

A New Testament Defense of Conditional Immortality

Author Note

Daniel G. Sinclair, Masters in Theology Program, CT530

Williamson College

Contact: [dgsinclair@gmail.com](mailto:dgsinclair@gmail.com)

**Contents**

1	Abstract.....	4
2	Conditional Immortality Defined .....	5
2.1	Intrinsic Mortality .....	5
2.2	Conditional Immortality.....	5
2.3	Irreversible Annihilation .....	6
3	Major Biblical Themes Supporting Conditionalism.....	6
3.1	The Biblical Vision of Eternity .....	6
3.2	The Atoning Death of Christ.....	6
3.3	The Language of Destruction.....	7
4	Exegeting the Major Scriptural Categories with Respect to Hell.....	7
4.1	The Language of Destruction.....	7
4.2	Eternal, Unquenchable Fire.....	8
4.3	Eternal Punishment .....	10
4.4	The Symbology of Revelation.....	11
5	Some Remaining Objections .....	13
5.1	God would not ultimately destroy a human being .....	13
5.2	How can you claim the church has been wrong all this time? .....	14
5.3	Annihilation is not punishment .....	14
5.4	Annihilation cannot account for degrees of punishment.....	16
5.5	Destroyed from the presence of the Lord.....	16

6	Conclusion .....	17
7	Epilogue.....	18
8	References .....	20

### **A New Testament Defense of Conditional Immortality**

Therefore, let us leave the elementary teaching about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works, faith in God, teaching about ritual washings, laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, *and eternal judgment*. (Hebrews 6:1-2 CSB, emphasis mine)

#### **1 Abstract**

The doctrine of final judgment is a foundational, though perhaps not an essential doctrine of scripture. Modern evangelical Conditionalists (a.k.a. annihilationists) view their movement as part of the continued reformation of Christianity, intending to conform our doctrine of final judgment to the scriptures (Fudge, 2011, pp. 9–11). Through standard and accepted principles of reason and hermeneutics, Conditionalists make their primary case, rather than through a low view of scripture or starting with philosophical assumptions, as is sometimes accused. In this paper, I first summarize the three major New Testament biblical themes that support Conditional Immortality (CI); the *biblical view of eternity*, *the atoning death of Christ*, and *the language of destruction*. Secondly, I address in detail the relevant scriptures in four major groupings; *the language of destruction*, *eternal fire*, *eternal punishment*, and *the symbology of Revelation*. Thirdly, I address additional objections and draw conclusions. Lastly, I provide an epilogue of my own journey from the traditional view, sometimes called Eternal Torment (ET), to CI.

## 2 Conditional Immortality Defined

Conditional Immortality entails annihilation as an outcome of two or three biblical doctrines:<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1 Intrinsic Mortality

While this is not a necessary doctrine for CI, it is included because both ET and Evangelical Universalism (EU) are partially based on the assumption of intrinsic immortality, often concluding (errantly) that all humans must “spend eternity somewhere” (Beale et al., 2009, pt. 4952; Constable, 2015, pp. 19–20). The unregenerate man is not by nature immortal, but mortal. God alone has immortality (1 Timothy 6:16), and Adam and Eve were obviously mortal after their expulsion from the garden (Genesis 3:22).<sup>2 3</sup>

### 2.2 Conditional Immortality

The corollary to human mortality, and the primary assertion of CI is that life and immortality are gifts that come with the salvation of the gospel (2 Timothy 1:10, John 3:16). As additional evidence, the imagery of Revelation 2:7 and Revelation 22:14 indicates that only believers will have access to the Tree of Life in the New Jerusalem, perhaps the same tree of life that Adam and Eve were barred from in Genesis 3:22.

