

The biblical and theological case for and against conditional immortality and annihilationism.

The mainstream Christian belief has always been that the damned face eternal conscious punishment. Packer comments: “belief in the everlasting conscious distress of those pictured by Jesus as the goats whom he banished from his presence belonged to the Christian consensus from the first. Fathers, medievals, and moderns up to the time of the enlightenment were unanimous about it; Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox were divided on many things, but not on this.... Bible-believers of all schools of thought and all church allegiances found it inescapable”¹. Nevertheless, in recent years belief in annihilationism has grown in frequency and respectability amongst evangelicals².

Part of this move is because of a re-examination of anthropology. The traditional belief in the immortality of the soul was a factor in the maintenance of the doctrine of unending conscious punishment. The immortality of the soul, which is fundamental to much Hellenistic thinking, seems often simply to have been assumed. Gregory of Nyssa apparently argued for the idea as an aspect of man being in the image of God. Calvin asserted that mankind (across the barriers of history and culture) generally has a sense of his own immortality, that human conscience is an undoubted sign of it and that our knowledge of God proves it³. Nevertheless, the immortality of the soul is increasingly questioned in favour of the conditionalist view. This is partly because the very existence of the soul is disputed, being rejected by many modern scientists who advocate materialism.

As far as the Biblical data is concerned, it is now common to say that the more truly Scriptural understanding is the Hebraic one of man as a psycho-somatic unity. However, it is unlikely that the Bible is really that neat and a simplistic contrast between Greek and Jewish thought forms is not entirely helpful, the Judaism of Jesus’ day being significantly Hellenised. For example, the Bible speaks of man in both a bipartite and tripartite fashion. Further Paul, the Hebrew of Hebrews, seems happy to think of disembodied states⁴.

¹ Packer, J. I., “The Problem of Eternal Punishment”, *Evangel* 10/2 Summer 1992, p16

² I do not feel in a position to give an accurate survey of current opinions either in the wider church or the academy, or within the evangelical constituency itself. Prominent evangelicals such as John Stott, Michael Green, John Wenham, (Clark Pinnock) have advocated the doctrine with varying degrees of vehemence. For some this was a painful move (see esp. Stott on his desire to respect tradition and not to “disrupt” evangelical unity). Wenham eventually spoke out on the issue forcefully and clearly, and *Facing Hell*, which is semi-autobiographical, makes fascinating reading both on the recent history of evangelical thought and the psychology of annihilationism. Pinnock contends that more evangelicals would see the light over conditional immortality if they didn’t think that it somehow meant compromise to follow the text against tradition and if they did not fear that it represented a move of “going liberal!”.

³ cited by Hughes, p399

⁴ 2 Cor 12:3

According to 1 Timothy 6:16, it is God alone who is immortal. Immortality is intrinsic exclusively to God and therefore extrinsic to man. Man only ever has life in a “conditional” derived manner.

It is preferable, according to Philip E. Hughes, and others to think that “man was originally created as both potentially immortal and potentially mortal. The possibility of his sinning involved the possibility of his dying, just as the possibility of his not sinning involved the possibility of his not dying”⁵. It seems to me that this makes good sense of the Biblical evidence, but it must be emphasised that God’s highest original intention for man was unending life and that had he not sinned it was planned that he would go on living in unbroken relationship with God. The Genesis narrative implies that spiritual and physical death are the punishment for sin and that had man eaten of the tree of life he would have lived forever⁶. In a sense, deathlessness is mankind’s proper state. Further, it is clear from Scripture that the wicked are resurrected⁷. Although none of us possess immortal life in ourselves, we will all live beyond the grave to face the judgement⁸.

On its own, then, the discussion of anthropology is inconclusive; the nature and duration of the afterlife for unbelievers must be decided by a close examination of the pertinent Scriptural texts.

