

Evangelical Annihilationism in Review

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Evangelicalism is variously defined by various people. I define it as the religion of Trinitarian Bible-believers who glory in Christ's Cross as the only source of peace with God and seek to share their faith with others; and I note that in the West (to look no further) evangelicalism, like Protestant liberalism, Roman Catholicism of all stripes, and Eastern Orthodoxy, has a communal mindset of its own. Factors shaping that mindset during the past half-century include the dogmatic, devotional, apologetic and activist nurture given in evangelical churches and parachurch movements; the reading matter (books, journals, magazines) that evangelicals produce for each other; the feeling of superior faithfulness to the Bible, its God and its Christ, which evangelical institutions cultivate; a sense of being threatened by the big battalions of the liberal Protestant, Roman Catholic, and American secular establishments, leading to bluster when these ideological power bases are discussed; a passion for effective evangelism; and an idealizing of scholars and leaders as gurus, whence a sense of betrayal and outrage surfaces if any of these are felt to be stepping out of line. Within the distinctive corporate identity of evangelicalism an awareness of privilege and vocation, a siege mentality, a low flashpoint in debate, a certain verbal violence, and a tendency to shoot our own wounded — all obtrude.

Whether the movement's recent recovery of confidence and burgeoning intellectual life¹ are mellowing this raw mindset is not yet clear; certainly, however, the rigidities hinted at above have been apparent as evangelicals have intramurally debated annihilationism during the past ten years.

Annihilationist ideas have been canvassed among evangelicals for more than a century,² but they never became part of the mainstream of evangelical faith,³ nor have they been widely discussed in the evangelical camp until recently. In 1987 Clark Pinnock authored a punchy two-page article titled "Fire, Then Nothing,"⁴ but this, though widely read, did not spark debate, any more than the 500-page exposition of the same view, *The Fire That Consumes* (1982) by the gifted Churches of Christ layman Edward William Fudge, had done.⁵ In 1988, however, two brief pieces of advocacy came from Anglican evangelical veterans: eight pages by John Stott in *Essentials*,⁶ and ten by the late Philip Edgecumbe Hughes in *The True Image*.⁷ These put the cat among the pigeons.

At Evangelical Essentials, a conference of 350 leaders held at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois, in 1989, I read a paper portentously titled "Evangelicals and the Way of Salvation: New Challenges to the Gospel: Universalism and Justification by Faith."⁸ In that paper I offered a line of thought countering the view of these two respected friends.⁹ It turned out that the conference was split down the middle over the annihilation question. The *Christianity Today* report said:

Strong disagreements did surface over the position of annihilationism, a view that holds that unsaved souls will cease to exist after death . . . the conference was almost evenly divided as to how to deal with the issue in the affirmations statement, and no renunciation of the position was included in the draft document.¹⁰

After this, at the request of John White, then president of National Association of Evangelicals, the late John Gerstner wrote a response to Stott, Hughes and Fudge under the title *Repent or Perish* (1990);¹¹ and in 1992 the papers read at the fourth Edinburgh Conference on Christian Dogmatics came into print as *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*.¹² Included were John W. Wenham, “The Case for Conditional Immortality,” and Kendall S. Harmon, “The Case Against Conditionalism: A Response to Edward William Fudge.”

Nor was this all. Semipopular books reaffirming the reality and endlessness of hell began to flow: Ajith Fernando, *Crucial Questions About Hell* (1991);¹³ Eryl Davies, *An Angry God?* (1991);¹⁴ Larry Dixon, *The Other Side of the Good News* (1992);¹⁵ William Crockett, John Walvoord, Zachary Hayes and Clark Pinnock, *Four Views on Hell* (1992);¹⁶ David Pawson, *The Road to Hell* (1992);¹⁷ John Blanchard, *Whatever Happened to Hell?* (1993);¹⁸ David George Moore, *The Battle for Hell: A Survey and Evaluation of Evangelicals’ Growing Attraction to the Doctrine of Annihilationism* (1995);¹⁹ Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment* (1995).²⁰ All these books argue more or less elaborately against annihilationism. The debate continues.