---

<sup>1</sup> The modern flag-bearer for modern evangelical CI is probably Rethinking Hell. Their definition is “Conditionalism is the view that life is the Creator’s provisional gift to all, which will ultimately be granted forever to the saved and revoked forever from the unsaved. Evangelical conditionalists believe that the saved in Christ will receive glory, honor and immortality, being raised with an incorruptible body to inherit eternal life (Romans 2:7). The unsaved will be raised in shame and dishonor, to face God and receive the just condemnation for their sins. When the penalty is carried out, they will be permanently excluded from eternal life by means of a final death, implicating the whole person in a destruction of human life and being (Matthew 10:28).” (*Statement on Evangelical Conditionalism*, n.d.)

<sup>2</sup> This doctrine is sometimes called “Christian Mortalism,” and is one of the doctrines behind not only CI, but anthropological trichotomy and soul sleep, though these doctrines are not mutually inclusive (Date & Stump, 2014, pp. 11–12). In fact, seminal trichotomist John Heard argues that when mortalism (which he holds) is combined with dualism, it requires soul sleep, but when combined with trichotomy, it does not (Heard, 1868, pp. 261–294).

<sup>3</sup> “But among philosophers they were perhaps equally notorious for their commitment to the mortalist heresy; this is the doctrine which denies the existence of a naturally immortal soul.” (Garber & Ayers, 2003, p. 383)

### 2.3 Irreversible Annihilation

The unrepentant will suffer irreversible destruction as their eternal punishment –not an eternal *punishing*, but a *punishment* that is decided for all eternity (2 Thes. 1:9).

## 3 Major Biblical Themes Supporting Conditionalism

Three major New Testament themes support CI, and are contrary to ET (Glenn Peoples in Date & Stump, 2014, pp. 10–24):

### 3.1 The Biblical Vision of Eternity

The Biblical vision of eternity is of a new creation without sin or death. God will “bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ” (Ephesians 1:10, NIV). “There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” (Revelation 21:4). The traditional view (ET) has not only redefined “death” to mean immortality without life (ongoing separation from God), it contends that this death continues throughout eternity. Sinning in the form of cursing God also continues for eternity in the ET model. By comparison, under Conditionalism, death and the unbelieving are judged and destroyed forever (Eph. 1:10, 1 Corinthians 15:24-28, 1 John 2:17), and sin and death are no more in the creation.

### 3.2 The Atoning Death of Christ

Jesus’ physical death is what atones for sin (1 Peter 3:18). The saved will not die the *second death*, since Jesus died for them. But the lost *must* die this second death, since they reject the substitute. Conditionalists argue that the results of the final judgment entail a parallel to Jesus’ death where both body and soul are destroyed (Matthew 10:28). The gift of God is eternal life, and the contrasting outcome is death (Romans 6:23), not torment. But the question must still be answered, is “separation from God” the Biblical *definition* of death, or is it the *cause* of death? And does such separation result in immortality with torment, or annihilation?

### 3.3 The Language of Destruction

The majority of passages that speak of the judgment of the unbelieving use the words *perish*, *destroy*, *burn up*, and *death*. The final judgment is actually called “the second death” (Rev. 20:14-15), begging the question, how is it like the first death? Arguably, it is primarily a ceasing to exist as a living person, but irreversible. This “extinction” is the clear definition of the second death; 2 Peter 2:6 says that “by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes” God “condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly.” This example seems clear, though we might be tempted to spiritualize it with a redefinition of Sodom’s total destruction. This overwhelming majority of descriptors ought to be taken as definitive, not secondary.

## 4 Exegeting the Major Scriptural Categories concerning Hell

There are generally four major groups of scripture to exegete when discussing hell.

