

The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent

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I. APPROACHING THE ISSUE

All Christian doctrines undergo a certain amount of development over time. Issues such as Christology and soteriology are taken up at various periods in church history and receive a peculiar stamp from intellectual and social conditions obtaining at the time. A variety of factors in society and philosophical thought impact upon the way in which issues are viewed and interpreted. All doctrinal formulations reflect to some extent historical and cultural conditions and have an incarnate or historical quality about them. Not to recognize this is (I think) to be willingly blind to reality.¹

Eschatology is not an exception to this principle. Indeed it exemplifies it. It illustrates the reality of doctrinal change and development very well, having gone through a number of important changes in time. Consider briefly the following changes in eschatology: the way thinking moved from the expectation in the New Testament and the early church of the nearness of the Second Coming of Christ to the willingness of later orthodox theologians to delay their expectation until the far distant

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¹This is made plain by J. Hopper, *Modern Theology II: Reinterpreting Christian Faith for Changing Worlds*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987, 4-31, in chap. 1 which is entitled "The Recognition of Historical and Cultural Relativity."

future; from a millennial or chiliast belief in Christ's reign upon the earth which one finds in the early fathers to a belief which sees his rule taking place in the world above and beyond history; from placing the final judgment at the end of history to an expectation of it occurring at the moment of death; from an emphasis on the gloriously resurrected body to an emphasis on the naturally immortal soul. Eschatology is one of those doctrines in which interpreters should be careful not to place uncritical confidence in what tradition has said, since it has undergone several large sea changes and does not speak with a single voice.²

The aspect of eschatology which we are studying here is the doctrine of divine judgment and hell.³ As in so many matters, for better or worse, it was Augustine who gave the church its standard way of thinking about hell, a way which would become dominant for the next millennium and a half. Specifically he taught us to view hell as a condition of endless torment of conscious persons in body and soul. In a major section of *The City of God* (book 21), he argues at length against all objections to this grim idea and defends his view vigorously that God plans to torture the wicked both mentally and physically forever. To get a feeling for his orientation, one should consider his argument in answer to one objection: how could a resurrected person burn physically and suffer psychologically forever without being materially consumed or ever losing consciousness? How could they suffer the same kind of burns one would sustain on earth from contact with raging flames and not be consumed by them? To explain this marvel Augustine explains that God has the power to do such things which transcend ordinary nature. He will employ His power to perform miracles to keep them alive and conscious in the fire.

Unfortunately Augustine is not alone in thinking this way but rather speaks for orthodoxy. The Protestant J. Edwards is every bit as rigorous in his doctrine of hell, as is well known. His sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" is (in)famous for the picture of God dangling sinners over the flames like a loathsome spider. J. Gerstner, an Edwards scholar, summarizes Edwards' view in this way:

²See S. Travis, *Christian Hope and the Future*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1980; H. Küng, *Eternal Life, Life After Death as a Medical, Philosophical, and Theological Problem*, New York: Doubleday, 1984; and J. Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, London: Collins, 1976.

³For an orientation see P. Toon, *Heaven and Hell, A Biblical and Theological Overview*, Nashville: Nelson, 1986; R. Morey, *Death and the Afterlife*, Minneapolis: Bethany, 1984; and E. Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of Final Punishment*, Houston: Providential, 1982.

Hell is a spiritual and material furnace of fire where its victims are exquisitely tortured in their minds and in their bodies eternally, according to their various capacities, by God, the devils, and damned humans including themselves, in their memories and consciences as well as in their raging, unsatisfied lusts, from which place of death God's saving grace, mercy, and pity are gone forever, never for a moment to return.⁴

Not only is it God's pleasure so to torture the wicked everlastingly, but it will be the happiness of the saints to see and know this is being faithfully done. It would not be unfair to picture the traditional doctrine in this way: just as one can imagine certain people watching a cat trapped in a microwave oven squirming in agony and taking delight in it, so the saints in heaven will, according to Edwards, experience the torments of the damned with pleasure and satisfaction.

In my paper I do not intend to consider what one might call "revisionist" versions of the traditional doctrine which in effect take the hell out of hell: for example, views which remove physical suffering from it, or make it into a timeless state, or put it down to the sinner's free choice to live separately from God rather than its being God's will to torment them. Augustine and Edwards too would certainly have rejected these softening concessions. I want to address the traditional view of the matter as it has actually been held, namely, the everlasting, conscious torment of the finally impenitent in body and soul. I want to do that first because such is the traditional view of hell and second because that view, like my own, takes the Bible's actual imagery of burning fire seriously.

