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Evangelicals and the Annihilation of Hell

Part One

by Alan W. Gomes

> And now, who is responsible for this God-dishonoring doctrine? And what is his purpose? The promulgator of it is Satan himself; and his purpose in introducing it has been to frighten the people away from studying the Bible and to make them hate God.
>
> — Joseph Franklin Rutherford, Watchtower Society's Second President [1]

> 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.
>
> — Clark Pinnock, Professor and Noted Evangelical Author [2]

Christians through the centuries have affirmed that those who do not accept God's offer of salvation in Christ will suffer conscious, everlasting torment. Denial of this teaching has, until recently, been limited almost exclusively to cultic or quasi-cultic groups. For example, the Jehovah's Witnesses vociferously reject the orthodox teaching on hell, denouncing it as an error of apostate Christendom. They teach that the wicked will be "annihilated" rather than suffer eternal torment. Likewise, Herbert Armstrong's Worldwide Church of God, Christian Science, Mormonism, and the New Age movement all repudiate the orthodox doctrine. Besides these undeniably cultic groups, the Seventh-day Adventists also reject the historic doctrine in favor of annihilation. [3] While Seventh-day Adventism may not be a cult in the technical theological sense of the term I am using here, [4] they nonetheless have been perceived commonly as a "fringe" group by orthodox Christians. [5]

Alternative, unorthodox views concerning the final state of the wicked are no longer limited to the fringe. Today, individuals who have been regarded as solidly within the evangelical camp are abandoning the doctrine of conscious, eternal punishment in favor of various "annihilation" scenarios. Probably the most prominent evangelical to go over to the annihilationist position is Anglican John R. W. Stott, Rector of All Soul's church in London. Stott's shift came to light in a book published by InterVarsity Press entitled *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue*. In this book, Stott responds to liberal Anglican David Edwards on a range of theological issues. It was in response to Edwards's

position on judgment and hell that Stott presented his reformulated views. [6] Though Stott is probably the most respected evangelical to espouse the annihilationists' cause, others have joined this growing movement as well. Clark Pinnock, John Wenham, Philip Hughes, and Stephen Travis have all positioned themselves as annihilationists within the evangelical camp. [7] In addition, Adventist scholars who regard themselves as evangelical, such as Edward Fudge and David A. Dean, also actively propagate annihilationist views. [8]

There is every reason to think that more evangelicals will jump on the annihilationist bandwagon. As Clark Pinnock notes, the annihilationist position "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." [9] Furthermore, this movement away from the traditional doctrine of hell is part and parcel of a larger evangelical "megashift" away from other standard orthodox teachings — such as the substitutionary atonement, sin, and judgment — in favor of so-called "new-model" views. [10] In other words, the rejection of eternal punishment is but one incident in the larger campaign to construct a kinder, gentler theology.

It is precisely this desire for a kinder, gentler theology that appears to be the dynamic that is driving this movement. Stott's own meditations on the doctrine of hell have led him to say, "Well, emotionally, 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." [11] Pinnock's complaint is even more emotionally charged: "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." [12]

It would be easy to write off this shift as mere sentimentalism. Yet, such a facile conclusion would be unfair — as is clear in the case of Stott. As emotionally traumatic as Stott finds the doctrine, he admits that our emotions "are a fluctuating, unreliable guide to truth and must not be exalted to a place of supreme authority in determining it." [13] Stott is, after all, an evangelical. As such, he declares that the issue for him is "not what does my heart tell me, but what does God's word say?" [14]

When one reads the writings of "evangelical annihilationists," it is clear that they believe the Bible is on their side. We are not dealing with liberal critics — like Samuel Davidson, the famous nineteenth-century rationalist critic [15] — who admit on the one hand that the Bible teaches the eternal torment of the lost, but who then reject the doctrine in the next breath. In a way, the evangelical annihilationists represent more of a threat to the orthodox doctrine than the cultists and liberals. In the past, defenders of the traditional view could more readily attribute the annihilationist position to a cultic mind-set or to a general denigration of biblical authority. [16] Defenders of the doctrine of eternal punishment must now gird up their loins to meet the objections from within their own evangelical camp. [17]

Evangelicals must agree with Edward Fudge, a strong advocate of the annihilationist position, when he states that the doctrine must finally be determined by Scripture and Scripture alone. We must "humbly receive" what Scripture says "on this or any subject."

[18] While it is true that the doctrine of endless punishment for the wicked is the position traditionally held by the church throughout the centuries, this in itself does not make it correct. [19] Of course, the fact that the church historically has interpreted the Scriptures to teach the doctrine of endless punishment ought to make us think long and hard before setting the doctrine aside. But when all is said and done, it is the teaching of Scripture that is determinative.

Alternatives to the Traditional View of Endless Punishment

Up until now we have mentioned two broad alternatives to the fate of the wicked: eternal, conscious torment (the traditional view) and annihilationism. But it is important to recognize that there are other nontraditional options besides annihilation, and that even within the annihilationist camp there is significant variety.

Universalism

Simply stated, the doctrine of universalism is that ultimately everyone will be saved. Though this teaching has never been the dominant view of the church, it nevertheless has had its champions. Space simply does not permit us to consider the history of universalistic teaching. [20] Suffice it to say, such teaching has not gained a significant foothold among evangelicals. For example, the recent Evangelical Affirmations Conference, held in May of 1989 at Trinity Seminary in Deerfield, Illinois, officially repudiated universalism, even though traditionalists could not muster enough support to secure a repudiation of annihilationism. [21] As Millard Erickson observes, it is "difficult to find any evangelicals" who hold to universalism. [22] Since universalism has not made significant inroads among evangelicals — at least so far — it is not the focus of this article. [23]

Annihilationism

As noted throughout the previous discussion, "annihilationism" is the teaching that God will "condemn them [the wicked] to extinction, which is the second death." [24] Those who remain impenitent will simply pass out of existence; they will be no more.

Within this basic model several variations emerge. For example, the Jehovah's Witnesses teach that some persons (e.g., Judas Iscariot) pass out of existence at death, never to return. Others will be raised from nonexistence during the Millennium and be given a chance to accept Jehovah's kingdom. Those failing to do so will be annihilated. [25]

The Seventh-day Adventist teaching differs somewhat from the above. Like the Witnesses, the Adventists deny that there is an entity called the "soul" that survives the body. That is to say, the conscious, thinking part of man dies (ceases to exist) with the body. Though this position is often called "soul sleep," the term "soul extinction" better describes it. [26] The Adventists teach that the wicked will be raised (or, more properly, "re-created") on the day of judgment. At that time, God will inflict on the wicked "conscious pain of whatever degree and duration God may justly determine." [27] This infliction is truly penal in character, though the suffering is not endless. "But in the

end...the wicked will be consumed entirely and be no more." [28]

Other variations are possible. For one thing, not all annihilationists teach the doctrine of "soul sleep." Many would admit that the wicked experience conscious existence (or even punishment) between their deaths and resurrection (i.e., during the so-called "intermediate state"). Thus, they would experience extinction after their conscious existence in the intermediate state.

Regardless of the individual differences that exist (as well as those yet to be suggested), all annihilationists are united on these points: (1) The ultimate end of the wicked is annihilation or extinction of being, regardless of what state of existence may or may not precede this final annihilation event. (2) The annihilation is eternal; the sentence will never be reversed. These suppositions represent the irreducible core of annihilationist teaching.

