

The Nature of Hell in Modern Christian Theology with special focus on the Teaching of Conditional Immortality

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[California Pastoral Conference, Mission Viejo, CA, January 29, 1985 & Fremont, CA, January 28, 1986]

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The Nature of Hell

“Through me is the way into the woeful city; through me is the way into the eternal woe; through me is the way among the lost people. Justice moved my lofty maker: the divine Power, the supreme Wisdom and the primal Love made me. Before me were no things created, save eternal, and I eternal last. Leave every hope, ye who enter!” These words of obscure color I saw written at the top of a gate.ⁱ

Dante’s vision led him to a gloomy portal which led farther into an eternity of misery for reprobate souls. What would we say about his word pictures today?

Was Dante wrong? In the light of modern research, were his ideas merely derived from Plato and church tradition? How could “justice, supreme Wisdom, and primal Love” be the causes which moved the Creator to fashion such a place of horror: eternal torture for beings first brought into existence for eternal life? People are asking these questions today.

Martin Marty, who recently spoke at Harvard Divinity School as part of the century-old Ingersoll lecture series, pointed out that religious and sociology magazines of the past three years contained no pieces on the subject of hell (although I sure found more than enough!). Though Marty remained neutral in his lecture, he pointed out, “The idea of eternal punishment is nominally present, but it has lost its moral seriousness.”ⁱⁱ That seems to be true as a modern Gallup poll conducted throughout ten European countries showed the

Proportion in percentages of believers in the hereafter compared with the proportion of believers in Hell among ten European countries: 45.6% believe in “Life after death”; 52.7% believe in “Heaven”; 29.3% believe in “Hell.” Though belief in hell is always less frequent than belief in the hereafter, the survey shows that there are more people who profess to believe in heaven than there are who believe in the hereafter. (There is a) lower proportion of believers in hell compared to those who believe in heaven.ⁱⁱⁱ

Another researcher quit his ministry to discover some answers. Rev. DuSean Berkich after years of studying the Bible, believes a giant mistake has been made about the concept of hell. Students asked him, “How could you say there is a loving Creator who knew beforehand that He had created something (humans) that was primarily doomed to eternal suffering?” His answer:

Our research showed that no one is going to go to hell.... The word “hell” derives from the Hebrew “Gehenna” which referred to a dump east (!) of the city of Jerusalem. The dump was once the site of human sacrifices to pagan gods and later became a spot for the refuse of the city, including animal bodies, where flames continually smoldered.^{iv}

His findings are somewhat simplistic—“there is no hell.” But what is the thinking within Christianity today? What is the nature of Hell?

This paper was assigned for the purpose of informing the conference on modern trends in theological perspectives concerning the subject of hell, to be followed with Scriptural evaluations. After seeing that a research monster was in the making, I chose to narrow the subject down to the *nature* of hell. Even that left me with a mountain of material to sift through, especially after discovering that there no patterns exist on which I could neatly categorize the differing positions, such as “liberal” or “conservative.” Herman Otten says the same: “The Pope, liberal Protestants, the cults, many charismatics and even “evangelicals” refuse to accept what the Athanasian Creed and historic Christianity teach about the damnation of the heathen.”^v

Otten’s list of theologians who deny the traditional view include egregious names from across the spectrum of modern-day heterodoxy. So, let me begin with a rundown on the differing schools of thought.

I. Schools of Thought

One observation which S.M. Merrill (a 19th century English theologian) makes seems valid:

Objections usually urged against eternal punishment are of two classes--those which arise out of false and unscriptural views, and those which are merely fault-finding ... The latter are fallacious. They fault the thing itself, and stand with equal force whether the doctrine be true or false. They are aimed against the fact, and not against the proofs of the fact.^{vi}

The first school of thought is MATERIALISM, which falls at the left end of the theological spectrum. It is a crass Sadduceean/Agnostic way of looking at death, the ultimate teaching of annihilationism. Roger Nicole, Prof. of Theology at Gordon Divinity School, distinguishes the various types of annihilationism: "The word is from the Latin, *nihil*, "nothing" and expresses the position of those who hold that some, if not all, human souls will cease to exist after death ... This point of view may take three main forms: (a) that all men inevitably cease to exist altogether at death (materialism)."^{vii}

At the other extreme is UNIVERSALISM, the belief that God will finally redeem all rational beings. The radical German theologian Hans Küng presents the classic (philosophical) argument for universalism, and he finds support from other Roman writers:

No religion in the world has on its conscience so many millions of people who thought differently, believed differently. Christianity is the most murderous religion there has ever been ... And the real cause of this perversion of the Christian spirit is "belief in hell."^{viii} The question became increasingly insistent: should the God of love, perhaps together with the blessed in heaven, watch for all eternity this endless, hopeless, pitiless, loveless, cruel physical-psychological torture of his creatures? Does the infinite God really require all this because of a supposedly infinite offense (as a human act, sin is merely finite), for the restoration of his "honor," as his defenders think? Is he such a hardhearted creditor? A God of mercy from whose mercy some dead are excluded? A God of peace who perpetuates discord and irreconcilability? A God of grace and love of enemies who can mercilessly take revenge on his enemies for all eternity? What would we think of a human being who satisfied his thirst for revenge so implacably and insatiably?... The idea not only of a lifelong, but even eternal punishment of body and soul, seems to many people absolutely monstrous ... Why should God, who is infinitely good, want to perpetuate enmity instead of removing it?^{ix}

The answer, of course, is that He doesn't and He did. But this reveals a recurring problem: several writers of various persuasions mistake universal reconciliation (objective justification) for universalism—the Reformed Berkouwer, for one.

Küng's logic leads him to question the traditional Catholic beliefs:

Of course, if we start out precisely from the basic idea of dying into God, understood as purifying consummation, the old idea of a place of eternal punishment becomes so much more questionable ... the "eternity" of the punishment of hell may never be regarded as absolute. It remains subject to God, to his will and grace. And individual texts suggest ... a reconciliation of all, an act of universal mercy. (And he quotes Rm 11:32 as a proof text!)^x

In Küng's system, he comes very close to the teaching of restitution for all, or universalism in a conditional sense. The doctrine is not new. The third century mystic Origen first proposed such an answer to satisfy those who struggled with the idea of a real eternal place of torment, but the early church rejected his views: "The church justly abominates the opinion of Origen" (Augustine).^{xi}

Finally, the Catholic theologian isn't all that radical, because he returns to the traditional system involving Purgatory: "Here perhaps may lie the particle of truth ... Purgatory is God himself in the wrath of his grace. Purification is encounter with God in the sense that it judges and purifies, but also liberates and enlightens, heals and completes man."^{xii}

As the Lutheran theologian Han Schwarz describes their understanding today, it wavers between universal restoration on one extreme and traditionalism on the other:

The idea of a universal homecoming has always attracted speculative minds ... The idea is very closely connected with the notion, firmly rooted in Roman Catholic beliefs, that there is a purgatory ... Most Roman Catholic theologians today admit that death is not just a transitional stage ... Nevertheless, they still do not want to abandon the idea of a purgatory.^{xiii}

This brings us to our next school of thought, RESTORATIONISM.

The idea of humanity's universal salvation rests on a narrow biblical basis. The Greek words for this idea, ἀποκαταστάσεως πάντων, "restitution of all," occurs only once in the New Testament (Acts 3:21), when Peter told his audience that heaven must receive Jesus "until the time comes for God to restore everything."

But the context shows that Peter was referring to the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises and not to a universal homecoming: "as he promised long ago through his holy prophets. For Moses said: 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet ...'" (Acts 3:22).

For any who, like Küng, cannot understand how a finite, human act of sin can incur an infinite existence of torment, perhaps a formula passed along by Dr. Siegbert Becker to our Dogmatics class can help answer this seeming injustice:

$1 \times 10 = 10$	$10 \times \infty = \infty$	ANY sin committed
$1 \times 10^{10} = 10^{10}$	But $10^{10} \times \infty = \infty$	against $\infty = \infty$
$1 \times 10^{100} = 10^{100}$	$10^{100} \times \infty = \infty$	

Justness is not measured by the time it takes to commit a crime, nor even absolutely by the act itself. For example, as a child, you might not have thought much about punching your brother, but punching your father was unthinkable. Punching the President of the United States was even more so. But we punch and kick at our infinite, almighty Father for a lifetime. One millisecond of sin, even one wicked thought is enough to earn eternal justice. And even without actual sin, the *state* of sin, the presence of sin still permeates our being. As the formula states, *peccatum originis est vere peccatum--damnans* (AC, II, 29:1f).

I was pleasantly surprised to read the latest LCA Dogmatics volume, where Han Schwarz replies to this teaching:

The New Testament that tells us about God's universal love does not teach a universal homecoming. On the contrary, it confronts us with a twofold outcome of human history, with acceptance and rejection. Jesus' parables (Mt 25:1-13; Lk 16:19-31) ... convey the prospect of a definite and irrevocable final judgment, with ultimate consequences. Even Paul, though emphasizing salvation as the universal intention for everybody, does not mute Jesus' call for decision ... As we accept God's offer to direct our lives according to our eternal destiny, a universal homecoming is meaningless for our salvation, since we will be saved according to the promise of his redemptive word.^{xiv}

And he, a modernist, wonders (as I have) how "even conservative theologians find at least some merit in the idea of a universal homecoming."^{xv} It is interesting to note that Schwarz's editor of this very recent Lutheran Dogmatics text, Carl Braaten, is a universalist/restorationist, and has publicly registered his opposition

to the traditional view of hell. Another prolific and influential Lutheran who defends universalism is Richard Neuhaus. It looks as if the Roman and Lutheran camps are moving closer together on the idea of restorationism. Jaroslav Pelikan, another Lutheran, buys into Origen's way of thinking about apocatastasis:

... There is thus a kind of cycle, perpetually passing through the same stages; the soul never settles in any one state for ever." The biblical support for this speculation about the ultimate return and restoration of the soul comes not only from the biblical word "apocatastasis," but even more from the text that forms the keystone of Origen's eschatology ... , 1 Co 15:25-28: "He [Christ] must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet..."^{xvi}

King defines the next school of thought, which is ANNIHILATIONISM—

There are two forms of the doctrine--Annihilationism proper and the doctrine of Conditional Immortality ... The two doctrines are one in their outcome--the extinction of evil and evil-doers; but they differ in other fundamental points. Annihilationism teaches that the soul was created immortal; Conditional Immortality teaches that it was created mortal, with the capacity of immortalization. Immortality is a gift of God in Christ. Both doctrines teach a limited duration of conscious suffering for the wicked in the future life.^{xvii}

G. W. Grogan (Principal, Bible Training Institute, Glasgow, Scotland) describes conditionalism:

This doctrine is an attempt to steer a middle course between what is felt to be the harshness of the doctrine of eternal punishment and the sentimental tendencies of restorationism. It is held to be realistic without being repugnant. It is the view that the soul is immortal by grace and not by nature, and is a form of annihilationism, for the soul that persists in sin is ultimately destroyed. It is defended partly on philosophical and partly on biblical grounds ... Conditional Immortality is maintained by some of the sects, but also by some who, in other doctrines, stand within historic evangelicalism.^{xviii}

Conditionalism hinges on a denial of the immortality of the soul. One supporter, John Bonnell, writes in his chapter, "A Modern Christian's Concept of Hell,"

The doctrine of conditional immortality sprang from the fact that even though sin deserves punishment, thoughtful minds find it difficult to believe that evil will be as permanent as good ... Conditionalism has not a little to commend it. It teaches the complete and final destruction of those who have rejected the mercy of Almighty God ... It attracts those who are repelled by the teaching of everlasting punishment and yet who fear the moral results of (universalism). Ever since the Reformation conditionalism has found able adherents.^{xix}

Joseph A. Beet, a popular Methodist commentator writing at the turn of the century, in "protest" of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul claimed that "this alien doctrine" was "derived only from Greek philosophy."^{xx} The idea that this actual suffering will be endless, he insists, is an addition to church doctrine borrowed from Greek philosophy through the Jews, and possesses no adequate Scriptural support.^{xxi} And Bonnell claims that the concept of everlasting torment ... has never been mentioned in any of the three great historic creeds of the early Church--the Apostles', the Nicene, or the Athanasian.^{xxii} This will give you an idea how the conditionalist reduces the pertinent words to very narrow meanings. For while it is true that "torment" is not explicitly mentioned in the Apostles' or Nicene creeds, yet Judgment and Punishment is included in each, for "the living and the dead," i.e. all people. Yet creeds as historical statements are always occasioned by false teachings which arise and attack orthodoxy. The question of the nature of hell was not addressed because it was

not an issue at the time of their formulation. But in the Athanasian Creed, one would have to take a very narrow interpretation of the words, “those who have done evil will go into everlasting fire,” in order to claim it is never mentioned. In fact, the preceding antithetical gift of “eternal life” in the creed would be meaningless if the reader would interpret “everlasting” as limited. But they do. Another 19th century theologian, William Cochrane, explains:

The actual enjoyment of these blessings (heaven) by any human being depends upon his acceptance of the gospel (as a condition) and those who refuse to do so, remain under the original sentence of death, but liable to additional stripes in the execution of it, which is called destruction, ... that some men will ... consequently perish forever.^{xxiii}

Unlike the Jehovah’s Witness doctrine (which is similar), most conditionalists (particularly Seventh-Day Adventists) affirm that there will be a period of punitive suffering preceding the annihilation of Satan, his demons, and the wicked, the duration depending upon the amount of guilt involved. King sums up his feelings on the teaching:

This doctrine is meeting with considerable favor in certain very respectable quarters; and we confess to a very strong liking for it. If our liking for a doctrine were all that we were required to consider we would find no difficulty in knowing where to cast the anchor of our faith. (Conditionalism) has much in its favor. A divine theodicy is much easier under (this) view than under the orthodox doctrine. One of the heaviest burdens that latter doctrine is required to sustain is the eternal continuance of evil in a benevolent universe. Annihilationism does away with this difficulty by providing for the ultimate extinction of evil when the good and the pure and the happy will be “all in all,” when sin shall no longer exist even as a “speck on the infinite azure of eternity,” but when the last spot on the sun of righteousness shall be effaced. The doctrine is not wholly destitute of exegetical points. But when tested by the whole testimony of the Scriptures, we are compelled to believe that it is found wanting, and must, therefore, be rejected. We part from it as a doctrine we would like to believe.^{xxiv}

This gives you a short introduction to conditional immortality.