Augustine hardly pauses over the well-known objections that plague the modern mind on the subject. We wonder how this doctrine can possibly be reconciled with the revelation of God in the face of Jesus Christ, a problem made so much worse by the fact that according to Augustine the people God tortures are also the nonelect to whom He has sovereignly/arbitrarily declined to extend His grace or assist in any way to be saved from hell. Thus Augustine cannot even resort to the explanation one hears often today: if hell is what the wicked have asked for, what can God do about it?⁵ Edwards, on the other hand, is aware of the problems. Unfortunately, as Gerstner acknowledges, he just ducks the questions and does not really answer them. Edwards seems to grasp the

⁴J. Gerstner, *Jonathan Edwards on Heaven and Hell*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980, 53.

⁵H. Silvester, *Arguing With God: A Christian Examination of the Problem of Evil*, London: InterVarsity, 1971, chap. 7.

questions we moderns want to ask but does not in the end face them. Gerstner surmises in response to this strange situation that Edwards must have been blinded by the very fire he defended so vigorously.⁶ I find this explanation bizarre. More likely, he just could not bring himself to wrap his tongue around the words which his system demanded be said.

For there really is little doubt what Edwards would have said to the objections since he says similar things elsewhere. Our problem, he would say, is that we think God as more loving and merciful than He actually is and want to judge God by our puny moral standards. Torturing the wicked eternally presents no problem to God, as Edwards understands Him. I think there must have been times in his life when he just could not bring himself to say the horrible things he believed about hell. At least we have his disciple Gerstner to pronounce the words for him.⁷

How should I begin? Shall I treat the subject in the calm way one would when dealing with another issue? Would it be right to pretend to be calm when I am not? To begin calmly would not really communicate a full account of my response. I do not feel calm about the traditional doctrine of hell, and so I will not pretend. Indeed, how can anyone with the milk of human kindness in him remain calm contemplating such an idea as this? Now I realize that in admitting this I am playing into the hands of the critics, when I admit how disturbed the doctrine makes me. They will be able to say that I have adopted arguments on the basis of sentimentality and a subjective sense of moral outrage. In a recent paper, J.I. Packer has said that he dislikes the idea which critics of everlasting conscious punishment seem to have of their moral superiority, when it is not spiritual sensitivity, he says, but secular sentimentalism which motivates them (referring in the context to none other than his esteemed evangelical and Anglican colleague J. Stott).⁸ Nonetheless, I will take the risk of beginning at the point of my outrage and hope people will hear me and not put it down to sentimentality. To such a charge I would reply: if it is sentimentality which drives me, what drives my opponent? Is it hard-

⁶Gerstner, 87-90.

⁷Many traditionalists other than Gerstner have no difficulty saying what they really think about hell. Listen to A. W. Pink: "Startling as it may sound, it is nevertheless a fact, that the Scriptures speak much more frequently of God's anger and wrath, than they do of his love and compassion." For a booklet along these lines, see Pink, *Eternal Punishment*, Swengel, PA: Reiner, n.d.

⁸See Packer's essay in *Evangelical Affirmations*, ed. K. S. Kantzer and C.F.H. Henry, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990.

heartedness and the desire for eternal retribution? Such recriminations will get us nowhere fast.

Let me say at the outset that I consider the concept of hell as endless torment in body and mind an outrageous doctrine, a theological and moral enormity, a bad doctrine of the tradition which needs to be changed. 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? Surely a God who would do such a thing is more nearly like Satan than like God, at least by any ordinary moral standards, and by the gospel itself. How can we possibly preach that God has so arranged things that a number of His creatures (perhaps a large number predestined to that fate) will undergo (in a state of complete consciousness) physical and mental agony through unending time? Is this not a most disturbing concept which needs some second thoughts? Surely the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is no fiend; torturing people without end is not what our God does. Does the one who told us to love our enemies intend to wreak vengeance on His own enemies for all eternity? As H. Küng appropriately asks, “What would we think of a human being who satisfied his thirst for revenge so implacably and insatiably?”⁹

In a recent book ably defending the traditional view of hell, R. Morey complains that in every generation people keep questioning the belief in everlasting, conscious torment even though the basis of it, as far as he can tell, has been laid out in books like his time and again. Well, I would offer him an explanation for this. Is it a surprise, given the cruelty which the doctrine attributes to God’s action, that Christians would repeatedly wonder if this were true? It is no wonder to me why they would gravitate to the kind of view I am defending, that the finally impenitent wicked, rather than suffering torture forever, pass out of existence. Their moral sensibilities demand it of them.

