

RETHINKING HELL CONFERENCE 2014

Persuasive or Evasive? Subtle and Not-So-Subtle Shifts in Traditionalist Dialectics

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Notes:

Traditionalism refers to the view that the damned will suffer endless torment.

Conditionalism/annihilationism will be used synonymously in this talk, and refer to the view that only the saved live forever and that the damned will be punished with destruction after the resurrection and judgment.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV.

PART ONE – The Traditional Stance on Five Interrelated Biblical Affirmations.

1. The Death of the Damned

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

Romans 8:13: For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

John 6:50: This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.

John 11:25–26: Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?”

Saint Anselm: O worms, O worms, why do you gnaw me so cruelly? Pity me, pity me; pity poor me, that suffer so many and such awful other torments! Ah, poor me, poor me! And I want to die; but, dying and dying, still I cannot die.

Robert Murray M'Cheyne: Wicked men shall be cast away by themselves.—It is said, they shall wish to die, and shall not be able. They shall seek death, and death shall flee from them.

Proceedings of the Church Missionary Society for Africa and the East: Some say, “Suppose me go to Hell, me soon die there—big fire soon kill me; then me no feel.” But God says you no die in Hell. Suppose you put stone in the fire, he can't be burnt ! No—fire can't burn him—he always live there! God says the wicked have hearts of stone, and fire will no melt them.

John Wesley: Neither the righteous nor the wicked were to die any more: their souls and bodies were no more to be separated.

Hyman Appelman: You can take poison; you can blow your brains out; you can hang yourself and believe you have left your difficulties behind. But there is no poison in Hell. There are no guns in Hell. There is no death in Hell.

John MacDuff: [If we could] look into the lake of fire, and have a sight of the wretched beings who are there writhing in deathless agonies--we would then thank God for the most miserable condition on earth, if it were only sweetened with the hope of escaping that place of torment!

John Willison: Pray earnestly, that all your sins may die before you die; for if they die not before you, but outlive the dying body, they will live eternally to sting and torment the never-dying soul.

John Gill: ...the soul in torment shall never die, or lose any of its powers and faculties; and particularly, not its gnawing, torturing conscience.

Jerry Vines: To go to into hell knowing you will never return is the tragedy of all tragedies. "Let some air in." No air is in hell. "I need a drink of water." No water is in hell. "Turn on some light." No light is in hell. "Let me die." No death occurs in hell.

2. Only the Righteous Live Forever.

John 3:16: For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

1 John 2:17: The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever. (NASB)

John 3:36: Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

John Rice: But the Bible carefully teaches that sinners must live on in torment forever beyond the judgment.

J.I. Packer: In the New Testament, however, hell is a destiny: it is humanity's future life as all who oppose God will experience it.

John McKinley: Evildoers will continue to have purpose and value as God's image bearers who acknowledge Jesus as Lord. They continue to live with created dignity by the way God holds them accountable for their evil actions.

Pope John Paul II: The images of hell that Sacred Scripture presents to us must be correctly interpreted. They show the complete frustration and emptiness of life without God.

John Piper: You are not mere matter and energy. You are an embodied soul who will live forever in heaven or in hell, created in the image of God...

Jesus had a lively, daily awareness of heaven and hell. These awesome realities were always relevant for the way he lived and taught. He was radically reasonable about these things. If we will live forever in bliss or torment, then securing the one and escaping the other is more important than most of what we think about.

John MacArthur: The message of the Bible is that death does not end the existence of anyone, that every human being who has ever lived will live forever...either in hell or in heaven, either in eternal death or eternal life . . . Not merely as a disembodied spirit, but every person will live forever in bodily form.

C.S. Lewis: Christianity asserts that every individual human being is going to live forever, and this must be either true or false.

Robert Peterson: Believers will enjoy the new heavens and the new earth, whereas the final destination of the unrepentant will be “the lake that burns with fire and brimstone” Evidently God does not view unbelievers' being eternally alive in the lake of fire as incompatible with His being “all in all.”

Moreover the picture of the righteous and unrighteous living forever in bliss and misery, respectively, does not fit either universalism or annihilationism.

George Whitefield: I have in effect denied the Lord that bought me, and therefore justly am I now denied by him. But must I live for ever tormented in these flames?

Charles Spurgeon: Man was condemned to live forever in Hell.

