

## WHAT, IN HELL, IS GOING ON?:

An Examination of Annihilationism and the Boundaries of Evangelicalism

Presented by Lloyd A. Harsch on 14 November 2001, at the national meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Colorado Springs, CO.

The 31 January 2000, edition of *U.S. News & World Report* has hell as its cover story as it did on 25 March 1991. *Christianity Today* focused on the same topic on 27 May 1991, under the title of “Heaven and Hell.” Hell is a hot topic. Especially in Texas where there are August days when one wonders if the Lord had already returned and left us behind. This attention seems to be part of a growing interest within present-day culture in death and the life beyond that is partially piqued by reports of near death experiences.<sup>1</sup>

The uniformity of opinion which once characterized evangelicals on hell no longer exists. In prior debates on the subject, evangelicals debated with their counterparts on whether hell existed or not. In recent years, there has been growing discourse within evangelical circles in regard to the purpose and function of hell.

The traditional view holds that individuals who reject God will go to hell where they will experience eternal, conscious torment. The non-evangelical view states that hell will be empty, since a loving God would never send anyone there. A third view, known as conditional immortality or annihilationism, is now gaining strength within the evangelical community.<sup>2</sup> In this debate, the ultimate question is, “What, in hell, is going on?”

This third view, held by Clark H. Pinnock, John W. Wenham, John R. W. Stott, and others, will be examined and critiqued in this paper. This view has strong representation within the British Commonwealth and growing popularity across the pond.

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<sup>1</sup>Alan W. Gomes, “Evangelicals and the Annihilation of Hell,” (Part 1) *Christian Research Journal* 13 (Spring 1991): 14.

<sup>2</sup>Clark H. Pinnock, review of *The Other Side of the Good News: Confronting the Contemporary Challenges to Jesus' Teaching on Hell* by Larry Dixon, in *Calvin Theological Journal* 29 (November 1994): 554. Pinnock credits the rapid growth to John Stott's public support for the view. For continuity, this study will refer to supporters of this view with the term which Stephan H. Travis utilizes: conditionalists.

## CONDITIONAL IMMORTALITY

The foundational key to understanding the conditional immortality view rests on the contention that the soul is not innately immortal. According to conditionalists, the immortality of the soul is a Platonic concept which was adopted by the Church and proclaimed as official dogma by the Roman Catholic Church at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1512.<sup>3</sup> Wenham states that “conditional immortality was generally accepted in the early church until its [the church’s] thinkers tried to wed Plato’s doctrine of the immortality of the soul to the teachings of the Bible.”<sup>4</sup>

This philosophical marriage led to the conclusion that since the soul was immortal, it had to spend eternity somewhere. The result was either the universalism of Clement and Origen or the eternal punishment view of Tertullian and Augustine. It was not until the Second Council of Constantinople in 553 that the annihilation of the damned was condemned as one the nine Anathemas of Emperor Justinian I (527-565) against Origen.<sup>5</sup> The view did not resurface until after the Reformation nor begin to attract adherents until the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup>

Conditionalists contend that long tradition is the strongest support for the traditional view.<sup>7</sup> E. Earle Ellis contends that the Old Testament presents humanity as a unity of body and soul and that Plato’s body/soul dualism, with its concept of an immortal soul, is foreign to Scripture.<sup>8</sup> Pinnock asserts, “This is how the traditional view of hell got constructed: add a belief in divine judgment after death (scriptural) to a belief in the immortality of the soul (unscriptural), and you have Augustine’s terrible doctrine.”<sup>9</sup>

Traditionalists disagree. Robert A. Peterson argues that the early church Fathers

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<sup>3</sup>David L. Edwards and John Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 316; Clark H. Pinnock, “The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent,” *Criswell Theological Review* 4 (Spring 1990): 253; John W. Wenham, *The Goodness of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1974); reprinted as *The Enigma of Evil: Can We Believe in the Goodness of God?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 27-28; Stephen H. Travis, *I Believe in the Second Coming of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1982), 171; John P. Newport, *Life's Ultimate Questions: A Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1989; reprint, Fort Worth: Scripta Publishing, 1994), 274.

<sup>4</sup>Wenham, 36. E. Earle Ellis cites several patristic writers who advocated conditional immortality. E. Earle Ellis, “New Testament Teaching on Hell,” in *The Reader Must Understand: Eschatology in Bible and Theology*, ed. K. E. Brower and M. W. Elliott (Leicester, UK: Apollos, 1997), 199-205.