II. THE QUESTION BEFORE US

Having said that, I am ready to discuss the question rationally, if not exactly calmly. The question before us is whether Christian theology should contend that the wicked who are finally impenitent suffer everlasting, conscious punishment in body and soul or whether they are more

⁹Küng, 136.

likely to be destroyed in the destruction of a second death? Will the fire of hell torment condemned souls endlessly, or will it destroy and finally consume them? Does God intend to grant the wicked immortality in order to inflict endless pain upon them, or does He will that the wicked, following the last judgment, should finally perish and die? This is the question before us in this exchange of views.¹⁰ I myself will take the position that the finally impenitent wicked suffer extinction and annihilation.¹¹

In defending the annihilation of the wicked, I realize that this is the view of a minority among evangelical theologians and church leaders and that I place myself at risk when I oppose the traditional view of hell as endless agony and torment. After all, it is a well-established tradition, and one does not oppose such a tradition without paying a price in terms of one’s reputation. Even worse, I recognize that this puts me in some odd company, a fact which is regularly used against the position I am defending, for it is usually argued that only heretics or near-heretics deny the doctrine of everlasting punishment and defend extinction. The idea is that if the Adventists or the liberals hold such a view, the view must be wrong. In this way the position can be discredited by association and not need to be taken seriously or worried about.¹² Of course it is not much of an argument, but it proves effective with ignorant people who are taken in by rhetoric of this kind.

So it is that when such a noted evangelical as J.W. Wenham defends annihilationalism, it gets put down to liberal influences in the InterVarsity Press and to poor research on Wenham’s part for falling into this error.¹³

¹⁰Supporting Morey in defense of everlasting, conscious torment today are such names as A.A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979, chap. 19; H. Buis, *The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment*, Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1957; and M. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985, 1234-40. I believe that the majority of conservative theologians would side with this view and that I stand with the minority.

¹¹Supporting this view among contemporary evangelical theologians may be mentioned such authors as these: J.R.W. Stott in the book which he wrote with D.L. Edwards entitled *Essentials: A Liberal/Evangelical Dialogue*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988, 313-20; E. Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of Final Punishment*, Houston: Providential, 1982; P.E. Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989, chap. 37; and S. Travis, *I Believe in the Second Coming of Jesus*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982, 196-99.

¹²See Morey, 199-203.

¹³Morey, 203.

In my case, after *Christianity Today* published my view of hell as annihilation (March 20, 1987), A. Rogers, then the president of the Southern Baptist Convention, saw it as proof that my theology was no longer sound but was going liberal.¹⁴ Therefore, I suppose that I should feel grateful that Morey at least allows the possibility that one might actually be a Christian even if he believes in annihilation.¹⁵ Unfortunately for me, even that is now in some doubt, according to Morey, since I expressed some thoughts about divine omniscience.¹⁶ What does this tell us about the condition of evangelical theology that such a distorted evaluation of a fellow evangelical's work would be possible?

Nevertheless, the view I am advancing does seem to be gaining ground among evangelicals. The fact that no less of a person than J.R.W. Stott has endorsed it now will certainly encourage this trend to continue. It will tend to create a measure of accreditation by association and counter the dirty-tricks tactics used against it. It will be more difficult now to claim that only heretics and near-heretics hold the position, even though I am sure there will be people who will dismiss Stott too as a sound evangelical teacher for saying this.

This is surely a divisive issue at present among evangelicals, something that became clear at the "Evangelical Affirmations" conference held at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School last spring (as reported by *Christianity Today*, June 16, 1989).¹⁷ Stott himself expresses anxiety on that score, lest he should become a source of division in the community in which he is a renowned leader. The doctrine of hell enters into the struggle for evangelical identity. At the same time we should remember that whether Stott or Wenham or Hughes or anyone else holds the view of the annihilation of the wicked is irrelevant, since truth is not decided on the basis of who holds what opinion. The knife cuts both ways.

