



MODERN REFORMATION

Hell: The "Minority" View
(May-June, 2002)

An Interview with Edward Fudge

That it is a minority view, which contradicts several ecclesiastical creeds, should not matter, since we all agree that truth is learned from Scripture and not from polls or human creeds.

MR: For those unfamiliar with your teaching on hell or eternal punishment, would you please summarize it briefly? Is it fair to call your view "conditional"?

EF: First, let me say, I appreciate the desire of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals to call us back to Scripture, and to distinguish authentic scriptural teaching from the pollutions of later human creeds and culture. Those are also my own goals in ministry. I share most of the conclusions expressed in the Cambridge Declaration.

There is one point, however, on which we still disagree. That point concerns the precise nature of eternal punishment. Or, to say it another way, it concerns the effect of hell's fire on those who are sentenced to it. The Cambridge Declaration upholds the majority traditional view, that "eternal punishment" means that the lost will be kept alive forever in hell, where they will endure conscious torments forever and ever without end.

I do not believe that the Bible teaches that the lost will be made immortal, or that they will suffer torments without end. Instead, I believe Scripture teaches that God will

"destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28), and that "eternal punishment" means being "punished" with "eternal destruction" (2 Thess. 1:9). Our God is a "consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29). Because hell's fire cannot be extinguished ("unquenchable"), it will eventually "burn up" those sentenced to it (Matt. 3:12). In the end, the wages of sin really is "death"-to which the contrast is "eternal life" (Rom. 6:23; Rev. 21:8).

This view is neither eccentric nor cultish, having being advocated, held, or allowed by such faithful luminaries as F. F. Bruce, Michael Green, W. Graham Scroggie, Dale Moody, Clark Pinnock, John Wenham, E. Earle Ellis, Philip E. Hughes, Homer Hailey, and John Stott. That it is a minority view, which contradicts several ecclesiastical creeds, should not matter, since we all agree that truth is learned from Scripture and not from polls or human creeds. (It is entirely consistent, by the way, with the truly universal Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed.)

This understanding of Scripture is sometimes called "conditional immortality" and those who hold it are sometimes called "conditionalists." These labels point to the truths that God alone is inherently immortal (1 Tim. 6:16) and that any human who finally enjoys immortality will do so as God's gift, conditional on receiving his grace in Jesus Christ.

This position rests on hundreds of scriptures from throughout the entire Bible. I have summarized that scriptural teaching in *Two Views Of Hell*, which I coauthored with Robert A. Peterson (IVP, 2000), and set it out in detail in the much larger book, *The Fire That Consumes* (www.iUniverse.com).

This scriptural base includes messianic texts from the Old Testament, which picture the wicked's final destiny as perishing and being shattered like earthenware (Ps. 2:9, 12), as corpses (Ps. 110:5-6), as slain (Isa. 11:4), as corpses devoured by maggots and by fire (Isa. 66:24), and as chaff that burns until nothing is left-ashes under the feet of the righteous (Mal. 4:1, 3). It includes the entire recorded teaching of Jesus in the Gospels, who warns that God can destroy soul as well as body, and who compares the wicked's end to that of a house destroyed by a hurricane or typhoon (Matt. 7:27). It includes all that Jesus said about "hell" or Gehenna (an eschatological name borrowed from the Jerusalem garbage dump, a disgusting place of perpetually smoldering fire and stomach-turning putrefaction).

Such a scenario completely satisfies Jesus' statement that some will go away into "eternal punishment." The word punishment says that there will be penal consequences for wrongdoing, which are imposed by judicial authority. It does not say anything about the nature of that punishment itself, however. Paul explains what Jesus left vague, when he says that Jesus will "punish" the wicked with "eternal destruction" (2 Thess. 1:9). This punishment of eternal destruction is eternal punishment in two senses. Qualitatively, it is eternal because it pertains to the age to come. Quantitatively, it is

eternal because it lasts forever. The wicked, once destroyed, are gone forever. This destruction is fully as long-lasting as the eternal life and blessing of the saved.

MR: How different is your objection to the doctrine of Eternal Punishment from someone like Clark Pinnock?

EF: First of all, neither Clark nor I object to the doctrine of "eternal punishment," a teaching which comes from the mouth of Jesus himself. We do object to the traditional interpretation of that doctrine. Those who argue for unending conscious torment often call their interpretation "the doctrine of Eternal Punishment." Whether intentionally or unwittingly, they equate a particular human understanding with scriptural doctrine -- assuming what they need to prove.

That said, I believe that Clark and I share the same understanding of Scripture on this subject, as well as the same critique of the traditional doctrine's evolution through the course of church history.