What is at issue? The question is essentially exegetical, though with theological and pastoral implications. It boils down to whether, when Jesus said that those banished at the final judgment will “go away into eternal punishment” (Matt. 25:46), He envisaged a state of penal pain that is endless, or an ending of conscious existence that is irrevocable: that is (for this is how the question is put), a punishment that is eternal in its length or in its effect. Mainstream Christianity has always affirmed the former, and still does; evangelical annihilationists unite with many Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists and liberals — just about all, indeed, who are not universalists — to affirm the latter. Beyond this point, however, evangelical annihilationists have fanned out, and there is no unanimity.²¹

Some have maintained that the snuffing-out will occur immediately upon Jesus’ sentence at the final judgment, following Dives-like penal pain in the pre-resurrection interim state; others have thought that each person banished from Jesus’ presence will then undergo some penal pain, doubtless graded in intensity and length in light of personal desert, before the moment of extinction comes. Some base their annihilationism on an adjusted anthropology. They urge that endless existence is natural to nobody; on the contrary, since we were created as psycho-physical units, that is, personal selves (souls) living through bodies, disembodiment must terminate consciousness. So after our initial disembodiment (the first death) there is no interim state, only an unconsciousness that continues until we are reembodyed on Resurrection Day, and after resurrected unbelievers are banished from Christ their consciousness will finally cease (the second death) when, and because, their resurrection body ceases to be. Some who reason thus, however, do in fact affirm a conscious interim state, with joy for saints and sorrow for sinners, as the general consensus in the church seems always to have done. All who embrace this adjusted anthropology call their view conditional immortality, a phrase coined to make the point that the postmortem continuance that religions envisage and most if not all desire, is a gift that God gives

only to Christian believers, while sooner or later He simply extinguishes the rest of our race. Ongoing existence is thus conditional upon faith in Jesus Christ, and annihilation is the universal alternative.²²

Historically, these are nineteenth-century views. The nineteenth century was an era of bold challenges to past assumptions, bold dreams of things made better, and bold enterprise, both intellectual and technological, to bring this about. Historic Christian teaching about hell was called in question in light of the utilitarian and progressive conviction that retribution alone, with no prospect of anything or anyone being improved by it, is in no case a sufficient justification for punishment, let alone unending punishment. From this it seemed to follow that the idea of God maintaining anyone in permanent postmortem pain was unworthy of Him, and therefore the traditional view of eternal punishment must be abandoned, and another way of explaining the texts that appear to teach it must be found. Bible-believing revisionists developed two ways of doing this, both essentially speculative in the manner of Origen, who looked to currently established philosophy to fix the frame for interpreting texts and to fill gaps in what the texts teach. The first way was universalism, which says that all the humans there are will finally be in heaven, and speculates as to how through painful experiences those who die in unbelief will get there. The second way was annihilationism, which says that those in heaven will finally be all the humans there are, and speculates as to when unbelievers are extinguished. The arguments used by today's evangelical annihilationists are essentially no different from those of their last-century predecessors.

Two theological and pastoral caveats must precede our review of these arguments.

1) Views about hell should not be discussed outside the frame of the Gospel. Why not? Because it is only in connection with the Gospel that Jesus and the New Testament writers speak of hell, and the biblical way of treating biblical themes is in their biblical connections as well as in their biblical substance. As Peter Toon observes,

. . . the preaching and teaching of Jesus concerning Gehenna, darkness, and damnation were in the context of His proclamation and exposition of the kingdom of God, salvation, and eternal life; they were never proposed as independent topics for reflection and study. This latter point has been much emphasized by distinguished theologians.²³ . . . [Hell] is part of the whole gospel and thus cannot be left out. . . . To warn people to avoid hell means that hell is a reality, or can be a reality. Thus it is unavoidable that we offer a tentative description of hell at least in terms of the *poena damni* (pain of loss of the beatific vision) and possibly of the *poena census* (pain of sense, i.e., via the senses) but . . . recognize always that we are speaking figuratively.²⁴

The Christian idea of hell is not a freestanding concept of pain for pain's sake (the divine "savagery" and "sadism" and "cruelty" and "vindictiveness" that annihilationists accuse believers in an unending hell of asserting²⁵), but a Gospel-formed notion of three coordinate miseries, namely, exclusion from God's gracious presence and fellowship, in punishment and with destruction, being visited on those whose negativity towards God's humbling mercies has already excluded the Father and the Son from their hearts. The justice of God's final judgment, which Jesus will administer, according to the Gospel, lies in two things: first, the fact that what people receive is not only what they deserve but that they have in effect already chosen — namely, to be forever without God and therefore without any of the good that He gives; second,

the fact that the sentence is proportioned to the knowledge of God's Word, work and will that was actually disregarded (cf. Luke 12:42-48; Rom. 1:18-20, 32; 2:4, 12-15). Hell, according to the Gospel, is not immoral ferocity but moral retribution, and discussions of its length for its inmates must proceed within that frame.