Conditional Immortality and Annihilationism

Many writers believe that annihilationism and conditional immortality are just two different names for the same position. [29] However, these concepts — while related — are not the same.

Those who affirm "conditional immortality" are called "conditionalists." They deny that the soul of man is inherently immortal. Conditionalists maintain that "our immortality is not a natural attribute of humankind but God's gift." [30] David A. Dean says that immortality is "conditional" in the sense that "conditions must be met before the sinner can receive everlasting personal existence." [31] Conditionalists contrast their position with what they erroneously perceive to be the traditional teaching, namely, that the soul is by nature absolutely impervious to destruction.

On the other hand, annihilationism has to do with God's ultimate intention to annihilate the wicked, that is, remove them from existence forever. As we shall see below, it would be theoretically possible for one to believe in the natural immortality of the soul in the orthodox sense (rightly understood), and at the same time affirm that God will annihilate the wicked. Even though I will show that such a position is logically possible in theory, in actual practice those who teach annihilationism also teach conditional immortality, and vice versa. This accounts for the tendency to treat the terms as synonyms.

At this juncture, we should observe an error in the conditionalist's understanding of the orthodox view. Conditionalists are fond of charging the orthodox with simply having adopted the Platonic concept of an immortal, indestructible soul. [32] They allege that the Platonic teaching of the indestructibility of the soul "really drives the traditional doctrine of hell more than exegesis does." [33] The traditional logic, we are told, is that since the soul is incapable of destruction, it must live somewhere forever. Hell thus becomes an appropriate abode for the indestructible souls of wicked people. [34]

The conditionalists do not understand the orthodox teaching on the immortality of the soul. Even a cursory study of historic orthodoxy on this subject will bear this out. The orthodox point out that the immortality of the soul is not an absolute but a contingent immortality. The soul, as a created substance, depends on God's continuing providential support — just as all other created entities do. In the words of the seventeenth-century

Reformed theologian Johannes Wollebius, "The human soul is immortal not ... because it cannot be reduced to nothing by God; but by God's ordinance and so far as it is indestructible by second causes." [35] In other words, while the "immortal" soul is impervious to destruction from both external secondary causes (e.g., people), and internal secondary causes (e.g., diseases, such as can afflict the body), the soul could be annihilated by its primary cause, God. [36]

The orthodox doctrine of the soul's immortality can therefore hardly be, as Pinnock states, the teaching that "drives the traditional doctrine of hell." In order for Pinnock to be correct, the orthodox would have to teach the soul's absolute indestructibility. Yet, as we have seen, the orthodox explicitly deny such a notion.

From the previous discussion, we see that annihilationism and conditionalism are not synonymous. One could — at least in theory — hold to the natural immortality of the soul in the orthodox sense (i.e., in terms of the soul's freedom from destruction by secondary causes), and at the same time affirm God's intention to annihilate the souls of the wicked. Therefore, the real issue is not whether God could annihilate the wicked, but whether there is any reason to think that God in fact intends to do so. And this question can be answered only by looking at the Bible.

Biblical Passages on the Nature and Duration of Punishment

Before considering the annihilationist's arguments against the doctrine of eternal, conscious punishment for the wicked (which we will do in Part Two of this series), we will first consider the teaching of Scripture on this subject. Then, we will have a framework for evaluating the annihilationist's arguments.

An exhaustive study on the doctrine of hell is not necessary, for this controversy revolves around only two main points: (1) Do the wicked experience conscious torment?; and (2) Do they suffer this torment eternally? Therefore, in looking at the scriptural evidence for the historic position, we will focus on those passages that address these two questions.

Even after narrowing the issue to these two main points, there are still too many pertinent texts to allow a detailed exegesis of them all. But I believe that there are two sets of texts that answer these two questions conclusively. One set of passages comes from Matthew 25; the other verses come from the Book of Revelation. While many other texts can be used in defense of the orthodox position, these are — in my opinion — the clearest. I will therefore treat these two sets of texts in detail.

Matthew 25:41, 46

[v. 41] "Then He will also say to those on His left, 'Depart from me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire [*to pur to aionion*] which has been prepared for the devil and his angels....' [v. 46] And these will go away into eternal punishment [*kolasin aionion*], but the righteous into life eternal [*zoen aionion*]."

First let us consider what these texts say about the nature of the wicked's fate. Then we shall consider what they teach about its duration.

The Nature of Hell From Matthew 25:41, 46. We observe first of all that the wicked share the same fate as Satan and his demonic hosts. Indeed, this text tells us that hell was created specifically for Satan and his angels. As followers of Satan, impenitent men will meet the same fate as he. This is significant, because when we look at other passages in the Book of Revelation that speak of the Devil's fate (see below), we are fully justified in ascribing this same fate to unredeemed men.

Notice that this passage describes hell as a place of "eternal fire." Should we understand this to mean literal, material, physical fire? Or should we regard the expression as metaphorical language, designed to convey an awful spiritual reality through physical language? Most conservatives — who affirm the doctrine of eternal, conscious punishment — would say that this is metaphorical language. [37] For one thing, the rich man in Luke 16:24 is described as being in agony in the flames. He is also described as having a tongue, and Lazarus is said to have a finger. But this scene occurs in Hades, during the disembodied state between death and resurrection. It is therefore difficult to see how a nonphysical being could have a literal tongue, much less be tormented by literal, physical fire. [38] The same would apply to the other physical metaphors used to describe hell, such as the undying worm (Mark 9:48) and the chains of darkness (Jude 6).

Some may object that invoking the concept of figurative language is a thinly veiled attempt to evade the force of Jesus' words. But precisely the opposite is true. The fact is, the horrors of hell are so great that no earthly language can do complete justice to them. By using the figure of unquenchable fire, undying worms, etc., Jesus selected the most horrific descriptions that earthly language would allow. As Robert Reymond observes, "the reality they [the figures] seek to represent should surely be understood by us to be more — not less — than the word pictures they depict." [39] Likewise, Ralph E. Powell urges, "If the descriptions of hell are figurative or symbolic, the conditions they represent are more intense and real than the figures of speech in which they are expressed." [40]

In the Matthean texts before us, the final state of the wicked is described as one of everlasting punishment (*kolasin aionion*). [41] From this it follows that the wicked are not annihilated. William Shedd cogently argues that "the extinction of consciousness is not of the nature of punishment." [42] If suffering is lacking, so is punishment; punishment entails suffering. But suffering entails consciousness. "If God by a positive act extinguishes, at death, the remorse of a hardened villain, by extinguishing his self-consciousness, it is a strange use of language to denominate this a punishment." [43]

Consider also the following differences between either cessation of consciousness/annihilation and punishment: (1) There are no degrees of annihilation. One is either annihilated or one is not. In contrast, the Scripture teaches that there will be degrees of punishment on the day of judgment (Matt. 10:15; 11:21-24; 16:27; Luke 12:47-48; John 15:22; Heb. 10:29; Rev. 20:11-15; 22:12, etc.). (2) For those who are experiencing severe punishment, extinction of consciousness is actually a state to be desired. Luke 23:30-31 and Revelation 9:6 talk about the wicked — experiencing the intense wrath of God — begging in vain to have the mountains fall on them. They clearly prefer unconsciousness to their continuing torment. As Shedd observes, "The guilty and remorseful have, in all ages, deemed the extinction of consciousness after death to be a blessing; but the advocate

of conditional immortality explains it to be a curse...." [44] (3) Punishment demands the existence of the one being punished. As Gerstner points out, "One can exist and not be punished; but no one can be punished and not exist. Annihilation means the obliteration of existence and anything that pertains to existence, such as punishment. Annihilation avoids punishment, rather than encountering it." [45] (4) One could argue that annihilation might be the result of punishment. But the Scriptures say that it is the punishment itself which is eternal, not merely its result.

