

ON BANISHING THE LAKE OF FIRE

By Don Carson. The Gagging of God.

The final judgment is a difficult subject both because of its complexity and because the subject is grisly. But for at least three reasons, we must say something about it in this book.

First, there is widespread perception that the expanding definition of evangelicalism and the fragmentation within the camp is nicely (or painfully) exemplified by the diversity of views on this subject, and in particular by the rising number of self-confessed evangelicals who now publicly espouse some form of annihilationism.

Second, in the handling of some of these theologians (though certainly not all), some form of annihilationism or conditional immortality is linked to their views on the final state of those who have never heard of Christ, to the possibilities of post-death evangelism, and to a number of other matters that obviously tie in to the central concerns of this volume. Strictly speaking, of course, if one holds to universalism - the view that eventually all the offspring of Adam are saved, even if it takes a sojourn in hell to bring them to repentance - then there is no need to appeal to annihilationism, for hell will eventually be emptied of human beings anyway. Those who hold this position do not read the relevant biblical texts as saying that punishment is ended by annihilation, but as saying that the emphasis in Scripture on the love of God surely forces us to conclude that God's love will so triumph in the end that there will be no one left for the fires of hell to consume.¹

Third, in the minds of some evangelicals, recent developments in this doctrinal area signal a clear departure from Scripture, a lessening of biblical authority, perhaps a denial of inerrancy; in the minds of others, the issue is entirely hermeneutical, a matter of interpretation. For the former, pluralism and relativism and postmodernism have softened up the exegetical firmness that once characterized evangelicalism; for the latter, conservatives are ignoring how indebted they are to mere traditionalism, and are proving unwilling to be corrected by more careful exegesis, unwilling to recognize that fresh questions may call forth more light from God's Holy Word. Thus, this doctrinal area becomes a test case for assessing the changing face of evangelicalism, quite apart from its obvious bearing on how we go about evangelism, construction of doctrine, and other similar important matters.

A. Introduction

Because this is only a brief discussion, certain elements of the topic will be skipped over lightly or entirely ignored.

- (1) I do not intend to provide complex taxonomies of the various positions.² For example, some hold that the unrepentant are instantly annihilated at death. In this way, punishment is unending, but never experienced as conscious suffering. More commonly among evangelicals, it is held that the repentant suffer consciously for a while, and are then annihilated. In this view, punishment is unending, but the conscious suffering is temporary. Some speculate that there will be new opportunities to repent during this period of suffering; others deny it. Those who hold to the possibility usually do so by drawing inferences from the love of God. They then divide as to whether this further opportunity to repent will sooner or later be taken by all, thus emptying hell. The more conservative of those who espouse annihilation find such theories not only overly speculative, but impossible to sustain in the light of specific texts of Scripture.

(2)

Many "annihilationists" object to the term "annihilation," holding that it puts the emphasis on the wrong place and betrays a platonic worldview. They are annihilationists in the sense that they hold that there is finally a cessation of existence, but they are uncomfortable with the term because it sounds to them

¹ See, for instance, N. F. S. Ferr@, *The Christian Understanding of God* (New York: Harper 1951), 228-29; William Barclay, *A Spiritual Autobiography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 60-61.

² For some useful distinctions see Kendall S. Harmon, 'The Case Against Conditionalism,' in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Carlisle: Paternoster/Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 196-99.

as if God is destroying what would otherwise have endured forever and this they deny. They prefer an expression such as "conditional immortality" i.e., men and women are not "naturally" or constitutionally immortal, but become immortal under certain conditions. If they fail to meet those conditions, then inevitably their mortality prevails, and they are finally and completely destroyed.³ For our purposes we shall not usually distinguish between annihilationism and destruction that flows from conditional immortality, for the two positions are alike in that they both deny that hell is a place of everlasting, conscious punishment. They do differ in their anthropology, however, and this affects their approach to the intermediate state. I shall have more conservative annihilationists, largely because if their position cannot be sustained, the further extrapolations have little chance of robust defence.

(2) I shall not devote space here to an evaluation of the recent works that treat the earliest or most extended discussions of hell that have come down to us,⁴ essays and monographs that examine the place of hell in certain historical epochs,⁵ treatments which for different purposes chart the decline in serious mention of hell in sermons and books today,⁶ specialist treatments of certain words,⁷ or standard treatments of the subject from the past⁸ (though I fear these are largely unread by those who espouse annihilationism). I shall also avoid idiosyncratic interpretations.⁹

(3) I shall not here embark on the larger question of the fate of those who have never heard the gospel. That subject I addressed in part 2, especially chapter 7.

(4) Finally, I shall not address at any length a number of important synthetic questions about how the Bible's teaching on hell, however understood relates to God's sovereignty, foreknowledge, and omnipotence, and to human responsibility. This is not because the questions are unimportant, but because they will take us farther away from the first-order questions I am primarily addressing in this chapter. Moreover, some of the relevant issues have already been briefly discussed earlier in this book (chaps 5 and 6) and, from somewhat different perspectives, by Simon Chan¹⁰ and Paul Helm.¹¹

³ E.g., D. A. Dean, *Resurrection: His and Ours* (Charlotte: Advent Christian General Conference of America, 1977).

⁴ E.g., Alan E. Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds* (London: Univ. College London Press, 1993); Martha Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell: An Apocalyptic Form in Jewish and Christian Literature* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

⁵ E.g., Frank Burch Brown, "The Beauty of Hell: Anselm on God's External Design," *Journal of Religion* 73 (1993): 329-56; D. P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell: Seventeenth-Century Discussion of Eternal Torment* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1964); Philip C. Almond, *Heaven and Hell in Enlightenment England* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994); Jonathan M. Butler, *Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling: Heaven and Hell in American Revivalism, 1870-1920* (Brooklyn: Carlson, 1991); and several of the essays in Cameron, *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*.

⁶ E.g., Martin E. Marty, "Hell Disappeared. No One Noticed. A Civic Argument," *Harvard Theological Review* 78 (1985): 381-98; John Blanchard, *Whatever Happened to Hell?* (Durham: Evangelical Press, 1993); Larry Discon, "Warning a Wrath-Deserving World: Evangelicals and the Overhaul of Hell," *Emmaus Journal* 21 (1993): 7-21; Alan M. Linfield, "Sheep and Goats: Current Evangelical Thought on the Nature of Hell and the Scope of Salvation," *Vox Evangelica* 24 (1994): 63-75; Howard Davies, "Judgement: The Doctrine Lost to the Modern Pulpit," *Banner of Truth Magazine* 364 (January 1994): 13-18.