### 4.1 The Language of Destruction

The predominance of terminal vocabulary corresponding to the eternal state of the unbelieving cannot be ignored or easily dismissed. From central gospel declarations such as John 3:16 (“perish”) to Jesus’ metaphors of burning chaff (Matthew 13:40-42, Matthew 3:12), Paul’s wages of sin as *death* (Romans 6:23), John’s second death (Rev 20:14-15), and Jesus’ “destruction of body and soul” (Matt. 10:28), the bible is fairly consistent in its terminal depiction of the lost. Theological stalwart John Stott argued that the clear meaning of “destroy the soul” is that of extinction:

'Rather,' he continued, 'be afraid of the One [God] who can destroy both soul and body in hell' (Matthew 10:28; d. James 4:12). 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. (Edwards & Stott, 1989, p. 315)

The only places in the New Testament where *suffering* is explicit are (a) in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (which is not applicable because at most it describes the intermediate period, not the final state), and (b) in the highly symbolic passages in the highly symbolic Revelation 20, which is not a sound place to ground a doctrine. This is one of the main critiques of the traditional view, that it makes the classic mistake of using unclear passages to determine a more convoluted meaning for death and the life to come, and then tries to force that on the clearer passages of scripture.

#### 4.2 Eternal, Unquenchable Fire

The question of the nature of eternal fire is critical. Is it a fire that burns forever, or is it of a character that is more powerful than ordinary fire, being too strong to be extinguished prematurely? The answer seems the latter, for two reasons. First, it is the nature of fire to consume, not to burn without consuming the fuel, except in one notable exception, the burning bush of Moses. If we examine the descriptor of the fires in the New Testament descriptions of Judgment (e.g. Matthew 3:12, Luke 3:17), we find that the unquenchable fire consumes (*katakaio*), while that in the Septuagint's description of the burning bush is specifically called out as "not consuming" (οὐ κατεκαίετο). If the eternal fire of judgment did not consume, we would expect this negation, but it is absent in the passages describing eternal fire.

Secondly, Jude 7 declares that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by eternal fire as an example of the final judgment by the same fire. But rather than seeing those cities continue to burn, we see they were irreversibly destroyed. To assume that eternal fire burns forever is to assume that its *fuel* is inexhaustible, and in the case of torment, the fuel of physical bodies is either constantly recreated or indestructible but still capable of feeling pain. Not only are these contrary to how fire behaves in the natural world and the Bible, they are not explicitly or implicitly expressed in scripture.

Regarding the definition of *unquenchable fire*, we may first look at Jesus' comparison of judgment to the valley of Hinnom, or "Gehenna." (Matthew 5:30, Mark 9:43) This valley was once a place where pagan worshippers burned children up as sacrifices to their gods, not one of torture. Second, if we examine the Old Testament references to this valley, we don't get the idea of ongoing torment, but destruction. Jeremiah 7:32-33 says that Gehenna would become "the Valley of Slaughter...and the dead bodies of this people will be food for the birds of the air, and the beasts of the earth, and none will frighten them away." Note that these birds of prey will not be frightened away from their task of consuming the dead, not tormenting the living.

Traditionalists may assume that the ongoing nature of the burning trash pile of Gehenna equates *unquenchable* with *eternal*, changing the definition of unquenchable from "unable to be put out" to "perpetually burning." But the emphasis of Jesus is not perpetuity of process, but complete destruction (Matt. 10:28). As we have seen with the destruction of Sodom with eternal fire, *eternal* essentially means the fire entirely consumes in judgment, rather than burning perpetually. And so *unquenchable* is more likely the more straightforward understanding of "unable to be quenched (prematurely)." Fire consuming in judgment is throughout the Old Testament (cf 2 Kings 22:17; Isaiah 34:10; Jeremiah 7:20; 17:27; Ezekiel 20:47). Jesus may be quoting Isaiah 66:24, whose context is the consumption of corpses. Traditionalists miss the fact that the bodies in this image are dead, not living and suffering.

Lastly, we should evaluate the fire in the context of the other unstoppable agent of judgment, undying worms (Mark 9:48). Traditionalists often assume that *undying* means that the worms *never* die, rather than not dying *prematurely*, like the fire which burns until the fuel is gone. Like other scavengers of judgment in scripture, (Deuteronomy 28:26; Jeremiah 7:33), however, who are not scared away nor interrupted in their pursuit of complete consumption of the dead, it is likely that these worms will not die before completing their consumption of the

dead bodies. The only thing that lasts is the permanent shame of those who perish this way (Daniel 12:2).

