

Annihilation or Endless torment?

by **Brian P. Phillips**

Some time ago a Baptist friend invited me to his church to hear James I. Packer. "He's been invited to reinstate the doctrine of hell," my friend said, enlarging on his explanation of the presence of such a leading Anglican evangelical in a Baptist church. Packer told us that night that several "mainstream evangelicals," along with other prominent Protestant leaders and writers, had written in favor of either annihilation or conditional immortality, positions that mark the Seventh-day Adventist view on life after death. His list of writers included John Stott, Michael Green, John Wenham, and Philip Edgcumbe Hughes.

These scholars, who support the Bible and reject the more liberal interpretations of Scripture, have stated that they do not believe the more traditional views about hell. Most of them confess a belief in a punishment for the wicked that ends in annihilation. Although the writers named by Packer are of British origin, on the other side of the Atlantic, Clark Pinnock and Edward Fudge have written convincingly of their belief in conditional immortality.¹ There is increasing evidence that many evangelical Christians involving a variety of denominations are moving toward conditionalism.

The evangelical move toward conditionalism In *Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue*, published in 1988, John Stott affirmed his belief in the annihilation of sinners. When challenged by the well known Anglican liberal David Edwards about his ideas on hell, Stott said that it was "with great reluctance and a heavy heart" that he approached the subject of judgment and hell. His reluctance in speaking on the subject grew out of the fact that he did not wish to cause division in the ranks of evangelicals around the world. However, he went on to state his belief that "Scripture points in the direction of annihilation, and that 'eternal conscious torment' is a tradition which has to yield to the supreme authority of Scripture." Stott pleads for a frank dialogue on the subject among Evangelicals, again "on the basis of Scripture."²

Anglican writer John Wenham admits to an interest in conditional immortality that goes back to his student days in Cambridge in the 1930s. There he was strongly influenced by Basil Atkinson, who had privately published a book entitled *Life and Immortality*.³ Wenham said that he himself had taught conditional immortality in various British institutions, but it had not been until 1973 that he had been able to get an evangelical publishing house to print his views on conditionalism.

Wenham's book, *The Goodness of God*,⁴ was the first to be published by an evangelical publishing house in Britain that contradicted traditional ideas about hell. Although it contains only one far from exhaustive chapter on hell, Wenham's book was the prelude to further publication of similar ideas in Britain and America. This book came on the heels of L. E. Froom's *Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers*,⁵ which appears to have been at least partially responsible for setting off a chain reaction in the thinking of many in North America and Britain on questions relating to the doctrine of hell.

The reaction to the publication of works on conditionalism from the bastions of traditional evangelical orthodoxy came slowly. In Wales the Evangelical Movement published Eryl Davies' *The Wrath of God, and the Banner of Truth* reissued W.G.T. Shedd's *The Doctrine of Endless Punishment*. Throughout the 1980s books began to appear on both sides of the debate. It became obvious to observers that the debate was gathering momentum.

In 1982 Edward Fudge published a significant work, *The Fire that Consumes*,⁶ which investigates thoroughly the final punishment of the wicked. What is significant about the book is that it was written by a member of America's Evangelical Theological Society. Responses to the arguments in this book have been weak. Some opponents like John Gerstner, who once taught at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, said that Fudge's book was "the ablest critique of hell by a believer in the inspiration of the Bible." Other writers on the traditional side of the question have been confusing in their response to the debate.

In 1989 the Banner of Truth published Paul Helm's *The Last Things: Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell*. Although in the book Helm says that "Scripture does not teach the immortality of the soul in so many words," he does affirm that "the teaching of Scripture is not focused on 'the soul' but on the human being as embodied," which is what most conditionalists affirm. Helm's arguments do tend to descend into illogical confusion that makes one feel that he is not clear about the subject himself.

Packer against conditionalism

Further fuel was added to the debate when James Packer traveled around the world in 1990 to reestablish the traditional idea of hell in evangelical circles. In both the Eeon Morris Lecture for the Evangelical Alliance (in Melbourne), and the Annual Evangelical Library of Wales Lecture (in Cardiff), Packer's topic was titled "The Problem of Eternal Punishment."⁷ The lecture did not make a significant contribution to the debate.

Packer associates the decline in the traditional view of hell with the rise, in the past century, of Seventh-day Adventists, Christadelphians, and Jehovah's Witnesses. He makes this association without differentiating between the widely divergent views of these three groups when it comes to the question of life after death. This does come across as a rather tired polemical ploy, as does the argument promoted by evangelicals in the past that only the sects and liberal theologians want to do away with the traditional view of hell.

Packer admitted in his lecture at Cardiff that an increasing number of Bible-believing evangelicals were espousing the idea of hell as annihilation. In this he quoted Peter Toon: "In conservative circles there is a seeming reluctance to espouse publicly a doctrine of hell, and where it is held, there is a seeming tendency towards a doctrine of hell as annihilation . . . conditional immortality . . . appears to be gaining acceptance in evangelical orthodox circles."⁸ Packer then turned to four biblical arguments against conditionalism.