⁷ In addition to the standard lexical and theological dictionaries, I am thinking of recent essays such as Hans Scharen, "Gehenna in the Synoptics," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (1992): 304-15, 454-70.

⁸ E.g., W.G.T. Shedd, *The Doctrine of Endless Punishment* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1986 [1885]). It is worth remembering his own historical awareness: "Take the doctrine of eternal perdition, and the antithetic doctrine of eternal perdition, and the antithetic doctrine of eternal salvation, out of the Confessions of Augustine; out of the Sermons of Chrysostom; out of the Imitation of a Kempis; out of Bunyan's Pilgrim Progress; out of Jeremy Taylor's Holy Living and Dying; out of Baxter's Saints' Everlasting Rest; and what is left?" (vii).

⁹ E.g., David Pawson, *The Road to Hell* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992). Pawson accepts that hell involves eternal self-conscious punishment, but seeks to make an "original" contribution by pointing out that most of Jesus' teaching on the subject is addressed to his disciples. From this he infers various elements of a semi-Pegaian soteriology.

¹⁰ "The Logic of Hell: A Response to Annihilationism," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 18 (1994): 20-32.

¹¹ *The Last Things: Death, Judgement, Heaven, Hell* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1989).

B. The Case for Conditional Immortality

Recent writers who have defended conditional immortality do not invariably do so for the same reasons, or with the same degree of certainty.¹² But their principal arguments may be fairly summarized as follows.

- (1) A number of biblical passages speak of the *destruction* of the wicked (e.g., Phil 3:19; 1 Thess 5:3; 2 Thess 1:9; 2 Peter 3:7). Fair exegesis of the words involved suggests *total* destruction, i.e., cessation of existence.
- (2) Even the imagery of fire suggests that which devours and utterly destroys. In other words, the focus of fire is not the pain that it causes, but the destruction it exacts: the Judge burns up the chaff with unquenchable fire (Matt 3:12).
- (3) The Greek word commonly rendered “forever” (cognates) properly means “age.” Even if in some contexts this “age” may be endless, why must we assume that this is the case in passages describing hell? Why take the harshest view?
- (4) Even in passages where the same word is used to describe both “*eternal* life” and “*eternal* punishment” in parallel (e.g., Matt 25:46), demanding therefore that the one last as long as the other, the eternity of the punishment need not be construed as consisting in self-conscious punishment. If the wicked suffer conscious pain for a period of time, and then are annihilated without hope of reprieve or restoration, their punishment can still rightly be said to be “eternal.”
- (5) Surely an eternal hell full of conscious torment is irreconcilable with what the Bible says about the love of God, even about the justice of God. Assuming that we take what the Bible says seriously, surely any exegesis that avoids such blatant and eternal cruelty is to be preferred to the traditional view.

This particular point is held with various degrees of passion. At one end is Pinnock:

Let me say at the outset that I consider the concept of hell as endless torment in body and mind an outrageous doctrine, a theological and moral enormity, a bad doctrine of the tradition, which needs to be changed. How can Christians possibly project a deity of such cruelty and vindictiveness whose ways including inflicting everlasting torture upon his creatures, however, sinful they may have been. Surely a God who would do such a thing is more nearly like Satan than like God, at least by any ordinary moral standards, and by the gospel itself ... Does the one who told us to love our enemies intend to wreak vengeance on his own enemies for all eternity? As H Kung appropriately asks, “What would we think of a human being who satisfied his thirst for revenge so implacably and insatiably?” ... Everlasting torment is intolerable from a moral point of view because it makes God into a blood-thirsty monster who maintains an everlasting Auschwitz for victims whom he does not even allow to die.¹³

¹² See, among others, the arguments of John Stott in David L. Edwards and John Stott, *Essential: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), 312-20; idem, “The Logic of Hell: A Brief Rejoinder,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 18 (1994): 33-34; Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), esp. 402-7 (reprinted in *Evangel* 10/2 [Summer 1992]: 10-12, from which the page references below are drawn); Clark H. Pinnock, “The Conditional View,” in *Four Views on Hell*, ed. William Crockett (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 135-66, and his responses to other contributors; idem “The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent,” *Criswell Theological Review* 4 (1990): 243-59; Leroy From, *The Conditional Faith of Our Fathers* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1965); Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: The Biblical Case for Conditional Immortality* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994); Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *The Problem of Hell* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994); Stephen T. Davids, “Universalism, Hell, and the Fate of the Ignorant,” *Modern Theology* 6 (1990): 173-86; Stephen H. Travis, *Christ and the Judgment of God: Divine Retribution in the New Testament* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1986); idem, *Christian Hope and the Future* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1980); John W. Wenham, “The Case for Conditional Immortality,” in Cameron, *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, 161-91.

¹³ Pinnock, “The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent,” 246-47, 253. Similarly, Michael Green, *Evangelism Through the Local Church* (Nashville: Nelson, 1992), writes of this “doctrine of such

By contract, John Stott, who like Pinnock defends conditional immortality, does so with much more caution:

I find the concept [of eternal conscious punishment in hell] intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterising their feelings or cracking under the strain. But our emotions are a fluctuating, unreliable guide to truth and must not be exalted to the place of supreme authority in determining it. As a committed Evangelical, my question must be – and is – not what does my heart tell me, but what does God's word say?¹⁴

- (6) Along the same lines, one must surely question whether the notion of an eternal hell of conscious torment is *fair*. No matter how grievous the offence, no matter how wretched the sinner – a Hitler, perhaps – is *eternal* hell appropriate? Searing pain that goes on and on, for billions of years, and then more billions of years, and never stops, because all those billions of years are as a drop in the ocean?
- (7) Does not the notion of a continuing hell with conscious suffering inmates jar against the image of the new heaven and the new earth, created to reflect God's glory and extol his perfections? Would not an ongoing hell mar heaven?

