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## Undying Worm, Unquenchable Fire

What is hell—eternal torment or annihilation? A look at the Evangelical Alliance's *The Nature of Hell*.

By Robert A. Peterson | posted 10/13/00

It was six pages near the end of the book that exploded like a bombshell within evangelicalism. The book was *Evangelical Essentials* (InterVarsity) and the year was 1988. As the book's subtitle announced, it was *A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* between liberal Anglican David L. Edwards and evangelical Anglican John Stott. For 338 pages, Edwards and Stott ranged over many issues, including the gospel, biblical authority, miracles, ethics, and missions. But near the end, in those six pages, Stott tentatively defended annihilationism—the view that unbelievers are finally annihilated and thus do not experience torment that is eternal in duration (as traditionalists believe).

Traditionalists, who make up most of evangelicalism, were shocked. Some, like John H. Gerstner, went so far as to question Stott's salvation. Evangelicals have been debating the subject ever since, both sides producing books and articles defending their views and contesting the opposition.

Out of England came another book this past April, but of a different order: *The Nature of Hell: A Report by the Evangelical Alliance Commission of Unity and Truth Among Evangelicals*. It is an evenhanded introduction to the historical, biblical, and theological issues that pertain to the evangelical debate over the nature and duration of hell. I have been studying these matters for seven years, have written two books on hell, and I regard this work as an outstanding resource for

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quickly accessing the issues. It is also a model of how evangelicals can agree to disagree.

**The hell debate**

With the publication of Stott's views, evangelicals were spurred to study the issue more deeply and to respond. Perhaps emboldened by Stott's example, others followed and declared their commitment to annihilationism: Philip E. Hughes resigned from Westminster Seminary and wrote *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Eerdmans, 1989), toward the end of which he took an annihilationist stance. A 1992 Baker collection of essays, *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, included a piece by John W. Wenham, "The Case for Conditional Immortality." Conditional immortality, or *conditionalism* for short, is the view that human beings are not naturally immortal. God, who alone is inherently immortal, grants the gift of immortality only to believers. Unbelievers, because they lack this gift, do not live forever. Although technically not identical with *annihilationism*, *conditionalism* has come to be used as a synonym for it.

Through Wenham's influence, a previous book by Edward Fudge was revised and issued in 1994 by Paternoster Press as *The Fire That Consumes: The Biblical Case for Conditional Immortality*.

Plainly, the annihilationist side had taken up the debate, challenging the traditional view.

Proponents of the traditional view of hell did not take this lying down. Some came with pistols flaring, such as Gerstner's *Repent or Perish* (Soli Deo Gloria, 1990). Others were more reserved but no less opposed to annihilationism: Larry Dixon, *The Other Side of the Good News: Confronting the Contemporary Challenges to Jesus' Teaching on Hell* (Victor, 1992) and my own *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment* (Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995). And in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (the same book in which Wenham attacked traditionalism), Kendall Harmon defended the traditional view in "The Case Against Conditionalism: A Response to Edward William Fudge."

Heavyweight traditionalists did not stay out of the fray. D. A. Carson devoted 22 pages of *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Zondervan, 1996) to an exegetical defense of the traditional view. J. I. Packer, a figure as revered by evangelicals as Stott, expressed his displeasure in *Evangelical Affirmations* (Academie, 1990) that Stott had advocated annihilationism.

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Plainly evangelical Anglicans were lining up on opposite sides of this issue: Stott, Hughes, Wenham and Michael Green on the side of conditionalism; Packer, Harmon, Gerald Bray, and Alec Motyer on the side of traditionalism.

Into the fray stepped the Evangelical Alliance (EA). Also called World's Evangelical Alliance, founded in 1846, EA is a Britain-based association of evangelical churches, parachurch organizations, and individuals. It is the umbrella organization for evangelicals in the United Kingdom. Seeing the controversy on hell and other issues dividing evangelicals, EA established the Alliance Commission of Unity and Truth Among Evangelicals (ACUTE) in 1995 "to work for consensus on theological issues that test evangelical unity, and to provide, on behalf of evangelicals, a coordinated theological response to matters of wider public debate." ACUTE comprises three evangelical bodies: the Evangelical Alliance, the British Evangelical Council, and the Evangelical Movement of Wales.

