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## THE PROBLEM OF ETERNAL PUNISHMENT

(1990)

Packer has consistently shown himself to be a staunch defender of traditional evangelical teachings, even when these are the subject of considerable discussion within the evangelical constituency. A case in point is Packer's vigorous defence of the concept of eternal punishment – a notion which has come under considerable revisionary scrutiny on the part of evangelicals since about 1980, with growing interest in the idea of 'conditional immortality'.<sup>1</sup> Those who affirm 'conditional immortality' – who are often referred to as 'conditionalists' – deny that the human soul is created inherently immortal. Conditionalists argue that immortality is not a natural attribute of humankind but is a specific additional gift to humanity, and is conditional upon faith and repentance. Immortality is thus 'conditional' in the sense that certain conditions must be met before the sinner can receive everlasting personal existence. Conditionalists contrast their position with what they perceive to be the traditional teaching, namely, that the soul is by nature absolutely impervious to destruction. At present, it seems that most evangelicals continue to hold that the doctrine of conditional immortality is unbiblical. However, a related debate has also developed, in which some of the arguments associated with universalism appear to have found at least a degree of acceptance in some evangelical circles. How, universalists demanded, could a God of love consign anyone to eternal torment? Was not the traditional doctrine of hell inconsistent with the idea of a loving God?

For some evangelicals, this question had merit. The idea that no-one will

suffer eternal torment has gradually emerged as a significant viewpoint within evangelicalism since 1988, when two leading evangelical writers committed themselves in print to the idea of 'conditional immortality'. This idea can be defined as the belief that God created humanity with the potential to be immortal. Immortality is a gift conveyed by grace through faith when the believer receives eternal life and becomes a partaker of the divine nature. The distinctive feature of the teaching is that it sees no continuing place for human beings to exist in continuous torment, unreconciled to God.<sup>2</sup> The traditional view held that humanity was immortal, and was therefore subject to eternal life or eternal punishment. The 'conditionalist' approach argued that immortality was bestowed only on those who were to be saved, so that none would endure the torment of eternal punishment in hell.

In 1988, two leading conservative evangelicals published their doubts concerning the traditional understanding of the nature of hell and eternal punishment, and tentatively advocated annihilationism as a serious option for evangelicals. Philip E. Hughes, a former Librarian of Latimer House (see p. 13), and subsequently a member of the faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary, published his views in *The True Image*; John R. W. Stott contributed to a dialogue with David L. Edwards, in which he affirmed (although very tentatively) his inclination to believe in the final annihilation of the wicked, rather than their eternal punishment. Stott stressed that he stated this view with some hesitation, partly on account of his 'great respect for longstanding tradition which claims to be a true interpretation of Scripture' and partly because of his high regard and concern for 'the unity of the worldwide evangelical constituency'.<sup>3</sup> Additional support for such views also came from John Wenham, the veteran English conservative evangelical, who indicated that he had come round to this way of thinking as early as 1934, partly through the influence of Basil Atkinson, widely regarded as a bastion of orthodoxy in evangelical student circles.<sup>4</sup>

All of these writers were colleagues of Packer, with whom he had worked closely in the past, especially in connection with Latimer House. It was not an easy situation for Packer, in that his personal regard for the people concerned had to be set against his fundamental belief that their ideas were misguided and misleading. Another noted proponent of conditional immortality was Clark Pinnock, whom Packer had succeeded as Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology at Regent College.<sup>5</sup>

Packer responded to these developments in the annual Leon Morris Lecture, delivered to the Evangelical Alliance in the Australian city of Melbourne on Friday 31 August 1990. The lecture commemorated the considerable achievements of Leon Morris, one of Australia's leading

evangelicals, who served with great distinction as Principal of Ridley College, Melbourne. Packer chose as his topic 'The Problem of Eternal Punishment', and indicated that he wished his lecture to be seen as 'a dissuasive from universalism and conditionalism, and particularly from conditionalism'. Packer argued that the doctrine of eternal punishment was an integral aspect of 'the Christianity taught by the Lord Jesus Christ and his apostles', pointing out that it was also found in the writings of Christian theologians as diverse as Tertullian, Thomas Aquinas and Jonathan Edwards. The teaching is also found in the Westminster Confession; which affirmed that 'the souls of the wicked are cast into Hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness'. Packer appealed to W. G. T. Shedd's famous work *The Doctrine of Endless Punishment*, first published in 1885, and reprinted by the Banner of Truth Trust in 1986. Shedd pointed to the teaching of Christ himself as the strongest warrant for the doctrine of endless punishment. Packer concurred, and pointed particularly to the parable of the sheep and the goats, in which Christ speaks explicitly of the goats being sent away to 'eternal fire' and 'eternal punishment'. (Matt. 25:41, 46). Eternal punishment is thus, according to Jesus, departure into eternal fire.