<sup>5</sup>Wenham, 28.

<sup>6</sup>J. H. Leckie, *The World to Come and Final Destiny*, 2d ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1922), 224-25.

<sup>7</sup>Pinnock, “Destruction,” 257; Stott, *Evangelical Essentials*, 319.

<sup>8</sup>Ellis, 208-9.

<sup>9</sup>Pinnock, “Destruction,” 253.

taught hell out of faithfulness to the Bible, not Plato.<sup>10</sup> However, he is silent regarding the influence of Greek thought on the early church. Ellis so firmly roots his argument in the Old Testament, that he leaves no room in the New Testament for progressive revelation. John Sanders, a conditionalist supporter, acknowledges that “what transpired was just as much the Christianization of Hellenism as Christian writers, brought up in the Hellenic tradition, worked out how to be a Christian in that context.”<sup>11</sup>

Conditionalists assert that only God is immortal (1 Ti 1:7; 6:16).<sup>12</sup> Humanity’s creation in God’s image does not extend to his immortality. Philip Hughes contends that humanity was created “both potentially immortal and potentially mortal.”<sup>13</sup> The soul’s immortality is a gift from God which he gives to those who accept it (Ro 6:23). Those who reject God, do not receive this gift. Hughes concludes: “The immortality which was potentially ours at creation and was forfeited in the fall is now really ours in Christ, in whom we are created anew and brought to our true identity.”<sup>14</sup>

Traditionalists share the view that immortality is a gift from God but believe that God gives eternal life to all humanity.<sup>15</sup> The death that came with the Fall was the death of humanity’s intimate relationship with God, not the cessation of its created immortality. In his critique of conditional immortality, Larry Dixon states that traditionalists do not teach the absolute indestructibility of the soul.<sup>16</sup> Alan W. Gomes adds that “the real issue is not whether God *could* annihilate the wicked, but whether there is any reason to think that God in fact intends to do so.”<sup>17</sup> Pinnock admits that conditional immortality does not rule out God giving immortality to the finally impenitent, but for reasons to be explained later believes that God does not do so.<sup>18</sup>

In *Evangelical Essentials*, Stott presents the conditional immortality of the soul and outlines his support for the annihilation of the wicked according to four categories.<sup>19</sup> This framework will be followed in the ensuing discussion.

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<sup>10</sup>Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment*, with Forewords by John F. MacArthur, Jr. and David F. Wells (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1995), 177.

<sup>11</sup>Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 59-60.

<sup>12</sup>Edwards and Stott, *Evangelical Essentials*, 316.

<sup>13</sup>Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), 400.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 401.

<sup>15</sup>Peterson, 177; David F. Wells, “Everlasting Punishment,” *Christianity Today* 31 (20 March 1987): 41; Newport, 277.

<sup>16</sup>Larry Dixon, *The Other Side of the Good News: Confronting the Contemporary Challenges to Jesus’ Teaching on Hell*, with a Foreword by J. I. Packer (Wheaton, IL: BridgePoint Books, 1992), 27. See also Gomes, 17.

<sup>17</sup>Gomes, 17.

<sup>18</sup>Pinnock, “Destruction,” 253.

<sup>19</sup>Edwards and Edwards and Stott, *Evangelical Essentials*, 313-320.

## BIBLICAL LANGUAGE OF HELL

Conditionalists allege that the vocabulary of destruction in the Bible supports annihilation.<sup>20</sup> For example, the Greek verb *apollumi* means “to destroy.” Mt 10:28, a quote of Jesus, is a key verse for conditionalists:

Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.<sup>21</sup> (NIV)

This verse implies the annihilation of the wicked. Relevant intertestamental literature also points in this direction.<sup>22</sup> Stott reasons: “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>23</sup> He concludes that “It would seem strange . . . if people who are said to suffer destruction are in fact not destroyed.”<sup>24</sup>

Traditionalists counter by showing that *apollumi* can also be used figuratively.<sup>25</sup> In Ro 14:15 it refers to “ruining/destroying” a relationship with a brother in Christ. The wineskins in Lk 5:37 are “ruined,” but do not cease to exist and in the parables of the “lost” sheep and son, those missing are not annihilated, only their location is unknown.<sup>26</sup> Employing the figurative use of this word in opposition to the normally understood definition is unconvincing and a strange role reversal for people who take the Bible seriously.<sup>27</sup> However, it cannot be dismissed altogether.