One project of ACUTE is *The Nature of Hell*. It was written that evangelicals might stand united against universalism while disagreeing among themselves concerning the nature of hell.

The study group, consisting of traditionalists and conditionalists, had the task of writing a report that would promote understanding and tolerance among member believers.

### **Building a foundation**

After describing points of agreement among evangelicals, the report gives background regarding universalism (the idea that ultimately all will be saved), a recurring issue in English church history.

The report concludes that universalism is not an option for evangelicals because it lacks biblical warrant. Nevertheless, the report adds, "In an increasingly multicultural, pluralist society, the universalism which now underlies most forms of liberal Christianity is likely to present an ever-greater challenge for evangelicals."

The report then identifies the key biblical texts in the debate on the nature of hell. In the Old Testament, the focus is on the present life, not on life after death. *Sheol* is a dark, dreary, silent underworld of half-existence. Only two Old Testament texts, Isaiah 26:19 and Daniel 12:2, refer to resurrection. The report then comments on the New Testament pictures of the afterlife, including Gehenna and Hades.

Two conclusions stand out. First, the report notes that the synoptic Gospels, Jude, and Revelation speak of "Gehenna," "Hades," and "fire." John, Paul, and the other epistles speak chiefly of "perishing," "destruction," and "death."

Second, the report recognizes that "this variation in biblical imagery stands behind much of the debate between traditionalists and conditionalists."

*The Nature of Hell* next traces the history of each point of view. Traditionalism sports an impressive pedigree: Tertullian, Lactantius, Basil of Caesarea, Jerome, Cyril of Jerusalem, Chrysostom, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Edwards, Whitefield, and Wesley all endorsed eternal punishment.

Embryonic forms of conditionalism are found in Justin Martyr and Theophilus of Antioch. Arnobius (died c. 330) was the first to defend annihilationism explicitly. The Second Council of Constantinople (553) and later the Fifth Lateran Council (1512–17), though, condemned annihilationism.

### **The meaning of burning sulfur**

After outlining key definitions (see "Coming to Terms: Five key phrases in the hell debate," p. 34), the report examines five critical exegetical issues that each side debates.

1. *Destruction and perishing.* Conditionalists argue that biblical language about the lost perishing (e.g., John 3:16) or being destroyed (e.g., Matt. 10:28) ought to be taken at face value to indicate extinction of being. Although the report almost always sets out the best arguments for both conditionalist and traditionalist sides of an issue, here it includes only a weak traditionalist response. A stronger one involves the "destruction" of the beast, foretold in Revelation 17:8, 11; he is later cast into the fiery lake of burning sulfur (19:10) and is "tormented day and night for ever and ever" (20:10).

2. *The fire and the worm.* Conditionalists maintain that the biblical imagery of hellfire indicates consumption and not the infliction of pain. Traditionalists respond that the fire and worm in Mark 9:48, a key text, are "undying" and "unquenchable," respectively. Conditionalists counter by insisting, "Although both the worm and the fire *themselves* appear to be everlasting, the *effect* they have on any individual sinner may yet be terminal."

3. *Eternal punishment and "the age to come."* Traditionalists historically have pointed to Jesus' parallel between the two destinies in Matthew 25:46: *eternal* punishment and *eternal*

life (*italics mine*). Conditionalists respond by saying the text does not define *eternal*, and it could be rendered qualitatively rather than quantitatively; hence "the punishment of the age to come" and "the life of the age to come." Even if "eternal" punishment is the correct rendering, it could point to the everlasting effects of the punishment (conceived as destruction) rather than to everlasting suffering of the punishment.

Traditionalists raise their eyebrows when conditionalists insist on a different meaning for the word *eternal* when it is used in two parallel phrases in the same sentence to describe the two destinies.

4. *Jesus' account of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19–31*. Fire imagery here plainly speaks of pain and not consumption (vv. 23, 24, 25, 28). Some traditionalists say this account teaches that the lost will endure eternal torment. But conditionalists correctly point out that Jesus' parable pertains to the intermediate rather than the final state.

5. *Sulfur, smoke, and the "second death."* The meaning of Revelation 14:10–11 is contested: the wicked will be "tormented with burning sulfur" and "the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night" for them. Traditionalists assert that this text unambiguously teaches their view.