The punishment of the wicked entails separation from God as a key component. Notice that Christ banishes them forever from His presence. As Guthrie observes, "When we penetrate below the language about hell, the major impression is a sense of separation...." [46] Even those who do not follow Christ in this lifetime are still recipients of His goodness (Matt. 5:45), even if they do not acknowledge this. In the final state it will not be so.

The Duration of Hell From Matthew 25:41, 46. The Greek adjective *aionion* used in these verses means "everlasting, without end." We should note, however, that in certain contexts the adjective *aionios* is not always used of eternity. In some passages it refers to an "age" or period of time. Luke 1:70, for example, says that God "spoke by the mouths of His holy prophets from of old (*ap aionos*)." Clearly, this cannot be a reference to eternity past. A similar construction is found in Acts 3:21. [47] On the other hand, the adjective is predicated of God (i.e., the "eternal God"), as in 1 Timothy 1:7, Romans 16:26, Hebrews 9:14, and 13:8. In these latter passages *aionios* means "eternal," as shown from their context and from the fact that God is the subject.

Granting that the term may or may not refer to eternity, how can we be sure of its meaning in Matthew 25? What is particularly determinative here is the fact that the duration of punishment for the wicked forms a parallel with the duration of life for the righteous: the adjective *aionios* is used to describe both the length of punishment for the wicked and the length of eternal life for the righteous. One cannot limit the duration of punishment for the wicked without at the same time limiting the duration of eternal life for the redeemed. It would do violence to the parallel to give it an unlimited signification in the case of eternal life, but a limited one when applied to the punishment of the wicked. John Broadus, in his classic commentary on Matthew, states, "It will at once be granted, by any unprejudiced and docile mind, that the punishment of the wicked will last as long as the life of the righteous; it is to the last degree improbable that the Great Teacher would have used an expression so inevitably suggesting a great doctrine he did not mean to teach...." [48]

Revelation 14:9-11; 20:10

[14:9] "...If anyone worships the beast and his image... [14:10] he will be tormented [*basanisthesetai*] with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. [14:11] And the smoke of their torment [*basanismou*] goes up forever and ever [*eis aionas aionon*]; and they have no rest day or night, those who worship the beast and his image,... [20:10] And the Devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented [*basanisthesontai*] day and night forever and ever [*eis tous aionas ton aionon*]."

The Nature of Punishment in Revelation 14:9-11; 20:10. These texts describe the nature of the punishment as "torment." The words used in these texts are forms of the Greek word *basanizo*. As Thayer states, *basanizo* means "to vex with grievous pains (of body or mind), to torment." [49] Likewise, Arndt and Gingrich say that *basanizo* means "to torture, torment," and may apply to either physical or mental vexation. [50] When we examine the uses of the verb *basanizo* and its various noun forms throughout the New Testament, we see that great pain and conscious misery are in view, not annihilation or cessation of consciousness. For example, the centurion's sick servant is grievously tormented (*deinos basanizomenos*) by his palsy (Matt. 8:6). Revelation 12:2 uses the verb to describe the pains of childbirth. In 2 Peter 2:8, righteous Lot is described as tormented (*ebasanizen*) in his soul by the wicked deeds of the Sodomites. In Luke 16:23 and 28, the plural noun "torments" (*basanoi*) is used to describe the rich man's conscious suffering in Hades. Indeed, in verse 28 Hades is described as "the place of torment" (*ho topos tou basanou*).

At this point, one might object that the passage does not specify whether or not the torment is "conscious." Are we not smuggling in the word conscious here? But, what other kind of torment is there besides conscious torment? Torment, by its very nature, demands a sentient (i.e., feeling) subject to experience it. A rock or a tree cannot be "tormented." How much less could a nonentity — such as an annihilated devil, beast, false prophet, or sinner — experience torment?

One might also object that these passages in Revelation do not say that men are tormented, just the Devil, the beast, and the false prophet. Are we justified in jumping from the Devil's torment to the torment of the wicked? As we already observed from Matthew 25, the fate of the wicked is the same as the Devil's fate. Other passages affirm the same fact (e.g., Rev. 20:15).

The Duration of Punishment in Revelation 14:9-11; 20:10. In the most emphatic language possible, we are told that the torment is unending. When we considered Matthew 25:46 above, we noted that *aionos* can, in some contexts, qualify nouns of limited duration. (Though, as we also observed, the context of Matthew 25 demands that we take *aionios* in its unlimited signification there.) But here, we find the emphatic forms *eis aionas aionon* and *eis tous aionas ton aionon* ("unto the ages of the ages"). This construction is only used to describe unending duration. As Sasse points out, the "twofold use of the term [*aionios*]" is designed "to emphasize the concept of eternity." [51] The fact that the forms used are plural in number further reinforces the idea of never-ending duration. Speaking of the Greek construction in this verse, the great biblical commentator R. C. H. Lenski observes: "The strongest expression for our 'forever' is *eis tous aionan ton aionon*, 'for the eons of eons'; many aeons, each of vast duration, are multiplied by many more, which we imitate by 'forever and ever.' Human language is able to use only temporal terms to express what is altogether beyond time and timeless. The Greek takes its greatest term for time, the eon, pluralizes this, and then multiplies it by its own plural, even using articles which make these eons the definite ones." [52]

This same emphatic construction is found in Revelation 1:6; 4:9; and 5:3, where it refers to the unending worship of God. In Revelation 4:10 and 10:6 it is used to describe God's own endless life. And in Revelation 22:5 the construction is employed to characterize the

everlasting reign of the saints. [53]

Note also that the unending nature of the torment is shown by the fact that the expression "day and night" is used to describe its duration. The expression "day and night" is indicative of ceaseless activity. This same phrase is used of the never-ending worship of God in Revelation 4:8 and 7:15. By juxtaposing the words "day and night" with "forever and ever" in 20:10, we have the most emphatic expression of unending, ceaseless activity possible in the Greek language.

In summary, these verses from Matthew and Revelation are more than adequate to answer the two questions before us. The language is unambiguous, emphatic, and conclusive. These verses by themselves should be sufficient to settle the argument forever.

Unquenchable Fire, Undying Worms

A lake of fire burns but is never quenched ... undying worms ... chains of darkness ... weeping and gnashing of teeth. Such is the powerful imagery for the horrible fate that awaits those who persist in their rejection of God and of His Christ. What else do these awesome figures force upon our imagination but a picture of unutterable suffering, fueled by the hopelessness of unceasing duration? Are they adapted to convey anything else? Does the thought of remedial, temporary suffering naturally come to mind when we contemplate the picture of unquenchable fire or undying worms? Do we envision the cessation of consciousness or the extinction of being as we picture the Devil and his followers tormented with fire and brimstone, day and night, forever and ever? Had Christ wished to teach the annihilation of the wicked, is it reasonable that He would have selected language guaranteed to lead His church astray? If annihilation is the true fate of the lost, would not Christ Himself be to blame for the erroneous teaching of His saints in all ages?

