</sup>.' More weight is given to this from 1 Corinthians 15:25 "He must reign till he has put all enemies under his feet." These so called 'universalistic texts' must not be overlooked by Evangelicals. But they do not lead us to Universalism, as Liberals suggest, or Annihilationism, as Stott suggests. They rather lead us to conclude that Christ has complete and eternal victory over all sin, even in hell. This is the reason why I believe Shedd is wrong to use the arguments of 'the endlessness of sin' and 'the preference of the wicked' to support the justice of the doctrine of endless punishment.

We have now looked at the four areas of language, imagery, justice and universalism which comprehensively cover the arguments used by Annihilationists against the traditional doctrine of endless, conscious punishment. To summarise, there are three conclusions which we have arrived at concerning the nature and duration of the punishment of the lost: (i) none of the arguments raised by Annihilationists actually contradicts the orthodox doctrine (apart from a couple of peripheral views held by some theologians i.e. 'the endlessness of sin' and 'the wicked preferring hell to heaven' which have no bearing on the conclusion; (ii) one of their arguments is complementary to the orthodox view (i.e. the so-called 'universalistic texts' which speak of Christ's complete victory over sin. This has been shown to have no bearing on the endlessness of punishment but rather on the fact that the lost will not sin in hell); (iii) most of the issues raised by their arguments, when carefully examined, actually support the orthodox view (i.e. the language of death, destroy, perish actually point to separation and a totally different and devastated order of existence, not Annihilation; the imagery of fire is seen to represent torment forever and ever; and the question of justice actually demands endless punishment because of the infinite gravity of sin).

Thus I see no reasons to support Annihilationism and every reason to maintain the biblical doctrine of endless, conscious punishment of the lost.

Having completed these two sections on the nature and duration of the soul and the nature and duration of the punishment of the lost (i.e. the anthropological and eschatological aspects of the subject) I want us to consider:

### Two Challenges From Within

These are challenges that I perceive are being made upon the doctrine of endless, conscious punishment of the wicked from those who actually believe it.

#### 1. Will Christians Rejoice in the Wrath?

In Prof. Donald Macleod's excellent book *Behold Your God* he devotes a chapter to the question "Will Christians Rejoice in the Wrath?"<sup>56</sup> In recognition of the fact that he stands against the position held by 'giants' like Jonathan Edwards<sup>57</sup> and Robert Murray McCheyne<sup>58</sup> he respectfully answers in the negative. Another similar question is asked by Paul Helm in the Banner of Truth Magazine by way of criticism of Eryl Davies' *An Angry God?*: 'Is there not a sense in which the final judgement is not a glorious vindication of the wrath of God but a sad and mournful occasion?'<sup>59</sup> Let me make absolutely clear that I am not suggesting that either of these men would see themselves as challenging the traditional doctrine of hell as a whole, but only a peripheral and 'non-essential' element of it. However, my concerns are both biblical and pragmatic. From the biblical angle, I must disagree with both Macleod and Helm. Verses of importance are Revelation 18:20; 19:1 – 4. The context of both passages is the judgement of God on the world and the response in heaven to this event. 'Rejoice over her . . . for God has avenged you on her' (Revelation 18:20). 'For true and righteous are his judgements . . . And again they said "Alleluia! And her smoke rises up forever and ever"' (Revelation 19:2,3). Homer Hailey comments, 'This is not an expression of glee over the fall of a great city or people, but a rejoicing over the defeat of evil and the victory of righteousness<sup>60</sup>.' We are given another glimpse of the judgement in Isaiah 63. The One who is 'mighty to save' (i.e. the Lord Jesus, v.1) is seen approaching with his clothes spattered with red. He gives this as his explanation, 'I have trodden the winepress alone . . . I have trodden them in my anger, and trampled them in my fury; Their blood is sprinkled upon my garments, and I have stained all my robes' (v.3 cf Revelation 14:19, 20; 19:15). Is this portrayed as a 'sad and regretful occasion', as Helm suggests? No. The One who has judged in anger is described as being 'glorious in his apparel' (v.1) even though blood-stained (NIV 'robed in splendour', NASB 'majestic in his apparel').

However, if my only concern was biblical, I would not have included these comments in this paper. The questions Macleod and Helm have raised are, in a sense, peripheral to the current debate because they certainly do not affect the endlessness of future punishment. But I have very real pragmatic concerns for this reason: those who have swung from an orthodox doctrine of hell to Annihilationism have begun their journey with an emotional distaste for the orthodox



view. Stott says that 'emotionally, I find the concept intolerable'<sup>61</sup>. Atkinson said that it was his hope 'to show that the teaching of Scripture about the final state of the lost is far less *burdensome*' than the traditional view<sup>62</sup>. Therefore, if it is believed that even in heaven the saints will find no cause to rejoice in the righteous judgement of God upon the wicked and will see it as a sad and regretful occasion, what hope have we of ever coming to terms with the facts of future judgement now (when our understanding is far from perfect)? I, therefore, believe that there is a real danger that the comments of Donald Macleod and Paul Helm could lead some to take the next step of rearranging their theology in order to erase the doctrine of endless, conscious punishment from their minds. Their comments may encourage some in their search for an alternative and allow them to justify their process of escapism. This, I believe, is a very real (however unintentional) challenge from within.

