

**Introduction - Reading: Romans 6:23** “For the wages of sin is death, but the **gift of God** is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”.

The thought of an eternity of Divine punishment and retribution has indeed been a major aspect of traditionalist preaching and doctrine down the centuries. Throughout church history, such historical ‘heavy weights’ as Tertullian, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, J Edwards (to name a few) were all advocates of this traditionalist doctrine which until recent times has gone unabated within evangelical circles.

Yet as one takes a ‘closer look’, the question arises, ‘is this really what the Bible teaches?’ Does the Bible, as the final and supreme authority of Almighty God, tell us of a “loving God” who “eternally tortures” sinners who have rejected Him?

Some prominent theologians are questioning this and in preference of the traditionalist view of man’s ‘final state’ are giving their increasing support to what is termed the doctrine of *annihilation*, alternatively referred to as *conditional immortality*.

## **What is Conditional Immortality?**

So what is the general thrust and basis of the argument for conditional immortality? Modern day theologians such as E W Fudge, J Wenham and J W Stott support the argument that annihilationism ultimately is the *finite* punishment of unbelievers in Hell, following which they will ‘cease to exist’. In other words, ‘while Christians enjoy eternal fellowship with God, the unbeliever ceases to exist’<sup>1</sup>.

## **Four Key Arguments**

W Grudem, in his book, *Systematic Theology*, points out four key arguments that supporters of annihilationism put forward to support their stance:

### **Arguments From Scripture**

Annihilationists quote many passages of scripture which refer to the ‘destruction’ of the wicked. Many of the Psalms and Proverbs are cited as such examples of the final state of the wicked. Psalm 1 speaks of the ‘blessed and the wicked’ where ‘the Lord watches over the way of the righteous but the way of the wicked will perish’<sup>2</sup>. Other passages are utilised in support of the annihilationist argument, such as Matthew 10:28 which speaks of both ‘body and soul’ being destroyed in Hell.

<sup>1</sup> LST Introducing History & Doctrine, Unit 4   <sup>2</sup> Psalm 1:6

The traditionalists are also criticised for their views on the immortality of all human souls (i.e. both unbelievers *and* believers souls will live on in one or other of the 'final states' of Heaven or Hell), suggesting that such traditionalist views have been adopted from Greek, Platonic philosophy rather than the sound biblical interpretation of inspired scripture. E W Fudge comments, 'the Old Testament writers disagree with later Greek philosophers who portray humans as immortal souls entrapped for a time in mortal bodies'<sup>3</sup>. Fudge goes on to suggest that immortality is indeed a 'gift from God' and belongs to Him alone.

Such Old Testament passages of 'destruction' as in the accounts of the 'flood' and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah are cited, with annihilationists highlighting how such events were utilised by Jesus and the New Testament writers when speaking of the 'final judgement'.

### **Arguments from God's Character**

Annihilationists also question and criticise the traditional doctrine of 'eternal/ongoing' punishment as an incorrect representation of the character of a loving God. J Wenham comments, 'unending torment speaks to me of sadism, not justice'<sup>4</sup>. Further suggestions are made that the traditionalist stance on this doctrine attributes unworthy motives to God, based upon secular philosophy, ultimately jeopardising the witness of the church.

### **Arguments from Injustice**

An additional argument against eternal/ongoing punishment is seen as the injustice of the disproportionate time between 'sins committed in time' versus 'punishment that is eternal'. A just God, annihilationists argue, would surely not act in this way.

### **Arguments from the ongoing presence of evil**

A further argument annihilationists use is that the continued presence of evil in God's universe, following the final judgement, would surely 'mar' the perfection of God's new order. They argue that it is difficult to imagine believer's celebrations going on whilst those in Hell are eternally tortured.

In preference to this, annihilationists teach that 'the punishment will therefore be "conscious" but it will not be "eternal"'<sup>5</sup>. In essence, the wicked will be exterminated after they have suffered conscious punishment proportionate to their sins; the 'final judgement' being that they will 'exist no more'.