Let the reader note well that most of these graphic descriptions of perdition come from the lips of the Lord Jesus. "Without the explicit and reiterated statements of God Incarnate, it is doubtful whether so awful a truth would have such a conspicuous place as it always has had in the creed of Christendom." [54] If we gladly embrace the teaching of Incarnate Love when He speaks words of comfort and of life, must we not also receive, with all due solemnity, the words of Incarnate Justice when He speaks of judgment, perdition, and hell?

We can well sympathize with Stott, when he censures "the glibness, which almost appears to be the glee ... with which some evangelicals speaks about Hell." [55] Yet, speak of it we must, for it is the teaching of Scripture in general and of the Son of God in particular. As ambassadors of Christ we must deliver the message with which we have been entrusted. We must agree with Shedd's cogent summary in his classic work, *The Doctrine of Endless Punishment:* "Neither the Christian Ministry, nor the Christian church, are responsible for the doctrine of eternal perdition. It is given in charge to the ministry, and to the Church, by the Lord Christ Himself, in His last commission, as a truth to be preached to every creature." [56]

About the Author

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NOTES

1. Joseph Franklin Rutherford, Let God Be True (1946; rev. 1952), 79.

2. Clark Pinnock, "The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent," Criswell Theological Review 4 (Spring 1990):246-47.

3. I am not suggesting annihilationism is false because certain cults teach it. Nor am I suggesting that Seventh-day Adventists should be branded as a cult because their position on hell bears a certain (though inexact) resemblance to the Watchtower teaching. After all: the fact that the Jehovah's Witnesses believe in the inerrancy of Scripture and in the existence of God should hardly lead us to deny these two truths! The truth or falsity of a doctrine must stand or fall on its own merits, not on the basis of who holds it.

4. That is, a group that denies one or more of the central doctrines of the Christian faith. This would include the deity of Christ, the Trinity, the bodily resurrection, and salvation through Christ's atoning work.

5. See Ken Samples, "From Controversy to Crisis: An Updated Assessment of Seventh-day Adventism," Christian Research Journal (Summer 1988); and "The Recent Truth About Seventh-day Adventism," Christianity Today, 5 February 1990, 18-21.

6. David L. Edwards and John R. W. Stott, Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988), 312-20.

7. Clark Pinnock, "The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent"; "Fire, Then Nothing," Christianity Today, 20 March 1987, 40-41; John Wenham, The Goodness of God (London: Inter-Varsity, 1974), 27-41; Philip Hughes, The True Image (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 398 ff.; and Stephen Travis, I Believe in the Second Coming of Jesus (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 196-99.

8. Edward W. Fudge, The Fire That Consumes (Fallbrook, CA: Verdict Publications, 1982); "The Final End of the Wicked," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 27 (September 1984):325-34; "Putting Hell in Its Place," Christianity Today, August 1976, 14-17; "'The Plain Meaning': A Review Essay," Henceforth 14 (1985):18-31; David A. Dean, "American Conditionalism in the Decade of the Eighties," Henceforth 17 (1989):3-10; Resurrection: His and Ours (Charlotte: Adventist Christian General Conference of America, 1977).

9. Pinnock, "Destruction of the Finally Impenitent," 249.

10. Robert Brow, "Evangelical Megashift: What You May Not Have Heard About Wrath, Sin, and Hell Recently," Christianity Today, 19 February 1990, 12-17.

11. Edwards and Stott, 314-15.

12. Pinnock, "Destruction of the Finally Impenitent," 253.

13. Edwards and Stott, 315.

14. Ibid., 314-15.

15. Samuel Davidson, The Doctrine of Last Things Contained in the New Testament (London: Kegan

Paul, Trench, and Co., 1882), 133, 36, 51.

16. Note, however, the weakness of this reasoning as discussed in note 3 above.

17. See John H. Gerstner, Repent or Perish (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1990), 29-65.

18. Fudge, "Final End of the Wicked," 334.

19. Stott (Evangelical Essentials, 314) admits that the vast majority of Christians through the centuries have held to the doctrine of eternal punishment for the lost. Some Adventist scholars have tried to argue that many of the early church fathers held a different view, and that the doctrine of eternal punishment for the lost represents a later corruption. LeRoy Froom labors hard but in vain to demonstrate this in his massive work, The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: The Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1965). A careful reading of the early fathers does not support Froom's thesis. See Robert A. Morey, Death and the Afterlife (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1984), 58-60, 273-79 for a refutation of Froom's treatment of the church fathers.

20. See Roger Nicole, "Universalism: Will Everyone Be Saved?," Christianity Today, 20 March 1987, 31-39; John H. Gerstner, "The Bible and Hell" (in four parts), His, January 1968, 34-39; February 1968, 24-27; March 1968, 12-14; April 1968, 35.

21. Kenneth Kantzer and Carl F. H. Henry, eds., Evangelical Affirmations (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 36; 123-26; 137-49.

22. Millard Erickson, "Is Universalistic Thinking Now Appearing Among Evangelicals?," United Evangelical Action, September-October 1989, 6.

23. For a refutation of universalism, consult the following: Archibald Alexander's Universalism False and Unscriptural (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1851); Robert Morey's Death and the Afterlife; and Roger Nicole, "Universalism: Will Everyone be Saved?"

24. Pinnock, "Fire, Then Nothing," 40.

25. For example, You Can Live Forever in Paradise on Earth (New York: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1982), 76-89, 170-83.

26. Anthony A. Hoekema, The Four Major Cults (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 345.

27. Fudge, "The Plain Meaning," 18-19.

28. Ibid.

29. Harold O. J. Brown equates the two. See "Will the Lost Suffer Forever?," Criswell Theological Review 4 (Spring 1990):266.

30. Pinnock, "Destruction of the Finally Impenitent," 252.

31. Dean, Resurrection: His and Ours, 114-15.

32. Froom, 1:211; 1:529-600; Rutherford, 79; Fudge, "Final End of the Wicked," 325; Pinnock, "Fire, Then Nothing," 40; Edwards and Stott, 316.

33. Pinnock, "Destruction of the Finally Impenitent," 252.

34. Ibid.

35. Johannes Wollebius; cited in Heinrich Heppe, Reformed Dogmatics, Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources, ed. Ernst Bizer, trans. G. T. Thomson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 225.

36. See the concise discussion in Richard A. Muller, Dictionary of Greek and Latin Theological Terms (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 147.

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38. See Nicole, "Punishment of the Wicked," 14.

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40. Ralph E. Powell, "Hell," in Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible, 953.

41. Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Literature, 1957 ed., s.v. "kolasis." (Hereafter cited as BAG.) J. Schneider, "kolazo, kolasis," in Theological Dictionary of the New Testament 3 (1965), 814-17. (Hereafter cited as TDNT.)

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43. Ibid.

44. Ibid., 94.

45. Gerstner, "The Bible and Hell," part 1, 38.

46. Donald Guthrie, New Testament Theology (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 889-90.

47. See the discussion in TDNT 1 (1964), 199.

48. John A. Broadus, Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, ed. Alvah Hovey (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1886), 512.

49. Joseph Henry Thayer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (New York: Harper, 1887), 96.

50. BAG, s.v. "basanizo."

51. Hermann Sasse, "aion, aionios," in TDNT 1 (1964), 199.

52. R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. John's Revelation (Columbus: Wartburg, 1943), 438, cf. 48.

53. See the discussion in Morey, 138.

54. Shedd, 12.

55. Edwards and Stott, 312-13.

56. Shedd, Preface, V.

Alan W. Gomes, "Evangelicals and the Annihilation of Hell, Part Two" *Christian Research Journal*, Summer 1991, pp 8ff.