C. Biblical and Theological Responses

Without here attempting to list every passage and itemize every metaphor, we should remind ourselves of representative terms and passages. *Sheol* in the Old Testament and *Hades* in the New have roughly the same semantic range and overtones. Although both words can refer in fairly neutral ways to the abode of the dead, or stand in parallel to death itself, in some contexts torment is in view. The rich man, for example, is in torment in Hades when he glimpses the blessedness of Lazarus in heaven (Luke 16:23). Revelation 20:10, 14 link Hades, the lake of fire, Satan, and suffering that goes on day and night forever. The Abyss can be a synonym for Sheol (Ps 71:20; 107:26; cf. Rom 10:6-7); in the New Testament it is more commonly linked with Satan or with the demonic. It is a prison for demons (Luke 8:31) from which smoke rises (Rev 9:2), a place whose ruler is Abaddon or Apollyon (Rev 9:11), usually identified with Satan (though some dispute the identification). *Gehenna* occurs twelve times in the New Testament, all but one (James 3:6) in the Gospels. The eleven gospel references offer five distinct sayings or pictures, once parallels are taking into account. The word itself is transliterated from a Semitic expression referring to the "Valley of Hinnom," the burning dump outside of Jerusalem that would not only be obnoxious but would be doubly offensive to Jews because of its ability to defile all who entered it. This word then becomes a metaphor for hell, conveying not only notions of suffering, destruction, and judgment (e.g., Matt. 5:22, 29-30; 10:28; 18:9) but also of the archetypal source of evil (hence the Pharisees can be labeled "sons of Gehenna," 23:15, as well as being sentenced there, 23:33). Both body and soul are destroyed in Gehenna (Matt. 10:28 Luke 12:5).

Of course, one should not restrict oneself to isolated words. The New Testament repeatedly warns of the certainty of final judgment and the danger of final ruin (e.g., Rom. 2:5-9, 11, 16). When the Lord Jesus is finally revealed from heaven "in blazing fire with his powerful angels," he will "punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power" (2 Thess. 1:7-9). Hell is described as a place where "their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:48), a place of outer darkness, characterized by "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 8: 12). God's searing holiness is bound up with this wrath (Rom. 2:5-9; Rev. 14:9-11): God is a "consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29), and one must be careful not to fall into his hands when he acts in judgment (Heb. 10: 31). There is no escape from hell: there is a great, fixed chasm (Luke 16.26), the door is shut (Matt. 25:10-12), and the condemned are in "dungeons" and bound by "everlasting chains" (2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6). The lost "suffer the punishment of eternal fire" (Jude 7), and beatings of greater or lesser intensity (Luke 12:47-48). They suffer "everlasting contempt" (Dan. 12:2). One of the most horrific series of scenes comes from Revelation 14, to which I shall, regretfully, return. The images are diverse. They variously suggest exclusion, actual punishment, destruction, restraint. No one with the least sensitivity finds these passages easy to preach and write about. But they are

savagery" (73).

¹⁴ Edwards and Stott, *Essentials*, 314-15

there in the Bible, and not only will they not go away, but much of the most graphic language about hell comes from the Lord Jesus himself. How shall we understand these texts?

I offer six brief reflections, of varying degrees of significance, and in no particular order.

(1) It is often argued that the meaning of some of the critical Greek words deployed in the relevant passages favors the annihilationist position. Stott, for instance, argues that the verb *απολλνμι* ("to destroy") and its cognate noun *απωλεια* ("destruction") are best understood, in contexts dealing with perdition, to refer to cessation of existence.¹⁵ When the verb "to destroy" is transitive, it means "to kill [someone]," just as Herod wanted to kill the baby Jesus (Matt. 2:1-3). Jesus instructed his followers not to be frightened of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. "Rather," he insists, "be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28). Stott comments, "If to kill is to deprive the body of life, hell would seem to be the deprivation of both physical and spiritual life, that is, an extinction of being."¹⁶ The same reasoning applies to the middle, intransitive use of the verb, i.e., "to perish": one can perish physically (e.g., Luke 15:17; 1 Cor. 10:9) or eternally in hell (e.g., John 3:16; Rom. 2:12; 1 Cor. 15:18; 2 Peter 3:9). The same argument applies to the noun, where "destruction" is set over against life (e.g., Matt. 7:13). Similarly, another word for "destruction," (1 Thess. 5:3; 2 Thess. 1:9), surely suggests ultimate cessation of existence. In Stott's words, "It would seem strange ... if people who are said to suffer destruction are in fact not destroyed."¹⁷

But the argument is too hasty. The *απωλεια* word-group has a range of meanings, depending on the context. It can refer to the "lost" coin or son of Luke 15, and to the "ruined" wineskin of Matthew 9:17: in neither case is cessation of existence in view. Similarly, the ointment lavishly poured out on Jesus is in the mind of his disciples a "waste" (Matt. 26:8): the same noun is deployed, with no suggestion that the ointment goes out of existence. Moreover, when "life" and "destruction" are contrasted (as in John 3:16, etc.), one might reasonably infer that "destruction" refers to cessation of existence only if "life" means no more than mere existence. But is Christ doing no more than contrasting mere survival and extinction? "Rather, Christ is contrasting two qualitatively different types of existence, one involving a loving communion with God and another lacking it (a state of 'ruin')."¹⁸ Stott's conclusion ("It would seem strange ... if people who are said to suffer destruction are in fact not destroyed") is memorable, but useless as an argument, because it is merely tautologous: *of course* those who suffer *destruction* are *destroyed*. But it does not follow that those who suffer destruction cease to exist. Stott has assumed his definition of "destruction" in his epigraph.

None of this response so far demonstrates that the words in the New Testament for destruction, found in the context of perdition, necessarily refer to something eternally ongoing. The only point so far is that they do not militate against such a view, and therefore the issue itself must be decided on other grounds.