2) Views about hell should not be determined by considerations of comfort. Said John Wenham: "Beware of the immense natural appeal of any way out that evades the idea of everlasting sin and suffering. The temptation to twist what may be quite plain statements of Scripture is intense. It is the ideal situation for unconscious rationalizing."²⁶ Said John Stott:

Emotionally, I find the concept [of eternal conscious torment] 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 . . . my question must be — and is — not what does my heart tell me, but what does God's word say?²⁷

Both men adopted annihilationism, in which they may be wrong, but they embraced it for the right reason — not because it fitted into their comfort zone, though it did, but because they thought they found it in the Bible. Whatever our view on the question, we too must be guided by Scripture, and nothing else.

The Arguments for Annihilationism

1) The first argument is of necessity an attempt to explain "eternal punishment" in Matthew 25:46, where it is parallel to the phrase "eternal life," as not necessarily carrying the implication of endlessness. Granted that, as is rightly urged, "eternal" (*aionios*) in the New Testament means "belonging to the age to come" rather than expressing any directly chronological notion, the New Testament writers are unanimous in expecting the age to come to be unending, so the annihilationist's problem remains where it was. The assertion that in the age to come life is the sort of thing that goes on while punishment is the sort of thing that ends begs the question. Basil Atkinson, "an eccentric bachelor academic," according to Wenham,²⁸ but a professional philologist, and mentor of Wenham and Stott in this matter, wrote:

When the adjective *aionios* meaning "everlasting" is used in Greek with nouns of *action*, it has reference to the *result* of that action, but not the process. Thus the phrase "everlasting punishment" is comparable to "everlasting redemption" and "everlasting salvation," both scriptural phrases . . . the lost will not be passing through a process of punishment forever but will be punished once and for all with eternal results.²⁹

Though this assertion is constantly made by annihilationists, who otherwise could not get their position off the ground, it lacks support from grammarians and in any case begs the question by assuming that punishment is a momentary rather than a sustained event. While not, perhaps, absolutely impossible, the reasoning seems unnatural, evasive and, in the final assessment, forlorn.

2) The second argument is that once the idea of the intrinsic immortality of the soul (that is, of the conscious person) is set aside as a Platonic intrusion into second-century exegesis, it will

appear that the only natural meaning of the New Testament imagery of death, destruction, fire and darkness as indicators of the destiny of unbelievers is that such persons cease to be. But this proves on inspection not to be so. For evangelicals, the analogy of Scripture, that is, the axiom of its inner coherence and consistency and power to elucidate its own teaching from within itself, is a controlling principle in all interpretation, and though there are texts which, taken in isolation, might carry annihilationist implications, there are others that cannot naturally be fitted into any form of this scheme. But no proposed theory of the Bible's meaning that does not cover all the Bible's relevant statements can be true.

Jude 6 and Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30 show that darkness signifies a state of deprivation and distress, but not of destruction in the sense of ceasing to exist. Only those who exist can weep and gnash their teeth, as those banished into the darkness are said to do.

Nowhere in Scripture does death signify extinction; physical death is departure into another mode of being, called sheol or hades, and metaphorical death is existence that is God-less and graceless; nothing in biblical usage warrants the idea, found in Guillebaud³⁰ and others, that the "second death" of Revelation 2:11; 20:14; 21:8 means or involves cessation of being.

Luke 16:22-24 shows that, as also in a good deal of extra-biblical apocalyptic, fire signifies continued existence in pain, and the chilling words of Revelation 14:10 with 19:20; 20:10 and of Matthew 13:42, 50 confirm this.

In 2 Thessalonians 1:9 Paul explains, or extends, the meaning of "punished with everlasting [eternal, *aionios*] destruction" by adding "and shut out from the presence of the Lord" — which phrase, by affirming exclusion, rules out the idea that "destruction" meant extinction. Only those who exist can be excluded. It has often been pointed out that in Greek the natural meaning of the destruction vocabulary (noun, *olethros*; verb, *apollumi*) is wrecking, so that what is destroyed is henceforth nonfunctional rather than annihilating it, so that it no longer exists in any form at all.