Supporters of annihilationism tend to emphasise those texts which speak of “destruction”⁹, claiming that these verses imply that the damned will cease to exist. When active and transitive, the verb means to kill and, Stott comments, “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, the extinction of being”¹⁰. However, the *απωλεια* word group in fact carries a broader range of meaning, and is also used of the “lost” coin and son in Luke 15, the “ruined” wineskin of Matthew 9:17 and the “wasted” ointment of Matthew 26:8. Similarly, *ολεθρος*, which is used of the destruction of the wicked¹¹ can be used without the sense of ceasing to be, as it is in 1 Cor 5:5, where although the immoral brother is said to be “delivered to Satan” for the “destruction” of his flesh, we are not intended to suppose that either his sinful nature or his body are annihilated as a result of his excommunication.

Those who hold to the traditional view are required to argue that “death”¹² need not necessarily imply non-existence. Such a metaphorical reading of death is ridiculed by annihilationists. Hughes, for example, comments that “it would be hard to imagine a concept more confused than that of death which means existing endlessly without the power of dying”¹³. However, since the first death does not lead to cessation of being, why must the second? Given that imagery is widely used to describe the afterlife, this

⁵ Hughes, *True Image* p399

⁶ Genesis 2:17; 3:22

⁷ e.g., Daniel 12:2

⁸ Hebrews 9:27

⁹ e.g., Phil 3:19; 2 Pt 3:7, Stott, for example, describes the meanings of *απωλλυμι* (verb, to destroy) and *απωλεια* (noun, destruction) to indicate this doctrine.

¹⁰ Stott, John, *Essentials* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), p315

¹¹ e.g., in 1 Thess 5:3 and 2 Thess 1:9

¹² e.g., in e.g., Rom 6:23; Rev 20:6

¹³ Hughes, Philip Edgcumbe, ‘Conditional Immortality’, *Evangel* 10/2 (Summer 1992) 1, p10

seems to introduce excessive literalism into the debate and disallow what would otherwise be a rhetorically effective description of perdition.

The image of fire is also said to imply destruction, as is the notion of Gehenna, the Valley of Hinnom, where Jerusalem's rubbish was incinerated. Again, this is to insist on a particular aspect of the image which is not necessarily intended to bare such a meaning. It could equally well speak of torment, which is the point brought out in Luke 16:24.

The fires of hell are specifically said to be "eternal"¹⁴. However, the word αἰώνιος strictly means "of the age" and annihilationists point out that it does not necessarily imply everlastingness. However, as the age to come is recognised as an endless age, one might think that the fire proper to that age will have the same duration. Similarly, the parallel between eternal life and eternal punishment¹⁵ tends to encourage one to think that both will be everlasting. Others argue that the flames or death may be "eternal" in the sense that their *result* is everlasting and irrevocable. Thus, for example, Hughes: "because *life* and *death* are radically antithetical to each other, the qualifying adjective *eternal* or *everlasting* needs to be understood in a manner appropriate to each respectively. Everlasting life is existence that continues without end, and everlasting death is destruction without end, that is, destruction without recall, the destruction of obliteration. Both life and death hereafter will be everlasting in the sense that both will be *irreversible*."¹⁶ Carson however concludes that "αἰώνιος more commonly has temporal/eternal overtones, rather than qualitative force. And even when it has the latter, the former is rarely forfeited"¹⁷.

Some texts in particular would seem to present difficulties for annihilationists. For example, Jesus says, "And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; because it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies and the fire is never quenched"¹⁸. This seems to be a graphic description of eternal conscious torment. Annihilationists argue that although the worm and the fire may endure, the wicked are consumed, but as Carson says, "It is not "the worm" but "their worm", which suggests that it is perpetually bound up with those who are suffering"¹⁹, both remaining forever.

Revelation 20:10,15 also seems to speak unmistakably of persons facing eternal conscious punishment²⁰.