The TRADITIONAL doctrine is the orthodox confession. I have appended to this paper the applicable section of Prof. Meyer’s Dogmatics notes, together with the Bible passages printed into the body of the outline. We cannot cover all the details, but we can focus on some of the salient points as they pertain to Conditionalism’s claims.

Many contemporary theologians still cling to the traditional position, explained by J.A.T. Robinson:

All men will be raised ... to a life from which no escape from God is possible. And for some that will be heaven, and for some that will be hell ... To be raised to live with God, without any possibility of surcease, may be the most unendurable torment. But God will nevertheless to have it so ... Can a God of love be content that any should find that to live with him is hell, torment without remedy, without escape, and without end?... (and in a footnote:) This is what the Bible means by eternal death--not extinction, but, as Althaus puts it: “Inescapable godlessness in inescapable relationship to God. If ‘eternal death’ meant annihilation, God’s judgment would be finite, limited by a saving ‘No more.’ ”^{xxv}

--In the Old Testament, **שְׂאוֹל** is used 65 times, where context determines its usage as either the grave or eternal punishment.

--In the New Testament, ἄδης is used 11 times, again with context determining its meaning. Compare the rich man (Lk 16:23) and Jesus in the grave (Ac 2:31). It is safe to say, as most dictionaries make clear, ἄδης and Ἥιδης are equivalent terms. In every case but one in the LXX, Ἥιδης is translated ἄδης.

Our conclusion then is that Sheol in most cases can and should be translated as hell, but where the context clearly indicates that this is too strong a translation, a lesser term such as ‘grave’ (used in the sense of a person being dead) is an acceptable alternative.^{xxvi}

--In the New Testament, γέεννα is used 12 times, mostly by Jesus, but once by James (3:6).

--In the New Testament, τάρταρος is used once by Peter concerning the rebellious angels (2 Pe 2:4).

Of the commentators I found, Hendrickson (Calvinist) offered the best explanation for understanding γέεννα:

The word comes from Ge-Hinnom, i.e. the land of Hinnom, a valley belonging originally to Hinnom and later to his sons. You will find this valley ... just south of the city curving toward the west. Originally, no doubt, this was a fine place, a beautiful valley. But it did not remain so. It was in this valley that a high place was built. It was subsequently called *Tophet*, meaning, according to some, “place of spitting out” or “abhorrence,” according to others, “place of burning.” Either interpretation would fit very well. It would seem that in the top of this high place there was a deep hole in which much wood was piled, and that this wood was ignited by a stream of brimstone (Is 30:33). The wicked kings Ahaz and Manasseh actually made their children pass through this terrible fire as offerings to the gruesome idol Moloch (2 Chr 28:3; 33:6). Others copied their wicked example (Je 32:35). Jeremiah predicted that the divine judgment would strike Tophet: God would visit the terrible wickedness that occurred in Ge-Hinnom with such mass-destruction that the place would become known as “the valley of slaughter” (Je 7:31-34 and others). The God-fearing king Josiah defiled this idolatrous high place, and stopped its abominations (2 Ki 23:10). Afterwards Jerusalem’s rubbish was burnt here. Hence, whenever you approached the valley, you would always see those rubbish-burning flames. Now by adding these various ideas represented by Ge-Hinnom—namely, ever-burning fire, wickedness, abomination, divine judgment, slaughter—it is easily seen that this Ge-Hinnom became a symbol for the everlasting abode of the wicked, namely, hell. Ge-Hinnom becomes (in Greek) *Gehenna*, the place of never-ending torment.^{xxvii}

Dr. Becker described the nature of hell in his paper, “Heaven and Hell”:

While the Bible gives us no other such concrete description of hell (as the Rich Man experienced), it leaves no doubt that hell is a place of pain, suffering, and torment. The Lutheran dogmatists discuss the question whether this is actual physical fire, or whether the word fire denotes a spiritual phenomenon ... Whether it is physical or spiritual fire is really immaterial. Either way, it is a place to which we do not want to go and from which we pray to be delivered. Many times, too, the Savior speaks of the weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth which will take place in hell. Weeping and wailing is surely indicative of sorrow and grief ... The significance of the gnashing of teeth ... is pain by anger and hatred that is expressed by this gesture.

Because men are so prone to identify death with non-existence, with unconsciousness, it is well to point out that this is a mistake. According to Scripture Adam died on the day he ate of the forbidden fruit. Terrified and hiding in the bushes of the garden he was separated from all the spiritual blessings that had been his in that joyful communion with God in which he was created. From that day on also all of Adam's descendants were born dead in trespasses and sin, and physical death and eternal death is only a matter of course unless the mercy of God intervenes to make it possible for us once more to enjoy the presence of God, and to love Him. All this is impossible in eternal death. And just as eternal death is not eternal non-existence or unconsciousness, so the words "destroy" and "perish," which are used so often to denote what happens to men in hell, do not denote annihilation. We have already noted that the Bible says that the world was destroyed or perished in the flood, yet it did not go out of existence. A ship is destroyed when it can no longer serve the purpose for which it was built. So also those whose bodies and souls are destroyed in hell have no more opportunity for salvation, but they continue to exist in misery and pain forever and ever.^{xxviii}

J.T. Mueller explains the form, or essence of eternal damnation. It

consists in everlasting banishment from divine grace and communion ... Scripture, moreover, very carefully describes the unspeakable sufferings of the damned as "tribulation and anguish" (Rm 2:9), "being in torments" (Lk 16:23), "being tormented in this flame" (Lk 16:24), "being cast into unquenchable fire, where their worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched" (Mk 9:43f), "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt 13:50), etc.

To describe the torments of the damned more accurately, our dogmatists divide them into privative and positive sufferings (See also Meyer's Dogmatics Outline, p. 4, -3, -4). The privative sufferings include a) forfeiture of the beatific sight of God, Mt 25:41; b) separation from the communion of the blessed, Lk 16:26; c) exclusion from heavenly light, rest, and happiness, Mt 8:12; d) entire denial of pity, divine and human, Lk 16:25f; and e) complete lack of everything that might comfort them, Rv 6:16f. The positive sufferings are both internal and external. The internal are the most inexplicable pains and tortures of the soul, Mk 9:44, and the external, their association with devils, Mt 25:41, their everlasting confinement in a place of unspeakable sorrow, Mt 25:30; 1 Pt 3:18-20, and their ceaseless torments in fire that burns, but does not consume, Lk 16:23f; Rv 14; 20:10, 15.^{xxix}

Finally, the Lutheran confessions speak often about hell and eternal damnation, but only one instance I found explicitly states the nature of eternal damnation: "Ungodly men and the devils He will condemn to be tormented without end." The same article rules out any promotion of conditional immortality for the confessional Lutheran: "Rejected, therefore, are the Anabaptists who teach that the devil and condemned men will not suffer eternal pain and torment" (AC XVII, 38:3-4 and restated in the Ap, XVII). At that time the majority of visible Christianity confessed the traditional belief in a real eternal place of torment. It was not a point of controversy, and therefore never debated at length.

Endnotes

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- ⁱ Dante, tr. C. E. Norton, *The Divine Comedy*, p. 4.
- ⁱⁱ Lani Olson, “Has Hell Disappeared? Do Christians Want It Back?” *Christian News*, (December, 1984), p. 1.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Pierre Delooz, “Who Believes in the Hereafter?” *Death & Presence*, p. 34.
- ^{iv} Denise Cerny, “There is No Hell,” *The Grand Rapids Press* (Sept. 29, 1984).
- ^v Herman Otten, “The Disappearance of Hell,” *Christian News* (Dec., 1984), p. 4.
- ^{vi} Merrill, S.M., *The New Testament Idea of Hell*, p. 11.
- ^{vii} Harrison, Everett, ed., *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, p.43.
- ^{viii} Küng, *Eternal Life*, p. 132.
- ^{ix} *Ibid.*, p. 136-137.
- ^x *Ibid.*, p. 140.
- ^{xi} Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, p. 503.
- ^{xii} *Ibid.*, p. 137.
- ^{xiii} Schwarz, (Braaten, ed.) *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, p.578-578.
- ^{xiv} *Ibid.*, p. 578 & 579.
- ^{xv} *Ibid.*, p. 579.
- ^{xvi} Pelikan, *The Shape of Death*, p. 85.
- ^{xvii} King, George W., *Future Retribution*, p. 218f.
- ^{xviii} Douglas, ed., *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, p. 249f .
- ^{xix} Bonnell, *Heaven and Hell*, p. 39.
- ^{xx} Beet, *Immortality of the Soul*, p. v.
- ^{xxi} *Ibid.*, p. 32f.
- ^{xxii} *Ibid.*, p. 32f.
- ^{xxiii} Cochrane, William, *Future Punishment*, p. 116.
- ^{xxiv} *Op. Cit.*, p. 218f.
- ^{xxv} Robinson, J.A.T., *In the End God*, p. 93f.
- ^{xxvi} Frohmader, R.E., “A Definitive Study of Gehenna, Sheol, & Hades,” p. 4.
- ^{xxvii} William Hendrickson, *The Bible on the Life Hereafter*, p. 196.
- ^{xxviii} Becker, “Heaven and Hell.”
- ^{xxix} J.T. Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 635f.

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Appendix

3. Eternity.

I. The wicked, persistently rejecting Christ, will suffer eternal damnation in hell.

1. Damnation in eternity is a fact.

a) Note

-1) Man's conscience testifies to this.
cf Rom.2:15,16. - e.g. Tartarus.

... since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.) This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.

-2) The many Scripture names for it.
cf Prov. 15:11

Death and Destruction lie open before the Lord--how much more the hearts of men!

cf Mt.5:22,29,30; 10:28; 22:13; 23:15,33; 25:41,46

But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brothers, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell. Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell. "Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' "
"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to." "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?" "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.' "
"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

cf Mc.9:43

"If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out."

cf Lc. 8:31; 16:23,28

And they begged him repeatedly not to order them to go into the Abyss. In hell, whence he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.... for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.

cf Rom.10:7

"or 'Who will descend into the deep?' " (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).

cf 2 Th.1:9

They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power ...

cf Heb.6:2

... instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.

cf Jas. 3:6

The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

cf 2 Pet.2:4,17

For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them into gloomy dungeons to be held for judgment; These men are springs without waxen and mists driven by a storm. Blackest darkness is reserved for them.

cf Rev.2:11; 20:6; 21:8.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death. Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years. "But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars-- their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."

-3) Eternal damnation is as real as eternal salvation.

cf Mt.25:46.

"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

cf Jn.3:36

"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."

b) Objections to eternal damnation.

-1) Conflicting with God's infinite love.

Contra

cf Rom.11:33,34

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?"

cf 1 Tim.6:16

... who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen.

-2) Unfair: eternal punishment for temporal sin.

Contra

-a) On sin

cf 1 Jh.3:4; - 8-10

Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; neither is anyone who does not love his brother.

cf Gerhard, al (IV,306,9-): The proportion of punishment and guilt is not to be sought in the duration of time, but in the quality and rottenness of sin.

cf Brochmand: Because God is offended by sin, God the infinite and eternal good, thence is it that sin merits eternal punishment. (Hoenecke IV,306)

- b) On unbelief
 cf Jh.3:16
For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.
 cf Rom.5:8
But God demonstrated his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.
 cf 1 Jh.1:9
If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.
 cf Heb.6:6; 10:28,29; - 26,27.
... if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.