### 4.3 Eternal Punishment

While the previous century's Conditionalists may have questioned the meaning of eternal, proposing it to mean "of the age to come" rather than "of infinite duration," modern Conditionalists have abandoned this line of reasoning for another – that the problem with the phrase "eternal punishment" is not with our understanding of *eternal*, but with the word *punishment*. The first question is, does "eternal punishment" mean "eternal punishing" (an ongoing action) or "an eternal unchangeable outcome," that is, irreversible destruction? Consider the use of such "nouns of action" in the phrases "eternal salvation", "eternal redemption" or "eternal judgment" (Hebrews 5:9, 9:12, Mark 3:29). Do these refer to ongoing processes or to the everlasting outcome of a finite process? It is the latter, and it is possible, if not probable that the punishment spoken of in Matthew 25:46 ("And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life") is comparing life and death, not life and ongoing punishment. Especially when 2 Thessalonians 1:9 describes that punishment as "They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might . . ." It is counter to reason to assume that "destroy" means "to destroy but never completely destroy."

There is theological debate on the meaning of the Greek word for destruction (*appolumi*), with traditionalists arguing that it sometimes means "ruin" or "torment," not "destroy" (Beale et al., 2009, pt. 1783). However, John Stott takes issue with this reading, explaining that in the scriptures regarding judgment, it is most likely plain destruction, not ruining:

When the verb is in the middle, and intransitive, it means to be destroyed and so to 'perish', whether physically of hunger or snakebite (Luke 15:17; 1 Corinthians 10:9)

or eternally in hell (e.g. John 3:16; 10:28; 17:12; Romans 2:12; 1 Corinthians 15:18; 2 Peter 3:9). If believers are *hoi sozomenoi* (those who are being saved), unbelievers are *hoi apollumenoi* (those who are perishing). The phrase occurs in 1 Cor 1:18, 2 Cor 2:15; 4:3, and in 2 Thess 2:10....It would seem strange, therefore, if people who are said to suffer destruction are not destroyed: and, as you put it, it is “difficult to imagine a perpetually inconclusive process of perishing.” (Date & Stump, 2014, p. 51)

While ruination is a possible interpretation, destruction as it is commonly understood a less convoluted approach, it also makes better sense in these passages based on the pervasive related use of perish, destroy, burn up, and kill in reference to final judgment.

#### 4.4 The Symbology of Revelation

The two most oft-quoted passages in support of eternal torment are

- Revelation 14:9-11: “. . . and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night . . .”
- Revelation 20:10-15 “. . . and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.”

These passages must be examined in tandem, as well as in comparison to the passages their imagery is taken from in the Old Testament. Regarding Revelation 14, torment and forever-ascending smoke are also seen in Revelation 18, where the harlot “Mystery Babylon” is thrown into the lake of fire. This image is interpreted for us by the angel giving John the revelation, and so is translated for us *by the scriptures themselves*. Of the harlot the angel says, “Babylon the great city [will] be thrown down with violence, and will be found no more” (Rev 18:21). This

interpretation (destruction) should then hermeneutically be applied to our understanding of Revelation 14 unless there are other contextual indicators, which seem absent.

There is, however, another reason to interpret the imagery of Revelation 14 as destruction. Its language is borrowed directly from Ezekiel 26:20-21, a prophecy concerning the destruction of the city of Tyre fulfilled long ago: “you will not be inhabited . . . you will be no more; though you will be sought, you will never be found again.” Obviously, Tyre is not smoking still, nor in existence. The imagery of perpetual torment used to indicate permanent destruction may seem odd to us, but it can be understood as perpetual shame and remembrance of the judgment. Additionally, forever-ascending smoke seems to speak of permanence of the destruction, not ongoing and never-ending destruction. It leaves behind death and ashes, not living tormented beings.