Although a few critics have argued that the word often rendered "for- ever"-viz., *αιων* and its cognate adjective *αιωνιος* - properly means simply age," and therefore that "aional" punishment simply does not mean eternal punishment, it is widely recognized that the argument does not work. The age" in question may be eternal, as it clearly is with respect to the new heaven and the new earth. The parallelism found in some verses such as Matthew 25:46 ("Then [the goats] will go away to *eternal* punishment, but the righteous to *eternal* life") is decisive.¹⁹ Therefore it is far more common to argue that the adjective *αιωνιος* in the relevant passages refer to the result of the action and not to the action itself. Indeed,

when the adjective ... is used in Greek with nouns of *action* it has reference to the *result* of the action, not the process. Thus the phrase "everlasting punishment" is comparable to . . .

¹⁵ Ibid., 315.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 316.

¹⁸ Timothy R. Phillips, "Hell: A Christological Reflection," in *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those who Have Never Heard*, ed. William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 51 n. 8.

¹⁹ This verse merits closer attention: see below.

"everlasting salvation. " . . . No one supposes that we are ... being saved forever. We were ... saved once and for all by Christ with eternal results."²⁰

Thus eternal punishment occurs once and for all, but has "eternal" results. As common as the argument is, even some annihilationists acknowledge²¹ and several others have roundly challenged it.²² The critical question is whether the adjective *αιωνιος*, even when applied to salvation, refers *only* to the once-for-all work of Christ and its results. Can the redeemed in heaven not say that they are being saved by Christ, but only that they have been saved by Christ? In any case, "salvation" itself has a broad semantic range; it can refer to the ongoing blessedness introduced by the consummation - and if this is the case, one must at least ask if "eternal punishment" likewise refers to ongoing punishment. More importantly, Harris agrees with Sasse, to the effect that *αιωνιος* more commonly has temporal/eternal overtones, rather than qualitative force. And even when it has the latter, the temporal sense is rarely forfeited.²³

Similar results obtain for other disputed words.

(2) More important perhaps than the individual words are the graphic images of hell themselves. Fire consumes: "the main function of fire is not to cause pain, but to secure destruction, as all the world's incinerators bear witness."²⁴ John the Baptist pictures the sovereign Judge "burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matt. 3:12): the fire may be unquenchable, but the chaff certainly isn't fire resistant. If hell is the place where "their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:48; cf. Isa. 66:24), it is not necessary to conjure up the kind of vengeance depicted by Judith (and later many Christians), who pictures God putting "fire and worms in their flesh" so that "they shall weep and feel their pain for ever" (Judith 16:17). Jesus simply says that the worm will not die and the fire will not be quenched - i.e., their destruction is implacable, "until presumably their work of destruction is done."²⁵ Even the use of "Gehenna" supports this view: the garbage is finally burned up.

But there are several weaknesses to this argument. Most interpreters recognize that there is a substantial metaphorical element in the Bible's descriptions of hell. This does not mean that hell itself is merely metaphorical. One must not infer from the fact that someone thinks that many of the descriptions of hell are metaphorical and not literal the conclusion that hell itself is not literal. Hell is real; the question is how far the descriptions of it are to be taken literally. Normally, we do not think of unquenchable fire and worms coexisting: the former will devour the latter as easily as they will consume people. It is hard to imagine how a lake of fire coexists with utter darkness. And if one is cast into a lake of fire, what need of chains?

Inevitably, this means that the metaphors need interpreting. Virtually all sides (except those who, like Jehovah's Witnesses, think of instantaneous annihilation at death) acknowledge that the least that is at stake is suffering. I am reluctant to say that none of this suffering is physical in some sense, when the Bible speaks of the resurrection of the unjust (e.g., John 5:28-29). But the argument of Stott and others is that the natural inference from the language of fire is that it totally consumes what it burns, that the natural inference from the worms (probably maggots) is that total corruption accompanies their work until there is nothing left to be destroyed. But one must at least ask if there is anything in the text that encourages this reading of the language, or, alternatively, if there are elements that point away from such inferences. For example, if the worms do not die, what keeps them alive once they have devoured all the people? The question is ugly and silly, precisely because it is demanding a concrete and this-worldly answer to the use of language describing the realities of punishment in a future world still largely inconceivable.

²⁰ Basil F. C. Atkinson, *Life and Immortality* (Taunton: Goodman, 1962), 101 (emphasis his). See especially the extended argument in Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 37-50, 194-96.

²¹ Eg., Stephen H. Travis, *Christian Hope and the Future* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 133-36; John W. Wenham, *The Enigma of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 34-41.

²² E.g., Philips, "Hell: A Christological Reflection," 51-52; Harmon, "The Case Against Conditionalism," 205-6.

²³ Murray J. Harris, *Raised Immortal* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 182-83; cf. H. Sasse, "αιων," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey D. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964): 198-208.

²⁴ John Stott in Edwards and Stott, *Essentials*, 316.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 317.

In fact, there are more than a few hints in the text that the annihilationist reading is incorrect. Observe the wording of Jesus' famous words: "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*" (Mark 9:47-48; emphasis mine). It is not "*the worm*" but "*their worm*," which suggests that it is perpetually bound up with those who are suffering. By itself, fire that is "not quenched" might be taken to mean "unquenchable" in the sense that nothing can stand in its path for as long as it burns, rather than in the sense that it burns forever. But this leads to new difficulties. In a parallel passage, Jesus speaks of those who are thrown into the *eternal fire* (Matt. 18:8).²⁶ Besides, one is surely entitled to ask why the fires should burn forever and the worms not die if their purpose comes to an end. And if one draws the inferences Stott draws about being totally consumed, must we not also infer that fire consumes everyone at more or less the same rate, and that death (i.e., cessation of existence) would be almost instantaneous? Where then is there place for degrees of punishment before annihilation, as usually accepted by those who espouse annihilationism or conditional immortality? It appears that the interpretation of these passages is going off track precisely because illegitimate and arbitrary inferences are being drawn from the language, against the more natural readings, in order to support a theory that is being imposed on the text.

There are three passages that are peculiarly difficult for annihilationists. These passages do not easily allow for the view that the destruction is total and decisive while the judgment is eternal in the sense that it is irreversible, i.e., that there is no coming back from the cessation of existence.