Evangelicals and the Annihilation of Hell

Part Two

by Alan W. Gomes

In Part One of this article I discussed how some prominent evangelicals recently have abandoned the doctrine of eternal, conscious punishment for the wicked in favor of various annihilation theories. I also examined the scriptural teaching on the doctrine of hell, paying particular attention to key passages from the Gospel of Matthew and the Book of Revelation. From our investigation, we saw that the biblical teaching on the fate of the unsaved is clear: they will experience conscious torment of unending duration.

From what we saw in Part One, we might well question how anyone who claims to believe in the authority of Scripture — as the evangelical annihilationists do — could affirm anything but the traditional teaching. Evangelical annihilationists counter that they have rational and biblical evidence to support their position. In Part Two of this article, we will examine some of the main arguments advanced by annihilationists in support of their theory.

In the short space available it is not possible to present every proof annihilationists could marshal in defense of their position — just as there was not enough space in Part One to advance many of the arguments supporting the orthodox position. In Part One, I selected what I consider to be the strongest arguments in favor of the traditional teaching. In this concluding installment I will do the same in presenting the annihilationists' case. In selecting these arguments I have tried to discern which ones the annihilationists themselves regard as the strongest. These proofs appear in virtually every defense of the annihilationist view.

When annihilationists present their case, their evidence generally falls into one of three basic categories. First we have the moral arguments, which maintain that the traditional teaching on hell would — if true — involve immoral actions on God's part. Second are linguistic arguments, based on the meaning of key biblical terms used to describe the final fate of the wicked. Third are exegetical arguments that attempt to neutralize verses the traditionalists commonly offer in proof of their position (such as those expounded in Part One). We will consider evidence from each of these three categories. (A fourth category, that the traditional doctrine is derived from the Platonic notion of the soul's immortality, was adequately answered in Part One.)

Moral Arguments

Annihilationists frequently complain that it would be immoral for God to inflict everlasting torture on His creatures. Clark Pinnock regards the doctrine of endless punishment as "morally flawed" and a "moral enormity." [1] If the "outrageous doctrine" of the traditionalists were true, God would be a "cruel" and "vindictive" deity. In fact, He would be "more nearly like Satan than like God, at least by any ordinary moral standards...." Indeed, the traditionalist's God is a "bloodthirsty monster who maintains an everlasting Auschwitz for victims whom he does not even allow to die." [2]

Annihilationists commonly argue that endless torment represents a punishment far in excess of the offense committed. John Stott maintains that if the traditional teaching were true, there would be "a serious disproportion between sins consciously committed in time and the torment consciously experienced throughout eternity." [3] Likewise, Pinnock states, "it would amount to inflicting infinite suffering upon those who have committed finite sin. 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." [4] Such vindictiveness, we are told, is totally incompatible with the character of God and utterly unacceptable to "sensitive Christians." [5] It would "serve no purpose" and be an act of "sheer vengeance and vindictiveness," which is "out of keeping with the love of God revealed in the gospels." [6]

Stott and Pinnock's argument that "sins committed in time cannot be worthy of eternal suffering" is fallacious. It assumes that the heinousness of a crime is directly related to the time it takes to commit it. But such a connection is nonexistent. Some crimes, such as murder, may take only a moment to commit, whereas it may take a thief hours to load up a moving van with someone's possessions. Yet, murder is a far more serious crime than theft. [7]

Second, the nature of the object against which the sin is committed, as well as the nature of the sin itself, must be taken into account when determining the degree of heinousness. As W. G. T. Shedd observes, stealing in general is a crime, but stealing from one's mother is even more despicable because one owes special allegiance to one's parents. Torturing an animal is a crime, but torturing a human being is an even greater crime, worthy of greater punishment. The criminal act is the same in each case (i.e., stealing and torture), as is the person committing the act. But "the different worth and dignity of the objects upon whom his action terminates makes the difference in the gravity of the two offenses." [8]

How much more serious, then, is even the slightest offense against an absolutely holy God, who is worthy of our complete and perpetual allegiance? [9] Indeed, sin against an absolutely holy God is absolutely serious. For this reason, the unredeemed suffer absolute, unending alienation from God; this alienation is the essence of hell. It is the annihilationist's theory that is morally flawed. Their God is not truly holy, for he does not demand that sin receive its due.

The reason these "sensitive Christians" have such an emotional problem with hell is because they, in the words of Anselm, "have not as yet estimated the great burden of sin." [10] If they truly saw sin as God does (recognizing that no sinner can do so perfectly), they would not have the slightest problem with the doctrine. Indeed, they would find themselves distraught if God did not punish sin for all eternity.

Linguistic Arguments

Annihilationists believe they can make a case for their theory based on the meaning of key biblical terms used to describe the ultimate fate of the wicked. LeRoy Edwin Froom, in his book *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers*, presents a list of seventy words that he says demonstrate total annihilation. [11] On the basis of these words, Froom exults triumphantly that "no loopholes are left." [12] Edward W. Fudge likewise cites this list, and concludes: "Without exception they portray destruction, extinction or extermination." [13]

Space will not permit us to examine all or even many of the words that Froom, Fudge, Stott, and others offer to establish their position. We should note, however, that many of the words in Froom's "impressive, cumulative array" of seventy terms do not even merit examination. [14] For example, he lists words like "tear" and "tread down" as proof of annihilation — as if a torn piece of paper has been removed from existence! Here, we will consider a few of the words that at least offer the possibility of teaching annihilation. By refuting these examples, I will demonstrate the flaws in their method generally. [15]

"Destroy," "Perish," and "Cut Off"

Annihilationists believe that words like "perish," "destroy," and "cut off" indicate total annihilation. Fudge declares that these words "seem clearly to say what the conditionalist wishes to convey ... and the conditionalist is confident that the ordinary man in the street can tell us what those words usually mean to him." [16]

The most common term translated "destroy" in the Old Testament is the Hebrew word *abad*. It is used to describe the fate of the wicked, as in, for example, Proverbs 11:10. But should we understand this destruction to mean total annihilation?

It is clear from other Old Testament passages using this word that *abad* need not mean annihilation. [17] The word has a range of meaning. For example, Numbers 21:29 says that the people of Chemosh were "destroyed" (*abad*). But this is a reference to their being sold into slavery, not to their annihilation. In 1 Samuel 9:3 and 20, the word is used in reference to Saul's "lost donkeys" (*athonoth abadoth*). In this context, the word means "lost," not "annihilated." In Psalm 31:12, a vessel is "broken" (*abad*), not annihilated. Here, the meaning is that the vessel is rendered unfit for use, not that it has lapsed into nonexistence. It simply is not true that *abad*, "without exception," must mean annihilation. [18]

Evildoers are also said to be "cut off." Fudge and Pinnock both cite Psalm 37:22, 28, 34, and 38 as representative. [19] These verses, they believe, prove the utter annihilation of the wicked. The word used here is *carath*. But note that this same word is used to describe the Messiah being "cut off" (Dan. 9:26), who certainly was not annihilated. Even if one admits that the wicked are "annihilated" in the sense of being removed from earthly existence (as Jesus was), this would not prove that they are removed from any existence.

Turning to the New Testament, annihilationists claim that the Greek word *apollumi* conveys total annihilation. Stott asserts that the verb *apollumi* means "destroy," and the noun *apoleia* means "destruction." He cites Matthew 2:13, 12:14, and 27:4, which refer to Herod's desire to destroy the baby Jesus, and the later Jewish plot to have Him executed.