Conditionalists appeal to Old Testament texts that describe God's destruction of cities, "all of which are reduced to wastes of burning sulfur, but which themselves cease to exist as cities once they have been razed to the ground." The rising smoke in Revelation 14:10 is a trace of the destruction wrought by the consuming fire. And the torment relates to the moment of their destruction rather than eternal suffering.

But, traditionalists protest, the text speaks of "the smoke of *their* torment" going up "for ever and ever" and thereby connects the suffering of persons with eternal duration. Traditionalists also point to the sentence that follows—"There is no rest day or night" for the wicked—as evidence of eternal punishment. Conditionalists counter that this does not prove endless suffering but only suffering that lasts as long as the sufferers do.

Traditionalists point to Revelation 20:10 as unequivocally teaching eternal punishment. After the devil is cast into the lake of fire, John reports that the devil, beast, and false prophet "will be tormented day and night for ever and ever." Because "day and night" is further modified by "for ever and ever," surely here the conditionalists must cry, "Uncle!"

They refuse, however, and instead argue that this text says nothing about human beings suffering eternal torment. Indeed, the devil, beast, and false prophet function symbolically here to denote opposition to God. In fact, the meaning of the imagery of Revelation 20:10 considered in its totality, they argue, is annihilation. This is confirmed, conditionalists claim, by the fact that a few verses later the lake of fire is defined as "the second death," a clear reference to cessation of being.

Traditionalists remain unconvinced. The devil, at least, and probably his henchmen, are personal beings. Furthermore, Jesus in Matthew 25:41 assigns the "goats" to "the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." Traditionalists also reject conditionalists' equating the lake of fire with annihilation, arguing instead that death signifies not extermination but separation. The second death, therefore, stands for eternal separation from God. Moreover, the lake of fire signifies eternal torment in Revelation 20:10; if conditionalists' interpretation were correct, shouldn't John have indicated a change in its meaning five verses later when he speaks of humans being thrown into it?

Two theological issues round out this discussion. The view that at least some of the unsaved receive a chance after death to believe in Christ is rejected by traditionalists and most conditionalists for the good reasons that "it is seriously lacking in exegetical foundation" and that it contradicts the solid biblical principle that "death represents a decisive and final step to final judgment." *The Nature of Hell* affirms a wider hope for persons dying in infancy and for the mentally disabled, and acknowledges a case can be made that some who have never heard the gospel may be saved by implicit faith.

### **From philosophy to blessedness**

The report notes that four main theological issues also figure in the debate.

1. *The place of philosophy.* Annihilationists claim that the church Fathers imbibed uncritically the Greek notion of the immortal soul and consequently were misled into the traditional doctrine of hell. If all human beings live forever, the argument runs, they must forever inhabit either heaven or hell. Traditionalists point out that, aside from the debated question of Platonic influence on the Fathers, the important thing is whether the Bible teaches immortality. Traditionalists take different paths here, some claiming Scripture affirms immortality, others saying Scripture implies it. Matthew 10:28 ("Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell") is hotly contested: conditionalists insist on the plain sense; traditionalists say destruction is a metaphor for terrible loss.

2. *God's love and justice.* How could God's love and justice possibly be made known in the everlasting conscious torment of human beings? Indeed, the report notes, "This question is regularly cited by conditionalists as a starting point for their abandonment of the traditional position." How is it just for God to punish for eternity sins committed in a finite lifetime? Some traditionalists have followed Aquinas in insisting that sins against an infinite God deserve infinite recompense. They have maintained that only a holy and just God (not sinful human beings) is qualified to determine the consequences of sin. They suspect that conditionalists "are succumbing to contemporary cultural representations of pain as the ultimate evil to be avoided, when sin against God is in fact a more heinous thing." And traditionalists have affirmed that eternal conscious punishment will bring glory to God, the righteous Judge.

3. *God's triumph.* According to conditionalists, the traditionalist picture of the end mars the biblical hope of God's ultimate victory, for traditionalism pictures an eternal eschatological dualism between good and evil. Traditionalists reply that Revelation 21 and 22 paint a picture that includes the lake of fire as well as the new heavens and new earth. They insist that God will reign over heaven and hell and be glorified in both places.