The first argument used by Packer does not address the biblical terms of destruction, death, perdition, and punishment. However, he did say that they *could* mean annihilation, but that he believes they mean ruin and distress, not nonexistence. So in his first argument Packer chooses

not to deal with the issue. His second argument is based on his first: because believers have eternal life, so will unbelievers! Packer's third and fourth arguments are similar. He suggests that conditionalist ideas of a new heaven and earth without impenitent sinners is pure speculation. The thrust of his argument seems to be that heaven will not be marred for Christians if the impenitent are being tormented, because God has willed it.

Although Packer promised he would give biblical foundations for his thinking, any reference to Scripture, apart from a casual allusion to Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), is lacking. This cannot be said of the increasing number of writers who correctly use Scripture to define their conditionalism. One example is Clark Pinnock's *Four Views of Hell*.

Pinnock: arguments for conditionalism

Pinnock says: "The Bible uses the language of death and destruction, of ruin and perishing, when it speaks of the fate of the impenitent wicked. It uses the imagery of fire that consumes whatever is thrown into it; linking together images of fire and destruction suggests annihilation. ... Although there are many good reasons for questioning the traditional view of the nature of hell, the most important reason is the fact that the Bible does not teach it. Contrary to the loud claims of the traditionalists, it is not a biblical doctrine."⁹

Examining the Old Testament texts, Pinnock cites Psalm 37 (NIV) and outlines the imagery that may be associated with the annihilation of the wicked "they will soon wither" (verse 2); "will be cut off (verse 9); "the wicked will perish . . . and vanish vanish like smoke" (verse 20); and "all sinners will be destroyed" (verse 38). According to Malachi 4:1, 2, the wicked will be consumed.

Pinnock then turns to the New Testament and quotes Jesus who speaks of the ability of God to destroy both soul and body in hell (Matthew 10:28). He also reminds his readers of the words of Jesus in Matthew 13:30, 42, 49, 50, where the wicked are burned up. Turning to Paul's words, "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23), Pinnock argues that the language of destruction can be seen throughout the Epistles. He sees 1 Corinthians 3:17, Philippians 3:19, and 2 Thessalonians 1:9 as clearly referring to the total annihilation of the wicked. He also finds convincing support for the concept of annihilation in 2 Peter 3:7; 2:1, 3; Hebrews 10:29; Jude 7; and Revelation 20:14, 15.

Thus from a study of the Old and New Testaments, Pinnock concludes that Scripture "employs the words death, perishing, destruction, and corruption to describe the end of the wicked."

After studying the proof texts offered by traditionalists, Pinnock asserts that the objections to their view is formidable. "I conclude," he writes, "that the traditional belief that God makes the wicked suffer in an unending conscious torment in hell is unbiblical, is fostered by a Hellenistic view of human nature, is detrimental to the character of God, is defended on essentially pragmatic grounds, and is being rejected by a growing number of biblically faithful, contemporary scholars."¹⁰

The debate continues

One of the most significant books produced as a part of this ongoing debate was published in 1989 by InterVarsity Press and Eerdmans: *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ*, by the Anglican scholar Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, who taught at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia. A deep and thorough study, it traces the integration of human beings created in the image of God: how through sin the image was blurred and how through Christ the image will be restored. The later chapters of the book deal with the discussions going on in the Christian world on conditionalism.

Some of the books written in recent years are light by comparison. However, the book *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, a report on the Fourth Edinburgh Conference on Christian Dogmatics, has a chapter by John Wenham entitled "The Case for Conditional Immortality"¹¹ that gives a good account of the debate among evangelicals to date. Wenham writes: "I feel that the time has come when I must declare my mind honestly. I believe that endless torment is a hideous and unscriptural doctrine which has been a terrible burden on the mind of the church for many centuries and a terrible blot on her presentation of the gospel. I should indeed be happy if, before I die, I could help in sweeping it away. Most of all I should rejoice to see a number of theologians . . . joining ... in researching this great topic with all its ramifications."¹²

FOOTNOTES

1. Clark H. Pinnock, *Four Views of Hell* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).
2. John R.W. Stott, *Essentials* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), pp. 306-326.
3. May be obtained from B. L. Bateson, 26 Summershard, South Petherton, Somerset, TA13 5DP, United Kingdom.
4. The book was again published under the title of *The Enigma of Evil* by InterVarsity Press in Britain as a second edition in 1985. It was soon sold out. Eagle Books, Guilford, England, has published a new edition in 1994, with an extended chapter on the debate.
5. LeRoy Edwin Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers: The Conflict of the Ages Over the Nature and Destiny of Man* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1965, 1966).
6. Fudge's book was originally sponsored by Robert Brinsmead, an Australian.
7. This lecture was later published under the same title by Orthos, Disley, Cheshire, in the United Kingdom.
8. Peter Toon, *Heaven and Hell* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986), pp. 174, 176.
9. Pinnock, pp. 145, 146.

10. Ibid., p. 165.

11. John Wenham in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, ed. N.M.S. Cameron (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992).

12. Ibid., pp. 190, 191.