Stott then mentions Matthew 10:28 (cf. James 4:12): "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy [*apolesai*] both soul and body in hell." [20] He regards this "destruction" as a reference to the soul's total annihilation in hell. Stott also offers the contrast between believers and unbelievers as manifest proof: "If believers are *hoi sozomenoi* (those who are being saved), then unbelievers are *hoi apollumenoi* (those who are perishing). This phrase occurs in 1 Corinthians 1:18, 2 Corinthians 2:15; 4:3, and in 2 Thessalonians 2:10." [21] He believes that this language of destruction points to the total annihilation of the wicked.

Stott concludes: "It would seem strange, therefore, if people who are said to suffer destruction are in fact not destroyed; ... it is difficult to imagine a perpetually inconclusive process of perishing." [22]

Careful scrutiny of passages using these words shows, however, that they do not teach annihilation. Consider 1 Corinthians 1:18, one of the passages cited by Stott. This passage tells us that "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing [*tois apollumenois*]." This participle is in the present tense, which, as Robert Reymond rightly notes, "describes existing people who are presently perishing. The verb does not suggest that their future state will be non-existence." [23]

As Reymond points out, Luke 15:8-9 uses the word to describe the lost but existing coin. In Luke 15:4 and 6 it describes the lost but existing sheep. The prodigal (but existing) son is described by this term in Luke 15:17, 24. [24] Murray Harris cites other passages, such as John 11:50, Acts 5:37, 1 Corinthians 10:9-10, and Jude 11, where the concept of destruction (*apoleia*) or perishing (*apolusthai*) need not imply annihilation. [25] Indeed, as Albrecht Oepke remarks in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, "What is meant here [in passages speaking of divine judgment] is not a simple extinction of existence, but an everlasting state of torment and death." [26]

It is true that *apoleia* is often translated "destruction" or "ruin." But Charles Hodge explains how "destruction" or "ruin" differs from annihilation: "To destroy is to ruin. The nature of that ruin depends on the nature of the subject of which it is predicated. A thing is ruined when it is rendered unfit for use; when it is in such a state that it can no longer answer the end for which it was designed ... A soul is utterly and forever destroyed when it is reprobated, alienated from God, rendered a fit companion only for the devil and his angels." [27]

Roger Nicole offers an illustration that highlights in a very lucid way the truth of Hodge's explanation. We speak of an automobile as wrecked, ruined, demolished, or "totalled," "not only when its constituent parts have been melted or scattered away, but also when they have been so damaged and twisted that the car has become completely unserviceable." [28]

"Consume"

Annihilationists also point to words translated "consume" or "consumed" in the Old and New Testaments as proof that the wicked are annihilated. Pinnock states, for example, that the Bible repeatedly "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." [29] Pinnock then cites Malachi 4:1 as a case in point.

Stott likewise claims that the imagery of fire does not refer to conscious torment, even though all of us who have experienced being burned have felt acute pain. He says that the main function of fire is not to cause pain but to secure destruction, as in the case of an incinerator. The Bible speaks of a "consuming fire" and of "burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matt. 3:12; cf. Luke 3:17). Stott concludes, "The fire itself is termed 'eternal' and 'unquenchable' but it would be very odd if what is thrown into it proved 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 forever and ever' (Rev. 14:11; cf. 19:3)." [30]

In response, Robert Morey and others have shown conclusively that the Hebrew words translated "consume" are used in many contexts where the meaning cannot possibly be annihilation (e.g., Ps. 78:45; Lam. 3:4; Ezek. 13:13; etc.). [31] (Since space does not permit an exposition of these passages, I refer the interested reader to Morey's fine discussion.) Therefore, we should not assume automatically that the mere presence of the word "consume" *ipso facto* proves annihilation. Context is always determinative.

Now, let us grant that fire normally represents that which consumes or annihilates its fuel until nothing but ashes are left. Normal fire dies out once the fuel has been consumed. But the fire of judgment is no normal fire: it is described as an eternal fire (Jude 7) which is unquenchable (Mark 9:48). The fact that the smoke is said to rise "forever and ever" is not evidence that "the fire has done its work," as Stott wrongly infers, but rather that the fire is doing its work through a process of endless combustion. Stott replaces the "unquenchable" fire of Jesus with the "quenchable" fire of the annihilationists.

The same argument holds for the undying worms (Mark 9:48). Worms are able to live as long as there is food for them to consume. Once their food supply has been consumed, the worms eventually die. But the torments of hell are likened to undying, not dying worms. This is because their supply of food — the wicked — never ceases.

Annihilationist Answers to Texts Supporting the Traditional View

Adherents of the annihilationist position believe that they have the teaching of Scripture on their side, and that they are able to answer the arguments advanced by the traditionalists in support of eternal, conscious punishment. But is this really the case?

In Part One I put forth a few selected texts to demonstrate the doctrine of eternal punishment. I stated my conviction that these texts alone are sufficient to settle the matter once and for all. Let us see how annihilationists attempt to answer the challenge of these texts, and whether they succeed at doing so.

Matthew 25:46

Consider the approach of John Stott:

> At the end of the so-called parable of the sheep and goats, Jesus contrasted

> "eternal life" with "eternal punishment" (Matt. 25:46). Does that not indicate that in hell people endure eternal conscious punishment? No, that is to read into the text what is not necessarily there. What Jesus said is that both the life and the punishment would be eternal, but he did not in that passage define the nature of either. Because he elsewhere spoke of eternal life as a conscious enjoyment of God (Jn. 17:3), it does not follow that eternal punishment must be a conscious experience of pain at the hand of God. On the contrary, although declaring both to be eternal, Jesus is contrasting the two destinies: the more unlike they are, the better. [32]

Stott is incorrect in asserting that the passage "does not define the nature of either [eternal life or eternal punishment]." As we observed in Part One, the mere fact that the wicked are said to experience "punishment" (Greek: *kolasin*) proves two inescapable facts by the nature of the case: the existence of the one punished, and the conscious experience of the punishment. If either of these two are lacking, then punishment is not occurring — at least not in any meaningful sense of the term.

Someone cannot be punished eternally unless that someone is there to receive the punishment. One can exist and not be punished, but one cannot be punished and not exist. Nonentities cannot receive punishment. Now, it is possible that one could receive punishment for a time and then be annihilated. In that case, we would have a finite time of punishment followed by a finite process of annihilating (i.e., the actual time it takes to accomplish the annihilation), followed by an unending result of the annihilating process. But the Bible uses the adjective "eternal" to describe the punishment itself, not merely the result of the punishment.

But mere existence is not enough either. One cannot "punish" a rock or a tree, even though these might exist. Annihilationists (e.g., Pinnock [33]) sometimes complain that traditionalists "smuggle" the word "conscious" into their descriptions of punishment. But really, the traditionalist need not "smuggle" anything into the description. Once we have said the word "punishment" we have also said, at least by implication, the word "conscious." Punishment, *per se*, is conscious or it is not punishment. A punishment that is not felt is not a punishment. It is an odd use of language to speak of an insensate (i.e., unfeeling), inanimate object receiving punishment. To say, "I punished my car for not starting by slowly plucking out its sparkplug wires, one by one," would evoke laughter, not serious consideration.