This same imagery is used in Isaiah 34:9-10, which describes the destruction of Edom in similar terms – an Edom which is irreversibly destroyed:

Edom’s streams will be turned into pitch, her soil into sulfur; her land will become burning pitch. It will never go out—day or night. Its smoke will go up forever. It will be desolate, from generation to generation; no one will pass through it forever and ever.

Because the imagery of smoke rising forever communicates the permanency of Edom’s destruction and that of Mystery Babylon, the smoke rising from the torment of the beast-worshippers in Revelation 14 should be interpreted similarly, unless a meaningful contextual counter-argument could be offered (I cannot find one).

Regarding Revelation 20, it is notable that the inanimate *death* and *Hades* are thrown into the lake of fire, and are assumed destroyed since the final result is “death shall be no more” (Rev 21:4). Since the symbolic verbiage of “day and night forever” mean destruction, should we not

assume that it does not mean a literal eternity for the animate members thrown in. John specifically interprets the lake of fire as “the second death.”<sup>4</sup>

To summarize the hermeneutical reasoning behind our approach to these two passages: (a) the scriptures in Revelation interpret the torment and forever-ascending smoke of “Mystery Babylon” for us – they are *destruction*. (b) This same verbiage and imagery are borrowed from two major OT sources (Ezekiel and Isaiah), showing that this imagery is used to denote utter destruction, not an ongoing process. (c) The inanimate entities thrown into the lake of fire are later taken to be destroyed, and so (d) it is reasonable to assume the same end for the animate entities (Satan, the angels, the false prophet, and unbelievers) thrown in. If we desire to argue that last point, we cannot do it based on the imagery, but must assume a literal position on this imagery, as well as make assumptions about God’s inability or lack of desire to destroy animate beings.

## 5 Some Remaining Objections

The above interpretations attempt to show that even passages that seem to, at least superficially, strongly support the traditional view may *not* be neutral, but *better* and *directly* support Conditionalist exegesis. However, there are some remaining possible objections from traditionalists:

### 5.1 God would not ultimately destroy a human being

This contention is mostly grounded in the theology of immortality of the soul and the value of man – that God would not kill someone made in His image. But this contention is not

---

<sup>4</sup> Not only is a straightforward and Biblical definition of death typically understood as “not alive,” it is important to note that John is not saying that “the second death is fire,” but that “the fire is the second death.” Traditionalists seem to reverse this symbolic interpretation. The result of judgement is not fire, that is the *means* and the *imagery*. The actual end is clearly interpreted as “the fire is the second *death*.”

only founded upon the assumption of the immortality of the soul, it has no other scriptural basis. We certainly see that God killed all of humanity in the flood of Noah. To this, traditionalists often respond that this was not permanent because their souls were not destroyed. But even if the Noahic deaths were only physical, their destruction was real and complete, and none of those destroyed will be kept from the final day of judgment, nor given a chance at post-mortem repentance, unless one understands 1 Peter 4:6 as Jesus preaching the gospel to all the dead before Christ, which is not a mainstream position (Miller, 2002).

## **5.2 How can you claim the church has been wrong all this time?**

The theology of reformation is that we are continually aiming to make Christ's bride purer in love and doctrine. The Reformers enacted huge changes in the Church with their appeals to *sola scriptura* 1300 years after the Church's founding. And that reformation continued even after the initial reforms, as seen in later changes reinstating credobaptism. It is possible that there are still deep and important changes to our faith yet to be implemented as our doctrines are examined in the light of scripture and experience. The plain answer is "yes, the church can be wrong if it can be demonstrated from good exegesis of the Bible."