A more convincing traditionalist argument centers on the word for eternal, *aionios*; particularly in Mt 25:46. After noting the return of the Son of Man and his separating the sheep from the goats, Jesus concludes: “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life” (NIV). Traditionalists contend that this teaches the eternity of both life and punishment.

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<sup>20</sup>For a Greek word study in support of annihilation see Stephen H. Travis, *Christ and the Judgment of God: Divine Retribution in the New Testament*, Foundations for Faith Series (Basingstoke, Hants, England: Marshall Pickering, 1986), 65-77.

<sup>21</sup>Additional texts referring to the destruction of the wicked are: Mt 7:13; Gal 6:8; Php 1:28, 3:19; Heb 10:39; Jas 4:12; and 2 Pe 2:1-3.

<sup>22</sup>Travis, *Christ and Judgment*, 66.

<sup>23</sup>Edwards and Stott, *Evangelical Essentials*, 315.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 316.

<sup>25</sup>For an excellently documented word study of relevant passages, see David George Moore, *The Battle for Hell: A Survey and Evaluation of Evangelicals' Growing Attraction to the Doctrine of Annihilationism* (New York: University Press of America, 1995) and Robert L. Reymond, “Dr. John Stott on Hell,” *Presbyterion* 16 (Spring 1990): 41-59.

<sup>26</sup>Moore, 18-19.

<sup>27</sup>Wells warns against an “overly literal translation,” 42.

Conditionalists approach this text differently. Pinnock and Stott unconvincingly claim that Jesus does not define the nature of eternal life or death. Therefore, he is only stating that there will be two destinies, not that those destinies will be eternal.<sup>28</sup>

Wenham interprets “eternal” in the same figurative way as does contemporary Jewish thought which sees two contrasting ages: the present age and the age to come. He asserts that Jesus’ intent was to state the finality of what happens when the age to come is inaugurated.<sup>29</sup>

Conditionalists hold that it is the results of destruction that are eternal. The wicked are destroyed for eternity.<sup>30</sup> The eternality of the situation refers to a destiny which is final and irreversible, not necessarily to a conscious state.<sup>31</sup> Pinnock contends that this passage does not teach “eternal punishing, but eternal punishment.”<sup>32</sup> As additional support, conditionalists use 2 Th 1:9, “They will be punished with everlasting destruction” (NIV).

David Moore correctly observes that such a position regarding Mt 25:46 introduces two different definitions for the same word in one sentence. He states, “Whatever is true of the punishment being eternal must equally be so with the eternal that modifies life.”<sup>33</sup> While *aionios* can mean a long, but definite time, Scot McKnight, in his study of Matthew’s use of the term, claims that Matthew never uses *aionios* in the limited sense, only in the sense of immeasurable time.<sup>34</sup> Gomes notes, “One cannot limit the duration of punishment for the wicked without at the same time limiting the duration of eternal life for the redeemed.”<sup>35</sup>

Gomes also points out that the word *basanizo* means to torment or torture and by its very nature, demands a sentient subject.<sup>36</sup> Dixon adds that demons expect torture in hell (Mt 8:29; Lk 8:28; Mk 5:7).<sup>37</sup> Could human occupants of hell expect anything less?

## BIBLICAL IMAGERY OF HELL

The fires of hell have long captured the human imagination and, described in graphic detail, have been used by revivalists as a motive to encourage sinners to repent.

<sup>28</sup>Pinnock, “Destruction,” 256; Edwards and Stott, *Evangelical Essentials*, 317.

<sup>29</sup>Wenham, 36.

<sup>30</sup>Travis, *Christ and Judgment*, 67.

<sup>31</sup>William Neil and Stephen H. Travis, *More Difficult Sayings of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1981), 87.

<sup>32</sup>Clark H. Pinnock, “Fire, Then Nothing,” *Christianity Today* 31 (20 March 1987): 40. See also Wenham, 36.

<sup>33</sup>Moore, 23. See also Wells, 41.

<sup>34</sup>Scot McKnight, “Eternal Consequences or Eternal Consciousness?” in *Through No Fault of Their Own?: The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*, ed. William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 153.

<sup>35</sup>Gomes, 18.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup>Dixon, 94.