Annihilationists respond with special pleading. Sometimes they urge that such references to continued distress as have been quoted refer only to the temporary experience of the lost before they are extinguished, but this is to beg the question by speculative eisegesis and to give up the original claim that the New Testament imagery of eternal loss naturally implies extinction. Peterson quotes from John Stott's pages, which he calls "the best case for annihilationism,"³¹ the following comment on the words "And the smoke of their torment rises forever and ever" in Revelation 14:11:

The fire itself is termed "eternal" and "unquenchable", but it would be very odd if what is thrown into it proves indestructible. Our expectation would be the opposite: it would be consumed forever, not tormented forever. Hence it is the smoke (evidence that the fire has done its work) which "rises for ever and ever."

"On the contrary," Peterson replies, "our expectation would be that the smoke would die out once the fire had finished its work. . . . The rest of the verse confirms our interpretation: 'There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image.'"³² There seems no answer to this.

So at every point the linguistic argument simply fails. To say that some texts, taken in isolation, might mean annihilation proves nothing when other texts evidently do not. We move on.

3) The third argument is that for God to visit punitive retribution endlessly on the lost would be disproportionate and unjust. Writes Stott: “I question whether ‘eternal conscious torment’ is compatible with the biblical revelation of divine justice, unless perhaps (as has been argued) the impenitence of the lost also continues throughout eternity.”³³ The uncertainty expressed in Stott’s “perhaps” is strange, for there is no reason to think that the resurrection of the lost for judgment will change their character, and every reason therefore to suppose that their rebellion and impenitence will continue as long as they themselves do, making continued banishment from God’s fellowship fully appropriate; but, leaving that aside, it is apparent that the argument, if valid, would prove too much, and end up undermining the annihilationist’s own case.

For if, as the argument implies, it is needlessly cruel for God to keep the lost endlessly in being to suffer pain, because His justice does not require this, how can the annihilationists justify in terms of God’s justice the fact that He makes them suffer any postmortem pain at all? Why would not justice, which on this view requires their annihilation in any case, not be satisfied by annihilation at death? Biblical annihilationists, who cannot evade the biblical expectation of the Final Resurrection to judgment of unbelievers along-side believers, admit that God does not do this, and some, as we have seen, admit too that there will be some pain inflicted after judgment and prior to extinction; but if God’s justice requires no more than extinction, and therefore does not require this, the pain becomes needless cruelty, and God is thus in effect accused of the very fault of which annihilationists are anxious to prove Him innocent and to condemn the Christian mainstream for implying; while if God’s justice really does require some penal pain in addition to annihilation, and continued hostility, rebellion, and impenitence Godward on the part of unbelievers remains a postmortem fact, there will be no moment at which it will be possible for either God or man to say that enough punishment has been inflicted, no more is deserved, and any more would be unjust. The argument thus boomerangs on its proponents, impaling them inescapably on the horns of this dilemma. Wiser was Basil Atkinson, who declares: “I have avoided . . . any argument about the final state of the lost based upon the character of God, which I should consider it to be irreverent to attempt to estimate.”³⁴ No doubt he foresaw the toils into which such argument leads.

4) The fourth argument is that the saints’ joy in heaven would be marred by knowing that some continue under merited retribution. But this cannot be said of God, as if the expressing of His holiness in retribution hurts Him more than it hurts the offenders; and since in heaven Christians will be like God in character, loving what He loves and taking joy in all His self-manifestation, including the manifestation of His justice (in which indeed the saints in Scripture take joy already in this world), there is no reason to think that their eternal joy will be impaired in this way.³⁵

It is distasteful to argue in print against honored fellow-evangelicals, some of whom are good friends and others of whom (I mention Atkinson, Wenham, and Hughes particularly) are now with Christ, so I stop right here. My purpose was only to review the debate and assess the strength of the arguments used, and that I have done. I am not sure that I agree with Peter Toon that discussion as to whether hell means everlasting punishment or annihilation after judgment

... is both a waste of time and an attempt to know what we cannot know,"³⁶ but I am sure he is right to say that hell "is part of the whole gospel" and that "to warn people to avoid hell means that hell is a reality."³⁷ All who settle for warning people to avoid hell can walk in fellowship in their ministry, and legitimately claim to be evangelicals. When John Stott urges that "the ultimate annihilation of the wicked should at least be accepted as a legitimate, biblically founded alternative to their eternal conscious torment,"³⁸ he asks too much, for the biblical foundations of this view prove on inspection, as we have seen, to be inadequate. But it would be wrong for differences of opinion on this matter to lead to breaches of fellowship, though it would be a very happy thing for the Christian world if the differences could be resolved.