Thou art a fallen creature, having only capacities to live here in sin, to live forever in torment.

Menno Simmons: Therefore, consider seriously the heartrending misery and wretchedness of their poor souls which must live forever, either in heaven or in hell.

Mark Driscoll: God is an eternal God; a sin against him is an eternal act that requires an eternal consequence. And we are going to live eternally into the future—the question is where.

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You are going to live forever, and it will be unceasing joy or unceasing anguish.

John Walvoord: It also seems very clear, according to Revelation 20:10 as well as other passages, that those thrown into the lake of fire are not *annihilated*. The *beast* and the false prophet *are still alive* and still tormented a thousand years after they are cast.

Billy Graham: [The soul] will never die, but will live forever in either Heaven or Hell.

3. Only the Righteous Gain Immortality

1 Corinthians 15:52–53: In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.

2 Timothy 1:10: And which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel

Romans 2:6–7: He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.

C.S. Lewis: There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - These are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit - immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.

Frederick Faber: But the indestructible immortality of a lost soul even in the tightest grasp of omnipotent anger this gives us another measure of the severity of God's punishments.

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These are but figures of the divine punishments. God can find unimaginable capabilities of pain in the immortal body, and yet more unimaginable capabilities in the soul.

Jonathan Edwards Jr: The righteous are no more in the very words said to be immortal in happiness, than the wicked are said to be immortal in misery.

Ligon Duncan: Furthermore, one must begin to look at unbelievers with the same kind of pathos and compassion that Jesus and his disciples evinced when they contemplated an immortal soul and the reality of eternal darkness.

Edward Payson: We shall only add that as after the resurrection the bodies of the wicked will be immortal, they will be capable of enduring suffering that in this world would cause instant death.

Richard Baxter: They knew it was an everlasting kingdom which they refused, and what wonder if they are everlastingly shut out of it. Their immortal souls were guilty of the trespass, and therefore must immortally suffer the pains.

Belgic Confession: The evil ones will be convicted by the witness of their own consciences, and shall be made immortal—but only to be tormented in the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

Calvary Chapel Deer Park Statement of Faith: We believe in the resurrection of both the saved and the lost. For those who are saved, life in heaven, and those who are lost, damnation and eternal life in hell.

Adam Zens: There are two choices: eternal life with god, eternal life apart from god. The Scriptures demonstrate that.

Charles Swindoll: Don't misunderstand. *Everybody* has eternal life because everyone has an eternal soul. The issue is not “Do I have eternal life?” It is, rather, “Where will I spend my eternal life?”

Everyone has eternal life. The question is where will we spend it?

4. The Destruction of the Damned

Matthew 7:13: Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.

Matthew 10:28: And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

2 Peter 2:12: But these, like irrational animals, creatures of instinct, born to be caught and destroyed, blaspheming about matters of which they are ignorant, will also be destroyed in their destruction.

2 Thessalonians 1:9: They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.

John Walvoord: Those being resurrected from Hades and the grave will receive a body that can never be destroyed, but unlike the body of the righteous, it is a body that is still wicked, still in rebellion against God, and still deserving God's judgment.

J. Warner Wallace: They will not be destroyed, but instead, will be left in a conscious state to experience the torment and anguish of their punishment forever.

Greg Koukl: Men are not destroyed, they are in torment.

Robert Peterson: Hell is where “the fire is not quenched.” This is a picture of everlasting suffering, not of destruction.

J.I. Packer: The fire of hell in the Bible is a picture not of destruction but of ongoing pain.

J.P. Moreland: If God is the source and preserver of values, and if persons have the high degree of intrinsic value Christianity claims they have, then God is the preserver of persons. He would be wrong to destroy something of such value just because it has chosen a life it was not intended to live.

Frank Turek and Norman Geisler: Hell is real. In fact, Jesus spoke more of hell than he did of heaven. God will not annihilate unbelievers because he will not destroy creatures made in his own image. That would be an attack on himself.

Robert Thomas: Jesus described the fire as unquenchable as did John the Baptist. Jesus said it will be a fire that acts like salt, preserving rather than destroying.

Lactantius: Because [the wicked] have committed sins in their bodies, they will again be clothed with flesh, that they may make atonement in their bodies; and yet it will not be that flesh with which God clothed man, like this our earthly body, but indestructible, and abiding forever, that it may be able to hold out against tortures and everlasting fire.