## **5.3 Annihilation is not punishment**

Gomes writes:

In the Matthean texts...the final state of the wicked is described as one of everlasting punishment (*kolasin aionion*). From this it follows that the wicked are not annihilated. William Shedd cogently argues that "the extinction of consciousness is not of the nature of punishment." If suffering is lacking, so is punishment...suffering entails consciousness....Annihilation avoids punishment, rather than encountering it." (Gomes, 1999)

This assumption makes several errors. First, it assumes that there is no day of judgment or giving account *before* destruction and that this experience is not, in fact, great suffering. But standing with a naked conscience before a holy God is not a small thing, but what the Bible calls “great and terrible” (Malachi 4:1-6). This experience seems to be the main focus of the terror of the day of judgment, followed by the “second death.” Second, Conditionalism argues that the weeping and gnashing of teeth are the sorrowful and angry (respectively) responses to (a) the loss of eternal life and (b) the dread of the coming destructive end of sinners (Luke 13:28), not necessarily to ongoing torment. So these reactions can be made sense of under annihilationism, and are not explicitly a description of eternal activities. Third, the process of being executed and the soul leaving the body may entail suffering as well.

Critics of CI often claim that in addition to entailing no suffering, annihilation is also exactly what the atheist expects, which is to cease existing with no punishment at all. But this ignores the fact that CI teaches that they will suffer resurrection confession, judgment, and execution, as well as the loss of eternal life *before* annihilation.

There is also a more sinister assumption below this “no punishment” attack on CI, which is the “less punishment” approach. The primary assumption of this flavor of traditionalism is that the punishment must be *maximal*, for two reasons. First, this is assumed to make Jesus’ suffering equivalently maximal, and so more valuable or important. Additionally, it provides a maximal contrast with the goodness of God in the gospel. But while a maximal difference between sin and gospel may be a good rhetorical tool, this maximal contrast view is not required by scripture. Secondly, the maximal punishment model assumes that such punishment is required to glorify the power and holiness of God. However, this is not the biblical rule for justice, which is *proportional* (*lex talionis*, Exodus 21:24), not cruelly *maximal*. Even more, Jesus implied that

even *lex talionis* was too harsh (Matthew 5:38-42), and at least in the sense of gospel, if not in general, God's mercy triumphs over such simplistic 1:1 justice.

#### **5.4 Annihilation cannot account for degrees of punishment**

In truth, both ET and CI have difficulties with explaining degrees of punishment, but CI has arguably less trouble. If we were to estimate the quantity of punishment under ET, we could quantify two attributes: *intensity* and *duration*. Under ET, it is argued, there are different intensities of suffering. However, when this variable is multiplied by an infinite duration, is the net punishment not infinite? Arguably, at a point in time, the less intense punishment may be different from the person with more intense punishment, but the net punishment for both individuals is still infinite using this crude calculation. This is not a definitive argument against degrees of punishment under ET, but it does suggest the absurdity of claiming as valid a difference between two infinities.

Under CI, there are many possible biblical models for degrees of punishment, including (a) differences in suffering while giving account to God, (b) a short period of punishment before annihilation, (c) differences in the pain of execution, or even (d) differences in eternal shame. The latter form of punishment is not suffered directly by the person, but in Middle Eastern cultures like Judaism, honor and dishonor carry a lot of weight. This point is supported in part by Daniel 12:2 which reads "Many who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life, and some to disgrace and eternal contempt."

#### **5.5 Destroyed from the presence of the Lord**

2 Thess. 1:9 reads "They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, (away) from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might" (ESV). Traditionalists use this verse to argue for a redefinition of destruction as separation from God's presence (and hence *ruination*, not actual *destruction*) (Tanksly Jr & Demler, 2016). However, the word "away" is not

represented directly in the Greek, and many English translations omit that word (NIV, CSB, NLT, NKJV), making the verse merely “eternal destruction from the presence of the Lord.” In this light, there are at least two other readings of this passage that do not require a redefinition of destruction; (a) that the act of destruction removes them from God’s presence, or (b) that the presence of God itself destroys them or is the source of the destruction (who can stand in the presence of a holy God?).