The first is Revelation 14: 10-11: those who worship the beast and his image "will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. 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." The Greek expression rendered "for ever and ever" (εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας ἢ εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰῶνων) is consistently the most emphatic way of saying "forever" in the New Testament. Annihilationists commonly take one of two steps. (a) Some introduce sequence: those who have the mark of the beast suffer, then they are totally consumed, and then the smoke eternally memorializes their destruction.²⁷ But why then does John insist that the lost enjoy "no rest day or night"? It is surely special pleading to argue that "the action described is not a day-time action, nor is it a night-time action. It happens either and both."²⁸ The truth is that while the New Testament writers use many images to describe the awfulness of hell, which are often summarized as punishment, destruction, and exclusion, writers like Fudge constantly resort to serialization of these elements. As Harmon rightly points out,

For Fudge, God's final sentence begins with banishment, continues with a period of conscious suffering, and ends with destruction. In fact, not a single New Testament passage teaches exactly this sequence. Instead, some texts speak of personal exclusion, some of punishment, and others of destruction, and these images need to be understood as giving us hints at the same eschatological reality. Fudge not only chronologizes these images, but he also emphasises one to the exclusion of the other two: destruction dominates while punishment and exclusion fall into the background. Indeed, the latter image is hardly discussed.²⁹

(b) Other annihilationists compare this passage to Isaiah 34:9-10: "Edom's streams will be turned into pitch, her dust into burning sulfur; her land will become blazing pitch! It will not be quenched night and day; its smoke will rise forever." As Edom was wiped out, and the result is permanent, with the "perpetual smoke" a symbol of irreversible judgment, so the smoke in Revelation 14:11 may simply be an evocative way of saying that the torment of the lost, though itself not endless, is irreversible.³⁰ But that is surely less than clear. Revelation 14 stipulates that "the smoke of *their torment* rises for ever and ever," of those who enjoy no rest day or night. If there is an allusion to the sufferings of Edom in Isaiah 34, I suspect that Edom has the same sort of typological reference to hell that Sodom

²⁶ Not "the fire of hell," as in the NIV (Greek εἰς τὸ πῦρ αἰωνιον).

²⁷ E.g., Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 297-98: "Actually torment is meted out according to the mixture of God's cup. Then, as the next image points out, it is forever memorialized in the smoke that remains [emphasis mine]."

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 300.

²⁹ "The Case Against Conditionalism," 213 (emphasis his).

³⁰ So From, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers*, 1:298, 301, 409.

and Gomorrah have: "They [Sodom and Gomorrah] serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire" Jude 7).

The second critical passage is Revelation 20: 10-15: "And the devil ... 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 forever and ever... And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire." Stott points out that verse 10 "refers not only to the devil, but to 'the beast and the false prophet.'"³¹ The beast and the false prophet, and for that matter the harlot of Revelation 17-18, "are not individual people but symbols of the world in its varied hostility to God. In the nature of the case they cannot experience pain" (318). For that matter, neither can "death and Hades" which follow the others into the lake of fire. Thus "the most natural way to understand the reality behind the imagery is that ultimately all enmity and resistance to God will be destroyed" (318).

It is disagreeable to differ with John Stott when he interprets Scripture, for ordinarily his exegesis is a model of clarity and sanity and has often been an inspiration for my own work. But I have to say that this really will not do. (a) In my view the beast and the false prophet are best thought of as recurring individuals, culminating in supreme manifestations of their type, rather than mere symbols that cannot experience pain. (b) More importantly, Stott does not comment on the devil's pain. Even if Stott were right in his reading of the beast and the false prophet, the devil is cast into the lake of fire with them, and the torment "day and night for ever and ever" is *his* experience. Stott does not side with those who depersonalize the devil. Thus Satan (cf. Rev. 12:9) constitutes at least one sentient being who is clearly pictured as suffering conscious torment forever. We may not feel as much sympathy for him as for fellow human beings, and we may cheerfully insist he is more evil than any human being, but even so, it is hard to see how the arguments deployed against the notion of eternal conscious suffering of sinful human beings would be any less cogent against the devil. Conversely, if this text demonstrates that there cannot be a sound argument in principle against the eternal suffering of a sentient being, it is difficult to see why humans should be a special case.³² (c) Stott does not mention verse 15: "If *anyone's* name [not just the beast and the false prophet, or even the devil himself] was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire." In this context, why should it be thought that they would be consumed when the same fire does not manage to consume the devil, but only to torment him "day and night for ever and ever"? Again in the next chapter, we are told that the place of the ungodly "will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death" (Rev. 21:8). Clearly the reference is to the lake of fire at the end of Revelation 20,. Where the torment never ends. What warrant is there for thinking, then, that in this passage total destruction, thoroughgoing annihilation, is in view?³³

The third critical passage is Matthew 25:46, at the end of the parable of the sheep and the goats. The latter "will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life." Pinnock comments,

Jesus does not define the nature of eternal life or eternal death in this text. He just says there will be two destinies and leaves it there. One is free to interpret it to mean either everlasting

³¹ Edwards and Stott, *Essentials*, 318. Other annihilationists follow a similar tack.

³² Incidentally, this sort of passage also stands against the universalism of, among others, Madeleine L'Engle, *The Irrational Season* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), 97: 'I know a number of highly sensitive and intelligent people in my own communion who consider as a heresy my faith that God's loving concern for his creation will outlast all our wilfulness and pride. No matter how many cons it takes, he will not rest until all of creation, including Satan, is reconciled to him, until there is no creature who cannot return his look of love with a joyful response of love ... I cannot believe that God wants punishment to go on interminably any more than does a loving parent. The entire purpose of loving punishment is to teach, and it lasts only as long as is needed for the lesson. And the lesson is always love.' Regrettably, L'Engle pays little attention to what the Bible actually says, but simply expounds what she can and can't believe. On the notion of punishment as *exclusively* remedial, see below.