Erwin Lutzer: *Hell*, then, is the raw *soul* joined to an *indestructible* body.

Christopher Morgan: Annihilationism is the belief that those who die apart from saving faith in Jesus Christ will be ultimately destroyed.

Albert Mohler: The Socinians . . . questioned the eternity of punishment in hell, teaching instead that the wicked would be destroyed in hell—a view that has come to be known as annihilationism.

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Wenham leaned toward the annihilationist view that unbelievers might be destroyed rather than endlessly tortured in hell.

J.I. Packer: Furthermore, the theory of annihilationism, in which unbelievers are not tortured but destroyed in hell, must be read into the Bible.

Vernon McGee: [Hell is] not annihilation. Some of our cults like Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventism, they teach that the righteous will live forever but the wicked are just going to be destroyed and that ends it as far as they’re concerned.

Randy Alcorn: Another view [of annihilationism] states that unbelievers are destroyed not at death, but sometime later.

5. The Damned Will be Consumed

Hebrews 10:26–27: For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

Cyril of Jerusalem: But if a man is a sinner, he shall receive an eternal body, fitted to endure the penalties of sins, that he may burn eternally in fire, nor ever be consumed.

Thomas Aquinas: Likewise they shall be passible, because they shall never deteriorate and, although burning eternally in fire, they shall never be consumed.

Richard Baxter: Woe to the soul that is thus set up as a butt, for the wrath of the Almighty to shoot at; and as a bush that must burn in the flames of his jealousy, and never be consumed.

Jonathan Edwards: And here the bodies of all the wicked shall burn, and be tormented to all eternity, and never be consumed; and the wrath of God shall be poured out on their souls.

John Gill: So the fire of hell, as it will burn, torture, and distress rebellious sinners, it will preserve them in their beings; they shall not be consumed by it, but continued in it.

Charles Spurgeon: In fire exactly like that which we have on earth thy body will lie, asbestos-like, forever unconsumed, all they veins roads for the feet of pain to travel on, every nerve a string on which the devil shall forever play his diabolical tune of “Hell’s Unutterable Lament.”

John MacArthur: Transcendent, eternal bodies, greater than anything we have on this earth, are going to be given to the damned so that they can suffer in those bodies forever. And that's the only reason that they'll have those bodies. With the present body, man couldn't endure hell. You ... the body that we have now would be consumed in a moment. So as God fits the redeemed with new bodies for heaven, He fits the damned with new bodies for hell.

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In hell, the worms never die because the body, though it is continually being consumed, is never consumed.

Just how serious is Rob Bell’s heresy? It is not merely that he rejects what Jesus taught about hell; Bell rejects the God of Scripture. He deplores the idea of divine vengeance against sin (Romans 12:9). He cannot stand the plain meaning of texts like Hebrews 12:29: “Our God is a consuming fire.”

Robert Peterson: Hebrews also contains two texts that could be construed as teaching annihilationism: “a raging fire that will consume the enemies of God” (Heb 10:2); “our God is a consuming fire” (12:29).

These five texts could possibly be so interpreted, but should they be? I must answer in the negative due to the Scriptural testimony that hell-fire speaks of the pain of the wicked, not their consumption.

Saint Augustine: As the soul too, is a proof that not everything which can suffer pain can also die, why then do they yet demand that we produce real examples to prove that it is not incredible that the bodies of men condemned to everlasting punishment may retain their soul in the fire, may burn without being consumed, and may suffer without perishing?

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I have sufficiently argued that it is possible for living creatures to remain alive in the fire, being burnt without being consumed, feeling pain without incurring death; and this is by means of the omnipotent Creator.

Millard Erickson: If these bodies are burned up, consumed, destroyed, how can there still be smoke? What would produce smoke, unless something was burning?

J. Warner Wallace: Over and over again, we see that the Early Church Fathers believed that those who enter Hell are NOT annihilated or destroyed. In summary, these early believers understood the Scriptures to teach that:

Souls live on after the grave. Even those who are assigned to Hell are “immortal”, “indestructible” and “abide forever” Those assigned to Hell will be “detained in everlasting fire” for a period of time that is as “equally perpetual and unending” as the eternal life of those who are in Heaven.