The debate is complex, and involves a number of issues. The interpretation of a substantial number of biblical passages is clearly of importance, although other questions also emerge as significant. Perhaps the most important of these is the question whether God creates human souls in a state of immortality (the traditional view) or with the potential for immortality (the conditionalist view). Packer was quite clear that conditionalism missed out on 'the awesome dignity of our having been made to last for eternity'. However, it is clear that one of Packer's major concerns was the impact of conditionalist teaching on evangelism. Conditionalism seriously detracted from the motivation for evangelism, in that if there is no everlasting punishment from which a sinner is to be delivered, there is correspondingly little reason to preach a gospel of deliverance. There can be no doubt that one of Packer's major concerns here – shared by others defending this position – is that missionary activity is seriously endangered by the belief, which removes a fundamental motivation for preaching the gospel.

### Related works by Packer

'The Way of Salvation: I. What is Salvation. II. What is Faith? III. The Problem of Universalism. IV: Are Non-Christian Faiths Ways of Salvation?' *Bibliotheca Sacra* 129 (1972), pp. 105–125; 291–306; 130 (1973), pp.3–10; 110–116.

'Good Pagans and God's Kingdom', *Christianity Today*, 17 January 1986, pp. 27–31.

'Evangelicals and the Way of Salvation: New Challenges to the Gospel', in C. F. H. Henry and K. Kantzer (eds.), *Evangelical Affirmations*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990, pp. 107–136.

## The problem of eternal punishment

I count it a great privilege, and feel it as a great pleasure, to be delivering this Leon Morris Lecture today: for Dr Morris, an old friend and one still happily with us, is a man whom I, with many more, am delighted to honour. A versatile and productive scholar, a fluent speaker, and above all a man of God, he has made an outstanding contribution to biblical and theological study, and to ongoing evangelical life, in Australia, Britain, North America, and in a more diffused sense worldwide. I would honour him both as an academic of highest ability who has never compromised his intellectual integrity and also as an evangelical for whom the cross of Christ, as an achievement of redemptive penal substitution, has always been the main theme, and the person of Christ, as the proper object of faith, hope, and love, has always been the central focus. So it seems to me most appropriate that I should offer you in this lecture a subsidiary to Dr Morris' own work, and that was one factor determining the subject that I have chosen. The article, 'Eternal Punishment', in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, published in 1984, was written by Dr Morris, and, following a dismissal of universalism and conditional immortality, it ends thus: 'If we are to be true to the whole teaching of Scripture, we must come to the conclusion that the ultimate fate of the wicked is eternal punishment, though we must add that we have no way of knowing in exactly what that punishment consists.' That statement is the springboard off which I dive in what follows.

### I

At Regent College, from time to time, we have fun. (We are not, of course, alone in that; what serious community does not need an occasional giggle to speed it on its way?) One bit of Regent fun was the appearance in faculty mail boxes on

April 1st this year of a spoof course programme. Our New Testament pundit, who writes on hermeneutics, was down to lecture on 'How to Prove Anything from the Bible'. The Principal of the Baptist college with which we work was to give instruction in 'What the Bible Teaches about Infant Baptism', and his colleague, whose speciality is family ministries, was slated for one course on 'How to Conquer Self-Doubt through Pretence and Ostentation', and for another on 'Motivating your Children by Guilt and Fear'. My assignment was 'Guilt without Sex: an Introduction to Puritan Theology', and our new Professor of Theology was given the theme, 'Overcoming Peace of Mind: the Doctrine of Eternal Punishment'.

Overcoming peace of mind ... Many a true word is spoken in jest, and it certainly is true that to any normal person the thought that people one knows and cares for, not to mention oneself, might face a destiny that could be described as eternal punishment, will be profoundly disturbing. It rudely disrupts the sort of peace of mind that we in the western world cultivate today – the peace of mind, that is, that is gained by constantly telling oneself that there is nothing to worry about, and everything will work out all right in the end. But since this complacency is part of our culture, and is sniffed like glue in the air we breathe, and does in fact operate as a deadening drug on the mind, it is a kind of knee-jerk reaction with us to resent having it disturbed, and hence to dismiss the doctrine of eternal punishment in all its forms as debased Christianity. We scoff at hell fire as a bad dream, the murky stamping-ground of redneck fundamentalists, backwoods preachers, and old-fashioned Roman Catholics. For ourselves, we write off the idea as a hangover from primitive ages now long past, and when we meet someone who still believes in eternal punishment we regard him as at least quaint, and perhaps weird; we certainly do not take him seriously. We know, of course, that belief in eternal punishment has been part of the mainstream of Christian conviction from the first. Maybe we know that Tertullian in the third century, and Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth, taught that the sufferings of those in hell would be a joyful spectacle to those in heaven – a notion affirmed also by Jonathan Edwards, whose famous or infamous sermon, 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God', was, of course (so we were all taught at school), the product of a sick mind. We know, too, that belief in eternal punishment bulked large in all forms of Victorian Christianity; but, just as we would not dream of aping the Victorians in other matters, so we acquit ourselves of any responsibility to go along with them in this. Hell is dead, we say; so back to peace of mind!