What I would ask my readers to do is to entertain the possibility that the Christian tradition has gone wrong in regard to hell as everlasting, conscious torment. It should not be too much to ask since many of them already hold that Augustine got certain other things wrong in his theology. Many will hold, for example, that he was wrong on the doctrine of the

¹⁴*The Proceedings of the Conference on Biblical Inerrancy: 1987*, Nashville: Broadman, 1987, 106.

¹⁵Morey, 204.

¹⁶Morey, *Battle of the Gods*, Southbridge, MA: Crown, 1989, 114-17.

¹⁷See Packer's essay in the conference volume soon to appear: *Evangelical Affirmations*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990.

millennium, on the practice of infant baptism, and on God's sovereign/arbitrary reprobation of the wicked. So why should they not entertain the possibility that he may have erred with regard to the doctrine of hell as everlasting, conscious punishment as well? Since as Protestants we accept the fact that Christian doctrines sometimes need reforming in some ways at some times, why would we refuse at least to consider the possibility that it might need to be reformed in this matter too? It can be viewed as a thought experiment.

III. THE CASE FOR THE ANNIHILATION OF THE WICKED

What I want to do is what I am assured cannot be done, namely, to show that the Bible does not teach Augustine's version of the doctrine of hell. Almost all who defend his view admit that the idea of everlasting torment is a genuinely awful concept, but they go on to defend it anyway on the assumption that it is nevertheless mandatory scriptural truth (much as a strict Calvinist argues in defense of his doctrine of the sovereign reprobation of the nonelect—recall Calvin's reference to "the horrible decree"). They tell us that they do not like the doctrine any more than anyone else but have to espouse it because it is a biblical idea and they have no choice but to uphold it. They make it sound like the infallibility of the Bible were at stake. Let us ask then whether the traditional doctrine of hell is biblically and theologically sound. In my view it is not.

1. The strong impression the Bible creates in this reader with regard to the fate of the finally impenitent wicked is a vivid sense of their final and irreversible destruction. The language and imagery used by Scripture is so powerful in this regard that it is remarkable more theologians have not picked up on it. The Bible repeatedly uses the language of death, destruction, ruin, and perishing when speaking of the fate of the wicked. It uses the imagery of fire consuming (not torturing) what is thrown into it. The images of fire and destruction together strongly suggest annihilation rather than unending torture. It creates the impression that eternal punishment refers to a divine judgment whose results cannot be reversed rather than to the experience of being tormented forever.

Frankly it is a little annoying to be told again and again by the defenders of everlasting torment that there is no biblical case for the annihilation of the wicked. A. Pink, for instance, calls the position an absurdity, while W. Hendriksen says he is aghast that anyone would argue otherwise than for hell as everlasting torment; and Packer attributes the

position to sentimentality, not to any scriptural ground. But is it not really quite the other way around? Does the burden of proof not rest with the traditionalists to explain why the strong impression of the destruction of the wicked which the Bible gives its readers should not just be believed?

A brief overview of the Bible will show what I am driving at. The Old Testament gives us a clear picture of the destruction of the wicked (perhaps because it is more oriented to this world than the next) and supplies the basic imagery of divine judgment for the New Testament as well. Consider Psalm 37 where we read that the wicked fade like grass and wither like the herb (v. 2), that they will be cut off and be no more (vv. 9, 10), that they will perish and vanish like smoke (v. 20), and be altogether destroyed (v. 38). Listen to this oracle from the prophet Malachi: “For behold, the day comes, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch” (4:1). The message is plain—the finally impenitent wicked will perish and be no more.

Turning to the New Testament, Jesus’ teaching about the afterlife is sketchy in matters of detail. While he certainly referred to a destiny beyond the grave either of bliss or woe, he did not bother to give us a clear conception of it. He was not a systematic theologian but a preacher more concerned with the importance of a decision here and now than with speculations about the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell. At the same time Jesus said things which support the impression the Old Testament gives us.