The rebellious will exist in Hell with an “eternal body, fitted to endure the penalties of sins”. They will “burn eternally in fire” and they will never “be consumed” Those tormented in Hell will never “have respite” and their torment will never “be at an end”. “Souls along with their bodies will be preserved for suffering in unlimited agonies”

PART TWO – TRADITIONALIST RESPONSES

Commenter 1: Being raised with a physical body that eternally endures the displeasure of God is not, on my reading of Scripture, a form of immortality . . . To put it another way, unbelievers will not live forever. They will die forever.

Commenter 2: I agree that the unbeliever does not “live” forever. There is no living in hell or the LOF. Existence is a different distinction from “living” “life” or even being so called “immortal.”

Jonathan Edwards: The wicked, in their punishment, are said to weep, and wail, and gnash their teeth; which implies not only real existence, but life, knowledge, and activity, and that they are in a very sensible and exquisite manner affected with their punishment.

Henri Blocher: One can sense a paradox in the concept of permanence in destruction which the Bible itself expresses when it speaks of “*second death*,” “*undying worm*,” and tradition sharpens, e.g. in the words of Saint Gregory the Great: “a deathless death, an endless end, a ceaseless cessation, since [the] death lives, the end always begins, and cessation knows not how to cease.”

Henry Newman: God is in hell as well as in heaven, a thought which almost distracts the mind to think of. The awful God! “Whither shall I go from Thy Spirit, or whither shall I go from Thy Presence? If I climb up into heaven, Thou art there; if I go down to hell, Thou art there also.” Where life is, there is He; and though it be but the life of death—the living death of eternal torment—He is the principle of it.

Martin of Cochem: The existence of the damned is more like death than life; it is a living death, an everlasting, unlimited torture and misery.

John Boys: [In Hell] all shall not be punished in the same degree, though in the same fire: all shall be burnt, yet none consumed. In that unquenchable flame, “Hell fires torment but do not consume the body; they punish, without destroying.” Prosper. *Mors sine morte, finis sine fine, defectus sine defectu*. “Deathless death, endless end, destruction of the indestructible.” Aug.

Jeremy Taylor: After all this, there shall not want in hell the pains of death, which amongst human punishments is the greatest ; that of hell is a living death. The death which men give, together with death, takes away the pain and

sense of dying ; but the eternal death of sinners is with sense ; and by so much greater, as it hath more of life, recollecting within itself the worst of dying, which is to perish ; and the most intolerable of life, which is to suffer pain. In hell there shall be, unto the miserable, a death without death, and an end without end; for their death shall ever live, and their end shall never begin.

Johann Gerhard: Severe indeed is their punishment on account of the bitter pain of the torments they shall suffer; severer still because of the diversity of these torments; but the thought that they shall last forever and ever with no diminution, no cessation, is the worst of all. That will be death without death, end without end, perishing without perishing; because that death is an ever living death; that end is a ceaseless beginning; and that perishing knows no perishing. Those poor lost souls shall seek for life and find it not; they “shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them”; and after a hundred thousand, thousand, thousand years they shall simply suffer renewed torments without end! The very thought of the endlessness of their pain will torment them more than the sense of eternal pain itself. What can be conceived of as more intolerable than thus to die that you are always living, and thus to live that you are always dying? That life will be lifeless, and that death will be deathless! If thou art life, why dost thou die, and if death, how dost thou always endure?

Charles Hodge: The Scriptures everywhere recognize the distinction, in reference to men, between animal, intellectual, and spiritual life. A man may have the two former and be destitute of the latter.

John 6:49–51: Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever.

Douglas Moo: Does this mean, then, that Paul teaches “conditional immortality”? Yes and no. If we define “immortality” as Paul uses the terminology, then the answer is yes. But Paul's way of using the word is not the same as the way the word is usually used in theology. In this broader sphere the word usually has the sense of unending existence. Because Paul's focus is restricted, nothing in his letters denies the immortality of human beings in this broader sense.

Debate opponent: I don't think that people could experience [burning] forever if they are consumed at some point.

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They will be consumed in the sense that that passage is describing and that sense is that those people will be eternally tormented in hell. That's what that's a reference to. Which is not the literal sense of “consume” I fully concede that point.

Takeaways

1. Traditionalists tend to *apparently* contradict scripture when describing their view of final punishment.
2. Traditionalists often use biblical language when describing the conditionalist view of final punishment.
3. At best, traditionalism is a view that is—or at least appears to be—convoluted.