2. Damnation is essentially a separation from God.

- a) On the nature of damnation
- 1) Note the expression of the judgment.
 cf Mt.24:41; 8:12
“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’ ” “But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”
- 2) Note some general descriptions.
 cf Rev.20:6
Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.
 cf Jh.8:51,52
“I tell you the truth, if a man keeps my word, he will never see death.” At this the Jews exclaimed, “Now we know that you are demon-possessed! Abraham died and so did the prophets, yet you say that if a man keeps your word, he will never taste death.
 cf Rom.1:32 (death)
Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.
 cf Mc.16:16
Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.
 cf Jh. 5:29
“ ... and come out--those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.”
 cf Heb.6:2; 10:27

... instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.... but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.

cf Mt.7:13

“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it.”

cf 1 Th.5:3

While people are saying, “Peace and safety” destruction will come on them suddenly as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

cf 2 Th.1:9

They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power ...

cf 1 Tim.6:9

People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction

-3) Mala privativa, poena damni.

cf Ps.1:5; 5:5

Therefore the wicked will not stand in judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. The arrogant cannot stand in your presence; you hate all who do wrong.

cf Mt.7:23

Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’

cf 2 Th.1:9 (ἀπό προσώπου)

They will be punished with even everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power ...

cf Is.48:22 (no peace)

“There is no peace,” says the Lord, “for the wicked.”

cf Lc. 13:28 (thrust out)

There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out.

cf 2 Th.1:6

God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you ...

cf Heb.4:3

Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, “So I declared an oath in my anger, ‘They shall never enter my rest.’ ” And yet his work has been finished since the creation of the world.

cf Lc.16:24-31

So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’ But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’ “He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father’s house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’ “Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’ “ ‘No father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ “He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’ ”

- 4) Mala positiva, poena sensus.
cf Mt.13:42

They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.
cf Lc.16:23,25,28

In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. "But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. ' ... for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'
cf Rom.2:9

There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; ...

cf Rev.14:11 (fire - tribulation, anguish, torment).

"And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name."

- b) The intensity of the pain.

- 1) Is presented most vividly.
cf Mt.8:12; 13:50; 24:8

"But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." " ... and throw them into the fiery furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." All these are the beginning of birth pains.

cf 1 Th.5:3

While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

cf Rev.6:16,17; 9:6

They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" During those days men will seek death, but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will elude them.

- 2) Are the unquenchable fire and the never-dying worm to be understood literally or metaphorically?

cf Is. 66:24

"And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind."

cf Mc.9:43,44,46,48

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell, whence their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.

cf Mt.3:12; 18:8,9; 25:41

"His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering the wheat into his barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire." If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell. "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.' "

cf Quenstedt (IV,300,4): Finally there is the opinion of those who here prefer to hold back, rather than state anything certainly. Gerhard follows this same opinion, saying: We do not doubt that by divine power it can happen that a corporeal, material, and visible, or whether incorporeal, immaterial, and invisible, we leave undecided, although I am more inclined to the latter, and we earnestly pray God that he does not manifest this knowledge to us through experience. (Hoenecke IV,298-300)

- 3) There will be degrees of damnation.
cf Mt.10:15; 11:22

“I tell you the truth, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.” “But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you.”

cf Lc.12:47,48

“That servant who knows his master’s will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

cf Rom.2:11,12

For God does not show favoritism. All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the Law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law.

3. Damnation will be eternal.

- a) Sin, as an attitude, is perpetuated in the damned.

- 1) They will not repent.
cf Mt. 7:22,23; 22:12; 25:44

Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord did we not prophecy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’ ‘Friend,’ he asked, ‘how did you get in here without wedding clothes?’ The man was speechless “They also will answer, ‘ Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

- 2) They will however be in eternal bondage to sin.
cf Mt. 22:13

“Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

cf 1 Pet.3:19

... through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison ...

- b) Eternity implies that

- 1) There will be no intermission in the pain.
cf Lc.16:24,25

So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’ “But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received yours good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.

cf Is.34:10

It will not be quenched night and day; its smoke will rise forever. From generation to generation it will lie desolate; no one will ever pass through it again.

cf Rev.14:11; 19:3; - 20:10

“And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, on for anyone who receives the mark of his name. And again they shouted: “Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up for ever and even.” And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

-2) There will be no end.

cf Is.66:24

“And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.”

cf Mc.9:43,44,46,48 (above)

cf Lc.16:26

‘And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’

cf Mt.5:25

I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

cf Lc.12:59

“I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.”

cf coll Ps.49:8

... the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough-- ...

cf Mt.18:8; 25:41

If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire.

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’ ”

2 Th.1:9

They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his powers ...

cf Jude 6,7

And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home--these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day. In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.

cf A.C. XVII,3 (p.50); Apol. 334,66 (sine fine).

c) Objections.

-1) “Eternal” may mean a long, yet limited period of time.

-a) Passages adduced.

cf Ex.12:14,24; 21:6; etc.

“This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD--a lasting ordinance. Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants.... then his master must take him before the judges.

-b) Contra note:

- (1) Qualifications: “generations,” life time.
- (2) Parallel between eternal damnation and eternal life.
cf Mt.25:46; 3:12
“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”
His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor gathering the wheat into his barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.
cf Jh.3:36
Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.
cf Dan.12:2
Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.
- 2) Scripture teaches a “restitution.”
- a) A “visitation” “after many days.”
- (1) Passage quoted.
cf Is.24:21,22 וּמָרְבֵּי יָמִים יִפְקְדוּ (Luther: “wieder”)
LXX – διὰ πολλῶν γενεῶν ἐπισκοπή ἔσται αὐτῶν
In that day the LORD will punish the powers in the heavens above and the kings on the earth below. They will be herded together like prisoners bound in a dungeon; they will be shut up in prison and be punished after many days.
- (2) Contra
- (a) What does visitation mean (deliverance, punishment)?
- (b) What is “after many days” (end, continuation)?
Jewish - “punished”
- b) “Regeneration.”
- (1) Passage quoted.
cf Mt.19.28
Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”
- (2) Contra: Plain reference to Judgment Day.
- c) “Restitution.”
- (1) Passage quoted.
cf Acts 3:21.
He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets
- (2) Contra: Salvation, in the sense of the prophets.
- d) All things under Jesus’ feet.
- (1) Passages quoted.
cf 1 Cor.15:27,28
For he “has put everything under his feet.” Now when it says that “everything” has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.

cf Eph.1:10

... to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment--to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

cf Phil.2:9,10

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ...

(2) Contra: Subjection of enemies by force.

cf Ps.2:9,12

"You will rule them with an iron scepter; you will dash them to pieces like pottery." Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth.

4. The cause of damnation is unbelief.

a) The cause is not

-1) A deficiency of divine grace.

cf Jh.3:16

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

cf 1 Tim.1:15

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst.

-2) A lack of efficacy of the means of grace.

cf Lc.16:29,31

"Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.'

"He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.' "

cf Rom.10:17

Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.

-3) An absolute decree.

cf Tim.2:4

... who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

cf 2 Pet-3:9

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

b) The cause lies entirely in man.

-1) In general

cf Is. 3:9

The look on their faces testifies against them; they parade their sin like Sodom; they do not hide it. Woe to them! They have brought disaster upon themselves.

cf Jer.2:19

"Your wickedness will punish you; your backsliding will rebuke you. Consider then and realize how evil and bitter it is for you when you forsake the LORD your God and have no awe of me," declares the Lord, the Lord Almighty.

cf Hos.13:9

I will destroy you, O Israel, because you are against me, against your helper.

-2) The unbeliever, rejecting Christ, remains in his sin.

cf Jh.3:18,19,36; 9:41

“Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.” Jesus said, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.”

-3) The unbeliever, thus is damned both on account of his sins and of his unbelief.

cf Eph.5:6

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God’s wrath came on those who are disobedient.

5. The place of damnation is hell.

a) Hell is a “somewhere”

-1) On the fact

cf Lc.16:28

‘ ... for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’

cf Acts 1:25

“ ... to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs.”

cf 1 Pet.3:19

... through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison ...

cf Gerhard (IV,311,4-): It does not seem to be denied that there is a certain POU, in which the damned will suffer their punishment.

-2) It is distinguished from the realm of heaven.

cf Mt.8:11,12

“I say to you that many will come from the east and west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

cf Rev.22:14,15

“Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.”

b) Its location is not revealed.

-1) It is customary to refer to heaven as above and to hell as below the earth.

cf Phi1.2:10

... that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth

...

-2) This understood literally by Roman Catholics.

cf Bellarmin (IV,313,12): The Latin name “hell” is not doubtful because it is distinct from the name “sepulchre,” and since it signifies something lower than we, and below us, it is nothing if

not the center of the earth, and the place of hell is necessarily understood as a deep, subterranean place. (Hoenecke IV,313)

-3) This does not follow, however, from

-a) The fact that Korah and his followers were swallowed by the earth.

(1) Passage quoted.

cf Num.16:33

They went down alive into the grave, with everything they owned; the earth closed over them, and they perished and were gone from the community.

(2) Contra:

(a) Mode of their death.

(b) Is heaven in the clouds?

cf 2 Kg.2:11

At this the king sent to Elijah another captain with his fifty men. The captain said to him, "Man of God, this is what the king says, 'Come down at once!'"

cf Acts 1:9

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

-b) The use of the term hell in parallelism with grave.

(1) Passages quoted

cf Ps.16:10

... because you will not abandon me to the grave, ...

cf Acts 2:27,31; 13:35

... because you will not abandon me to the grave, ... Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay. So it is stated elsewhere: " 'You will not let your Holy One see decay.' "

(2) Contra:

(a) What kind of parallelism? In other words: Are burial and hell identical?

(b) Is hell in this passage a place at all? (: excruciating pain).

-4) Remember Chrysostom's word. *μη ζηλωμεν, ποũ εστιν, αλλα πω̄ς φευγωμεν.*

cf Chrysostom (IV,313,15): Let us not be zealots where it is, but how we may escape it.

(Hoenecke IV,313).

6. The doctrine of damnation is revealed as a warning.

a) That we may be spared its painful experience.

cf Mt.3:12 coll 2; 8:11,12 coll 10; 24:48-51 coll 42; 26:24

"His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering the wheat into his barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

" ... I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, 'My master is staying away a long time,' and he then begins to beat his fellow servants arid to eat and drink with drunkards. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with hypocrites where there will be weeping and gnashing of

teeth. “The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.”

cf Mc.9:43-48

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where “ ‘their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.’ ”

b) “Humane” theologians are really lacking in mercy.

cf Ez.33:6-8.

But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet to warn the people and the sword comes and takes the life of one of them, that man will be taken away because of his sin, but I will hold the watchman accountable for his blood.’ “Son of man, I have made you watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked man, you will surely die,’ and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood.

----- January 28, 1986-----

How often have you encountered someone, possibly while making an evangelism call, who confesses, “Oh, I don’t believe in hell! God could never be so unloving as to send someone to everlasting agony!” Probably more times than you can recall. The doctrine, which insists upon a real place where unbelievers suffer, has kept apologists active for centuries, defending this clear teaching of the Word.

Even from religious quarters one can hear the sound of dissent. Rev. DuSean Berkich “after years of studying the Bible, believes a giant mistake has been made about the concept of hell.” Students asked him, “How could you say there is a loving Creator who knew beforehand that He had created something (humans) that was primarily doomed to eternal suffering?” His answer: “Our research showed that no one is going to go to hell.... The word “hell” derives from the Hebrew “Gehenna” which referred to a dump east (!) of the city of Jerusalem. The dump was once the site of human sacrifices to pagan gods and later became a spot for the refuse of the city, including animal bodies, where flames continually smoldered.”^{xxx}

It may seem ironic to some that the doctrine of hell is a “fundamental” doctrine, in the sense that without a belief in hell, there is no possibility of saving faith. Ironic, yet faithful to the Bible’s witness. For if there is no hell, there is no need for justification, no need for the cross. If no Law in deepest preachment of terror (hell), then no Gospel in sweetest consolations of love (heaven).

Could it be that perhaps a mediating position exists? A position, drawn from the pages of Scripture, where hell as a fundamental doctrine is a real place of suffering, yet not everlasting? Many theologians believe so today, in their “interpretation” of the Biblical words in question.

The infamous Apple Computer television advertisement pictured rows of blind businessmen walking off a cliff, following the crowds ahead of them. Are we like the businessmen in the commercial, at best simply blindly following after tradition? At worst, have we been wrong for so many centuries, alienating thousands from Christ through a false doctrine of God-induced never-ending torture?