He presented God’s judgment as the destruction of the wicked. He said that God could and perhaps would destroy body and soul in hell, if He must (Matt. 10:28). Jesus’ words are reminiscent of John the Baptist’s when he said that the wicked are like dry wood about to be thrown into the fire and like chaff to be burned in the unquenchable fire (Matt. 3:10, 12). He warned that the wicked will be cast away into hell like so much rejected garbage into the *Gehenna* of fire (5:30), an allusion to the valley outside Jerusalem where sacrifices were once offered to Moloch (2 Kings 16:3; 21:6), and possibly the place where garbage actually smoldered and burned in Jesus’ day. Our Lord said that the wicked will be burned up there just like weeds when thrown into the fire (13:30, 42, 49, 50). The impression is a very strong one that the impenitent wicked can expect to be destroyed.

The Apostle Paul communicates the same thing, plainly thinking of

divine judgment as the destruction of the wicked. He writes of everlasting destruction which will come upon the wicked (2 Thes. 1:9). He warns that the wicked will reap corruption (Gal. 6:8). He states that God will destroy the wicked (1 Cor. 3:17; Phil. 1:28). He speaks of their fate as a death they deserve to die (Rom. 1:32) and which is the wages of their sins (6:23). About the wicked, he states plainly and concisely: “Their end is destruction” (Phil. 3:19).

It is no different in the other New Testament books. Peter speaks of “the fire which has been kept until the day of judgment and the destruction of ungodly men” (2 Pet. 3:7). The author to the Hebrews speaks of the wicked who shrink back and are destroyed (Heb. 10:39). Peter says that false teachers who deny the Lord who bought them will bring upon themselves “swift destruction” (2 Pet. 2:1, 3). They will resemble the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah which were “condemned to extinction” (2:6). They will perish like the ancient world perished when deluged in the great Flood (3:6, 7). Jude also points to Sodom as an analogy to God’s judgment, being the city which underwent “a punishment of eternal fire” (Jude 7). Similarly, the Apocalypse of John speaks of the lake of fire consuming the wicked and of the second death (Rev. 20:14, 15).

At the very least it should be obvious to any impartial reader that the Bible may legitimately be read to teach the final destruction of the wicked without difficulty. I am not making it up. It is not wishful thinking. It is simply a natural interpretation of Scripture on the subject of divine judgment. I think it is outrageous for traditionalists to say that a biblical basis for the destruction of the wicked is lacking. What is in short supply are texts supporting the traditional view.

2. Some advocates prefer to call their position conditional immortality rather than annihilationism because it sounds more positive to the ear. Underlying the doctrine of annihilation, after all, is a belief in conditional immortality, the understanding that our immortality is not a natural attribute of humankind but God’s gift. This is clearly an important issue in our discussion because belief in the natural immortality of the soul which is so widely held by Christians, although stemming more from Plato than the Bible, really drives the traditional doctrine of hell more than exegesis does. Consider the logic: if souls must live forever because they are naturally immortal, the lake of fire must be their home forever and cannot be their destruction. In the same way, the second death would have to be a process of everlasting dying and not a termination of existence which is impossible. I am convinced that the hellenistic belief in the

immortality of the soul has done more than anything else (specifically more than the Bible) to give credibility to the doctrine of the everlasting conscious punishment of the wicked. This belief, not holy Scripture, is what gives this doctrine the credibility it does not deserve.

Belief in the immortality of the soul has long attached itself to Christian theology. J. Maritain, for example, states: “The human soul cannot die. Once it exists, it cannot disappear; it will necessarily exist forever and endure without end.”¹⁸ To this we must say, with all due respect, that the Bible teaches no such thing. The soul is not an immortal substance that has to be placed somewhere if it rejects God. The Bible states that God alone has immortality (1 Tim. 6:16) and that everlasting life is something God gives to humanity by grace (1 Cor. 15:51-55). Eternal life is not something we possess by any natural right according to Scripture. Immortality is not inherent in human beings. We are dependent on God for what happens to us after death. Rather than speaking of immortal souls, the Bible refers to resurrected bodies, to persons being reconstituted through the power of God (Phil. 3:20). In a word, Jesus Christ “abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Tim. 1:10).¹⁹

The Greek doctrine of immortality has affected theology unduly on this point. It is one of several examples where there has been an undue hellenization of Christian doctrine. The idea of souls being naturally immortal is not a biblical one, and the effect of believing it stretches the experience of death and destruction in *Gehenna* into endless torment. If souls are immortal, then either all souls will be saved (which is unscriptural universalism) or else hell must be everlasting torment. There is no other possibility since annihilation is ruled out from the start. 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.