MR: What is your chief criticism of the doctrine of Eternal Punishment? Is it mainly a question of what the Bible teaches? Or are your concerns apologetic, e.g., does Hell keep non-believers from accepting the truth of the gospel?

EF: See, you did it again! (Smile.) I have no criticism of "the doctrine of eternal punishment." I teach the doctrine of eternal punishment. What I criticize (and totally reject) is the interpretation of "eternal punishment" which says that God will make the wicked immortal in order to torment them forever and ever without end.

The reason -- and the only reason -- that I reject that interpretation of "eternal punishment" is that I do not find it taught anywhere in the Bible. Instead, I find the Bible to teach -- from Genesis to Revelation -- that the wicked will finally die, perish and be destroyed. That fate stands in sharp contrast to the destiny of the saved, to whom God will give immortality (deathlessness) to enjoy eternal life with him forever.

After I had reached these conclusions during a year of intensive exegetical study of pertinent passages throughout the whole Bible, I began to discover several of their implications. One of those implications involved apologetics and missions.

There are many people, I came to realize, for whom the traditional doctrine of unending conscious torment seems to contradict (if not to blaspheme) the character of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. For many individuals, learning that "eternal punishment" means conscious suffering according to precise divine justice, then ceasing to exist forever, removes an offense to the gospel. I have always insisted, however, that such implications must follow exegesis. We cannot start with our conception of what we think ought to be (as people holding both these views sometimes do). We must begin

by asking what the Bible actually teaches, then let the implications follow however they might.

MR: How do you explain Christ's teaching in Matt. 25: 31-46, especially verse 41 where Christ says of the King that he will say to those on his left, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels"?

EF: I have briefly discussed "eternal punishment" in this passage. As for "eternal fire," Jude tells us, in verse seven of his epistle, that Sodom and Gomorrah "are exhibited as an example, in undergoing the punishment of eternal fire" (NASB). The NIV says that those cities, which were totally and irreversibly destroyed by (probably volcanic) fire and burning sulfur, "serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire." What does "eternal fire" do? It destroys forever, and Sodom is an example of that. Of course, in the Matthew passage in particular, "eternal" probably also has connotations of the Age to Come.

MR: You have said that the doctrine of Hell is inconsistent with the character of God revealed in Scripture. If so, what does Christ's suffering and descent into Hell reveal about the character of God? Wouldn't his death indicate that in addition to being a God of love, he is also a God of righteous anger?

The "doctrine of hell" is not inconsistent the character of God, but I believe that the traditional interpretation of that doctrine is wholly inconsistent with God's character as revealed in Jesus Christ. The Bible clearly teaches that God is also a God of righteous anger. The New Testament contains many references to the "wrath" of God. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God! I would never minimize God's wrath, and I would chide anyone who does. At the same time, we cannot use our own imagination or sense of propriety to define what the outworking of divine wrath against the wicked will be. For that, we must be bound by and limited to Holy Scripture.

As you know, scholars are not of one opinion about the meaning of the creedal phrase concerning Christ's descent into hell. It is possible that the original meaning was that he truly died. Whatever the creed means, the Bible makes it absolutely plain that Jesus Christ did die on the Cross as a substitute for all his people, vicariously bearing the punishment of all who finally will be saved. That is entirely consistent with my understanding of eternal punishment, since the wages of sin is "death" and the wicked finally experience the "second death."

MR: What happens to the souls of those who experience punishment and do not go to Heaven? Is it possible for souls to be destroyed? If so, does this involve a denial of the immortality of the soul?

EF: Jesus warned that God is able to destroy both soul and body in hell (Matt. 10:28). The clear implication is that he intends to do just that. I am glad that you asked this question, however, because it goes to the origins of the notion of unending conscious torment within Christian doctrine. During the second century, several notable Greek philosophers became Christians. They brought with them into the Church the pagan Greek teaching that every person has a mortal (dying) body and an immortal (deathless) soul.

These Apologists, as they came to be known, admitted that the Bible teaches that only God has immortality in himself. They argued that God created the human soul immortal, but admitted that, as its creator, God could even destroy an immortal soul if he wished to do so. But when they talked about hell, they forgot their earlier admissions. The soul is immortal, they reasoned, and it cannot be destroyed. When Jesus warned that God can destroy the soul in hell, for example, Tertullian explained that the soul is incapable of destruction because it is immortal. He then concluded that "destroy" must really mean to keep alive in perpetual torment forever. I document all this in both of my books on this subject.