The assignment given me was to research “the doctrine of Hell in modern American Christianity,” with special emphasis upon the book, *The Fire That Consumes*, by William Fudge, who champions the “mediating position briefly touched on above. Last year at this conference, I shared the various current schools of thought (I.), ranging from crass Materialism (death being the end of human existence) to traditionalism, the orthodox belief in hell as a place of continual, conscious suffering.

With this study, we will take a closer look at the teaching of conditionalism through history up to the present time, including its resurgence as of late (II.), then present an analysis of its prominent contentions (III.).

II. CONDITIONALISM Defined:

It would help to define our terms first, and Fudge provides a workable explanation for the language we will use:

The “traditionalist” view signifies the understanding that hell will involve the unending conscious torment (whether spiritual or physical or both) of the wicked who have been made deathless (immortal). The term “conditionalist” is used for the view that the wicked will suffer conscious punishment precisely measured by divine justice but that they finally will perish in hell so as to become totally extinct forever.^{xxx}

Conditionalism is not to be equated exactly with strict annihilationism, where the wicked will never be raised up (JW doctrine). Rather, the “eternal destruction” will be the extinction of those so sentenced. This retribution will be preceded by penal suffering exactly suited to each degree of guilt by a holy and just God, but this penal suffering *within itself* is not the ultimate retribution or punishment. There will be an act of *destroying*, resulting in a destruction that will never end or be reversed. The *act* of destroying *includes* penal pains, but they will end. The *result* of destruction will never be reversed and will never have an end.^{xxxii}

G. W. Grogan (Principal, Bible Training Institute, Glasgow, Scotland) describes conditionalism:

This doctrine is an attempt to steer a middle course between what is felt to be the harshness of the doctrine of eternal punishment and the sentimental tendencies of restorationism. It is held to be realistic without being repugnant. It is the view that the soul is immortal by grace and not by nature, and is a form of annihilationism, for the soul that persists in sin is ultimately destroyed. It is defended partly on philosophical and partly on biblical grounds ... Conditional Immortality is maintained by some of the sects (e.g. Jehovah's Witnesses, Christadelphians), but also by some who, in other doctrines, stand within historic evangelicalism.^{xxxiii}

And how does the doctrine of the immortality of the soul fit into conditionalism's scheme? Traditionalist theologian George King explains that in opposition to our familiar understanding of the soul's immortality, "Conditional Immortality teaches that the soul was created mortal, with the capacity of immortalization. Immortality is a gift of God in Christ. If sin had not entered into the world this gift would have been conferred (sacramentally, we suppose) through the 'tree of life,' from whose fruit our first parents were excluded after their fall."^{xxxiv}

A. Short History of Conditionalism:

All agree that the traditional view of hell has been predominant throughout history. Conditionalists point back to Augustine as setting the stage, after he was influenced not by Scripture, but by classical Greek philosophy, especially Platonic thought.^{xxxv} This is a common accusation from conditionalists, an accusation which ironically seems to drive these usually conservative "inerrantists" into the arms of more modernistic theologians, who look at doctrine as *evolving* rather than as dogma established in the Apostolic age. Fudge himself, who swears by his conservative outlook on Scripture, acknowledges the support of men like F.F. Bruce, Robert Brinsmead (Ed., of *Verdict* gone "scholarly"), and several Seminex men.

But it is true that St. Augustine solidified the orthodox teaching on the nature of hell: "Faith maintains this principle and we must believe it: Neither the soul nor the human body suffers complete annihilation; the wicked arise again for punishment beyond imagination, while the good rise again for everlasting life."^{xxxvi} For centuries this remained the unquestioned standard concerning the nature of hell among the orthodox.

Then in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries things began to change. Did the age of Rationalism hasten conditionalism along? It seems too coincidental that many Englishmen of the Eighteenth Century who embraced Arianism also questioned the traditional doctrine of hell (John Locke, Isaac Newton). Fudge claims that lumping these heretics together with conditionalists is a "most unfair response."^{xxxvii} Maybe so, but historians remarked that here was when the traditional understanding of the nature of hell was assailed:

What critics in England (mostly anonymously) from the 17th century and many in Europe from the middle of the 18th century openly asked, showed a change in both the attitude to the sufferings of others and in the understanding of God which led to a decline in the power of eternal punishment in hell as a deterrent (Küng here footnotes Walker, *The Decline of Hell*). The question became increasingly insistent: should the God of love, perhaps together with the blessed in heaven, watch for all eternity this endless, hopeless, pitiless, loveless, cruel physical-psychological torture of his creatures? Is he such a hardhearted creditor? A God of mercy from whose mercy some dead are excluded? A God of peace who perpetuates discord and irreconcilability? A God of grace and love of enemies who can mercilessly take revenge on his enemies for all eternity? What would we think of a human being who satisfied his thirst for revenge so implacably and insatiably?... The idea not only of a lifelong, but even eternal punishment of body and soul, seems to many people absolutely monstrous ... Why should God, who is infinitely good, want to perpetuate enmity instead of removing it?^{xxxviii}

So the movement began first with the simple argument not from Scripture, but from the rationalistic mind: “It seems too horrible.” It was much easier to tell the agnostic, “Your Uncle won’t be in hell suffering forever,” in order to wrestle him into the pew.

For their case, conditionalist authors love to point to the beloved hymnwriter Isaac Watts as an ideal example. He is described by Arthur Paul Davis, a biographer and scholar of Watts, as one who “would not blindly accept even ecclesiastical tradition without comparing it for himself with the Bible. With reason and Scripture as his pilots, he was from his youth to his grave an open-minded and undogmatic searcher after religious truth.”^{xxxix} Again, placing reason on the same level of Scripture reveals the influence of the “Age of Reason.”

Later, the influential Frederic W. Farrar, Canon of Westminster and Chaplain to the Queen, further opened the question to public and respectable debate with his five sermon series, “Eternal Hope,” preached in Westminster Abbey in 1877. He named four main views: Universalism, Conditional Immortality, Purgatory, and the Common (traditional) view. He said about conditionalism: “I cannot accept the theory ... It seems to me to rest too entirely on the supposed invariable meaning of a few words, and to press that meaning too far.”^{xi} This is a very telling statement from one who rejects the traditional teaching as one “of which the heart faints and is sick with horror.”^{xli} He speaks finally of his belief that γέεννα is “for a small and desperate minority--of that purifying and corrective punishment which awaits impenitents here and beyond the grave ... Not a material and everlasting fire, but an intermediate, a remedial, and metaphorical, a terminable retribution.”^{xlii} In this way he ended up with a questionable but optimistic restorationism, while confessing “that God has given us no clear and decisive revelation on the final condition of those who have died in sin.”^{xliii}

This rebellion “swelled into a mighty revolt in the 19th century, a revolt which continues to the present day.”^{xliv} In 1892, Prof. G.G. Stokes, delivered a series of letters to one James Marchant, entitled, “Conditional Immortality, A Help to Sceptics [sic].” In the correspondence, he “endeavors to help the sceptic who cannot become a Christian, because of the ‘dogma of endless torments.’ ” Mr. Marchant calls the traditional doctrine, “a very big stumbling-block. Remove this dogma from Christian teaching and many unbelievers say they would LOVE their Elder Brother, Jesus Christ.” Prof. Stokes answers that such a teaching has “no part of the faith once delivered to the saints.”^{xlv} Although in his concluding letter, he admits, “though in face of one or two passages we cannot absolutely guarantee to them that they may not even suffer endless misery.”^{xlvi} It is the insistence on making the traditional teaching an article of faith “that has such an injurious effect, and makes so many men sceptics.”^{xlvii}

The controversy produced a tremendous amount of literature in debate over the subject. One 960-page Book: *That Unknown Country, or Future Retribution According to the Teachings of Scripture and the Opinions of Sages, Scholars & Divines. Especially at the Present Time (1888). What living men believe concerning punishment after death together with recorded views of men of former times. The Whole Field Explored. Every source of wisdom, past and present, made tributary to the illuminations of this theme: MAN’S FINAL DESTINY. A standard book for all time* (Illustrated with a full-page engraving of each author).”

From that time on the debate continued within and without the major denominations, primarily in England and the United States. No major denomination really approved of conditionalism, until the ball was picked up and carried most notably by the large Anabaptist sect, Seventh-Day Adventism. Growing from the intra-church advent movement of the mid-nineteenth century, the church with its three million members around the world today “espouses a detailed and literalistic premillennial eschatology that ends for the wicked in death by actual fire.”^{xlviii}

Seventh Day Adventist influence has progressed throughout this century to the point where it is no longer considered a cult among the mainline denominations which once spurned it. Even Eternity magazine, considered one of America’s “evangelical” periodicals, recently published an article by Adventist Ralph Blodgett entitled “What, Me Superstitious?” He states that “hell as popularly believed and taught is the doctrine of the devil and not of God.”^{xlix}

SDA's take the standard conditionalist line that there will be a period of punitive suffering preceding the annihilation of Satan, his demons, and the wicked, the duration depending upon the amount of guilt involved. Of course, they look back to their "spokesman," Ellen White, for enlightenment on eternal punishment: "How repugnant to every emotion of love and mercy, and even to our justice, is the doctrine that the wicked dead are tormented in an eternally burning hell ... Oh, dreadful blasphemy!"^l But she also condemned universalism as the "opposite error," which "pleases the carnal heart and emboldens the wicked in their iniquity."^{li} What happens, then, to the unbeliever? "It is in mercy to the universe that God will finally destroy the rejectors of His grace."^{lii}

She even claimed historical precedent for conditionalism from the time of the Reformation and Martin Luther:

The theory of the immortality of the soul was one of those false doctrines that Rome, borrowing from paganism, incorporated into the religion of Christendom. Martin Luther classed it with the "monstrous fables that form part of the Roman dunghill of decretals. (--E. Petavel, *The Problem of Immortality*, p. 255.) The dead are asleep, and feel nothing at all. --Martin Luther, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes*, p. 52.) Nowhere in the Sacred Scriptures is found the statement that the righteous go to their reward or the wicked to their punishment at death ... They are represented as sleeping until the resurrection.^{liii}

That brings us up to the present and a look at one of Seventh Day Adventism's popular authors, the "historian" LeRoy Edwin Froom. In 1965, the SDA Church published Froom's massive, two-volume work, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers*. Fudge describes it as "the most thorough historical, biographical and bibliographical survey of conditionalism ever published."^{liv} From his SDA standpoint, Froom tries his best to document the history on conditionalism, showing how the established church over the centuries smothered it with the traditional teaching, then it rose again in the Reformation with the resurgence of truth. He elevates the teaching (as sects are wont to do) to the status of a central, crucial "foundation stone" doctrine. He wrote that "Immortality for man is a gift of God, reserved for the righteous only, and is conditional upon faith and obedience."^{lv} Semi-pelagianism rises again.

Froom devotes several chapters to presenting and defending the case for conditionalism, extensively quoting Ellen White, with her "amazing time span, sheer output, and range of subjects!"^{lvi} while taking the opportunity to showcase his sect: "1,500,000 Seventh-day Adventists Champion Conditionalism."^{lvii} Can one and a half million (1962) tithers be wrong?

What makes the book of slight interest to us is the way Froom classifies Luther as one of his "conditionalist fathers." Two claims about the Reformer need to be answered: 1) Luther taught a "psychopannychia" or "soul sleep" of the wicked and righteous until the day of Judgment, and 2) He rejected the immortality of the soul. Fudge also makes the same claims in his book.

It is true that Luther spoke of *death* as a sleep "awaiting the Resurrection, together with the saints who precede them in death,"^{lviii} Yet Luther did not ascribe to a "*soul* sleep." Froom obviously never read Luther's Small Catechism, where the Reformer says, without any question of misunderstanding: "We pray in this petition that our Father in heaven may deliver us from all manner of evil, whether it affect body or soul, ... and that at last, when the hour of death comes, he may grant us a blessed end and graciously take us from this world of sorrow to himself in heaven" (348:20).

Donald Bloesch refers to one of Luther's lectures on Genesis: "The soul does not sleep but is awake and enjoys the vision of angels and of God, and has converse with them."^{lix} This is not a discrepancy. The explanation is that Luther appropriated the Biblical picture language of "sleep" as in reference to the body, yet also believed the Biblical language which speaks of the soul immediately existing in heaven or hell upon death. Though he continually swears to his honest review of facts, Fudge (as his Adventist brother Froom) misrepresents both Luther and history in a manipulative, Sectarian-like way.