The argument based on biblical imagery centers on passages describing these fires. Conditionalists see John the Baptist's description of judgment as support. He depicts the wicked as unfruitful trees and chaff which are thrown into the fire and burned up with "unquenchable fire" (Mt 3:10,12). Jesus talks of burning the tares (Mt 13:30) and that the wicked will be thrown into the fiery furnace (Mt 13:49-50). John says that "the lake of fire is the second death" (Rev 20:14).

Stott asserts that the main function of fire is to consume.<sup>38</sup> Once wood and chaff are burned, there is nothing left but ash. They are completely consumed. This would plainly indicate that the wicked who are cast into the lake of fire would also be consumed. Annihilation is what is meant by the second death.

In addition, Ro 6:23 claims that the wages of sin is death. Stott contends that the ultimate consequence of sin is separation from God, which is itself spiritual death. Therefore, hell is the forfeiture of eternal life and an eternal separation from God.<sup>39</sup> Wenham states:

Conditionalists . . . look for the resurrection of all men, followed by a just sentence according to the desserts of each, which will mean anguish (but not unending torment) for those outside Christ, finally terminating in the second death.<sup>40</sup>

Traditionalists are quick to point out other images of hell which contradict the conditionalist stance. Peterson notes that of the five main pictures of hell in the Bible--darkness and separation, weeping and gnashing of teeth, punishment, fire, and death and destruction--only the last one fits annihilation, and imperfectly at that.<sup>41</sup>

Ajith Fernando astutely observes that while the main function of fire is to destroy, New Testament writers used imagery to illustrate a truth in a way which their readers would understand. For him, when most people connect fire with punishment, they think of the pain of being burned.<sup>42</sup> Dixon addresses the contention that fire must totally consume its fuel by reminding his readers that if God can burn a bush and not consume it, the same can be true of the wicked.<sup>43</sup>

Jesus describes hell as a place with undying worms and eternal fire (Mk 9:48). Traditionalists argue that such could not be the case if the wicked were annihilated.<sup>44</sup> On what would the worms feed? Conditionalists respond with Is 66:24 which Jesus quoted in

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<sup>38</sup>Edwards and Stott, *Evangelical Essentials*, 316.

<sup>39</sup>John R. W. Stott, *Basic Christianity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1958), 74.

<sup>40</sup>Wenham, 34-35.

<sup>41</sup>Peterson, 164.

<sup>42</sup>Ajith Fernando, *Crucial Questions about Hell*, with a Foreword by J. I. Packer (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 39.

<sup>43</sup>Dixon, 81.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 80.

Mk 9:48.<sup>45</sup> Isaiah is describing the Valley of Hinnom (from which the name Gehenna comes), located just outside of Jerusalem, where the bodies of God's rebellious enemies would be cast. They state that the smoke and worms are used hyperbolically. The smoke from the funeral fires and the ever-present worms feasting on decaying flesh would continue until all was consumed. The same will occur in hell.<sup>46</sup> Stephan H. Travis claims that the worm and fire are symbols of an irreversible fate.<sup>47</sup>

A related passage describes those who received the mark of the beast. Rev 14:10-11 states:

He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image. (NIV)

Stott asserts that this torment comes at the time of judgment and that it is the smoke which is eternal.<sup>48</sup> He goes on to say that the smoke is a symbol of the completed burning. Wenham unconvincingly claims that this smoke refers to the memory of God's triumph in righteousness, not burning flesh.<sup>49</sup>

Such a view discounts the adage that where there is smoke there is fire. Peterson fittingly responds that if the fire consumed its fuel, there would be no more smoke.<sup>50</sup>

Rev 20:10 describes the fate of Satan, the beast, and the false prophet as being "tormented day and night for ever and ever" (NIV). Moore notes that this clearly teaches the continuous nature of hell.<sup>51</sup> Pinnock points out, however, that there are no humans involved in this judgment.<sup>52</sup> They are mentioned later in the chapter in connection with the second death.

The last imagery passage is where Jesus describes the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:23f). Peterson states that the fire imagery points to conscious torment.<sup>53</sup> Wenham cogently notes that the rich man is in Hades, the place of the dead, not Gehenna.<sup>54</sup> Stott acknowledges the torment described and relates it to "when the lost will come to the unimaginably painful realisation [sic] of their fate."<sup>55</sup> Pinnock contends that the reference

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<sup>45</sup>Pinnock, "Destruction," 256; Edwards and Stott, *Evangelical Essentials*, 317; Travis, *Christ and Judgment*, 137.