Stott's axiom, "The more unlike they [i.e., heaven and hell] are, the better," actually harms his own case. If heaven represents unutterable joy, then hell should be unutterable sorrow. Yet, the whole point of the annihilationist's argument is to mitigate the horror of eternal suffering for the lost, not to increase it.

Revelation 20:10

Since Matthew 25:46 is more than adequate to refute annihilationism, we could stop here. But in Part One we saw that Revelation 20:10 is also an exceedingly clear passage teaching eternal punishment for the lost. Even if we conceded Matthew 25:46 to the

annihilationists, what could they possibly say in response to John's words: "And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever"?

Clark Pinnock on Revelation 20:10

Pinnock states that in Revelation 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." [34]

Well, first of all, even if Pinnock's point is that "everything which has rebelled against God will come to an absolute end," John's point is that the Devil, beast, and false prophet will be tormented day and night, forever and ever. To read the text is to refute Pinnock.

Second, Pinnock's statement that the Devil, beast, and false prophet "cannot be equated with ordinary human beings, however we should understand their nature" is both ambiguous and proves nothing, however one wishes to interpret it. Of course an angel's nature is different than a human being's nature. But the point of "equivalence" is not the nature of the beings (i.e., angels as disembodied spirits vs. human beings as psycho-physical unities), but their ultimate fate. I demonstrated clearly in Part One that the fate of wicked humans is "equated" with the fate of the Devil and his angels (Matt. 25:41; Rev. 14:11; 19:20; 20:15).

Besides, even in terms of nature, the Devil (and other angelic beings) can be equated with humans in this respect: both are personal, sensate (i.e., feeling) beings who can experience conscious torment. Consider, for example, Matthew 8:29, where the demons exclaim to Jesus, "Have you come here to torment us before the time?" This shows clearly that demons can be tormented.

If Pinnock allows that Revelation 20:10 proves even the Devil's unending torment, as the form of his argument implies, he will have annihilated one of the main pillars of his position: the belief that finite creatures are incapable of committing infinite sin ("however sinful they may have been" [35]), and thus cannot be punished justly with unending torment.

John Stott on Revelation 20:10

Let us see how John Stott handles this same passage. He declares, "The beast, the false prophet and the harlot, however, are not individual people but symbols of the world in its varied hostility to God. In the nature of the case they cannot experience pain. Nor can 'Death and Hades,' which follow them into the lake of fire (20:13)." [36]

If the beast, the false prophet, and the harlot are only abstract symbols — with no relation to individual people — then Stott is certainly correct in saying that they cannot experience pain. Symbols, being abstractions, cannot be tortured. However, the text says that these three are tortured. It is well and good to deny that abstractions can be tortured. But then Stott should tell us what the text does mean when it describes these alleged abstractions as "tormented day and night." Yet, no explanation whatever is offered. We are left with two possible conclusions: (1) that the three are not mere abstractions (contrary to Stott's exegesis); or (2) that Revelation 20:10 is pure gibberish (contrary to the character of

God, who inspired the text). If forced to choose between such an exegesis or God's character, the choice is obvious: the beast, false prophet, and harlot are not mere abstractions but have reference to individual people.

Now, even if we allow that these three are "symbols of the world in its varied hostility to God," we must admit that the world which they symbolize is made up of individual people who are the ones exercising the hostility. If abstractions cannot be tortured, neither can they express hostility. At some level, then, these symbols must designate real people. The same can be said for the expression "death and hades." That is to say, it is individuals held in the power of death and occupying hades who are cast into the lake of fire. This is made exceedingly clear by verses 13-15 of the same chapter.

For the sake of discussion, let us grant to Stott the impossible: the beast, false prophet, and harlot are abstract symbols with no real reference to individual people. Is Stott prepared to say the same about the Devil? Certainly Stott still believes in a personal devil. But the text says, "And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever." As we observed when refuting Pinnock's argument, the annihilationists fall on their own sword: finite beings, they tell us, cannot be punished with infinite punishment. Since none of the annihilationists are prepared to ascribe infinity (and, hence, true deity) to Satan, they must abandon their "moral" argument.

Edward Fudge on Revelation 20:10

Edward Fudge is recognized by many within the annihilationist camp as the standard-bearer for the position. What does the apostle of annihilationism say in response to this verse?

> This is the single most problematic text in the whole Bible for the extinction of all evil, even though it does not specify human beings. In view of the overwhelming mass of material otherwise found throughout Scripture, however, one ought to remember the general hermeneutical rule that calls for interpreting the uncommon in light of the common and the obscure in light of the more clearly revealed. [37]

I can paraphrase the essence of Fudge's response as follows: "We know from elsewhere in the Bible that annihilationism is true. Therefore, this verse cannot possibly mean what it says."

What about the hermeneutical principle Fudge invokes, "unclear passages should be interpreted by the clear ones"? Fine. Let us admit his principle. We have already shown that the passages advanced in favor of the annihilation theory can, and often must, be interpreted in the traditional sense. But what is ambiguous about Revelation 20:10, in so far as the doctrine of eternal, conscious torment for the lost is concerned? [38]

Is the word "devil" ambiguous? As seen throughout Fudge's writings, he believes in a personal, malignant spirit-being called the Devil. There is no ambiguity here.

How about the expression, "lake of fire and brimstone"? What is ambiguous about that? Certainly, when God threatens sinners with the lake of fire and brimstone, they do not

immediately scratch their heads and ask for clarification. Fudge argues that the term "lake of fire" is "but a symbol for annihilation." [39] But, if we might borrow the words of Fudge himself, the traditionalist "is confident that the ordinary man in the street can tell us what those words usually mean to him." Given the fact that the place described in Revelation 20:10 is a place of unremitting torment, annihilation does not (and cannot) come naturally to mind! Now, we did note in Part One that many traditionalists do not regard the "fire" of Gehenna as being a kind of material fire, but as symbolic of something far worse. Regardless of one's stand on that question, this "ambiguity" does not affect the argument here. The "fire" of Gehenna is at least as bad as the material fire we know in this life.

How about the expression, "beast and false prophet"? Like Stott, Fudge regards the language as "symbolic," referring to "political power and apostate religious beguilement." He concludes that these "are not persons who can be tortured in fire." [40] We already saw the futility of this "symbolic vs. personal" interpretation in connection with Stott. [41] But even allowing that the beast and false prophet are neither individual people nor symbolic of individual people, one cannot escape the fact that the Devil is an individual and that he is tormented day and night, forever and ever. Here Fudge is on the ropes, and grudgingly admits, "There is no easy solution." But then he adds, "Yet to this point no human beings are involved in the lake of fire, nor does this passage say that any of Adam's race are tormented forever and ever." [42] Of course, verse 10 does not mention humans, but one need only look at verse 15 of the same chapter — not to mention Matthew 25:41, Revelation 14:11, and Revelation 19:20 — to see that Satan's human followers experience the same fate as he.

If Revelation 20:10 teaches the eternal, conscious torment of the Devil (as indeed it does), then that fact alone annihilates the annihilationist's entire system because: (1) The Devil's eternal punishment reduces to ashes their "no infinite punishment for finite sin" defense. (2) It also shows that eternal, conscious punishment against a sensate, finite, sinful being is moral — and if it can be moral in one case, it can be moral in others. (3) It leaves the traditionalist in a position to prove his entire case simply by showing that unregenerate sinners experience the same fate as the Devil and his angels, a task that is quite easy to do.