³³ Cf. also John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 125-26.

conscious torment or irreversible destruction. The text allows for both possibilities and only teaches explicitly the finality of the judgment itself, not its nature. Therefore, one's interpretation of this verse in respect to our subject here will depend upon other considerations. In the light of what has been said so far, I think it is better and wiser to read the text as teaching annihilation.³⁴

But this is close to wishful thinking. We have seen the annihilationists take one of two approaches to $\alpha\iota\omega\nu/\alpha\iota\omega\nu\iota\omicron\zeta$, the "eternal" word-group. Some argue that it refers exclusively to a limited period, an "age," failing to recognize that the "final age" is open-ended. Matthew can use $\alpha\iota\omega\nu$ both in a temporal sense and in an eternal sense, even within one verse (12:32).³⁵ The adjective $\alpha\iota\omega\nu\iota\omicron\zeta$, however, Matthew uses only for what is eternal.³⁶ Here there can be little doubt, since "eternal life" and "eternal punishment" are in parallel. So most annihilationists argue, like Pinnock, that the punishment is indeed eternal, but that this might mean only that the wicked have been destroyed in the sense of annihilated, and that this annihilation is irreversible. But note: (a) One must take into account verse 41 where the Lord says to those on his left, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." As Harmon points out, annihilationists again introduce temporal serialization: first the fire that annihilates, then the eternal punishment which in fact constitutes the now reversing of the annihilation.³⁷ It is more natural to read verses 41 and 46 in parallel. (b) In the light of Revelation 20, where the devil endures the eternal fire forever, it is hard to discern my ground on which to conclude that the punishment of the goats is something qualitatively different. (c) The word "punishment" is graphic, and at least suggests suffering. (d) In the context of first-century Palestinian Judaism, Jesus could not have used such words as these without being understood to be in line with Pharisaic beliefs on the matter, beliefs that also took Gehenna as a model for eternal, conscious punishment. If Jesus had wanted to distance himself from that view, and make his espousal of annihilationism abundantly clear, he certainly forfeited numerous opportunities to do so.

(3) I have tried to discuss these distressing themes and texts coolly, precisely so that I can hear what at many levels I would prefer not to hear. I cannot say I find any of this easy. Even at the brutal level of having relatives and loved ones who have quite openly spurned the gospel, meditation on these texts is painful. Before pressing on with our exploration of these themes, it may be beneficial to reflect on the charges of 'savagery' and 'cruelty' that are often brought against the traditional interpretation of the relevant passages.

(a) As difficult as this subject is, some annihilationists should temper their language. They speak and write so fluently about the cruelty, savagery, hatefulness, implacable vengefulness, and sadism of the traditional view that they overlook the entailment: if they are wrong, they are using all those words of God, and if they are right they are using all those words of the overwhelming majority of Christian brothers and sisters across the last two millennia, including not a few of the gentlest, tenderest, most compassionate and loving believers one could hope to meet. Mercifully, not all annihilationists speak so intemperately. For example, Hughes cites one of the 'purple passages' drawn from Edwards's most famous sermon,³⁸ but fairly comments, 'It is only right to point out ... that the purpose of Edwards in this sermon was compassionately to urge his hearers to flee from the wrath to come and all its terrors by taking refuge in the redeeming grace of the gospel.'³⁹ By contrast, it takes considerable grace to listen sympathetically to Pinnock's passionate pleas that his view be granted legitimacy,

³⁴ "The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent," 256.

³⁵ See the useful discussion in Scot McKnight, "Eternal Consequences or Eternal Consciousness?" in Crockett and Sigountos, *Through No Fault of Their Own?* 151-57.

³⁶ McKnight rightly points out that it is methodologically unhelpful to find in this passage some notion more typical of *another* author, e.g., "eternal life" understood as "qualitatively new life" in the Fourth Gospel (ibid., 152, n. 14). Cf. also the earlier discussion in this chapter.

³⁷ "The Case Against Conditionalism," 113-15.

³⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, repr. 1992).

³⁹ "Conditional Immortality," 11. R.C. Sproul, "The Limits of God's Grace: Jonathan Edwards on Hell," *Tabletalk* 14 (July 1990): 4, comments that if Edwards were "a sadist who believed in hell [he] would probably be more likely to give assurances to people that they were in no danger of hell, so that he could deliciously relish the contemplation of their falling into it." Cited also in Larry Dixon, "Warning a Wrath-Deserving Hell: Evangelicals and the Overhaul of Hell," *Emmaus Journal* 2 (1993): 15.

when his own purple prose condemns as sadists devoid of the milk of human kindness all those who disagree with him.

(b) Should it not be pointed out that it is the Lord Jesus, of all persons in the Bible, who consistently and repeatedly uses the most graphic images of hell? And regardless of the duration of conscious suffering, is it not clear that he does so precisely to warn people against hell, and to encourage them to repent and believe? Should we not therefore do the same?

(c) Could not the same thing be said of a number of passages in Revelation? Consider, for instance, the image of Revelation 14:17-20. At the appointed hour the wicked are harvested like bunches of grapes, thrown into "the great winepress of God's wrath" where they are trampled down until the blood that flows from the vat is as high as a horse's bridle for an outrageous distance. So far as graphic pictures go, it is difficult to see how anything that Edwards says is more horrific than that.

(d) The assumption that eternal conscious punishment would be needlessly cruel owes something, I suspect, to a shift in our view of suffering. As Bray puts it, "Here the model has shifted from punishment justly deserved for sins committed to suffering pointlessly prolonged. The suggested remedy for this is therefore not a belated pardon, which would fit the imprisonment model, but euthanasia."⁴⁰ One might reasonably wonder why, if people pay for their sins in hell before they are annihilated, they cannot be released into heaven, turning hell into purgatory. Alternatively, if the sins have not yet been paid for, why should they be annihilated? The truth of the matter is that annihilation does not account for what Jesus calls "an eternal sin" (Mark 3:29), i.e., for sin that "will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come" (Matt. 12:32).

The shift in model is surely behind. Pinnock's rhetorical question, cited earlier: "Does the one who told us to love our enemies intend to wreck vengeance on his own enemies for all eternity?"⁴¹ But the logic of his question surely demands revision: "Does the one who told us to love our enemies intend to wreck vengeance on his own enemies?" So far as I know, Pinnock would answer that question in the affirmative, though probably he would want to recast the question a little. Justice must prevail; just punishment must be meted out; vengeance in the purest sense belongs to the Lord. What then is different about the question by adding the three final words, "for all eternity"? If justice is still prevailing, if just punishment is still being meted out (pints we shall explore below), then Pinnock's objection falls to the ground. If it was *ever* justly being meted out, then Pinnock should not cast his question as if to imply that *any* display of justice contradicts the command to love one's enemies.