<sup>46</sup>Edwards and Stott, *Evangelical Essentials*, 317.

<sup>47</sup>Travis, *Christ and Judgment*, 137. Gomes allows that the Marcan passage can be seen metaphorically, 17.

<sup>48</sup>Edwards and Stott, *Evangelical Essentials*, 318.

<sup>49</sup>Wenham, 36.

<sup>50</sup>Peterson, 167.

<sup>51</sup>Moore, 27.

<sup>52</sup>Pinnock, "Destruction," 257.

<sup>53</sup>Peterson, 168.

<sup>54</sup>Wenham, 37. Sheol and Hades describe the temporary dwelling places of the dead. Gehenna is the place of punishment. Moore, 2.

<sup>55</sup>Edwards and Stott, *Evangelical Essentials*, 317.

to Abraham's bosom indicates that the passage is not to be taken literally. Instead, it refers to an intermediate state after death, but prior to judgment.<sup>56</sup>

Arguments based on imagery are helpful, but not conclusive. Metaphorical language is graphic, but limited in its ability to provide definitive information beyond its illustrative character. One must hold conclusions based on such language cautiously.

## JUSTICE OF GOD

A third support for annihilation stems from conditionalists' understanding of God's justice and love. It is in this area that emotional rhetoric appears.

In creation, God gave humanity free will and God allows humanity to suffer the consequences of its actions.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, one's salvation or condemnation is based on one's relationship to God.<sup>58</sup> According to Travis, judgment is already taking place in how one responds to God's love in Christ, for "by the choices we make, we sentence ourselves."<sup>59</sup>

Punishment is remedial rather than retributive. Prior to the final judgment, punishment is a disciplinary action meant to correct.<sup>60</sup> Forgiveness is still at hand. However, after death, the verdict of one's destiny becomes irrevocable.<sup>61</sup> Travis sees heaven and hell not so much as a reward or a punishment but as the logical outcome of where one's relationship with God takes him.<sup>62</sup>

What then is the purpose of punishment? Sanders states,

I believe the primary purpose of divine judgment is redemptive. When God judges, he is seeking repentance and reconciliation.<sup>63</sup>

Throughout biblical history, God's wrath and judgment came upon his people with the ultimate goal of reconciliation.

Conditionalists then raise the question about the purpose of hell. Since hell is unredemptive in nature, punishment there has no purpose. Eternal punishment raises two problems for conditionalists. First, there is a moral objection. If God dispenses eternal punishment, it would be vindictive.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>56</sup>Pinnock, "Destruction," 256.

<sup>57</sup>Travis, *Second Coming*, 186.

<sup>58</sup>Travis, *Hope and Future*, 120.

<sup>59</sup>Travis, *Second Coming*, 187.

<sup>60</sup>Clark H. Pinnock, and Robert C. Brow, *Unbounded Love: A Good News Theology for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 70.

<sup>61</sup>Travis, *Hope and Future*, 122.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, 121; Pinnock and Brown, *Unbounded Love*, 88.

<sup>63</sup>John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized*, with a Foreword by Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 114.

<sup>64</sup>Pinnock, "Destruction," 254.

Pinnock passionately asserts:

How can Christians possibly project a deity of such cruelty and vindictiveness whose ways include inflicting everlasting torture upon his creatures, however sinful they may have been?<sup>65</sup>

How can one imagine for a moment that the God who gave his Son to die for sinners because of his great love for them would install a torture chamber somewhere in the new creation in order to subject those who reject him to everlasting pain?<sup>66</sup>

The idea that a fully conscious creature would undergo physical and mental torture through endless time is plainly sadistic and therefore incompatible with a God who loves humanity.<sup>67</sup>

If eternal life is a gift from God, then it makes no sense for him to give it to those who reject him solely for the purpose of punishing them. For Pinnock, this “makes God into a bloodthirsty monster” who could not be worshiped or imitated.<sup>68</sup> This is clearly an emotional issue for him and he reasons that destruction of the wicked is more just than torture.<sup>69</sup>

Stott frames the question along the lines of degree. He points to Rev 20:12 where “the dead were judged according to what they had done.” Stott then reasons that eternal punishment is not commensurate with temporal sins and out of step with *lex talionis*.<sup>70</sup> Pinnock states that it is only God’s love which is everlasting. His wrath is only for a season and will disappear when all sin and rebellion have been destroyed because it is not a core attribute of God’s character.<sup>71</sup> He also notes that eternal punishment inflicts “infinite suffering upon those who have committed finite sins.”<sup>72</sup> Conditionalists believe that limiting God’s wrath shows God as fairer and more just.