How should we respond to this? I hold no special brief for Victorian Christianity, or for Edwards, or Aquinas, or Tertullian; but I do hold a brief for that to which they all appealed, namely the Christianity taught by the Lord

Jesus Christ and his apostles, and my first task now must be to point out as forcefully as I can that Jesus and the apostles do not let us off the hook with regard to eternal punishment as we so blithely let ourselves off it. Rather, they impale us on that hook and make us face this issue directly. The doctrine of eternal punishment stems directly from Jesus, and the apostolic teaching on the subject simply echoes what the founder of Christianity first said. And no Greek myth-maker or Jewish apocalyptic fantasist ever spoke of eternal punishment with such weight and gravity as Jesus did. As W. G. T. Shedd affirmed in a landmark statement a century ago: 'The strongest support of the doctrine of Endless Punishment is the teaching of Christ, the Redeemer of men ... Christ could not have warned men so frequently and earnestly as He did against "the fire that shall never be quenched," and "the worm that dieth not," had he known that there is no future peril to fully correspond to them ... Jesus Christ is the Person who is responsible for the doctrine of Eternal Perdition. He is the Being with whom all opponents of this theological tenet are in conflict.' This is a strong statement, but the evidence warrants it, as we shall now see.

'Eternal punishment' is Jesus' own phrase. It comes from the passage that pictures the day of judgment in terms of the Son of Man, now returned as King, separating sheep from goats (that is, two classes of human beings from each other). To the goats his word is: "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" ... Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life' (Matt. 25:41, 46). 'Eternal' in these phrases is *aiōnios*, meaning, as has often been pointed out, not 'endless', but pertaining to the 'age to come', as distinct from the order of things that now is. However, the age to come, as Jesus and the Jews conceived it, was to be unending; therefore *aiōnios* implies the unending continuance of that to which it refers, unless something is said to show the contrary. In verse 46, Jesus' statement about the eternal life into which the sheep enter and the eternal punishment into which the goats go is clearly a conscious parallelism on his part; so if eternal life is taken to be unending, as surely it must be, the only natural supposition is that eternal punishment is unending also.

Eternal punishment, then, as Jesus declares it, is departure into eternal fire. Of this fire Jesus had spoken often, using for it the word *gehenna*, the Greek form of Ge Hinnom, 'Valley of Hinnom'. This was an area outside the wall of Jerusalem where children had once been offered as burnt sacrifices to Molech (2 Chr. 28:3; 33:6), and which had become the city's incinerator area where the city's garbage and the discarded corpses of the familyless were daily burned. In the Sermon on the Mount we find Jesus saying to his own professed disciples that anyone calling his brother a fool (an index of malicious contempt

in one's heart) 'will be in danger of the fire of hell' (literally, 'the Gehenna of fire') (Matt. 5:22). In Matthew 18:9 he refers again to 'the Gehenna of fire', as an equivalent of 'eternal fire' (literally, 'the fire that is *aiōnios*') in the verse before. The passage runs: 'If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.'

Another version of this same bit of teaching in Mark's Gospel speaks of a person with two hands going into 'Gehenna, where the fire never goes out' and of a person with two eyes being 'thrown into Gehenna, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched' (Mark 9:43, 48, echoing imagery from Is. 66:24, which speaks of the worm and the fire destroying corpses, but applying the imagery to the fate of living souls).

With all this should be linked Jesus' picture of tares and bad fish being finally taken out of the kingdom and thrown into 'the fiery furnace' (literally, 'the furnace of the fire'), where there will be 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matt. 13:42, 50), and also the grim form of Jesus' call for courage as he sends out the twelve on mission: 'Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell' (Matt. 10:28). 'Destroy' in that verse is *apollymi*, the regular Greek word for wrecking and ruining something, so making it useless for its intended purpose, and 'hell' is Gehenna; and the One to be feared is not the devil, but the One whom Jesus called Father.