(e) Pinnock forcefully reacts against any "softening" of the doctrine of hell by treating the language metaphorically. He wants the language to be harsh, literal, and unbending precisely because he thinks that only then will the doctrine be seen for the savage thing it is, and this will turn the church toward annihilationism. He fails to see that annihilationism itself might be seen as a "softening" of hell, or that his tentative suggestion of post-death evangelism, based on a doubtful exegesis of 1 Peter 3:19-20,⁴² might be taken the same way.

Crockett's response is telling:

Pinnock rails against the evangelicals (the vast majority, it turns out) who support the metaphorical view. To hold anything other than the traditional view, he says, takes the hell out of hell and amounts to nothing more than an attempt to weasel out of an uncomfortable doctrine. But to say that the metaphorical view takes the hell out of hell is an emotional trick that begs the question, and I think Pinnock knows that. He starts with the assumption that hell must be interpreted as a literal fire and that any change from that takes the hell out of hell. On this reckoning, Jude takes the hell out of hell because in verses 7 and 13 he talks about hell as being both eternal fire and the blackest darkness ... clearly metaphorical expressions ... Jesus also takes the hell out of hell because he uses opposing images of fire and darkness to describe the final place of retribution. The truth is that these incompatible images were never intended to be literal, but were metaphors to describe the awful place we call hell. You cannot

⁴⁰ Gerald Bray, "Hell: Eternal Punishment or Total Annihilation?" *Evangel* 1012 (Summer 1992): 23.

⁴¹ "The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent," 247.

⁴² *A Wideness in God's Mercy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 169, 172. Similarly, cf. Stephen T. Davis, "Universalism, Hell, and the Fate of the Ignorant," *Modern Theology* 6 (1990): 183.

take the hell out of hell if the hell you describe is true to the intentions of the biblical authors. If Pinnock objects to the metaphorical view, he must do so by showing why the metaphors should be understood as literal expressions, not by throwing out clichés for emotional effect.⁴³

This is not to deny that some speculations as to what precise reality lies behind the metaphorical language have gone too far. One thinks, for instance, of Lewis's suggestion that just as heaven makes human beings (as we now think of them) more than human, so hell, like fire that burns wood into ash that is no longer wood, but only remains, makes a human into something *less* than human, an "ex-man" or "damned ghost."⁴⁴ I suppose this is possible, but it certainly leaves the texts a long way behind. More satisfactory (though I remain uncertain of some of its arguments) is the classic treatment by Robert Anderson,⁴⁵ praised by Spurgeon as the best treatment of the subject. But my point is that hell may be very different from the depictions of many medieval imaginations. John Donne is more modern:

When all is done, the hell of bells, the torment of torments, is the everlasting absence of God, and the everlasting impossibility of returning to his presence.... To fall out of the hands of the living God, is a horror beyond our expression, beyond our imagination.... What Tophet is not Paradise, what Brimstone is not Amber, what gnashing is not a comfort, what gnawing of the worme is not a tickling, what torment is not a marriage bed to this damnation, to be secluded eternally, eternally, eternally from the sight of God?⁴⁶

It is vital that we reflect on how the Bible's teaching about hell is related to its teaching about God. The earlier chapters that began to paint a biblical theology (chaps. 5 and 6) insisted that God is both holy and loving; that he is sovereign and yet personal; that the good news of Jesus Christ cannot properly be understood if one neglects to hold together these polarities. In reading the annihilationist literature, one sometimes gains the impression that all who hold to the traditional view of hell ignore everything else the Bible says. Doubtless some do. But most of us, I think, remember Jesus' tearful words over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44) and his compassion for the daughters of Jerusalem (Luke 23:28-31). We remember Paul's heartrending cry for the conversion of his fellow-Jews (Rom. 9:2 - 3; 10: 1), Jeremiah's tears for the slain of his people (Jer. 9:1), and Jude's frank exhortation to "snatch others from the fire and save them" (Jude 23). Here Stott sounds exactly the right note: "I long that we could in some small way stand in the tearful tradition of Jeremiah, Jesus and Paul. I want to see more tears among us. I think we need to repent of our nonchalance, 1147 our hardheartedness."⁴⁷

(4) That the retributive judgment of hell is fair "rests upon this correspondence between enormity and severity."⁴⁸ In the ancient pagan world, many judges made their decisions while keeping in mind the social status of the person being judged. If this is tied in our minds to the notion that punishment is primarily remedial, we shall begin to think that we might get off before the bar of God's justice provided we can be represented by a first-class English QC. But such an attitude overlooks how central *retributive* punishment is in the Bible. At stake is the issue of justice. If we do not get this matter straight, it will radically affect how we view the cross, and thus the gospel.

The Bible's concern to assure us that the punishment of hell is fair is tied to the rather common biblical insistence that there are degrees of punishment there. That is presupposed, for instance, not only by Jesus' explicit words about some being beaten with more blows and some with few blows (Luke 12:47-48), but also by his insistence that God even takes into account how some guilty sinners, like those of Sodom, might have acted under different circumstances (Matt. 11:20-24). They are not thereby excused. What is clear is that for Jesus to talk about the final day being "more bearable" for some than for others, on the basis of how much light each has received (cf. also Rom. 1-2), presupposes not only that justice will be done, but that it will be seen to be done. Similarly, some are treated more severely for consciously trampling under foot the Son of God (Heb. 10:26-29).⁴⁹

⁴³ William V. Crockett, "Response," in *Four Views on Hell*, 172-73.

⁴⁴ See, for example, C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), 113-14.

⁴⁵ *Human Destiny: After Death - What?* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1913).

⁴⁶ Sermons IV, 86.

⁴⁷ Edwards and Stott, *Essentials*, 313.

⁴⁸ Daniel P. Fuller, *The Unity of the Bible: Unfolding God's Plan for Humanity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 192.

⁴⁹ Cf. Ajith Fernando, *Crucial Questions About Hell* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1991), 33-35.