Nevertheless, I do not call my position conditional immortality. It is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition of my view. Conditional immortality has to be true for a negative reason—to make the destruction of the wicked conceivable, but it does not positively establish annihilation simply because it would still be possible that God might give the wicked

¹⁸J. Maritain, *The Range of Reason*, London: Geoffrey Bles, 1953, 60.

¹⁹O. Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Body?* London: Epworth, 1958; M.J. Harris, *Raised Immortal: Resurrection and Immortality in the New Testament*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983, 187-205; and G. Wisbrock, *Death and the Soul after Life*, n.p.: Wisbrock, 1986.

everlasting life and condemn them to spend it in everlasting torment. Conditional immortality then, while necessary to belief in annihilation, does not prove that annihilation is true. The key issue remains my first argument: the Scriptures suggest the destruction of the wicked.

3. As I intimated earlier, everlasting torment is intolerable from a moral point of view because it makes God into a bloodthirsty monster who maintains an everlasting Auschwitz for victims whom He does not even allow to die. How is one to worship or imitate such a cruel and merciless God? The idea of everlasting torment (especially if it is linked to soteriological predestination) raises the problem of evil to impossible dimensions. A. Flew was quite right (I think) to say that, if Christians want to hold that God created some people to be tortured in hell forever, then the apologetic task in relation to theodicy is just hopeless.²⁰ Stott seems to agree: “I find the concept intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterizing their feelings or cracking under the strain.”²¹ I even wonder what atrocities have been committed by those who have believed in a God who tortures His enemies?

Naturally, various attempts have been made by the traditionalists to hide the gruesome problem. C. Hodge and B.B. Warfield, for example, make use of postmillennial eschatology to argue that very few persons (relatively speaking) will go to hell anyway. Presumably we do not need to worry much if only a negligible number is tormented while a numerical majority is saved. Such a calculus, however, achieves little: first, because few today would accept the postmillennial premise to begin with, and second, because the tens of millions still suffering everlasting torture even under their scenario are tens of millions too many.

Alternatively it is common to try to hide the moral problem by redefining hell. C.S. Lewis tries this when he pictures hell in *The Great Divorce* as almost pleasant, if a little gray, being the kind of place from which one can take day trips on the bus into heaven and return again to meet with the theological society which meets regularly in hell.²² This resembles Sartre’s picture of hell in *No Exit* as consisting of being cooped up with the other people forever. In these terms, hell is nasty and

²⁰A. Flew, *God and Philosophy*, London: Hutchinson, 1966, 56-57.

²¹Stott and Edwards, 314.

²²In another place, though, Lewis sounds much like an annihilationist himself. Hell speaks more of finality than of duration, he says, and it exists on the outer rim “where being fades away into nonentity” (*The Problem of Pain*, London: Geoffrey Bles, 1940, 114-15).

inconvenient, but certainly no lake of fire. Thus by sheer speculation the biblical warnings are emasculated and the moral problem dealt with by fancy footwork devoid of exegesis. The fact is that the biblical warnings spell a terrible destruction awaiting the impenitent wicked, and if hell is everlasting there is no way to make it other than endless torture. I understand why traditionalists want to take the hell out of hell, but it should not be permitted, because it breaks the concentration and prevents people from seeing the need for theological renewal on this point.

4. The need to correct the traditional doctrine of hell also rests upon considerations of the divine justice. What purpose of God would be served by the unending torture of the wicked except sheer vengeance and vindictiveness? Such a fate would spell endless and totally unredemptive suffering, punishment just for its own sake. Even the plagues of Egypt were intended to be redemptive for those who would respond to the warnings. But unending torment would be the kind of utterly pointless and wasted suffering which could never lead to anything good beyond it. Furthermore, it would amount to inflicting infinite suffering upon those who have committed finite sins. It would go far beyond an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. There would be a serious disproportion between sins committed in time and the suffering experienced forever. The fact that sin has been committed against an infinite God does not make the sin infinite. The chief point is that eternal torment serves no purpose and exhibits a vindictiveness out of keeping with the love of God revealed in the gospel. We should listen to H. Küng:

Even apart from the image of a truly merciless God that contradicts everything we can assume from what Jesus says of the Father of the lost, can we be surprised at a time when retributive punishments without an opportunity of probation are being increasingly abandoned in education and penal justice that the idea not only of a lifelong, but even eternal punishment of body and soul, seems to many people absolutely monstrous?²³