Whenever the Bible uses the words "immortal" or "immortality" of human beings, it always does so in terms of the resurrection (never of creation); always in terms of the body (never of a disembodied soul or spirit); and always of the saved (never of the lost). Most Bible scholars today, evangelical and non-evangelical alike, acknowledge that the Bible does not teach the immortality of the soul in the sense Tertullian spoke of it.

The traditional interpretation of unending conscious torment originated from the notion that souls cannot die, perish or be destroyed. Now that we know that notion to be false, we are free to accept at face value the multitude of Scripture verses which use those very terms to describe the final destiny of the lost. The Bible teaches eternal punishment. It is the punishment of everlasting destruction.

MR: Since it was possible for Adam after he sinned to die and still be alive, isn't it also conceivable that perishing or being destroyed could also involve continuing existence for those in Hell?

EF: In Genesis 2:17, God prohibits Adam from partaking of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, warning that "in the day that you eat from it, you shall surely die." Our modern idiom would say: "the moment you eat from it, you are a dead man!" Adam actually died at age 930 (Gen. 5:5), but he came under death's sentence on the day he ate the forbidden fruit.

Adam was not immortal by nature, and neither are we, for God only possesses immortality. However, Adam could have received immortality if he had obeyed the Creator (symbolized by eating from the Tree of Life). Instead, Adam sinned and came under penalty of death (mortality) -- a state shared by all persons whom Adam represented (everyone except Jesus Christ, the "last Adam" and representative head of a new humanity).

When Christ returns, God will give immortality to all who belong to Christ, either by resurrection (if dead) or instantaneous transformation (if still living). As noted earlier, the Bible speaks of "immortality" only in terms of the saved, never of the lost. Although God will raise the wicked dead, they are raised to be judged and, finally, to experience the second death. The saved are raised immortal, for eternal life.

MR: On the matter of biblical teaching, what do you make of Mark 9:48 which says of hell that it is a place "where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched."

EF: Jesus quotes this language from Isaiah 66:24, where the prophet portrays the Age to Come ("the new heavens and the new earth," v. 22). Borrowing imagery from the literal Gehenna, ancient Jerusalem's garbage dump, God portrays the saved as they observe the destruction of the lost: "They shall go forth and look on the corpses of the men who have transgressed against Me. For their worm shall not die, and their fire shall not be quenched; and they shall be an abhorrence to all mankind" (NASB).

This is not a picture of living beings suffering torment, but of dead people ("corpses") being consumed by maggots and by fire. The worm keeps eating and the fire keeps burning until nothing is left to eat or to burn. In this scene, the lost are already dead. They have been "slain" by God (Isa. 66:16). They have "come to an end altogether" (Isa. 66:17). They are nothing but "corpses" -- corpses already being consumed (Isa. 66:24). This picture elicits stomach-turning disgust and revulsion ("abhorrence," v. 24; the same Hebrew word used of the lost in Dan. 12:2). By the time of the scene portrayed in Isaiah 66:24, only the saved are still alive. "All mankind" worships God (Isa. 66:23). Those who are not saved are dead in the second death.

Jesus certainly could have changed this imagery or its meaning if he wished to do so. However, he merely quoted it and did not change it at all. In fact, Jesus confirmed Isaiah's meaning when he warned that God is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. Only later did certain Christian commentators interpret this standard biblical picture of destruction to mean a life in torment that never ends. The traditional view of everlasting torture in hell contradicts this passage in Isaiah which Jesus quotes but does not change.

MR: Likewise, what about the Parable of the Rich Man in Luke 16 which suggests a person undergoing ongoing punishment?

EF: Hell's destructive process (which culminates in the second death) will involve whatever conscious torment God determines to be necessary in each individual case. The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus does not teach us anything about that torment, however. Its whole story occurs while the Rich Man's brothers are still living on earth, during an era when Moses and the prophets represent God's final authority. If the parable's context and its "punch-line" mean anything, they suggest that Jesus' point involves the importance of making right choices while one is living, because afterward will be too late. Even if this story were taken literally, which practically no one does, it says nothing about the events that will follow Christ's return and the Final Judgment.

The Bible does teach "ongoing punishment" following the Judgment. That is the punishment of everlasting destruction, the second death. The person who suffers this fate will truly "die," "perish" and be "destroyed" -- forever and ever without end. That destiny -- not eternal conscious torment -- is the "eternal punishment" of which Jesus solemnly warned.

In closing, thank you for this opportunity to dialogue with your readers. I encourage each one to study the Bible afresh on this topic, and to allow Scripture (rather than any human creed or statement of faith) to have the final word. That is all anyone has the right to ask. As evangelical Christians, however, it is also our duty which we have no right to avoid.

Please visit *New Reformation* magazine at

<http://www.modernreformation.org/default.php?page=main>