## 2. Silence Threatens the Doctrine

J.H. Moorhead in his survey of 'Death and Afterlife in Protestant Thought 1840 - 1925' (speaking in the American context) found that 'the real decline in the traditional hell came as a result of a silence about, rather than an explicit attack upon, that doctrine'<sup>63</sup>. He wrote, 'The decline of hell . . . was not primarily the result of open questioning of the doctrine. The outspoken critics probably never accounted for more than a minority of the Protestants. Far more important was a growing silence on the subject. Even those who adhered to the traditional notion often gave it merely a passing nod'<sup>64</sup>. I suggest that similar research (if ever undertaken) of late twentieth century Evangelicalism in Britain would reach the same conclusion. While the number of 'Evangelicals' explicitly opposed to the traditional doctrine are few in number there is widespread confusion and disbelief in the pew. The greatest cause for this is probably the silence of preachers on the subject rather than the influence of outright opponents. This silence is very real, and maybe the most powerful challenge to the orthodox doctrine; and it comes from within.

The biblical doctrine of endless punishment needs to be preached with its biblical emphasis. It must be preached regularly, systematically, simply, directly, urgently, passionately and compassionately. It must not be avoided or marginalized or treated with a 'passing nod' out of fear of offence and misunderstanding, not only of unbelievers, but of believers as well. The consequences of neglect are inestimable. Sinners must be faithfully warned of their future and urged to repent and find salvation in Jesus Christ. Saints must both be comforted by realizing what they have been saved from and warned of what their unbelieving friends will one day enter unless they are first converted.

We need to be confident of the biblical foundation of the doctrine of endless, conscious, punishment and preach it in the power of the Holy Spirit sent from heaven.

Let C.H. Spurgeon set the standard as he preaches on the hopelessness of the lost: 'They have not even the hope of dying - the hope of being annihilated. They are forever - forever lost! On every chain in hell, there is written "forever". In the fires, there blaze out the words "forever". Up above their heads, they read, "forever" . . . Oh! if I could tell you tonight

that hell would one day be burned out, and that those who were lost might be saved, there would be a jubilee in hell at the very thought of it. But it cannot be - it is "FOREVER" they are "cast into outer darkness"<sup>65</sup>.'

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined the issues involved in the current debate amongst Evangelicals concerning the final state of the wicked. Having come to the Scriptures afresh, seeking to set aside all unjustified presuppositions, we have seen that the traditional doctrine of endless, conscious punishment is indeed biblical. Sadly, at times, it has been supported by poor arguments and inappropriate texts. But the central issues remain unscathed despite current attacks.

At times, the content of this paper has, of necessity, been academic, but the issues involved are never academic. They are momentous. It is not only our minds but our hearts also which need to be moved by this doctrine. In closing, I allow John Donne to underscore the point: 'When all is done, the hell of hells, the torment of torments, is the everlasting absence of God and the everlasting impossibility of returning to His presence . . . to fall out of the hands of the living God, is a horror beyond our expression, beyond our imagination . . . What Tophet is not Paradise, what Brimstone is not Amber, what gnashing is not comfort, what gnawing of the worme is not a tickling, what torment is not a marriage bed to this damnation, to be secluded eternally, eternally, eternally from the sight of God?'

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# CONFESSIONS OF A WOULD-BE ANNIHILATIONIST

*Colin Sedgwick*

**KEYWORDS:** Annihilationism, hell, traditionalist, eternal, punishment, fire, death, sin, immortality, torment, Gehenna, fear, judgement, freedom, moral health

## Wanting to be converted, but not quite being able to manage it

It's a strange situation to find oneself in! But I can think of no better way to describe my sensation on attempting a study of the two main views of hell: as *ongoing suffering* (the 'traditional' view); or as *extinction* (the 'annihilationist' or 'conditional immortality'<sup>1</sup> view).

The question of hell must gnarl away at the mind of every thoughtful and orthodox Christian; it certainly did at mine. But, to my shame, I shelved it for more than 30 years before eventually deciding to try to tackle it head-on. In common, I

suspect, with many, I had taken lazy refuge in what might be called the standard C. S. Lewis line – that hell is the chosen destiny of those who refuse to yield to God, that 'the doors of hell are locked on the *inside*'.<sup>2</sup> Not, of course, that this line is without truth; but its danger is that it allows one to sidestep the sheer enormity of the doctrine, to shovel it away into the periphery of one's mind with a sub-conscious 'So that's all right, then', and to focus on more congenial aspects of the Christian faith. Most of us probably regard hell as a belief rather than a conviction – something, that is, to which we subscribe out of dutiful orthodoxy, rather than something which grips us as an integral part of our faith. Surveying my own practice as a pastor and teacher, and comparing it with that of others, it seemed clear that like the revels of Hamlet's Denmark the teaching of hell was something more honoured in the breach than the observance, something genteelly ignored in most Christian and not least evangelical circles,