How about the word "tormented" (*basanizo*)? What is unclear about that? We examined the consistent scriptural usage of this word in Part One. We already observed that Fudge tacitly admits the obvious meaning of this term — at least in the Devil's case. But in the case of his "abstractions" (i.e., the beast and false prophet), Fudge, like Stott, tells us that abstractions cannot be tormented. He then leaves us hanging as to what John could have possibly intended by such a meaningless expression.

Finally, is there something ambiguous about the phrase, "day and night forever and ever"? Here we find the emphatic form eis tous aionas ton aionon ("unto the ages of the ages"). This construction is used only to describe unending duration. We saw in Part One that this phrase is the most emphatic way of expressing endless duration possible in the Greek language.

Superior Sensitivity or Secular Sentimentalism?

Pinnock speaks of the "sensitive Christians" who have no choice but to abandon the

doctrine of hell in favor of a kinder and gentler fate for the wicked. [43] But as J. I. Packer observes, "the feelings that make people want conditionalism to be true seem to me to reflect, not superior spiritual sensitivity, but secular sentimentalism which assumes that in heaven our feelings about others will be as at present, and our joy in the manifesting of God's justice will be no greater than it is now." [44]

We should never forget that it was the Lord Jesus Christ, more than any other, who enunciated the doctrine of everlasting torment for the lost. Christ had no need to attend a modern sensitivity training workshop; He was "sensitivity incarnate." But He also manifested a perfect balance of love and justice. The same holy God who "shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire" (2 Thess. 1:7) is the God who stooped to become one of us, and bore the vengeance of God's fire in His own body on the tree. If God should open our eyes to understand the terrible price He paid, we would in that instant comprehend the awful guilt of spurning that price. If those who scorned the old covenant were consumed with the fire of this present age, "how much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant" (Heb. 10:29)?

NOTES

1. Clark Pinnock, "Fire, Then Nothing," Christianity Today, 20 March 1987, 440; "The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent," Criswell Theological Review 4, no. 2 (Spring 1990):246-47, 253.

2. Pinnock, "Destruction of the Finally Impenitent," 246-47; 253.

3. David L. Edwards and John R. W. Stott, Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988), 318.

4. Pinnock, "Destruction of the Finally Impenitent," 255.

5. Pinnock, "Fire, Then Nothing," 40.

6. Pinnock, "Destruction of the Finally Impenitent," 254-55. See also Stephen Travis, I Believe in the Second Coming of Jesus (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), 199.

7. See W. G. T. Shedd, The Doctrine of Endless Punishment (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1886; reprint, Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1980), 152-53. It is also possible to interpret Pinnock's and Stott's ambiguous language to mean that sins committed in the realm of time (i.e., sequential duration) cannot justly be punished in a timeless, eternal realm (i.e., eternity in the sense of an "eternal now"). At least in Pinnock's case, it hardly seems likely that this is what he intends, since elsewhere he has wrongly argued against understanding even God's existence — much less the existence of His creatures — as "timeless." But even if this were their intended meaning, the argument would be refuted simply by noting that the realm in which sinners suffer in hell is the same — temporally speaking — as the realm in which they committed the sins: it is a temporal realm. Sinners in hell, as well as saints in heaven, do not occupy "eternity" in the same sense that God does; that is, as an "eternal now." Sinners will experience their punishment in temporal sequence, just as the sins they committed took place in temporal sequence. An endless time of punishment is a time of punishment nonetheless.

8. Ibid., 152.

9. The infinity of guilt for sin against God was cogently argued by St. Anselm in the eleventh century in his epochal work, Cur Deus Homo? ("Why the God-Man?"). See especially Book 1,

Chapters 20-24, 239-51. In St. Anselm: Basic Writings, trans. S. N. Deane (La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing, 1962).

10. Ibid., 242.

11. LeRoy Edwin Froom, The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: The Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1965), 1:106-11.

12. Ibid., 1:107.

13. Edward W. Fudge, "The Final End of the Wicked," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 27 (September 1984):326.

14. Froom, 1:108.

15. Robert A. Morey deals with many more of these terms in his book, Death and the Afterlife (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1984).

16. Edward W. Fudge, "'The Plain Meaning': A Review Essay," Henceforth 14 (1985):23-24.

17. See Morey, 109.

18. There are several other Hebrew words that are often rendered "destroy" or "ruin." For a discussion of these, see Morey, 108 ff. For additional evidence that "destroy" does not mean "annihilate," see Harry Buis, The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1957), 125 ff.

19. Edward W. Fudge, The Fire That Consumes (Fallbrook, CA: Verdict Publications, 1982), 92-93; Pinnock, "Destruction of the Finally Impenitent," 250-51.

20. Edwards and Stott, 315.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., 316.

23. Robert Reymond, "Dr. John Stott on Hell," Presbyterion 16 (Spring 1990):53.

24. See Reymond, 53; Albrecht Oepke, "apoleia," in Theological Dictionary of the New Testament 1 (1964), 397.

25. Murray J. Harris, Raised Immortal: Resurrection and Immortality in the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 184. See also R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel (Columbus, OH: Wartburg, 1943), 297.

26. Oepke, 397.

27. Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979 reprint edition), 3:874.

28. Roger Nicole, "Universalism: Will Everyone Be Saved?" Christianity Today, 20 March 1987, 34.

29. Pinnock, "Destruction of the Finally Impenitent," 250.

30. Edwards and Stott, 316.

31. Morey, 110 ff.

32. Edwards and Stott, 317.

33. Pinnock, "Destruction of the Finally Impenitent," 256.

34. Ibid., 257.

35. Ibid., 247.

36. Edwards and Stott, 318.

37. Fudge, Final End of the Wicked, 332.

38. Some may wish to argue that the entire book of Revelation, being a symbolic and prophetic book, is "ambiguous." But even if symbolic language (like any language) has a range of meaning, the language is certainly not meaningless, nor can it mean anything anyone wishes it to. Even granting the reasonable range of meaning for the words in the passage before us, the traditional doctrine concerning hell is still affirmed. In any case, it is not necessary to defend the understanding of the Book of Revelation as a whole, since the annihilationists themselves grant this point. Even Fudge, who calls the Revelation 20:10 passage "obscure," draws whatever conclusions he can from the passage in support of his position. This will be evident as we proceed.

39. Fudge, The Fire That Consumes, 304.

40. Ibid.

41. The logic that should be followed here is clear, and is easily expressed as a syllogism: (1) Mere abstractions cannot be tormented. (2) The text says that the beast and false prophet are tormented. (3) Therefore, the beast and the false prophet cannot be mere abstractions. I say "mere" abstractions because I have no problem believing that these could be abstract symbols that refer ultimately to individual persons. In that case, through a figure of speech, one could speak of "tormenting" the symbol with the understanding that it is the people represented by the symbol that actually undergo the torment.

42. Fudge, The Fire That Consumes, 304.

43. Pinnock, "Fire, Then Nothing," 40.

44. J. I. Packer, "Evangelicals and the Way of Salvation: New Challenges to the Gospel — Universalism, and Justification," in Evangelical Affirmations, ed. Kenneth Kantzer and Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 126. In Part One, I stated that I do not believe that annihilationists hold their position merely out of sentimentalism. In citing Packer's remarks, I do not wish to take away with my left hand what I granted with the right. Nevertheless, while I will take the evangelical annihilationists at their word when they declare their belief in the authority of Scripture, it also seems that emotional factors have predisposed them to interpret the texts on hell in a less-than-objective manner.