5. Finally, from a metaphysical point of view, everlasting torment gives the clear picture of an unending cosmological dualism. Heaven and hell just go on existing alongside each other forever. But how can this be if God is to be “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28) and if God is making “all things new” (Rev. 21:5)? It just does not add up right. Stott asks: “How can God in any meaningful sense be called ‘everything to everybody’ while an

²³Küng, 136-37.

unspecified number of people still continue in rebellion against him and under his judgment?”²⁴ It would make better sense metaphysically (as well as biblically, morally, and justicewise) if hell meant destruction and the wicked were no more. Otherwise the disloyal opposition would eternally exist alongside God in a corner of unredeemed reality in the new creation.

6. Nevertheless, the reader may be asking, have I not forgotten something important? What about the texts which have always been taken to support the doctrine of everlasting conscious torment? In regard to them I would say that their number is very small. The texts which can be taken to teach this doctrine are few in number and capable of being fairly interpreted in harmony with the majority of verses which teach the destruction of the wicked. I deal with these “difficult” texts in the way that biblical inerrantists or high Calvinists deal with the difficult passages they face.

(1) “Their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:48). This imagery is taken from Isaiah 66:24 where the dead bodies of God’s enemies are being eaten by maggots and burned up. It is safe to say there is not a hint of everlasting suffering in the verse. The fire and the worm destroy the dead bodies; they do not torment them. The fire will be quenched only when the job is finished, not before. The tradition simply misreads the verse.²⁵

(2) “They will go away into eternal punishment” (Matt. 25:46). I admit that the interpretation of everlasting, conscious torment can be read out of this verse if one wishes to do so. Such a meaning is not at all impossible from the wording, especially if one smuggles the term “conscious” into it as is very common.²⁶ But there are considerations which would bring the meaning more into line with what I judge to be the larger body of evidence. Jesus does not define the nature of eternal life or eternal death in this text. He just says there will be two destinies and leaves it there. One is free to interpret it to mean either everlasting conscious torment or irreversible destruction. The text allows for both possibilities and only

²⁴Stott, 319.

²⁵Unfortunately, W.L. Lane reads the text through Jth 16:17 and therefore gives the meaning as endless torment in his *Commentary on the Gospel of Mark*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974, 349.

²⁶Harris reads it this way (Harris, 182-84) as does R.H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on his Literary and Theological Art*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982, 516: “The parallel between eternal punishment and eternal life forestalls any weakening of the former.”

teaches explicitly the finality of the judgment itself, not its nature.²⁷ Therefore, one's interpretation of this verse in respect to our subject here will depend upon other considerations. In the light of what has been said so far, I think it is better and wiser to read the text as teaching annihilation.

(3) But did not the rich man suffer torment in the flames in a famous parable of Jesus? (Luke 16:23ff.). Yes, this is part of the Jewish imagery Jesus uses. But one should keep two things in mind here: first, the mention of Abraham's bosom (v. 22) should alert us to the fact that we are dealing with imagery, not literal description; and second (and more importantly), the story refers to the intermediate state between death and the resurrection and is not really relevant to our subject. This point should not be missed given the fact that the passage is used regularly (and erroneously) in the traditionalist literature to describe hell, not the intermediate state.²⁸

(4) But what about those passages in the book of the Revelation of John which speak of Satan, the false prophet, the beast, and certain evildoers being tormented in fire and brimstone (Rev. 14:11; 20:10)? Only in the first case (14:11) are human beings at all in view, and it is likely that what is being described is the moment of their judgment, not their everlasting condition, with the smoke going up forever being the testimony to their final destruction. In the other verse (20:10), it is the Devil, the beast, and the false prophet who are the only ones present, and they cannot be equated with ordinary human beings, however we should understand their nature. John's point seems to be that everything which has rebelled against God will come to an absolute end. As Caird comments: "John believed that, if at the end there should be any who remained impervious to the grace and love of God, they would be thrown, with Death and Hades, into the lake of fire which is the second death, i.e. extinction and total oblivion."²⁹ I think it would be fair to say that the biblical basis for the traditional view of hell has been greatly exaggerated.