4. *The blessedness of the redeemed.* Conditionalists argue that the joys of the saved in heaven would be diminished by their knowledge of the never-ending suffering of the lost in hell. The standard traditionalist response is that God will remove any pain that those in heaven might otherwise experience.

### **The need for sensitive reflection**

The report next seeks to remedy the fact that evangelicals on both sides of the debate have produced little in the way of pastoral reflection. It calls all to hold solemn and sensitive attitudes toward hell. Evangelicals historically have understood hell as a spur to evangelism. Recently, however, some have debated how prominent a place hell should have in Christian witness.

Traditionalists accuse conditionalists of underestimating the fate of the lost, and conditionalists criticize traditionalists for unnecessarily adding to the scandal of the gospel. The report calls for a truce and urges Christians to combine words of God's justice and love when presenting the gospel.

For example, on the issue of what believers are to say to terminally ill patients who do not know Christ: While demonstrating God's love in their actions and avoiding exploitation, Christians are to speak of God's judgment as

background for sharing the good news of Christ. Concerning pastoral care of the bereaved, pastors should rejoice at the home-going of a believer, but it is inadvisable to pronounce that a specific person is in hell. Instead, pastors should preach the gospel to the living.

### **Room at the evangelical table**

Though the report acknowledges that traditionalism is the majority view among evangelicals, it strives to maintain fellowship with conditionalists. Although a few traditionalists have questioned the right of conditionalists to be called evangelical Christians, the working group that drafted *The Nature of Hell* affirms that right.

In terms of doctrine, the study confirmed that the main conditionalists show a high regard for the authority of Scripture and attempt to base their case chiefly on biblical exegesis. Historically speaking, though, conditionalism fares far worse than traditionalism.

Although evangelicals are wary of appeals to tradition as compared to Scripture, the testimony of history, in which few major theologians have wavered from traditionalism, places a considerable burden of proof on conditionalists.

Yet conditionalism seems to share an evangelical worldview or ethos with traditionalism. Furthermore, conditionalists bear a "family resemblance"; they are part of the same relational network. Indeed, "when it comes to those who have moved from traditionalism towards conditionalism, the familial ties remain strong," the report notes.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

*The Nature of Hell* ends with 11 conclusions (each accompanied by biblical proofs) and 11 recommendations. First, a summary of the conclusions:

All human beings will die and will be resurrected to face God's judgment, issuing either in eternal glory or condemnation to hell. Furthermore, "God has revealed no other way to salvation and eternal life apart from through Jesus Christ." While rejecting universalism and postmortem repentance, the report affirms, "In his sovereignty, God might save some who have not explicitly professed faith in Jesus Christ," although we are not to assume this in any specific case. Christians should therefore evangelize, assuming that it is through proclamation of the gospel that God saves people.

The gospel is chiefly good news but also includes the message of hell: "Hell is more than mere annihilation at the point of



death. Rather death will lead on to resurrection and final judgment to either heaven or hell." Hell involves separation from God, severe punishment, and is "a *conscious* experience of rejection and torment."

Furthermore, "There are degrees of punishment and suffering in hell." Scripture describes hell as a realm of destruction, although evangelicals differ on whether this speaks of "the actual *existence* of individual sinners (eventual annihilation) or to the *quality of their relationship with God* (eternal conscious punishment)."

"Evangelicals diverge on whether hell is eternal in *duration* or *effect*," that is, on whether it consists of ceaseless conscious experience or irreversible annihilation. "God's purpose extends beyond judgment to the redemption of the cosmos. Evangelicals diverge on whether a place is preserved for hell in this new order of things."

Then come the recommendations:

Church leaders should not neglect teaching on hell but should teach it with "sensitivity and discernment." At funerals it is proper to declare the heavenly inheritance of Christians but not the condemnation of those whose relationship to God is unclear. Theological colleges should give attention to hell in preparing church leaders for ministries, and Christian educators should not neglect final destinies in their teaching. Hell understood as eternal conscious punishment is the historic view of the church and is the mainstream evangelical position.

Still, "Conditional immortality is a significant minority evangelical view. Furthermore, we believe that the traditionalist-conditionalist debate on hell should be regarded as a secondary rather than a primary issue for evangelical theology."