3 Two views of Hell, P22, Fudge & Peterson, IVP, 2000 4 J Wenham, The case for conditional immortality

5 Systematic Theology, W Grudem, p1150, Zondervan, 1994

Fudge further affirms, 'the fact is that the Bible does not teach the traditionalist view of final punishment'; describing this doctrine as, 'a horrible error, a gross slander against the Heavenly Father'<sup>6</sup>.

### **A further Argument – the use of terminology**

In addition to the above, such scholars as E W Fudge and other proponents of conditional immortality have considered in detail the language and terminology utilised throughout scripture which speaks of the 'final end' of the unbeliever. Such terms as 'eternal fire' (Matthew 25:41) and 'eternal punishment' (Matthew 25:46) are considered to be terms of 'consequence' as opposed to be terms that suggest 'ongoing' punishment (basically, that the *consequences* of the punishment of the unbeliever will be *eternal*). In support of this, such passages are quoted that refer to '*eternal salvation*' (Hebrews 5:9) and '*eternal redemption*' (Hebrews 9:12), both passages where one can argue that clearly the process is not 'eternal', however the consequential outcome is.

### **A Traditionalist Response**

In response to the growing support for annihilationism, many traditionalist theologians have themselves defended the position that there will be eternal and ongoing suffering for those who at the final judgement will be sent to Hell. They deny that the traditionalist teaching suggests that God is vindictive and indeed state that 'denying the anger and justice of God makes nonsense of the cross'<sup>7</sup>.

### **Arguments from Scripture**

A key passage of debate is the account in Matthew 25 where Jesus speaks of the 'sheep and the goats' (Matthew 25:31-46) and their 'eternal destinies'. On this passage, Grudem states that, 'Hell is a place of eternal conscious punishment for the wicked'<sup>8</sup>. The traditionalists appeal to the 'balance' of the account in the sense that the believers (righteous) are sent to 'eternal life', which is an 'ongoing' blessed state, in contrast to the unbelievers who are sent away to 'eternal punishment'. Grudem states, 'in this text, the parallel between eternal life and eternal punishment indicates that both states will be without end'<sup>9</sup>. In as much as annihilationists utilise such terms as 'unquenchable fire' and 'their worm does not die' as examples of symbolic annihilation; traditionalists utilise these same terms utilised by Jesus and the New Testament writers to refer to 'ongoing suffering'. Further passages referring to the suffering of unbelievers in the final state are utilised such as Revelation 14: 9-11 which speaks of 'the smoke of their torment (going up) for ever and ever'.

<sup>6</sup> Two views of Hell, Fudge & Peterson, p20, IVP, 2000 <sup>7</sup> LST, History & Doctrine, Unit 4  
<sup>8</sup> & <sup>9</sup> Systematic Theology, W Grudem, p1148/1149, Zondervan, 1994

A key scriptural link that traditionalists utilise is also the link between the account in Matthew 25 of the final state and judgement of unbelievers and Revelation chapter 20:10, which speaks of the fire of 'the devil and his angels'. This fire is depicted in scripture as one where they will be 'tormented day and night for ever and ever'. These passages state that both the unbelievers and the devil and his angels will meet the same end.

Traditionalists state that the scriptural argument for conditional immortality is based upon passages that are either not speaking of the final judgement or at best do not necessarily imply cessation of existence. Peterson states, 'the great majority of passages (utilised by annihilationists)...speak of God visiting the wicked with premature death'<sup>10</sup> as opposed to final annihilation.

### **Arguments from God's Character**

Traditionalists claim that by downgrading God's abhorrent hatred of sin by suggesting some finite judgement, is indeed as much an error as those who would deny Divine judgement and retribution at all. Some annihilationists would even suggest that unbelievers cease to exist at death, to which Grudem comments, 'it may be wondered whether this kind of immediate punishment can really be called a 'punishment' at all, since there would be no consciousness of pain'<sup>11</sup>.