Positively I am contending that Scripture and theology give solid support to the doctrine of the annihilation of the wicked. The case is impressive if not quite unambiguous, and the traditional view looks less likely in comparison with it. Yet I would not say that either side wins the

²⁷As C. Brown says in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978, 3.99.

²⁸For background on the Jewish imagery used in this parable of Jesus, see I.H. Marshall, *Commentary on Luke*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978, 632-39.

²⁹G.B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, London: Adam and Charles Black, 1966, 186-87.

argument hands down largely because the Bible does not seem concerned to deal with this question as precisely as we want it to. But it is amusing to hear traditionalists claiming that they alone hold to the infallibility of the Bible as illustrated by their holding to everlasting torment of the wicked.³⁰ Their position is in fact very weakly established biblically.

IV. HERMENEUTICAL COMMENTARY

A number of fascinating issues surface in this debate, some of which we should at least notice before we close. Some important things are revealed about theological method. First, it appears that the strongest argument for holding the Augustinian view of hell is the long tradition. The scriptural support is rather weak and the objections to it very strong. This raises the question why evangelicals cling tightly to certain ancient traditions and not others (like infant baptism)? Perhaps the issue of liberal theology comes into it. After all, all liberals hate the traditional doctrine of hell, and evangelicals know this well. This means that belief in everlasting torment can serve as a handy litmus test for separating liberals from evangelicals (much like the virgin birth has done for decades). This may account for some of the emotion and stubbornness one encounters around this subject. But if the best reason for holding to everlasting torment is tradition, then we had better reconsider because it is not a good enough reason.

Second, my own essay illustrates the primary reason why people question the tradition so vehemently. They are not first of all impressed by its lack of a good scriptural basis (that comes later). They are appalled by its awful moral implications. But this means of course that along with Scripture they are employing moral reasoning in their theological method even as their opponents are employing tradition in theirs.

Third, we receive some lessons in biblical interpretation too. How is it that the Bible can be read in such different ways as we have noticed? Does this not suggest that we need a more adequate understanding of hermeneutics? Ought we to press a single verse, the meaning of which we are personally certain, if it goes against a lot of other texts and also broader considerations? Should we be staring at texts or considering wider theological issues in this case? Does our interpretation depend upon larger paradigms?

³⁰As Buis argues (Buis, 127).

Fourth, reason is certainly playing a role here too. It gets used in assessing the meaning of texts, in constructing doctrines, and in considering issues surrounding the problem of evil, justice, and metaphysics. The discussion illustrates how reason, even operating in a ministerial role, plays a role in deciding doctrinal questions.

Fifth, there is clearly a lot of cultural and situational input too. The traditional view was greatly influenced by the hellenistic belief in the immortality of the soul. Pusey used hell as a whip to keep people morally observant, and Edwards used it to frighten them into faith. People even oppose annihilation on the grounds that it is not frightening enough and lets the wicked get off too easy! A great deal more than exegesis goes into decisions like these.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

First, I hope we remember that eschatology is an area in which what we know by way of specific knowledge is quite limited. The Bible is reserved about giving us detailed information about heaven or hell, so we should try not to be too dogmatic or harsh with one another.

Second, I hope that the traditionalists will not make this issue into one which will divide evangelicals from one another as seems quite possible. Whether the wicked perish or suffer endlessly, hell is a very grim prospect, and I and the others are not trying to lessen it.³¹ To be rejected by God, to miss the purpose for which one was created, to pass into oblivion while others enter into bliss—this will mean weeping and the gnashing of teeth. I do not think we have to be at one another's throats over this. I commended *Christianity Today* earlier and the *Criswell Theological Review* now for their willingness to examine the issue of annihilation.

Finally, take heed to what Stott says:

I am hesitant to have written these things, partly because I have a great respect for longstanding tradition which claims to be a true interpretation of scripture, and do not lightly set it aside, and partly because the unity of the worldwide evangelical constituency has always meant much to me. But the issue is too important to suppress, and I am grateful to you [D. Edwards] for challenging me to declare my present mind. I do not dogmatize about the position to which I have come. I hold it tentatively. But I do plead for frank dialogue among evangelicals on the basis of

³¹Neither is Wenham who hesitates on this very point (Wenham, 37-39).

scripture. I also believe that the ultimate annihilation of the wicked should at least be accepted as a legitimate, biblically founded alternative to their eternal conscious torment.³²

³²Stott, 319-20.