What does all this add up to? We may summarize as follows: Jesus speaks of a destiny of being in the fire for all people everywhere (in Matt. 25:32 the sheep and the goats are between them 'all the nations') whom he does not accept as his own. He calls the fire Gehenna, and describes it as *aiōnios*, part of the abiding future order of things, and as never going out. To enter or be thrown into it (Jesus uses both verbs) brings unqualified distress ('weeping and gnashing of teeth': a condition that Jesus elsewhere ascribes, we should note, to those banished at judgment day to 'the darkness outside', Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30). Clearly, we are in the world of imagery here, for the fire and the darkness are both picturing the same condition, one of painful and hopeless desolation; and equally clearly, what is being pictured is a condition that is unimaginably dreadful, one that it is worth any labour and any cost to avoid. And the speaker is the incarnate Son of God, our divine instructor, who if anyone should know what he is talking about and should therefore be heard as having authority when he deals with these things.

The apostolic writers use their own vocabulary, but for substance they do

no more, just as they do no less, than follow in their Master's footsteps. Here are some sample passages.

Paul warns each impenitent person thus: 'you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God "will give to each person according to what he has done"' (a quote from Ps. 62:12). 'For those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil ... God does not show favouritism. All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law ... This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares' (Rom. 2:5-6, 8-9, 11, 16). Thus Paul states the principle, and affirms the certainty, of final judgment and final ruin.

More dramatically, Paul also declares: 'When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire ... 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 ...' (2 Thess. 1:7-9). 'Everlasting' is *aiōnios*, reasonably so translated, as we have seen; 'destruction' is *olethros*, a noun from *apollymi*, signifying a reduction to ruin, which Paul also used in 1 Thessalonians 5:3 and 1 Timothy 6:9.

Jude's brief letter includes both Jesus' images for the state of final loss. Verse 7 reads: 'Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality ... They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.' Verse 13 speaks of certain immoral folk in the church as 'wandering stars, for whom blackest darkness' (literally, as in KJV, 'the blackness of darkness') 'has been reserved for ever'. It has sometimes been suggested that the eternal fire is an image of immediate annihilation, but Jude's phrase, 'darkness ... reserved for ever', surely indicates that he did not mean his words about the fire to be taken that way.

In the book of Revelation, the long visionary appendix to the Lord's letters (chs. 4 - 22) intensifies the Lord's picture of eternal fire in a deliberately excruciating way, doing canonically what 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God' attempted later, and for the same pastoral reason: to lead people to embrace and hold fast life in Christ, and not to risk the alternative. Revelation 14:9-11 warns that anyone who worships the beast 'will be tormented with burning sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever.' Revelation 20:10 pictures a lake of burning sulphur into which at the last judgment the devil, the beast, and the false prophet are thrown, to be 'tormented day and night for ever and ever'; then in verse 14 death and Hades are thrown into it, and it is identified with

'the second death', which verse 6 had told us would have no power over God's saints; and then, climactically, verse 15 declares: 'If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life' (of which we heard in 3:5, and will hear again in 21:17) 'he was thrown into the lake of fire.' In the context of this build-up, and in the light of the explicit statement of 14:11, it is excessively unnatural to suppose, as some do, that being thrown into the lake of fire means anything less than pain and grief without end.

It is true that in the inter-testamental literature of Judaism (such books as 2 and 4 Maccabees, the Wisdom of Solomon, Judith, Ecclesiasticus, Jubilees, 2 Baruch, and the Assumption of Moses) the imagery of Gehenna and predictions of unending future torment for the ungodly are already present. Jesus and the apostles were therefore drawing on a stock of ideas and beliefs that already existed. This does not, however, in any way lessen the divine authority of these notions when the New Testament teachers endorse them. Moreover, 'endorse' is hardly the right word; for in using these ideas Jesus and the apostles purged them of the overtones of gloating that they had often carried before and imparted to them a nuance, or temper, or feeling-tone of what I can only call traumatic awe: a passionate gladness that justice will be done for God's glory, linked with an equally passionate sadness that fellow human beings, no matter how perverse, will thereby be ruined. This traumatic awe is reflected in Jesus' tearful words of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44), and in his compassionate admonition to the woman walking with him to Calvary ('Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children ...', Luke 23:28-31). Similar submissive sadness comes out in Paul's heart-cry about the Jews whose rejection by God he announces - 'I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers ...'; 'my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved' (Rom. 9:2-3; 10:1).