Traditionalists view hell’s purpose as retributive, not remedial, and advance several arguments in response. Robert Reymond reasons, “On this ground God could not even annihilate the sinner for his sin since annihilation is certainly eternal in its effect.”<sup>73</sup> God never promised a fair life, just a redeemed one. In response to Job’s call for vindication, God reminds Job which one of them is creator and which is creature (Job

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 246-47.

<sup>66</sup>Pinnock, “Fire, Then Nothing,” 40.

<sup>67</sup>Pinnock and Brown, *Unbounded Love*, 88.

<sup>68</sup>Pinnock, “Destruction,” 253.

<sup>69</sup>Pinnock and Brown, *Unbounded Love*, 93.

<sup>70</sup>Edwards and Stott, *Evangelical Essentials*, 319.

<sup>71</sup>Pinnock and Brown, *Unbounded Love*, 68-69.

<sup>72</sup>Pinnock, “Destruction,” 255.

<sup>73</sup>Reymond, 57.

38-41). Moore contends that while one's sense of justice is offended, human justice is distorted to begin with.<sup>74</sup>

Peterson claims: "The Bible views sin as an attack on God's character, and therefore, it is deserving of great punishment."<sup>75</sup> He presents a compelling case when he gives a list of biblical examples where God's judgment is much harsher than what one would have expected.<sup>76</sup> Lot's wife was turned to salt for a backward glance (Ge 19:26). Achan and his entire family were executed for one simple theft (Jos 7:24-26). God killed Uzzah for touching the Ark (2 Sa 6:7). Ananias and Sapphira were killed for telling a lie (Ac 5:5-10). Most telling is that the entire human race came into sin when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit (Ro 5:15-19). Clearly God views sin much more severely than do his children.

One of the strongest arguments in favor of the traditional view is made by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*. Dealing with this same question he states:

Further, the magnitude of the punishment matches the magnitude of the sin; . . . Now a sin that is against God is infinite; the higher the person against whom it is committed, the graver the sin--it is more criminal to strike a head of state than a private citizen--and God is of infinite greatness. Therefore an infinite punishment is deserved for a sin committed against him.<sup>77</sup>

In light of this, Aquinas then asserts, "To annihilate one who has sinned is not consistent with divine justice."<sup>78</sup> Dixon states that conscious punishment in hell is not meant to be remedial, but to declare God's justice.<sup>79</sup> Moore wonders if justice would be served if someone like Hitler is simply annihilated.<sup>80</sup> J. I. Packer tempers his approach by coining the term, "traumatic awe" which he defines as "a passionate gladness that justice will be done for God's glory, linked with an equally passionate sadness that fellow human beings, no matter how perverse, will thereby be ruined."<sup>81</sup>

Wenham's rejoinder that to "sin means ultimately to forfeit heaven, and this is the greatest possible punishment which anyone can ever receive, *and this is the punishment which sin deserves,*" falls short.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>Moore, 29.

<sup>75</sup>Robert A. Peterson, "Does the Bible Teach Annihilationsim?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156 (January-March 1999): 23-24.

<sup>76</sup>Peterson, 170-72.

<sup>77</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Latin Text and English Translation, Introductions, Notes, Appendices and Glossaries* (Blackfriars; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964- ), 27:25, 1a2æ. 87.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid.

<sup>79</sup>Dixon, 84.

<sup>80</sup>Moore, 29.

<sup>81</sup>J. I. Packer, "The Problem of Eternal Punishment," *Crux* 26 (September 1990): 21.

<sup>82</sup>Wenham, 70.

## GOD'S UNIVERSAL RULE

The final support to which conditionalists point are the texts which declare God's universal rule. Jesus will draw all humanity to himself (Jn 12:32); God will be "all in all" (1 Co 15:9); all things will be brought under Christ (Eph 1:10); every knee will bow and tongue confess Jesus as Lord (Php 2:10-11).<sup>83</sup>

These are the same texts which universalists cite in support of their view. Conditionalists resoundingly disagree with their conclusion.<sup>84</sup> Hell is a reality and universalist claims to the contrary are inadequate. However, supporters claim that these texts make much more sense within a conditionalist framework.