## 6 Conclusion

Conditional immortality is congruent with the major biblical themes of judgment in scripture, including the destruction of the wicked, the vision of a sinless new creation for eternity, and the punishment of death for sin, rather than a more complicated redefinition of death as “immortality with separation” under ET. Examination of the individual New Testament scriptures involving eternality reveals that they are equally or more probably eternal *outcomes*, not eternal *processes*, as in such terms as eternal salvation, eternal redemption, and therefore eternal fire that is not prematurely extinguished. Thirdly, when the imagery of Revelation is examined in light of the Old Testament imagery it is directly borrowing, and in light of Jude’s and Peter’s descriptions of eternal fire destroying cities as an example to us, cities that were destroyed and are no longer burning, even these seeming depictions of torment and smoke end up speaking of destruction. Fourthly, death and the second death do not have to be redefined to make sense of the scriptures that tell us that the wages of sin is death and that the lake of fire is the second death. Lastly, since the main passages that use the phrase “forever and ever” and “torment” are in Revelation, it seems that generally speaking, ET starts with these unclear passages, and then multiplies entities (created more complication) by redefining death as “immortality with separation,” destruction and perishing as “ruination” and “processes which never complete,” and then break the rules of hermeneutics by applying these constructions to the

clearer passages that talk of perishing, being consumed, and being destroyed, and suffering death.

## 7 Epilogue

I became a Christian at age 20 in my senior year of college but got involved with a highly controlling spiritual ministry. I changed churches and sought healing for many years, but after 10 years, I left Christianity entirely in order to find the truth myself. I couldn't reform what I had because the foundations were riddled with legalism and bad theology. One of the secondary reasons I left was because I sensed that ET was somehow disproportionate and unjust. Unsurprisingly, this one sticking point is often one of the main sticking points of influential intellectual atheists such as Bertrand Russel, Robert Ingersoll, Lewis Carrol, and even Thomas Hobbes.<sup>5, 6, 7, 8</sup> As I explored many modalities of recovery outside of Christianity, including psychology, inner child work, A Course in Miracles, yoga, and Buddhist meditation, I finally realized that Jesu was unique and truly the way. I still found ET to be unjust, but I merely concluded that what I *did* believe about Jesus was sufficient to follow Him, and any unanswered questions I had could be put on the back burner.

---

<sup>5</sup> "There is one very serious defect to my mind in Christ's moral character, and that is that He believed in hell. I do not myself feel that any person who is profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment. (Russell, 1940)

<sup>6</sup> "They say that God says to me, "Forgive your enemies." I say, "I do;" but he says, "I will damn mine." God should be consistent. If he wants me to forgive my enemies, he should forgive his. I am asked to forgive enemies who can hurt me. God is only asked to forgive enemies that cannot hurt him. He certainly ought to be as generous as he asks us to be." (Robert Ingersoll, 1905)

<sup>7</sup> "When all has been considered, it seems to me to be irresistible intuition that infinite punishment for finite sin would be unjust, and therefore wrong. We feel that even weak and erring Man would shrink from such an act. And we cannot conceive of God as acting on a lower standard of right and wrong." (Carroll, 1961)

<sup>8</sup> "I find it difficult to believe that God who is the father of mercies, that doth in heaven and earth all that he will; that hath the hearts of all men in his disposing; that worketh in men both to do and to will; and without whose free gift a man hath neither inclination to good, nor repentance of evil, should punish men's transgressions without any end of time and with all the extremity of torture, that men can imagine and more. (Hobbes, 1962)

Years later, after returning to Christianity, I was functioning as an Assistant Teaching Pastor in a small country church in California, and the senior pastor announced that we would be spending the next year teaching through Romans. I proceeded to buy several commentaries on Romans, including Stott's (Stott, 2014), which I found superb. Tangentially, I heard that this excellent expositor had written a treatise defending an alternate view of hell, i.e. Conditional Immortality. I trusted this initial exposition, and then followed up on the subject. As I examined the scriptures for myself, I found that the traditional explanation folded like a house of cards upon close examination, and scriptures such as John 3:16 ("shall not perish") began to make clear sense – it had always been in front of me, but occluded by the power of the traditional viewpoint, which as it turned out, was based on tradition as much as exposition.