### **Arguments from Injustice**

In response to the claim that infinite punishment would indeed be an unjust punishment against crimes committed in finite time, traditionalists argue that such a stance incorrectly assumes that we can know the extent of the evil done by an individual, and the offence taken. D Kingdon states, 'sin against the Creator is heinous to a degree utterly beyond our sin-warped imaginations (ability) to conceive of.....who would have the temerity to suggest to God what the punishment should be?'<sup>12</sup> J Packer states that such a view would mean 'a conditionalist will miss out on the glory of divine justice'<sup>13</sup>.

### **Arguments from the ongoing presence of evil**

Rather than 'marring' God's perfect new order of things, traditionalists state that such a circumstance has the two-fold effect of 'demonstrating God's power to triumph over all opposition'<sup>14</sup> whilst allowing all redeemed sinners to recognise their position of 'grace'.

11 Systematic Theology, W Grudem, p1150, Zondervan, 1994 12 D Kingdon, Annihilation, Gain or loss? 1992

13 J Packer, The problem of eternal punishment

14 Systematic Theology, W Grudem, p1151, Zondervan 1994

Grudem, commenting on the doctrine of a finite period of suffering asks, 'does the short time of punishment actually pay for all of the unbeliever's sin and satisfy God's justice?'<sup>15</sup> .

## Conclusion

Whilst this has been a brief summary of the doctrine of annihilationism, with an attempt to summarise some of the key objections to such by the traditionalist theologians, the fact remains that there are clear arguments for both cases that respected and notable theologians support. One could ask the question 'does it matter?'. Answering from the perspective of how it effects our eternal destiny as believers, then the answer is probably "no". However, both sides of the debate demonstrate concern for the potential impact each stance could have on the witness and impact of the church toward the unbelieving world. Whichever view we take, it will ultimately 'affect our view of God, His justice, fairness...also our handling of the bible and our motivation for evangelism'<sup>16</sup>.

Ultimately, evangelicals agree that Hell is the most terrible fate that can befall a human being. Equally, there is no 'celebration' in either camp of the respected outcome of the final judgement. Grudem, commenting on the traditionalist view states, 'if our hearts are never moved with deep sorrow when we contemplate this doctrine, then there is a serious deficiency in our spiritual and emotional sensibilities'<sup>17</sup>.

Considering the arguments detailed above, the references quoted by annihilationists in support of a finite time of punishment are not clear in the translation. 'Eternal punishment' would appear to mean just that; certainly in the context of the 'sheep and the goats'. In addition, such terms as 'unquenchable fire' would strongly suggest a fire that does not extinguish. When fire has no 'fuel', it ceases to burn. This suggests that either the fuel does not run out, or that the victims are not 'consumed'.

Whilst considering the strength of such passages as Matthew 25 (sheep and the goats) and concluding that a 'balanced fate' would seem logical for unbelievers and believers, the over riding emphasis should be on ensuring that those with the truth should 'snatch' as many from the flames as possible. Whichever outcome proves to be true in eternity, the fact will remain that the final judgement for unbelievers will be awful and irreversible.

<sup>15</sup> Systematic Theology, W Grudem, p1151, Zondervan, 1994

<sup>16</sup> Two views of Hell, Fudge & Peterson, p11, IVP, 2000

<sup>17</sup> Systematic Theology, W Grudem, p1151/1152, Zondervan, 1994

## **Bibliography**

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*Annihilation, Gain or Loss, D Kingdon*

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## Exercises

Read Matthew 10:28 (and context) – what is the main point of Jesus' teaching here?

Why might some use it as a proof text to support the Annihilationist position?

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Those who believe in Conditional immortality or take the Annihilationist stance – state that it is the 'affects' that will be eternal and not the process: Compare the following verses – can you see how they might argue such from these (think about the use of the word 'eternal' in each):

Matthew 25:46, Hebrews 5:9, Hebrews 9:12

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How do the following support the Traditionalist view of 'eternal', on-going, 'forever' punishment?

Matthew 25:31-36 (think about the destinies of each – would one be forever and one not?)

Revelation 14:9-11

Revelation 20:10

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**Romans 6:23** "For the wages of sin is death, but the **gift of God** is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord".

"This means that our souls are not immortal – but that immortality is a gift from God"

Discuss.

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How might either view (traditionalist or annihilationist) impact our evangelism or people's response?