Although some texts permit an annihilationist reading, others require the eternal conscious punishment of the damned, and the apparently annihilationist texts can be

¹⁴ αἰώνιος, e.g., Matthew 18:8

¹⁵ e.g., Matthew 25:46

¹⁶ Hughes, *Evangel*, p11

¹⁷ Carson, Don, 'On Banishing the Lake of Fire' in *The Gagging of God*, (Leicester, Apollos, 1996) p523

¹⁸ Mark 9:47f, c.f. Isaiah 66:24, Judith 16:17

¹⁹ Carson, op. cit., p525

²⁰ "And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet were, and they were tormented day and night for ever and ever.... . and anyone whose name was not found in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire".

understood coherently within the traditional model. The Biblical case therefore leads us to reject annihilationism and conditional immortality.

Despite annihilationist objections, the traditional view is also the more theologically plausible.

Eternal conscious torment of the damned is sometimes dismissed as a cruel, vindictive and sadistic doctrine. For Pinnock "... the traditional view ... depicts God acting in a way that contradicts his goodness and offends our moral sense". God has become a torturer who, "acting like a bloodthirsty monster... maintains an everlasting Auschwitz for his enemies whom he does not even allow to die"²¹.

Thankfully, our depraved moral sense²² is not the ultimate arbiter of truth!²³.

An additional annihilationist argument is that everlasting punishment would be pointless, serving no conceivably good purpose as there is no hope of redemption. This merely shows a rejection of the traditional notion of retributive justice in favour of a remedial model. It seems to me that this shift cannot be sustained because we all actually cling to the view that punishment must have a properly retributive element, it must be deserved, or how can one object to any punishment as unjust²⁴?

Bray comments that: "the model has shifted from punishment justly deserved for sins committed to suffering pointlessly prolonged. The suggested remedy for this is therefore not a belated pardon, which would fit the imprisonment model, but euthanasia"²⁵. For Bray, one possible objection to annihilationism is therefore to question the propriety of euthanasia, which he says we do not accept as a valid response to hopeless suffering here on earth. He argues that however bad it may be, continuing existence is a better state than total annihilation, because it preserves the dignity of the individual person.

Indeed, some writers have argued that the continued existence of hell shows God's respect for our decision to live without him and emphasises the reality of human responsibility²⁶.

Pursuing a related line of thinking, Packer writes of retribution which is inflicted by God, but also, he stresses, in a very real sense self-inflicted²⁷. This perspective

²¹ Pinnock, Clark H., 'The Conditional View' in Four Views on Hell edited by William Crockett (Grand Rapids Michigan, Zondervan Publishing, 1992), p151

²² Jeremiah 17:9

²³ On this point Stott's honest statement of principle is instructive, if difficult to follow through: "... emotionally, I find the concept [of the eternal conscious torment of the damned] intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterising their feelings or cracking under the strain. But our emotions are a fluctuating, unreliable guide to truth and must not be exalted to the place of supreme authority in determining it. As a committed evangelical, my question must be – and is – not what does me tell me, but what does God's word say?", Stott, op. cit., p315

²⁴ For example, should thought crimes receive therapeutic punishments, such as exile to Siberia?

²⁵ Bray, Gerald, 'Hell: Eternal Punishment or Total Annihilation?', Evangel 10/2 (Summer 1992), p23

²⁶ Thus, e.g., Simon Chan, although his reasoning sometimes depends on a libertarian model of free will and also has universalism in its sights. Chan, Simon, 'The Logic of Hell: A Response to Annihilationism', Evangel 10/2 (Summer 1992)

²⁷ "We choose to retreat from God rather than repent before God, and God's judicial sentence is a ratifying for eternity of the sentence of separation from God that we by our own choice have already

exposes something of the misleading nature of Pinnock's depiction of the traditional doctrine, quoted above, in which man almost seems to become the innocent victim of a vindictive God.