It appears that Froom focuses only on Luther's comments about death as "sleep," without realizing (?) that Luther was referring to the body and not the soul. It is the body that sleeps until the awakening call of the Life-giver. And as for those who die in unrepentance, Froom states that

Luther rarely alluded to the question of Eternal Torment. In the immensity of the reformatory task, and separation from Catholic dogma in so many other matters, the early theologians of the Reformation Era did not at first examine the foundations of this Augustinian theory. It was enough for Luther that he stated his convictions on the paramount point of the sleep of the soul [Luther *never* said that the *soul* sleeps]. No one in that transition hour had as yet grappled with the problem of the traditional Hell concept.^{lx}

In other words, "Luther was with us, but he didn't have the time to point out just how he was with us!" At best, this is begging the question; at worst, it amounts to the manipulation of historical fact. You probably never knew that Luther stood shoulder to shoulder with the Anabaptists, did you? He just happened to let Melancthon's Article XVII of the Augsburg Confession (38:4) slip by when he reviewed it: "Ungodly men and the devils He will condemn to be tormented without end." For the confessional Lutheran, the same article rules out any teaching on annihilation: "Rejected, therefore, are the Anabaptists who teach that the devil and condemned men will not suffer eternal pain and torment" (AC XVII, 38:3-4 and restated in the Ap, XVII).

Notwithstanding Froom's thesis, at least Fudge admits that "Luther clearly believed that the wicked would suffer conscious torment forever."^{lxi} Two of Luther's many such statements makes this clear:

This is the punishment of the damned, who feel it, so that it is horrible even to think of the words (Ps 21:9) I recall no other passage which so clearly sets forth the misery of damnation. The fiery oven is ignited merely by the unbearable appearance of God and endures eternally ... The damned will be judged, constantly they will suffer pain, and constantly they will be a fiery oven, i.e. they will be tortured by supreme distress and tribulation (*What Luther Says*, #1919). Also, in 1533: They must live in darkness, cut off from God's light, i.e., from all comfort, in eternal torment, anguish, and sadness ... This is terrible misery ... and torment forever, with nothing but wailing and gnashing of teeth (*What Luther Says*, #1920).

As far as Luther's understanding on the immortality of the soul, these statements show that he clearly understood the soul of wicked to be immortal, even though Froom says he "classed the immortality of the soul among the 'monstrous fables that form the Roman dunghill of decretals.'"^{lxii} I didn't track that quote down, yet his other assertions, together with the Augsburg Confession, suffice to explain that 1) He was referring to the elaborate Roman system of afterlife, including Purgatory, or 2) This 1520 statement was not indicative of the mature theological formulations he would reach in order to endorse the Augsburg Confession, and again later its Apology.

Fudge understates that Froom shows "weaknesses ... and a tendency to overgeneralize at the expense of disagreeable evidence," yet he calls the book "most impressive," and worthy of study.^{lxiii} His endorsement of this book with obviously cultic characteristics casts a shadow over his own scholarship.

One of the aspects of this assignment was to determine "the doctrine's status today" in modern American Christianity. Although my observation is that conditionalism is generally receiving a less than cool reception among the evangelical camp (whatever that means), others would differ with me. Issues of *Christianity Today* in recent years have been providing much copy to Fudge and his cohorts.

Conservative Calvinism usually opts for the traditional view, yet Eerdmans recently published a book by Steven H. Travis, where conditionalism receives an endorsement: "In the last hundred years considerable ground has been gained by an alternative view, known as 'conditional immortality,' or 'annihilationism.' In my view the New Testament does not express itself clearly for one or the other of these options ... Nevertheless, if pressed, I must myself opt for the latter."^{lxiv}

He does so for many of the similar reasons (philosophical and theological) conditionalists have proposed to modern church theology.

Modern writer John S. Bonnell, writes that

ever since the Reformation conditionalism has found able adherents. In our own time, S. Parkes Cadman treats the subject in his book *Answers to Everyday Questions*: “The endless torture of human beings is not taught by the passages in question. They rather indicate in metaphorical language the absolute extinction of willfully rebellious souls.”^{lxv}

And a writer for the Religious News Service recently opined:

It has become harder (and harder) to envisage God as the Eternal Torturer ... Must the (unjust) burn in unquenchable fire for eternity? Has anyone ever sinned grievously enough to deserve horrible torture for not just a million times his life on earth, but literally forever? A few centuries ago the average Christian would have answered with an easy yes, but modern ideas of justice in the West are offended by the idea of an implacably vengeful God. So more and more Christians are simply ignoring the doctrine of hell, while some theologians are starting to ask themselves whether the Greek word, *kolasis* in the gospel according to Matthew, which they have always translated as eternal “punishment,” should not really be translated as “execution.” Perhaps when everyone is resurrected for the Last Judgment and the virtuous are gathered in heaven, the damned are indeed burned like chaff—but chaff does not burn forever.^{lxvi}

What is the modernist’s view of the nature of hell? After trying to read Barth’s *Christian Dogmatics*, it was difficult to determine where he stands on the subject. Then after reading what *others* say about his position, I was more confused—both traditionalists and conditionalists appear to claim his support. One writer says he rules out universalism, while another says he doesn’t. He seems to reveal an inclination toward annihilation, then holds to the immortality of the soul:

The dead exist in a state of utter weakness and helplessness. They are, so to speak, always dying. What the living person had and was is now gone; death has brought it to extinction ... What can this judgment mean but our rejection? And what can its execution mean but its total destruction, dissolution and abolition in confirmation of what it has made of itself? What fate can measure up to life’s deserts, and what can its goal be, but absolute negation?^{lxvii}

But then later he qualifies what he means by this fate as “absolute negation:

The death to which we all move implies the threat of eternal corruption ... Instead of the negative picture of a shadowy existence of departed “souls,” we now have a picture of human existence in “hell.” Hell means punishment of a very positive kind ... It is the New Testament which first gives us a picture like that of Dives, who in the realm of the dead is in “anguish in this flame” (Lk 16:24). It is in the New Testament that we first hear of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt 22:13), where “the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched” (Mk 9:48) ... In the sphere of the revelation and experience of the divine kingdom, grace and salvation, they (the church) were precluded from understanding man’s existence in death merely as an existence in unwelcome but tolerable neutrality. On the contrary, they had to understand it positively as intolerable suffering ... Here it becomes “hell.” Here the alienation from God becomes an annihilatingly painful existence in opposition to Him.^{lxviii}

This last statement may seem like an oxymoron to us: how can “existence” be “annihilating”? Perhaps it is a difficult translation of Barth. But to me it appears to present the proper interpretation of the word “destruction” when used in the New Testament, as an eternal state of existence in the *process* of death. Barth continues: “Here being in death becomes punishment, torment, outer darkness, the worm, the flame--all eternal as God Himself, as God Himself in this antithesis, and all positively painful.”^{lxi} Fudge, however, claims that Barth “wished to leave open a universalistic possibility, however rare.”^{lxx}

One can gain some insight into the Evangelicals’ flirtation with conditionalism by learning what F.F. Bruce writes in his forward to Fudge’s book: “There is no unanimity among evangelical Christians on the subject of this book (the nature of hell). If there is no unanimity here among people who are agreed in accepting the Bible as their rule of faith, it may be inferred that the biblical evidence is not unambiguous.”^{lxxi} Following that logic, anytime there is a divergence of opinion on any theological matter among “evangelical Christians,” the Biblical evidence must be ambiguous.

Bruce himself remains on the fence, choosing “not to systematize his thoughts on the subject,” regarding himself as neither a traditionalist nor a conditionalist. He reminds me of the “pan-millennialist,” who believes simply that “it’ll all pan out in the end”. Maybe here is where the world of “evangelical” interpretation wants to place the issue of hell’s true nature out to pasture in the field of “open questions.”

But there is some kind of connection between modernistic hermeneutical practices and the claims of conditionalism. Donald Bloesch, an “evangelical” professor at the Univ. of Dubuque, IA reveals the background behind so many modernistic theologians supporting annihilationism: “The authority (of the Bible) has been eroded both by higher critics who read into Scripture a naturalistic philosophy which *a priori* rules out the supernatural and (in an attempt to moderate that statement) by its uncritical devotees who absolutize the outmoded world view reflected in the Bible and thereby render the biblical witness incredible.”^{lxxii} His position provides a classical example of trying to find a position midway between the higher critic and the inerrantist, yet winds up with a contradiction of both and agreement with neither. He says, “Our position sees revelation in all of Scripture, authoritative and binding and not just on matters of faith and salvation. But our position is at the same time a qualified innerrancy because we recognize that the human expression in which scriptural truth comes to us bears the marks of cultural and historical contingency.”^{lxxiii} I believe that this is why the publication *Verdict* has faithfully championed the conditionalist cause, even underwriting Fudge’s *Opus Magnus*. Of course there is the SDA connection, but I don’t think it is coincidental that *The Fire That Consumes* followed so closely on the heels of their scholarly enlightenment into the “historical” (read “higher-critical”) method of hermeneutics.

Enough on that theory, but it shouldn’t surprise one to hear of Bruce’s *nihil obstat* over Fudge’s book, especially since his position falls somewhat to the left in the “evangelical” camp. In 1958 he revealed his tendencies toward viewing Biblical eschatology when he spoke favorably of a lecture “which investigates the origin and development of the most distinctive literary form in which the eschatological hope expressed itself ... the mythologizing of eschatology, the casting of the eschatological hope into forms drawn from mythology. In the latter case, the process of demythologizing could leave us with something of real substance and value.”^{lxxiv}

Like Fudge, Bruce also attributes much of the traditional thinking on hell to Pharisaic ideas concerning immortality, as recorded by Josephus in his *Antiquities*: “From the second century B.C., ... the idea of Gehinnom as a place of fiery punishment for the wicked after death took hold of popular imagination among the Jews--partly, no doubt, under the influence of Iranian belief.”^{lxxv} And since “Josephus (had a) tendency to conform Jewish beliefs and practices to those rendered respectable by Greek philosophy, Platonic ideas on immortality became assimilated into Jewish--and therefore Pauline thought.”^{lxxvi} I hope you can see that this demythologizing brings us back to what the conditionalists have been saying all along.

B. On to The Fire That Consumes, by William Fudge, the book which probably gave rise to the request for this paper.

Darrell Turner, writing for the RNS, gives a better description of Fudge's book than I am able to provide:

Total extinction --not eternal torment --is the fate of the evil, says a book that has won the attention of evangelical scholars while remaining virtually unknown to the general public. *The Fire That Consumes* was written by Edward Fudge, a graduate of Abilene Christian University and editor of an evangelical publication called "The Good Newspaper" in Houston. Since its original publication in 1982, the book has gone through two printings and sold more than 3,000 copies ... Fudge is a member of the Evangelical Theological Society, and has presented his case at its meetings. He has tried to broaden his audience by sending review copies to such periodicals as *Christian Century* and *Christianity Today*, as well as such religious broadcast outlets as "The 700 Club." Not a peep so far, despite the book's endorsement by such recognized scholars as F.F. Bruce, Clark H. Pinnock, and John W. Wenham. Using 1,600 technical footnotes, an index of more than 1,000 Scripture passages, and a recommended bibliography of some 200 books and articles, Mr. Fudge has elaborately documented his contention that the Bible does not teach that eternal conscious torment is the final punishment of the wicked. Rather, he says, Scripture indicates that a period of punishment will be followed by total extinction of the wicked. ... All the passages which have traditionally been used to justify the orthodox teaching ... are consistent with what he calls the conditionalist view--that there will be a final punishment that is eternal in its *effects*, not its torments.^{lxxvii}

Fudge describes himself as an evangelical who affirms both the infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible. Some selected quotes on his basic thesis:

My desire has been to be biblical, reverent, and fair. The only truth on the subject is contained in the Old and New Testament Scriptures. The only question that matters here is the teaching of Scripture. Does the Word of God teach the eternal conscious torment of the lost? Our modest study fails to show that it does.^{lxxviii}

All that matters is that we seek God's truth for His glory and the salvation of sinners.^{lxxix}

Closer investigation of the Scriptures indicates that we were mistaken ... A careful look discovers that both Old and New Testaments teach instead a resurrection of the wicked for the purpose of divine judgment, the fearful anticipation of a consuming fire, irrevocable expulsion from God's presence into a place where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth, such conscious suffering as the divine justice individually requires--and, finally, the total, everlasting extinction of the wicked with no hope of resurrection, restoration or recovery. Now we stand on that, on the authority of the Word of God.^{lxxx}

Scripture so consistently and emphatically teaches the NATURE of that everlasting punishment to be utter extinction into oblivion forever.^{lxxxii}

The question, therefore, is not whether man will exist forever on his *own* (Christian theologians have always denied that). It is not whether God, who created man, *can* also bring him to total extinction (that is also conceded by all). Neither is it whether God is able to make even the wicked immortal if He so chooses (which no one denies). The question is whether or not Scripture teaches that God *will* make the wicked immortal (along with the righteous) in the resurrection for everlasting life in *pain* rather than everlasting life in bliss ... Reduced to those terms, there is no longer any controversy. For no, not even the greatest traditionalist, has ever

presented a clear and convincing case in the affirmative to that question. In increasing numbers, on the other hand, evangelical theologians and commentators are becoming boldly explicit in pointing out biblical data which point the opposite direction.^{lxxxii} Mere assertions and denunciations will not refute the evidence presented in this book, nor will a recital of ecclesiastical tradition. The case rests finally on Scripture. Only Scripture can prove it wrong.^{lxxxiii}

“Mere assertions” may not sway Fudge, but he sure employs them for his own case, covering himself so well with claims of “legitimate exegesis” and “evangelical scholarship” and acceptance of the Word as “without error in anything it teaches.” One almost feels on the defensive while reading it, as if questioning this man’s view would be an insult to his integrity and “evangelical” identity.