Notes

1. The jeremiads of David Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), and Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), tell only half the story. Granted that evangelical theology and worldview reflections have in some quarters and in some respects been beaten out of shape and fragmented, the energy that is currently being devoted to recovery here is remarkable.
2. Details may be gleaned from LeRoy Edwin Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers* (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald, 2 vols., 1965-66), and from David J. Powys, "The Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Debates about Hell and Universalism," in *Universalism* (Paternoster Press, and Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 93-138.
3. I stated this in "The Problem of Eternal Punishment," *Crux* XXVI.3, September 1990, 23. John Wenham challenged my statement on the grounds that evangelicals talked much about the matter in the second half of the nineteenth century, which he called "the heyday of conditionalism among evangelicals" (*Universalism . . .*, 181 and note 27). But conversation and conviction are not the same thing. Evidence for my assertion is found in the fact that three of what Robert A. Peterson lists as "the four best books espousing annihilationism" (*Hell on Trial*, Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1995, 161-62), namely Harold E. Guillebaud, *The Righteous Judge*, privately printed, 1964; Basil F. C. Atkinson, *Life and Immortality*, privately printed, n. d., c. 1968; and Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, could not find a mainstream evangelical publisher.
4. *Christianity Today*, March 20, 1987, 40-41. Pinnock expanded his line of thought in "The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent," *Criswell Theological Review* 4 (Spring 1990), 243-59.
5. Houston: Providential Press, 1982. Fudge's book was noted and briefly answered by Robert A. Morey, *Death and the Afterlife* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1984), 124ff., 205. A revised and compressed edition, with Fudge's answers to critics, appeared in 1994 (Carlisle, United Kingdom: Paternoster Press).
6. David L. Edwards and John Stott, *Essentials* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), 313-20.
7. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, and Leicester, United Kingdom: Inter-Varsity Press, 1989, 398-407.
8. Kenneth Kantzer and Carl F. H. Henry, eds., *Evangelical Essentials* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 107-36.
9. The line of thought was developed in the *Crux* article, note 3 above.
10. *Christianity Today*, June 16, 1989, 60; 63.
11. Ligonier, Pennsylvania: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1990.
12. See note 2 above.
13. Eastbourne, United Kingdom: Kingsway, 1991.
14. Bridgend, United Kingdom: Evangelical Press of Wales, 1991.
15. Wheaton: Bridgepoint Books (Victor Books), 1992.
16. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992.
17. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992.
18. Darlington, United Kingdom: Evangelical Press, 1993.
19. Lanham, Maryland: United Press of America, 1995.
20. See note 3 above.
21. For a survey of views, see David J. Powys, "The Nineteenth & Twentieth Century Debates about Hell and Universalism," in *Universalism . . .*, 93-129.

22. In addition to its modern evangelical exponents, conditionalism has had the support of a wide range of others from world Protestantism during the past 150 years. See B. B. Warfield, "Annihilationism," in his *Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), ix., 447-57; Peter Toon, *Heaven and Hell* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986), 175-81; articles "Annihilationism" and "Conditional Immortality" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter A. Elwell, ed., (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984).
23. *Ibid.*, 199.
24. *Ibid.*, 200-201.
25. "Savagery" is from Michael Green, *Evangelism through the Local Church* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1990); "sadism" is from J. W. Wenham, *Universalism . . .*, 187; the other two words are from Clark Pinnock, *Criswell Theological Review* 4 (1990), 246.
26. Wenham, *The Enigma of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 37-38.
27. Stott, *Essentials*, 315-16.
28. Wenham, *Universalism . . .*, 162, note 3.
29. Atkinson, *Life and Immortality*, 101.
30. H. E. Guillebaud, *The Righteous Judge*, 14.
31. Peterson, *Hell on Trial*, 162. Wenham describes Stott's pages as a "slight" treatment, *Universalism . . .*, 167. Peterson's judgment seems to me more discerning.
32. *Ibid.*, 168-69; quoting Stott, *Essentials*, 316.
33. *Ibid.*, 319.
34. *Ibid.*, iv.
35. These sentences are mainly taken from Packer, *art. cit.*, 23.
36. *Ibid.*, 201.
37. *Ibid.*, 250.
38. *Ibid.*, 320.

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