If it could be shown that the punishment of the damned was strictly deserved, then these objections concerning injustice would evaporate. But the annihilationist asks how any finite crime, no matter how terrible, could ever merit an eternal punishment. Edwards argues that the infinite dignity of God renders it an infinite crime to sin against him²⁸. Pinnock rejects this line of reasoning, asserting that we simply no longer think that the status of the person against whom an offence is committed ought to be taken into consideration. Nevertheless, there is some plausibility in the view that it is more serious to spurn an infinitely perfect and good being rather than one who is merely a little better than ourselves. David Kingdon comments: "sin against the Creator is heinous to a degree utterly beyond our sin-warped imaginations' [ability] to conceive of.... Who would have the temerity to suggest to God what the punishment... should be?"²⁹

Much more significant is the suggestion that the damned in hell continue to reject God and sin against him, as is perhaps indicated by Revelation 22:11³⁰. This seems eminently likely given total depravity, the corrupting effects of ongoing sin and the removal of all the gracious influence of God and the moral restraints of society in hell. Therefore, the damned continue to store up more and more punishment against themselves forever.

Further, it is not clear that annihilationism is even successful on its own terms. Even if it is not consciously experienced, aren't annihilationists keen to remind us that the punishment is everlasting? Does this not mean that it is still a disproportionately harsh punishment for temporal wrongs?

One might also ask whether or not those who are due to be annihilated ever fully pay the price of their sins. If they don't then how is it that they can properly be annihilated and if they do then why are they not admitted to heaven? If it is said that the annihilation constitutes the punishment then what is the place of the experienced punishment that many evangelical annihilationists feel the pressure of Scripture to maintain?

Annihilationists have argued that texts which speak of cosmic redemption exclude the idea that souls will continue to rebel against God for all eternity. Pinnock, for example, says that the traditional doctrine creates a cosmological dualism and a terribly bad ending. God is not all in all and everything is not made new³¹. However, Grudem's thinking seems more Biblical at this point: "While evil *that remains unpunished* does detract from God's glory in the universe, we must also recognise that when God *punishes* evil and *triumphs* over it, the glory of his justice, righteousness

passed on ourselves.... no one is in hell who has not chosen to be there, in the sense of choosing to be self-absorbed and to keep God out of his/her life.... This is evidently one aspect of the grim truth", Packer, op. cit., p16

²⁹ quoted by Grudem, Wayne, *Systematic Theology*, (Leicester, IVP, 1994), p1151

³⁰ "Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy"

³¹ 1 Corinthians 15:28; Revelation 21:5

and power to triumph over all opposition will be seen”³². Indeed, according to Romans 9:22-23, the objects of God’s wrath serve the good purpose of displaying the riches of his glory to the objects of his mercy.

Annihilationists argue that heaven would be unbearable for the saints if their lost friends and relatives are facing punishment in hell. Again, it is not obvious that annihilationism alone solves this problem, as one could imagine that the memory of the damned’s sufferings, their obliteration and their present absence might create a similar sense of distress for the elect. Simon Chan says, “in order to make the saints truly happy, annihilationists must be prepared to defend the idea that the annihilation of unredeemed souls must be accompanied by the annihilation of certain memories in the saints; otherwise mere elimination of their being would be no help if the saints in heaven could still remember them”³³. More fundamentally, however, the Bible seems to indicate that God’s justice is something for which the saints should long³⁴. When we share God’s heavenly perspective, it seems that we will praise him for his perfect equity: “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgements are true and just; he judged the great harlot who corrupted the earth with her fornication, and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants.... Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up forever and ever.” (Revelation 19:1-3).

We conclude that annihilationism does not successfully resolve the dilemmas which its advocates see in the traditional doctrine, whereas a frank admission that we all deserve hell makes eternal conscious punishment of the damned likely.

However hard it may be, it seems, then, that we must continue to speak of God’s coming judgement as eternal conscious retribution against those who will persist in rejecting him and that we should seek to do so both with Biblical compassion for those who may yet flee from the wrath to come³⁵, and secure in the confidence that the judge of all the earth will bring justice on those who continue to oppose the gospel.

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³² Grudem, op. cit., p1151

³³ Chan, op. cit., p26

³⁴ Revelation 6:10

³⁵ Jeremiah 9:1; Luke 19:41f; Romans 9:1-4; 10:1; Acts 20:31

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