You’re probably wondering how he explains some of the simple passages we traditionalists have always assumed meant continual torment that never ends for the reprobate in hell. The following are a few examples of his thought:

αἰώνιος --How long is “Forever”? Jesus spoke in a single sentence of “eternal” life and “eternal” punishment. The question is whether the word refers to *qualitative* sense or a *quantitative* sense, i.e. a temporal sense. Fudge shows through the word’s derivation, “Jewish eschatological usage” and other passages in Scripture where *αἰώνιος* applies to “objects of a temporary and limited nature,” that the word may be either qualitative or temporal. Thus, “eternal judgment” (Hb 6:2), “eternal destruction” (2 Ths 1:9), and “eternal punishment” (Mt 25:46) may be interpreted either qualitatively or temporally.

We suggest that the “punishment” here includes whatever penal suffering God justly issues to each person but consists primarily of the total abolition and extinction of the person forever. The *punishing* continues until the process is completed, and then it stops. But the *punishment* which results (annihilation) will remain forever.^{lxxxiv}

שׂוֹל “is the common fate of all mortals. It is not a place of punishment... So far as the fate of the wicked is concerned, it is not a final word.”^{lxxxv} As far as the poetic pictures (e.g. Ps 47 relates the fate of the wicked), “we may learn from these passages of Scripture. They say nothing of the conscious unending torment. None of them hints at a fire which tortures but does not kill. They do not envision the presence of the wicked forever --the wicked will not be.”^{lxxxvi}

-Is 66:24 “And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.” Jesus quotes these words in one of His own statements on final punishment (Mk 9:48). Fudge:

Because this fire is “not quenched” or extinguished, it completely consumes what is put in it. The figure of unquenchable fire is frequent in Scripture and signifies a fire that consumes, reduces to nothing, or burns up something. Both worms and fire speak of a total and final destruction (since worms would only be found in a *dead* carcass). Both terms also make this a “loathsome” scene. The righteous view it with disgust.^{lxxxvii}

Fudge’s point of contention is that the wicked are *dead*, and the passage is to be read with the emphasis upon the revulsion of the righteous for the fate of the wicked. Thus, in the Judgment, Believers will have disgust over the fate of the unbelievers, namely, penal suffering and then passing out of existence. The author looks at all the pertinent NT passages in the light of their OT backgrounds.

-Mt 10:28 “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” Fudge: “Lest one read into Matthew’s account any Platonic dualism regarding man’s being, we have Luke’s record of the same words ... This passage does not teach the immortality of every man’s soul; it teaches rather that God can kill the soul as well as the body.”^{lxxxviii}

γέννα, for the Jew of Biblical times, conjured the vivid picture of a smoldering garbage dump, just south of Jerusalem. But since whatever was thrown into the burning pits was destroyed by fire and passed out of existence, the same applies to the destruction of the wicked. Though the pits keep burning, the unbelievers will be turned to ashes, or annihilated. “In the Old Testament, the end of the wicked is destruction: The picture portrays ... the wicked gone forever. It does not include perpetual torment, though it does include a total consumption by destroying fire ... nothing will remain of the wicked but ashes.”^{lxxxix}

Paul’s writings do not speak of endless torment, but often in terms of “destruction.” “They paint a single picture of utter, shameful extinction.”^{xc} 2 Ths 1:9 is an example: “They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord.”

In Revelation, the accounts of suffering for the wicked never say that it will continue forever. Many passages “either indicate or are agreeable to the idea that the suffering finally ends in total extinction and desolation.”^{xcii} The “Lake of Fire” in Rv 19, 20, & 21 “clearly means annihilation and cessation of existence. In the case of impenitent sinners, nothing in the text prevents this meaning.”^{xciii}

Finally, one major argument Fudge advances is from 1 Tm 6:16: “Who alone is immortal ...” The teaching of the immortality of man begs the question which is never answered in Scripture, but it comes from the Platonists and has not always been the universal faith of the church, but has polluted spiritual waters for nearly two millennia. He quotes several contemporary theologians: Reichenbach, Bloesch, Bruce, Thielicke, and Harris who all question man’s innate immortality.

In brief response before a more full analysis of Fudge’s thought: True it is that God alone possesses (ἔχων) immortality, yet the passage doesn’t rule out the conveyance of this immortality to all created beings, from the will of a gracious Creator. Whether to the Elect or to the unbeliever, God is the creator of man’s immortality. And though man may not necessarily inherently possess it merely by reason of his being, nevertheless God can and does impart immortality to man. The assumption that man does not begin his journey of immortality until *after* Judgment Day—and that exclusively “conditional” upon faith and obedience—is a *non sequitur* from the passage in question.

These are only a few of our conditionalist’s salient points of contention. He was very comprehensive in his study, covering every base of opposition, sometimes frustrated that the traditionalists often quoted verses with no explanation satisfactory for his scholarship, and we could add, presuppositions. Any disagreement I have with his line of argumentation has been both 1) presented already by traditionalists in different words and ways, and 2) anticipated by his insistent apologetic. For what it is worth, here is my analysis of his work, which I find wanting in these four areas: Historically, Exegetically, Hermeneutically, and Logically.

At first I was impressed with the comprehensive scope of Fudge’s book, and it seemed that his self-proclaimed “honest, Biblical scholarship” and logic would be formidable. But I didn’t notice anything new in comparing his work with conditionalists’ several centuries ago. So the book is basically a rehashing of the same material proposed in the past, with all the same questions (this “could mean” and that “could mean”) his predecessors begged. He uses all the same arguments, just more insistent that they’re Scriptural, throwing in a bit more “modern scholarship.” In spite of all his talk about inerrancy, however, I’m not so sure he doesn’t buy into a Wellhausenian method of interpretation more than he lets on. I write this judging from his emphasis upon extra-Biblical influences on developing theology, his derogatory attitude toward “dogmatism” (how can one accept inerrancy, claim to be an evangelical, and *not* be dogmatic?) his acknowledgments, his quoting of

modernists, his bibliography, and his alma mater. Eden Theological Seminary (St. Louis) is not known for adhering to a position of inerrancy.

1. HISTORICAL DISAGREEMENT: Fudge takes a cue from another outspoken conditionalist, J. S. Bonnell, in presenting an argument from silence to try and prove that the historical church never set itself firmly on the “traditional” doctrine of never-ending torment for the wicked: “This concept has never been mentioned in any of the three great historic creeds of the early Church--the Apostles’, the Nicene, or the Athanasian.”^{xciii}

It is true that the traditional teaching about hell is not explicitly mentioned in Apostles’ or Nicene creeds, yet judgment and punishment is included in each, for “the living and the dead,” i.e. all people. Yet creeds as historical statements are always occasioned by false teachings which arise to attack orthodoxy. The question of the nature of hell was not addressed because it was never an issue. But in the Athanasian Creed, one would have to take a very narrow, reductionist interpretation of the words, “those who have done evil will go into everlasting fire,” in order to claim it is never mentioned.

On the other hand, Fudge accuses the established church with “a fixedness and immobility which is not the result of any antecedent profound investigation, but simply of unreasoning inertia and uninquiring tradition.”^{xciv} He also quotes Clark Pinnock favorably: “There comes a time when our own faith in response to the Word of God must express itself with conviction. It is now time for evangelical thinkers to forsake the unimaginative mimicry of ‘textbook theology’ and forge an expression of biblical faith which will have the power to grip our generation.”^{xcv}

Is the church to be faulted for failing to jump at every new teaching that comes along? With something akin to a Hegelian outlook (dialectical method) applied to Christian thought, he says,

The church’s greatest theologians and most devout believers have always realized that God can continually cause new light to break forth from the Word that has been there all the time. One of the greatest compliments that can be paid the church is that it is *always* reforming, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit and under the authority of the Word.^{xcvi}

The Word of God is indeed fresh in its applications, but Truth does not change with history. Even the Reformation Era was conservative in nature, bringing nothing new, but rejoicing in established apostolic doctrine. To my first segment of this paper, I appended Meyer’s *Dogmatics Notes*. To Pinnock and Fudge, that may appear to be “textbook theology,” but Lutheran Confessionalism is satisfied with, even rejoices in her firm foundation, besides providing relief for “itching ear syndrome” which looks for new, relevant, acceptable teachings. We assume that the orthodox position is true because it is grounded on Biblical authority. That’s what being “evangelical” and “confessional” is all about.

2. EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS: The simple words of Scripture, as they stand, make the concept of hell’s nature clear, although *how* there can be an eternal process of painful destruction, without passing out of existence, is beyond the limitations of our reason. Conditionalists argue that when the nature of hell is described as “death,” it must be a kind of extinction. But the Bible shows a continuing kind of death, in the simplest understanding. For one example where New Testament precludes the idea of annihilation: “They shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever” (Rv 20:10).

Of all who treat the subject, George Ring offers the clearest and most detailed arguments annihilating the arguments of the conditionalists. Interestingly, Fudge does not include King’s book in his bibliography. “There are no instances of the use of the words in question where the orthodox view is not perfectly simple and intelligible.”^{xcvii} “This meaning (conditionalism) is not the natural impression that the language of the New Testament conveys to an unprejudiced reader.”^{xcviii} No amount of compression or expansion can make the simple Biblical descriptions of hell fit into a conditionalist box. More than once Fudge bemoans how traditionalist theologians merely quote passages without explaining them in detail. Maybe the reason is because so many passages stand by themselves in their clarity.^{xcix}

As an indication that the simple words of Scripture support the traditional, perhaps the testimony of an enemy of God's Word would be an objective enough observation. In Robert Ingersoll's lecture entitled "Skulls," he said,

Orthodox religion believes in the fall of man. It believes in the atonement. It believes in the eternity of hell, and it believes in salvation by faith ... If there is a God and he wrote the Old Testament, there is a hell ... The Bible teaches an eternity of punishment. If there is no hell, somebody ought to have said so, and Jesus himself should not have said: "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels."^c

Here is another strong argument from Kennedy as he quotes William Munsey (*Eternal Retribution*, Murfreesboro, TN: Sword of the Lord Publishers, 1951, p. 65):

One author has stated that every Hebrew and Greek word which is used to describe the eternity of the existence of God and the eternity of the blessedness of the redeemed in heaven is also used to describe the eternity of the sufferings of the lost in hell. If the punishment of the wicked is temporal, then there will come a day when God will be extinct, because the same terms are used. If these terms do not describe eternity then there is no word in the Hebrew or Greek language which does not mean eternity--and this is impossible. Every word that could possibly be used is used.^{ci}

(See Kennedy's full essay, an interesting defense of the traditional doctrine of the nature of hell.)

Some answers to Fudge's word studies: a) *Destruction, perish*:

Physical death does not mean that body or soul vanishes, but rather that an abnormal separation takes place which severs a natural relationship until God's appointed time. Hiram Mattison makes the same point:

Destruction and annihilation are very different things. A thing is said to be destroyed when it is seriously injured (Rm 14:15; Hb 11:14; Rv 11:18). Though the term is used in a great variety of senses it never means to annihilate; consequently the threatened destruction of the wicked is no proof of their approaching annihilation.^{cii}

The word "perish" is the same, in that it cannot be used, at least always, to mean "annihilate" (Ec 7:15; Is 57:1; 2 Pt 3:6; Hb 1:11). So of the wicked--they shall perish, i.e. they shall be condemned and sent away into everlasting punishment, but their *existence*, like that of the old world which perished by water, shall continue on forever and ever.^{ciii}

The same is true of "consume" and "burn up." These are never used in the sense of annihilated.^{civ}

Dr. Becker wrote an explanation in his paper, "Heaven and Hell":

Because men are so prone to identify death with non-existence, with unconsciousness, it is well to point out that this is a mistake. According to Scripture Adam died on the day he ate of the forbidden fruit. Terrified and hiding in the bushes of the garden he was separated from all the spiritual blessings that had been his in that joyful communion with God in which he was created. From that day on also all of Adam's descendants were born dead in trespasses and sin, and physical death and eternal death is only a matter of course unless the mercy of God intervenes to make it possible for us once more to enjoy the presence of God, and to love Him. All this is impossible in eternal death. And just as eternal death is not eternal non-existence or unconsciousness, so the words "destroy" and "perish," which are used so often to denote what happens to men in hell, do not denote annihilation. We have already noted that the Bible says that the world was destroyed or perished in the flood, yet it did not go out of existence. A ship is

destroyed when it can no longer serve the purpose for which it was built. So also those whose bodies and souls are destroyed in hell have no more opportunity for salvation, but they continue to exist in misery and pain forever and ever.^{cv}

αἰώνιος “eternal” is a word the conditionalists, as we have seen, nearly always interpret as a fixed, qualitative period of time, at least when it suits their purposes. But reducing the meaning to the qualitative sense in such instances violates the hermeneutical principle of applying the broadest possible interpretation unless the Word expressly reveals it should be otherwise. If indeed the word *may* express quantity, too, as Fudge admits, then he arbitrarily limits the word when he says, “then the punishing stops.” In other words, “forever” should be considered in both a qualitative *and* temporal sense (which rules out body/soul extinction), taking the broadest possible meaning, unless an unambiguous passage won’t allow it.