What is hard to prove, but seems to me probable, is that one reason why the conscious punishment of hell is ongoing is because sin is ongoing. Even some annihilationists recognize that this is an important consideration. Thus Stott questions whether “‘eternal conscious torment’ is compatible with the biblical revelation of divine justice, *unless perhaps (as has been argued) the impenitence of the lost also continues throughout eternity.*”⁵⁰ There is surely at least one passage that hints at this reality. In the last chapter of the Bible, the interpreting angel says to John, “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is near. Let him who does wrong continue to do wrong; let him who is vile continue to be vile; let him who does right continue to do right; and let him who is holy continue to be holy” (Rev. 22:10-11). Of course, the primary emphasis here is on the time from “now” until judgment: there is a kind of realized judgment, within time, that sometimes takes place. Nevertheless the parallelism is telling. If the holy and those who do right continue to be holy and to do right, *in anticipation of the perfect holiness and rightness to be lived and practiced throughout all eternity*, should we not also conclude that the vile continue their vileness *in anticipation of the vileness they will live and practice throughout all eternity*? Moreover, does not Revelation 16:21 provide a portrait of those who are being punished and who curse God?

Blocher strongly objects to this view, largely on the ground that the ultimate triumph of Christ, with all enemies destroyed (e.g., 1 Cor. 15), demands the conclusion that sin no longer exists. Hell will be full of remorse, but empty of sin.⁵¹ I find this reasoning unconvincing. The triumph of Christ should be understood in slightly different terms, as we shall see below. Meanwhile, are we to imagine that the lost in hell love God with heart and soul and mind and strength, and their neighbors as themselves? If not, they are breaking the first and second commandments. Are they full of spontaneous worship and praise?

Far better to understand Revelation 22 as I have suggested. But that means that at the end hell's inmates are full of sin. They hate and attract retribution, they still love only themselves and attract retribution, they are neither capable of nor desirous of repenting, and attract retribution. As dark as these reflections are, I suspect they go a long way to providing a rationale for the eternal nature of hell and its torments.⁵²

(5) The argument for what is sometimes called "mortalism" is filled with pitfalls. Over against the view that human beings are *intrinsically* immortal (a view that is sometimes charged with being overly dependent on Greek thought), some have argued that human beings this side of the Fall are all mortal, but that the redeemed gain immortality. Thus if the wicked die and cease their existence, whether immediately upon death or after appropriate punishment, strictly speaking they are not being "annihilated" but merely experiencing the inevitable result of their fallenness and sin, apart from redeeming grace. This, it is argued, is a truly Hebraic and biblical view of human beings.

The arguments are complex, and cannot be delved into fully here.⁵³ But note the following:

(6) Even if there were no sense in which human beings are constitutionally immortal, the annihilationist position would not therefore necessarily be substantiated. For John 5:28-29, as we have seen, speaks of the resurrection of the just and of the unjust. One must wrestle with what purpose the latter serves. Perhaps the resurrection of the unjust is to their mortal bodies again (as many annihilationists argue), but the texts do not say so.

⁵⁰ Edwards and Stott, *Essentials*, 319 (emphasis mine).

⁵¹ Henri Blocher, 'Everlasting Punishment and the Problem of Evil,' in Cameron, *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, 283-312.

⁵² At the same time, I would argue that we human beings are poorly placed to assess the enormity of our own sin. One must not firmly conclude (as many annihilationists do) that punishment must be finite because we are finite and our actions are finite. Is the magnitude of our sin established by our own status, or by the degree of offence against the sovereign, transcendent God? Cf. Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad!* 127. "The essential thing is that degrees of blame- worthiness come not from how long you offend dignity, but from how high the dignity is that you offend." The point is well established by Jonathan Edwards, *Works* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, repr. 1974), 1:669.

⁵³ See Eryl Davies, *An Angry God? What the Bible Says About Wrath, Final Judgement and Hell* (Bridgend: Evangelical Press of Wales, 1992), chap. 9.

(b) The strict dichotomy between Greek thought and Hebrew thought is now rightly dismissed by most scholars as far too rigid. For example, the apostle Paul, when he reflects on his experience of being caught up into the third heaven, is quite unsure whether it was in his body or out of his body (2 Cor. 12: 1 - 10). The least that this uncertainty presupposes is that Paul is not at all uncomfortable with the possibility of existence *apart* from his body.

(c) Doubtless some affirmations of human immortality are misleading, since they tend to give the impression of intrinsic indestructibility that not even God could reverse. It is better to think of the sovereign God, through his triumphant Son, upholding all things by his powerful word. In other words, however "immortal" we are, we live and move and have our being because God sanctions it, not because we have achieved some semi-independent status.

Within some such framework, I perceive no decisive argument against a properly articulated view of human "immortality," and much to commend the idea.

(6) Many annihilationists have argued that the continuing existence of sin and punishment would mar the joy of heaven, or betray an unacceptable cosmological dualism, or signal the sad fact that Christ's triumph is still not complete.

It is far from clear that any of this is convincing. " While evil *that remains unpunished* does detract from God's glory in the universe, we must also recognize that when God *punishes* evil and *triumphs* over it, the glory of his justice, righteousness and power to triumph over all opposition will be seen (see Rom. 9:17, 22 -24). The depth of the riches of God's mercy will also then be revealed."⁵⁴ As Packer puts it:

[I]t is said that the joy of heaven will be marred by knowledge that some continue under merited retribution. But this cannot be said of God, as if the expressing of his holiness in retribution hurts him more than it hurts the offenders; and since in heaven Christians will be like God in character, loving what he loves and taking joy in all his self-manifestation, including his justice, there is no reason to think that their joy will be impaired in this way.⁵⁵

D. Concluding Reflections

Despite the sincerity of their motives, one wonders more than a little to what extent the growing popularity of various forms of annihilationism and conditional immortality are a reflection of this age of pluralism. It is getting harder and harder to be faithful to the "hard" lines of Scripture. And in this way, evangelicalism itself may contribute to the gagging of God by silencing the severity of his warnings and by minimizing the awfulness of the punishment that justly awaits those untouched by his redeeming grace. Newbigin is right: "It is one of the weaknesses of a great deal of contemporary Christianity that we do not speak of the last judgment and of the possibility of being finally lost."⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 1151.

⁵⁵ James 1. Packer, 'The Problem of Eternal Punishment,' *Evangel* 1012 (Summer 1992): 18.

⁵⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, "Confessing Christ in a Multi-Religion society," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 12 (1994): 130-31.