This important revision not only removes a lot of unnecessary moral objections to Christianity due to ET, it makes simpler sense of the scriptures, and has huge implications on our approach to evangelism (Sinclair, 2014). While this is not my main bailiwick, I have done some podcasts with the team at [rethinkinghell.com](http://rethinkinghell.com) and done at least one presentation at one of their conferences (Sinclair, 2015).

## 8 References

- Beale, G. K., Block, D. I., Ferguson, S. B., Jr, R. A. M., Moo, D. J., Packer, J. I., & Yarbrough, R. (2009). *Hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment* (C. W. Morgan & R. A. Peterson, Eds.). Zondervan Academic.
- Carroll, L. (1961). *Diversions and digressions of Lewis Carroll*. Dover Publications.
- Constable, H. (2015). *The Duration and Nature of Future Punishment*. Ichthus Publications.
- Date, C., & Stump, G. G. (Eds.). (2014). *Rethinking Hell: Readings in Evangelical Conditionalism*. Cascade Books.
- Edwards, D. L., & Stott, J. (1989). *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal Evangelical Dialogue*.
- Fudge, E. W. (2011). *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment. 3rd edition, fully updated, revised and expanded* (Updated, Revised, Expanded edition). Cascade Books.
- Garber, D., & Ayers, M. (Eds.). (2003). *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy 2 Volume Paperback Set* (2nd Edition). Cambridge University Press.
- Gomes, A. W. (1999). Evangelicals and the annihilation of hell, Part 1. *Christian Research Journal, Spring 1999*.  
[http://www.biblicalcatholic.com/apologetics/EvangelicalsAnnihilationHell\\_Gomes.pdf](http://www.biblicalcatholic.com/apologetics/EvangelicalsAnnihilationHell_Gomes.pdf)
- Heard, J. B. (1868). *The Tripartite Nature of Man: Spirit, Soul, and Body, Applied to Illustrate and Explain the Doctrines of Original Sin, the New Birth, the Disembodied State, and the Spiritual Body*. Andesite Press.
- Hobbes, T. (1962). *Leviathan; or, The matter, forme and power of a commonwealth, ecclesiasticall and civil*. Collier Books.
- Miller, D. (2002). *Did Jesus Go to Hell? Did He Preach to Spirits in Prison?*  
<http://www.apologeticspress.org/APContent.aspx?category=10&article=851>

Robert Ingersoll. (1905). *Lectures and Essays (A Selection)*. Watts and Company.

Russell, B. (1940). *Why I am not a Christian*. Freethought Press Association.

Sinclair, D. (2014, July). Conditionalism and Evangelism. *Whole Reason*.

<https://www.wholereason.com/2014/07/conditionalism-and-evangelism.html>

Sinclair, D. (2015, July). *A Philosophical Case for Conditional Immortality (Slides and Audio)*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NsJ0-X78R9Y>

*Statement on Evangelical Conditionalism*. (n.d.). Rethinking Hell. Retrieved October 22, 2020,

from <http://rethinkinghell.com/statement/>

Stott, J. (2014). *The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World*. IVP Academic.

Tanksly Jr, W., & Demler, R. (2016, December 6). *Annihilation in 2 Thessalonians 1:9 (Part 2):*

*Separation or Obliteration?—The Present Controversy*. Rethinking Hell.

<http://rethinkinghell.com/2016/12/05/annihilation-in-2-thess-1-9-part-2-separation-or-obliteration/>