True enough, the word, “eternal” *may* sometimes mean a long, yet limited period of time. The Lord’s words concerning the Passover ordinance provide us an example: “Ye shall keep it a feast by an ordinance for ever” (Ex 12:14, 24). But in this instance, the passage itself provides us a qualification, disallowing the broad usage of the word “forever,” when the Lord *narrows* it down with His words: “throughout your generations” {see Meyer’s notes, p.7, c)}.

Why don’t conditionalists ever limit this word when it applies to “everlasting LIFE” (1 Tm 1:17; Jn 5:24; 10:28; Rm 6:23; Mt 25:46)? Why do they interpret the word *here* with both a qualitative *and* quantitative meaning? Because their hermeneutic is founded on presupposition, measuring words in the light of their own ideas instead of vice versa. The wish is father to the thought, rather than Scripture father to the thought. When interpretation becomes purely arbitrary, accepting broad or narrow meanings solely on the basis of a theoretical premise rather than following accepted principles, then determining the sense of the words becomes a subjective guessing game, a kind of “hermeneutical anarchy” reigns where every reader does “that which is right in his own eyes.” One way to describe Fudge’s method of interpretation would be “scholarly enthusiasm.”

לִּשְׁׁוֹן: Again, Fudge limits the word in view of his presuppositions. We all know that the meaning of Hebrew vocables are often determined by their context. Denying the possibility that any use of לִּשְׁׁוֹן could refer to punishment is another exercise in reductionism.

3. This line of discussion brings us to a HERMENEUTICAL ANALYSIS of *The Fire That Consumes*: I already mention above one principle of interpretation broken by Fudge and his associates—assuming the broadest possible meaning of a word, unless denied by the passage. A seeming contradiction does not give us the option to pick and choose which verses we will believe literally, or even (as F.F. Bruce) to remain noncommittal on the subject. One set of passages that insist on never-ending torment will contain the set of passages which seem to call for annihilation (“destruction”). But it won’t work the other way: Interpreting “destruction” as “annihilation” will render the other set of passages as nonsensical.

A cousin to this hermeneutical principle is that we should always opt for the natural sense of the words first. The best hermeneutics book available is *The Lord’s Supper*, in which Martin Chemnitz lays down the rules of interpretation:

All dogmas can be overturned and destroyed if in the case of passages we permit some opinion counter to the proper and natural sense of the words, as long as it is so astutely developed and explained that it seems to be in agreement in some way with certain other passages of Scripture.^{cvi}

... Human reason, in the area of interpretation of dogmas of the faith, must not force its way in, even when the proper and natural sense seems absurd and in conflict with certain facts.^{cvi}

These words of Chemnitz describe Fudge, even though he continually accuses traditionalists of the “page-turning” method of interpreting the Bible: “Obviously there is never a time when sharp minds are lacking a pretext for finding Scripture passages which are in conflict with one another.”^{cvi}

Fudge provides a whole chapter to “Traditionalism’s Problem of Pain.” Is the “pain” of hell for the traditionalist physical or spiritual? Fudge uses this as an argument against the traditional view. Some fundamentalists demand a real physical fire and torment in hell. Other evangelicals look upon the descriptions of hell as metaphorical. Fudge contends that this confusion seems to cast aspersions on the whole premise. Yet conditionalism itself takes differing forms from the dogmatic insistence of Fudge. Lutheran theology leaves this matter unanswered (See Meyer’s Notes, p. 5, b), -2) and doesn’t worry about its form as much as its reality (See Becker).

But this brings us to another failure in Fudge’s method of interpretation: misunderstanding the purpose of figurative language. Dr. Robert Morey explains in his new book:

There are those who correctly understand that figurative language illustrates some kind of reality, but they incorrectly assume that the reality is of a lesser nature of power than what the figure portrays. Thus “hell fire” becomes temporary remorse or grief: But this assumption is due to ignorance of the function of figurative language. The reality is always greater than the mental image created by figurative speech. Thus hell will be more horrible than the mental image of eternal worms gnawing on eternal bodies or being lost in an eternal lake of sulfuric fire.^{cix} The annihilationists are just as guilty here as well. When they take the position that the wicked will pass into nothingness, they fail to see that nothingness is less in nature and power than the figures of endless torment given in Scripture. Thus, the concept of annihilation would never generate such terrifying mental images as given in Scripture. As a matter of fact, annihilation is an idea which makes hell less than what is was intended to be by having it mean nothingness. In fact, if hell is nothingness, what mental images can be called upon to conceive of it? There is no mental image for “nothing.” ... If annihilation were true, then there would be no need for the terrifying mental images of figurative speech used in the Bible to describe hell ... The ultimate fate of the wicked will be eternal, conscious torment.^{cx}

And finally, Fudge is guilty of yet another abuse of hermeneutical principles when he turns topsy-turvy the proper way of understanding Scripture. Several times in his book he accuses traditionalists of doing what he considers incorrect: beginning with the NT in trying to understand the whole Biblical witness on the nature of hell, instead of beginning with the OT. “Rather than studying this (OT) passage, determining the sense of its figures and reading NT quotations on that foundation, commentators and theologians again begin with the NT, interpret them in the light of church positions, and ignore the (OT) text altogether.”^{cx}

It is certainly kosher to utilize the OT in helping us determine the meaning of Scripture, since we employ the grammatical *and* historical methods. Having said that, one must also reaffirm the truth of the plenary inspiration and inerrancy of God’s Old Testament revelation. Yet the proper rule is to begin with the New for insight on the Old, as e.g. Paul grants us a broader understanding of Abraham’s faith in order that we may understand the doctrine of Justification. In the same way, the descriptions of hell in the NT can help us best understand the nature of hell as presented throughout God’s Word.

4. LOGICAL ANALYSIS: I am quite sure that Fudge would twist most of us in sophistic knots were we to meet him on the debate floor, because he sounds so *logical*. Consider his prying into the details (also a hermeneutical no-no) of the figurative language of parables (“obviously no one could pay the ‘last farthing’ while in prison, so he would die there--hence annihilation following a period of suffering!”) and comes out sounding perfectly logical. But there are some logical deficiencies in his arguments, several of which I will now examine.

William Kelly, contributing writer for *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, writes concerning conditionalists: "they fail to do justice to biblical passages ... The sense of 'eternal' or 'everlasting' is not to be construed merely in terms of temporal duration, but its sense is surely more than that of termination."^{cxii}

Kelly's point suggested something more to me. Conditionalists argue that we cannot assume that eternity carries with it the normal logical quantitative aspect of time alone. That is true enough. But their argument turns on itself when they insist that eternity *cannot* be understood in relation to time and space, then DEFINE it *as an end to time and space*. They fall into the mistake of defining "eternal death" as a cessation of time, yet they decry all other attempts at explaining the *nature* of eternal death utilizing a broader interpretation of the Biblical wording. Eternity is their ball, and saying it is unfathomable gives them the right to take it home, if we don't play the game their way. If eternity is indeed beyond our understanding, then one shouldn't try to define it as total cessation, either. As Prof. Becker once said, we always think of eternity as the end of time, something beyond our understanding. But as he pointed out, who is to say that time as we know it is not just one segment of eternity. We just don't know, and if we try to insist on anything more or anything less (as conditionalists do) than the simple words of Scripture, we move into the muddy waters of speculation, where discussion of truth is impossible. Instead, the broadest possible interpretation is the safest to follow, that "its sense is surely more than that of termination."

Another one of Fudge's major arguments is that Calvary reveals the nature of God's final judgment, since Jesus' death involved total destruction. Traditionalists will not dispute the fact of His death. Our Almighty God did, in fact, die a real bodily death, an actual separation of His soul from His body. But if we cross-reference the nature of Christ's suffering and particularly his death (as "extinction") to the *nature* of the reprobate's suffering and supposed annihilation, we're taking steps unwarranted by any passage of Scripture that I know of. Besides, Jesus did not experience the end of his existence, or annihilation, since His soul went to heaven (Lk 23:46) and his body saw no corruption (Ac 3:31). He suffered in the depths of hell consciously. His soul separated from his body at the point-of death, but it was not annihilated. Even his body through death did not pass into a state of nothingness. So if someone says, "JESUS didn't suffer consciously forever," we may answer, "Neither was he annihilated, so let us not force the points of comparison to unscriptural extremes." John Schaller in his *Biblical Christology* can provide some insight: "We submit that the mystery which our intellect discovers here, is really not so deep as in the case of sinful men (who die) ... For in Christ, the personality was that of the Logos and was not even remotely affected by the separation of soul and body."^{cxiii}

In other words, don't compare apples with oranges. Unlike finite, sinful man, there in Jesus the infinite (divine nature) was inextricably bound to the finite (human nature). Though at the cross we "here may view its (i.e. sin's) nature rightly, here its guilt may estimate," we nevertheless look to other simple, clear Bible references to view hell's nature rightly.

II. Remaining Analysis

A. Law/Gospel

The doctrine of hell probably strikes many modern Americans as an unappealing, rather morbid topic, or at best as an oddity, a relic of some Jonathan Edwards-type of creed from the last century or two, fit only for television buffoonery. Yet when the doctrine is overlooked or weakened in intensity, we lose a necessary warning. When the warning light in my car began to flash "OIL!!," I asked a mechanically-inclined member about it. With tongue in cheek he suggested, "That's easy to fix—just break the light!" But the deeper problem and cause of the warning light really needs correction, because if the light were just broken, sooner or later "judgment day" will arrive in the form of a broken-down, useless engine. Some try to brush off the prospect of eternal suffering by twisting the Word and breaking the red warning light (Hell) in the Bible. But that won't do. We need hell and we need it in its fury in order to drive us to the Gospel. As Meyer concludes his notes on hell, he states, "'Humane' theologians are really lacking in mercy."^{cxiv}

Ingersoll tried with all his might to break the red light:

The doctrine of eternal punishment is the most infamous of all doctrines--born of ignorance, cruelty and fear. Around the angel of immortality Christianity has coiled the serpent. Upon Love's breast the church has placed the eternal asp. I have denied with all my might, a great many times, the infamous doctrine of eternal punishment. Editor's Note: No attitude is expressed more often by R.G.I. than this unremitting hatred for the doctrine of Hell. This is but one of hundreds of references to this horror.^{cxv}

And the infidel did break the light during the time of his earthly grace period: "I do not fear death any more than I fear sleep. I do not know which is better--life or death. It may be that death is the greatest gift that ever came from nature's open hand. We do not know."^{cxvi} Ingersoll preached funeral sermons on this theme. See his funeral "sermon" for an eloquent example of heathen "hope." The reality is that annihilation is a *faith* in total relief, and therefore is a comforting belief, not one to dread or fear. So the insistence of extinction would comfortably ease consciences that "death is non-existence, and even at its worst, is only perfect rest."^{cxvii}

But does conditionalism take away the force of the Law? Fudge et al would say "NO!" since they also point to a time of penal suffering, and then the ultimate punishment: annihilation. I and others disagree, saying that annihilation annihilates the power and force of the Law because it ultimately and undeniably provides as escape from suffering. Fudge addresses this argument but fails to face the simple fact that annihilation would actually be a merciful release, *especially* for the one suffering in hell. For the wicked soul suffering in hell, the prospect of cessation of pain by annihilation would provide a blessed hope. Oblivion would become even more an aspect of mercy. But one thing the Bible makes perfectly clear is that what follows a life of rejecting the Gospel is not mercy, but retribution and continual punishment. So, pointing out the suffering for a long period of time does not prove that the force of Law remains unweakened by this belief.

Now if one may reason that annihilation is an act of mercy instead of wrath, what is one to make of a suffering for one length of time for one unbeliever, and another length of time for another, based on their degree of wickedness, before their total annihilation? It is a confusing of Law and Gospel because it rewards the *less* wicked with *less* time suffering in hell. It presents the "salvation" of oblivion to the heathen person whose life was "better" than the other. In effect, personal work-righteousness again becomes the cause for "salvation," namely, relief from infernal suffering. But the grace of God does not extend to those suffering in hell. For heaven is totally a gift of grace, as eternal punishment is totally the reward for the unbeliever's works. Hell is Law together with its judgments and punishments (for man's sake), and heaven is grace together with its judgments and rewards (for Christ's sake). But the great gulf between the two cannot be bridged with ideas about lesser guilt and greater guilt shortening or extending the time frame of torment. Therefore, finally the doctrine of conditional immortality of the unbeliever is an attack not only upon God's Law, but also upon pure grace.