Furthermore, "We understand the current Evangelical Alliance Basis of Faith to allow both traditionalist and conditionalist interpretations of hell"; nonetheless it would be helpful to add a clause on eschatology that includes conditionalism. The evangelical traditionalist-conditionalist debate should continue with the parties maintaining "constructive dialogue and respectful relationships."

#### **An American assessment**

The report is a model of how evangelicals can study together constructively, even when they must agree to disagree. The working group did its homework well, as the extensive bibliography and footnotes attest. A spirit of Christian fairness

pervades the report. Traditionalist and conditionalist views are given on every debated point.

Surely we can appreciate the way our brothers and sisters have gone about their business. Too often evangelicals have ended up with black eyes before the world by conducting their debates with acrimony and rancor.

From the perspective of evangelical Anglicanism, the report must be deemed a success. It has a clear purpose: not to allow the traditionalist-conditionalist debate to further divide evangelicals in the United Kingdom. This is evident in the candor with which it describes the history of the debate, in the makeup of the working group (including scholars on both sides), in its design (the first and last two chapters form a literary inclusion that calls for theological inclusion), and in its conclusions and recommendations.

Readers should not miss the point: the book is not a debate between traditionalists and conditionalists concerning the nature of hell. Instead, it is a summary of that debate written to bring traditionalists and conditionalists together. It is an attempt at damage control.

As an American evangelical and a Reformed theologian, I have learned from *The Nature of Hell*. I have added to my bibliography, learned new ways conditionalists handle exegetical and theological problems, been brought up short a few times (the report cites my *Hell on Trial* frequently, usually favorably, but twice offers criticism), and appreciated the pastoral applications. I agree that the traditionalist-conditionalist debate does not extend to matters of salvation.

Yet I do not agree that the traditionalist-conditionalist debate should be regarded as "secondary," if that means a debatable matter as church government and eschatology are debatable. In my view conditionalism is a more serious error for three reasons.

First, despite good intentions, the conditionalist exegesis of the key texts falls short. After studying the report's presentation of the key exegetical debates, my conviction that traditionalism is the teaching of Scripture has been strengthened. Consequently, although I plan to assign the report as required seminary reading, I fear that it might confuse those who have not been trained to evaluate exegetical arguments. The report's approach to debated texts is this: traditionalists say this but conditionalists say this; to which traditionalists respond thus, to which conditionalists respond thus; and so on. This works well in the classroom, but it could easily give lay readers the impression that the arguments must come to a standoff. That

simply is not the case.

Second, conditionalism frequently leads to systemic error, adversely affecting other doctrines. So it is in the case of Edward Fudge, perhaps the conditionalist most cited in *The Nature of Hell*.

Fudge and I recently coauthored *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical and Theological Debate* (InterVarsity, 2000). Fudge argues that Jesus was "destroyed" when he died on the cross. I inquire whether he means that Jesus' whole person was destroyed or just his human nature. Either answer has disastrous implications for Christology: either God is "destroyed" or Jesus' two natures are separable in a way that Chalcedon would have condemned. Edward becomes agitated in response, signaling, I think, that he recognizes the theological problem.

Third, I fear that conditionalism might have a negative effect on evangelism and missions. If traditionalism is correct, then conditionalism seriously underestimates the pains of hell.

Indeed, the lost would rather be annihilated because their suffering would be over.

D. A. Carson speaks a hard but necessary truth:

Despite the sincerity of their motives, one wonders more than a little to what extent the growing popularity of various forms of annihilationism and conditional immortality are a reflection of this age of pluralism. It is getting harder and harder to be faithful to the "hard lines" of Scripture. And in this way, evangelicalism itself may contribute to the gagging of God by silencing the severity of his warnings and by minimizing the awfulness of the punishment that justly awaits those untouched by his redeeming grace.

**Robert A. Peterson** is professor of systematic theology at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis. He is the author of *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment* (P&R) and, with Edward Fudge, *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical & Theological Dialogue* (IVP).

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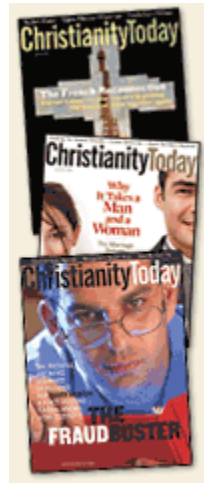
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