Stott asks how the above texts can be possible if rebellious hearts continue to exist in hell.<sup>85</sup> Sanders asserts that hell's purpose is to put an end to rebellion by annihilating the rebellious.<sup>86</sup> Pinnock asks how God can "make all things new" (Rev 21:5) if hell exists. An eternal hell would be a "corner of unredeemed reality" in the new creation and perpetuate an eternal dualism.<sup>87</sup>

Moore counters the dualism argument by claiming it is not appropriate to equate a "bound and banished" Satan with God.<sup>88</sup> However, he later seems to argue in favor of dualism when he states that those in hell "forever remain in a state of rebellion toward God because their fallen nature does not carry the ability to recognize its depravity and need for God."<sup>89</sup> It is precisely that scenario which conditionalists view as unwarranted dualism. Peterson is more convincing when he suggests that God being "all in all" means he rules over both the redeemed and the unredeemed.<sup>90</sup> J. H. Leckie concurs, stating that "man, even in his fallen state, and in all his sufferings, remains part of the divine order and contributes to its beauty. . ."<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>83</sup>Edwards and Stott, *Evangelical Essentials*, 319.

<sup>84</sup>Sanders, 109; Wenham, 33; Pinnock and Brown, *Unbounded Love*, 88; Edwards and Stott, *Evangelical Essentials*, 319; Travis, *Second Coming*, 205.

<sup>85</sup>Edwards and Stott, *Evangelical Essentials*, 319.

<sup>86</sup>Sanders, 115.

<sup>87</sup>Pinnock, "Destruction," 255; Pinnock and Brown, *Unbounded Love*, 93; Travis, *Second Coming*, 199.

<sup>88</sup>Moore, 34.

<sup>89</sup>*Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>90</sup>Peterson, 176.

<sup>91</sup>Leckie, 124.

## CONCLUSION

What in hell really is going on? Conditionalists assert that hell is a real place of torment where the impenitent are destroyed amid wailing and gnashing of teeth. For them hell brings complete closure on evil. It is the second death.

Adherents to this view are cautious in their approach. Pinnock, his emotional theatrics notwithstanding, admits that the Bible's ambiguity on this subject precludes a dogmatic stance.<sup>92</sup> Travis is of the same opinion.<sup>93</sup> Wenham titled his chapter summary, "Traditional Orthodoxy not to be Surrendered Lightly" and freely admits that conditionalists do not have all the answers.<sup>94</sup> Stott confesses, "I do not dogmatise about the position to which I have come. I hold it tentatively."<sup>95</sup> More recently he described his position as "agnostic" on the ultimate annihilation of the wicked.<sup>96</sup>

Traditionalists affirm the existence of an eternal, populated hell where its occupants experience everlasting torment for rejecting God's forgiveness. Hell is the logical conclusion to humanity's rebellion.

Conditionalists make several strong points. The most powerful argument noting that eternal life is God's *gift* in redemption. It would seem illogical for God to give this gift to the finally impenitent. While it is troubling pondering why God would choose to give eternal life to someone whom he will punish eternally, this author remains unconvinced. Traditionalists' arguments on the use of biblical language are compelling. Most telling is *aiōnios* describing both life and punishment in Mt 25:46.

However, there seems to be enough biblical support for annihilationism that conditionalists deserve a seat at the evangelical table. They attempt to base their views upon an honest interpretation of Scripture. Whether or not one agrees with their conclusions, one must admit that they seek to be true to scripture and it is upon scripture that they base their claims.<sup>97</sup> The reality of hell is upheld. It is its purpose and function which are debated.

As this issue is debated, may hell-fire and brimstone remain the topic of discussion and not a description of oratorical style. More importantly, may Stanley Grenz's admonition "that we ought never to speak about the fate of the lost without tears in our eyes" remain uppermost in our minds.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>92</sup>Pinnock, "Destruction," 258.

<sup>93</sup>Travis, *Hope and Future*, 136.

<sup>94</sup>Wenham, 37-39.

<sup>95</sup>Edwards and Stott, *Evangelical Essentials*, 320.

<sup>96</sup>Roy McCloughry, "Basic Stott: Candid Comments on Justice, Gender, and Judgment," *Christianity Today* 40 (8 January 1996): 28.

<sup>97</sup>Reymond, 42.

<sup>98</sup>Stanley J. Grenz, "Is Hell Forever?" *Christianity Today* 42 (5 October 1998): 92.

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