Related to this, "conditionalism" contends that the wicked will suffer conscious punishment precisely measured by divine justice. This aspect of the teaching totally ignores the doctrine of original sin as a *state*, a presence of sinfulness. All are equally deserving of God's wrath, not "some deserve more punishment, others less." As mentioned previously, "even without actual sin, the STATE of sin, the presence of sin still permeates our being. As the formula states, *peccatum originis est vere peccatum--damnans*" (AC II 29:1f). With the Anabaptist influence (SDA) over conditional immortality, this misconception is not surprising.

Even worse than hindering the effective administration of God's Law, conditionalism also vitiates the Gospel. Robert Preus wrote in a recent article, "God's wrath and grace are the presuppositions for any presentation of the sinner's justification."^{cxviii} When hell's fury is "conditioned upon" the degree of wickedness; when immortality in heaven is "conditional upon faith and obedience,"^{cxix} then free grace is no longer free, but it costs something for the sinner, robbing him of precious comfort. "Have I met the *conditions* as God fully expects of me? Oh well, I tried, so even if I don't make heaven, I shouldn't have to suffer too long in hell before I become nonexistent." Here, neither Law nor Gospel carry out their purposes, namely, to terrify and then comfort sinful souls. Grace, however, is *unconditional*.

Conditionalism then, weakens the force of the Law and places price tags (“conditions”) on the Gospel. Christ never did either. Roger Nicole observes: “It is worthy to note that, in the biblical record, those who spoke most about future punishment in its irrevocable finality are Jesus and the apostle, John, the very ones who also presented most glowingly the supreme glory of God’s love and the unshakable certainty of his ultimate triumph.”^{cxx}

B. Objective Justification

Everlasting suffering can appear to human emotion as a large stumbling block. Even Fudge, who claims over and over that “Scripture, not sympathy,” is the reason to reject the traditionalist view, still repeatedly makes use of statements which belie his emotional distaste for our doctrine: “If Scripture truly teaches eternal torment, we should make no apologies for the gross horror of the doctrine.”^{cxxxi}

If the doctrine seems horrible to man, the Lutheran Confessions show that man and his sin caused hell, not a just God of love:

No injustice is done to those who are punished and receive their “wages of sin” (SD, FC XI, 626:61).

The reason for such contempt of the Word is ... man’s own perverse will, which rejects the means (of grace) and the Holy Spirit ... They willfully turn away (SD, FC XI, 623:41-42). Everything which prepares and fits man for damnation emanates from the devil and man through sin, and in no way from God. Since God does not want any man to be damned, how could he prepare man for damnation? God is not the cause of sin, nor is he the cause of the punishment, the damnation. The only cause of man’s damnation is sin ... And as God does not will sin and has no pleasure in sin, so he also does not will the death of a sinner and has no pleasure in his damnation (SD, FC XI, 629:81).

Some conditionalists I encountered in research (along with restorationists and universalists), insist that God’s nature cannot allow endless suffering for His special creation, man. And they are correct, to a degree, since God bought an acquittal of sins to every person through the blood of His Son. Denying a real, everlasting hell, blasphemes that sacrifice as not as necessary or painful as the Bible claims, especially since the “conditions” for immortality are placed on man instead of our suffering Savior. But at the cross of Christ, where mercy and justice kissed, God vindicated His wrath and satisfied His mercy. Now, no one may accuse Him of being “unloving” to condemn someone who in unbelief “tramples the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of Grace” (Hb 10:29).

Val J. Sauer makes the same observation in *The Eschatology Handbook*: “God’s grace and love remain firm toward man’s sins, for love cannot tolerate sin even though it encircles the sinner. Paradoxically, it is not because God’s love is limited but because it is unlimited that hell is made necessary.”^{cxxii}

I was pleased to read similar words from Barth as he clearly pointed to the quality, nature and gracious effect (universal/objective justification) of Christ’s suffering as the clear proof that such must also be the nature of the unbeliever’s suffering in hell:

It is, of course true that this man is the Son of God. In Him God Himself suffers what guilty man had to suffer by way of eternal punishment. “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself” (2 Co 5:19). And it is this character, this quality of human death as eternal punishment, which the Church of Jesus Christ contemplates in His crucifixion. This is why the New Testament thinks and speaks so much more harshly of man’s being in death than does the Old ... In the light of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ this is just what can be learnt, so radical an expression is it, both in intensity and extent, of the New Testament judgment on man. The

crucifixion of Jesus Christ is the revelation of what it cost to restore the right of God and man which man had disrupted. It shows what that disruption implied. It shows how great was the remissness, and what was its inevitable consequence. This restoration, man's salvation, cost no more and no less than the self-oblation of the incarnate Son of God. It cost His death under the wrath of God, *with its quality of eternal punishment* (my emphasis) ... It is just because the New Testament sees and understands man (and Christ's sacrifice) in this light that it cannot oscillate between optimistic, neutral and pessimistic opinions about him.^{cxxiii}

To paraphrase Barth's last statement, the cross will allow us neither an overly optimistic form of universalism (including restorationism); nor an attempted neutral form of annihilationism (including conditionalism); NOR a pessimistic attitude about our own eternal welfare. Instead, "In Jesus Christ and Him alone, he (the sinner) is preserved from this execution of judgment on him with the severity with which it was executed at the cross. This is the only refuge to which he can flee to escape judgment."^{cxxiv}

C. The Hidden God

After all the apologetics are made and the gainsayers are still unconvinced about the reality and/or nature of hell, we must finally bow to the Word in submission and place our trust in God, who remains hidden to us where He will. For although the *concepts* concerning hell are clear in Scripture, now we see through a glass darkly, and cannot understand how these things can be. Conditionalists and others attempt to understand, e.g., "how fire can burn but not consume, annihilate." But as John Schaller called, "Let the hidden God remain hidden where he wants to remain hidden!"^{cxxv}

The traditionalist Merrill said something similar in 1878:

We cannot comprehend the nature of God, and to reason from his nature is to reason from what we do not know. (We cannot) argue from the divine nature, so imperfectly understood, to any conclusion with reference to the rightful method of revealing the justice and holiness of God, or with reference to the *degree* of punishment that is compatible with his goodness ... All reasoning from the nature of God to the nature or degree of the punishment which he can or cannot inflict is reasoning from premises which are imperfectly and inadequately understood.^{cxxvi}

Conclusion

The great atheist David Hume is reported to have died a happy death, scoffing at Christianity to the end. He died in faith, faith in annihilation. During our Dogmatics class once, Dr. Becker said: "the fear of God, hell, and punishment is in every atheist. This, really, drives men to atheism."

On the other hand, that same fear of hell drives men to the Savior. Thomas Paine is said to have called out from his deathbed, "I would give worlds, if I had them, if *The Age of Reason* had never been published. O Lord, help me! Christ, help me! Stay with me! It is hell to be left alone!"^{cxxvii} If that is true, and if there was a spark of faith in his cry, we will see Thomas Paine and join him in singing praises to Him who promised never to leave us or forsake us. But Paine needed a real hell in order to say that.

It is not contradictory to find oneself affirming and defending the Biblical teaching of everlasting torment for unbelievers in hell, and then praising the God of free and faithful grace. Because if we never minimize the horrible impact of hell, we'll also never minimize the sweet assurance and comfort of the gospel. But one paper on hell should suffice for a lifetime.

After all has been said concerning the detestable nature of hell, after all of Ingersoll's eloquence and universalists' emotional appeals and conditionalists' eisegesis, we can only say, "We are sure that the judgment

of God is according to truth against them which commit such things” (Rm 2:2), and thank God that His Son has delivered us from such a fate.

Endnotes

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- xxxiii Douglas, ed., *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, p. 249f.
- xxxiv King, George W., *Future Retribution*, p. 218f.
- xxxv Beet, *Immortality of the Soul*, p. v.
- xxxvi St. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 1, 21, 19, from *The Great Quotations*, (George Seldes, Ed.) 1960, p.832.
- xxxvii Fudge, p. 394.
- xxxviii Hans Küng, *Eternal Life?* p.136-137.
- xxxix Fudge, p.393.
- xl Farrar, *Eternal Hope*, p.xvi.
- xli *Ibid.*, p.xxvi.
- xlii *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- xliii *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- xliv Harry Buis, *Doctrine of Eternal Punishment*, p. 111.
- xlv Stokes, *Conditional Immortality*, pp. 5, 9, 10.
- xlvi *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- xlvii *Ibid.* p. 86.
- xlviii Fudge, p. 398.
- lix Ralph Blodgett, "What, Me Superstitious?" *Eternity* (February, 1981).
- ¹ White, Ellen, *The Great Controversy*, p.535 & 536.
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- lv Froom, Leroy Edwin, *The Conditionalist Faith of our Fathers*, 1965, p. 702.
- lvi *Ibid.*, p. 710.
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- lviii Martin Luther, Hugh Thompson Kerr, Jr., ed., *A Compend of Luther's Theology*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1943), p. 242.
- lix Donald Bloesch, "Essentials of Evangelical Theology," 2:205, note 32.
- lx Froom, p. 78f.
- lxi Fudge, p. 380.
- lxii Froom, p. 70. This quote is from Luther's reply to the Papal Bull of Excommunication.
- lxiii Fudge, p. 55.
- lxiv Steven H. Travis, *I Believe in the Second Coming of Jesus*, p. 197f.
- lxv Bonnell, John Sutherland, *Heaven and Hell*, p. 39.
- lxvi Gwynne Dyer, "Nobody Goes to Hell Anymore," *Christian News*, 7/29/85, p. 8.
- lxvii Barth, *Christian Dogmatics*, p.589 & 596.
- lxviii *Ibid.*, p. 603.
- lxix *Ibid.* p. 603.
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- lxxi Fudge, p.vii.
- lxxii Bloesch, Donald G., "Crisis in Biblical Authority," *Theology Today*, 35, no. 4, (January 1979), p. 455.
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- lxxvi *Ibid.*, p. 457ff.
- lxxvii Darrell Turner, "Theory on Final Punishment Still Searching for Acceptance," Review of *The Fire That Consumes* in *Christian News*, 2/11/85, p.11.
- lxxviii Fudge, p.435.
- lxxix *Ibid.*, p. xv.
- lxxx *Ibid.*, p. 436.
- lxxxii *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
- lxxxiii *Ibid.*, p. 409f.
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- lxxxv *Ibid.*, p. 48.

- lxxxv Ibid., p.85
- lxxxvi Ibid., p. 96.
- lxxxvii Ibid., p. 112.
- lxxxviii Ibid. p. 173.
- lxxxix Ibid., p. 117.
- xc Ibid., p.265.
- xcⁱ Ibid. p. 300.
- xcⁱⁱ Ibid. p. 307.
- xcⁱⁱⁱ Bonnell, p. 32f.
- xc^{iv} Fudge, p. 31, in quoting Beecher
- xc^v Ibid., p. 34.
- xc^{vi} Ibid., p.23
- xc^{vii} King, p. 223.
- xc^{viii} Ibid. p. 225.
- xc^{ix} A parallel example: Luther refused to “interpret” the words, “This is my body.” He merely accepted them.
- ^c Ingersoll, *Forty-Four Lectures Complete*, p. 15.
- ^{ci} James Kennedy, *Why I Believe*, p. 75.
- ^{cii} Hiram Mattison, *Immortality of the Soul*, p. 132.
- ^{ciii} Ibid. p. 133.
- ^{civ} Ibid., p. 133f.
- ^{cv} Becker, “Heaven and Hell.”
- ^{cvi} Martin Chemnitz, *The Lord’s Supper*, p. 32.
- ^{cvii} Ibid., p. 72.
- ^{cviii} Ibid., p. 76.
- ^{cix} Dr. Robert A. Morey, *Death and the Afterlife*, p. 30.
- ^{cx} Ibid., p. 31 & p. 91.
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- ^{cx^{ix}} Froom, p. 702.
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- ^{cx^{xi}} Fudge, p. 416.
- ^{cx^{xii}} Val J. Sauer, *The Eschatology Handbook*, p. 106.
- ^{cx^{xiii}} Barth, p. 605.
- ^{cx^{xiv}} Ibid., p. 606. Few of us would classify ourselves as disciples of Barth. Yet when you read his work, every now and then he rewards you with a clear, shining insight.
- ^{cx^{xv}} John Schaller, “The Hidden God,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 71, no. 3, p. 202.
- ^{cx^{xvi}} S.M. Merrill, *The New Testament Idea of Hell*, p. 121f.
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