The same traumatic awe, or awe-filled trauma, will strike the soul of every thoughtful Christian with unconverted relatives and friends who takes seriously the promise that Jesus the Saviour will one day return to judge the living and the dead. And surely we may boldly say that, though it is not in the least comfortable, yet it is healthy for us to feel this trauma, and to be unable, like Paul before us, to find relief from the pain save in whole-hearted commitment to the ministry of spreading the gospel, in which we become all things to all men that by all means we may save some (1 Cor. 9:22), and so fulfil Jude's blunt summons: 'Snatch others from the fire and save them' (Jude 23). The only spiritual method of alleviating distress at the prospect of souls being lost is to take action to win them; and the theological way of stating that

is to say that God enables us to live with the prospect of people we know, or know of, possibly being lost by moving us to pray and work so that they may not be lost, and indeed using that prospect in our consciences to stir us to this mode of action.

But the eternal punishment of all the ungodly none the less remains a distressing truth to discuss; which makes it vital to have at command for the purpose a form of words that is conceptually clear but not emotionally loaded. I have made a policy decision about this, which I shall try to hold to for the rest of this lecture, and I would like to share it now. It has both a negative and a positive side.

Negatively: though the language of punishment, in the sense of God's judicial infliction, is abundantly scriptural, as we have seen, I am now going to drop it, for it conjures up unhelpful suspicions. The dictum of Goethe, 'we should always distrust anyone who has a desire to punish', would nowadays be reinforced by the followers of Freud; modern thought is sceptical as to whether punishment that does not serve the purpose of reforming the offender and safeguarding others can ever be justified; and talk about God's punitive role on the last day, when neither of these further goals can enter into the reckoning, is bound to feed the suspicion that God is in truth arbitrary and vindictive in a way that is not quite admirable, because it is not quite moral. Indeed, the widespread revolt against the idea of eternal punishment during the past century has sprung from this suspicion, and from a desire for doctrine that does not thus impugn God's character, rather than from any other source. So I think it best not to use vocabulary of punishment at all.

By the same token, I do not propose at any point to use the word 'torment', scriptural though it is (see the story of Dives and Lazarus: Luke 16:23, 28) for describing the state of the ungodly beyond this world. Its vibrations, too, are bad: to the modern mind, it suggests sadism and cruelty and torture, and what we are talking about is none of these things, but the adorable justice of a holy Creator who deals righteously with people according to their works.

In what terms, then, do I propose to carry on this discussion? I propose, positively, to speak henceforth of the divinely executed retributive process that operates in the world to come. This rule of speech has three advantages.

First, though admittedly clumsy, the phraseology is not emotionally loaded, and it should not cloud discussion by evoking prejudicial attitudes, for in our culture retribution retains its status as a moral rather than an immoral idea.

Second, individual retribution, as one aspect of the larger reality of divine judgment whereby evil is stopped in its tracks and righteousness restored, is precisely what we are talking about: the word fits. Punishment can be arbitrary and not proportionate to the wrongdoing, but retribution means that one's

past becomes the decisive factor in determining one's present, for one gets what one deserves.

And then, third, the language of retribution permits, in a way that punishment language does not, the blending in our minds of two thoughts that are blended in the Bible – namely, that the condemnation justly imposed by God as the Judge, vindicating righteousness, is also, and in a sense primarily, self-inflicted through our own perversity in choosing death rather than life. This biblical blending is clearest in John 3:18–20, where, having stated that 'whoever does not believe stands condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son', John continues: 'This is the process.' (So Dr Morris himself renders *krisis*, the Greek word used here. NIV has 'verdict', but that does not seem to be right; nor does NEB's 'test'. The thought being expressed is that this is how the process of judgment works in the present case.) 'Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed ...' In other words, we choose to retreat from God rather than repent before God, and God's judicial sentence is a ratifying for eternity of the sentence of separation from God that we by our own choice have already passed on ourselves. Teachers like C. S. Lewis stress the thought that no-one is in hell who has not chosen to be there, in the sense of choosing to be self-absorbed and to keep God out of his or her life, and that is evidently one aspect of the grim truth. It is an aspect that the idea of retribution readily covers.

## II

It may be that someone is still wondering why I chose to lecture on this sombre theme rather than on any other subject. This is the moment for me to explain why. In today's Christianity, what I am now calling the divinely executed retributive process that operates in the world to come is becoming more and more a problem area for belief. Uncertainty is growing, and growing in a way that has a very weakening effect on Christian witness. Let me describe to you the uncertainties that I see.

(1) *Christians in general are increasingly uncertain about the finality of God's condemnation of sinners at the judgment.*

As we have noted already, belief in the everlasting conscious distress of those that Jesus pictured as the goats whom he banished from his presence belonged to the Christian consensus from the first. Fathers, medievals, and moderns up to the time of the Enlightenment were unanimous about it; Protestants,

Catholics, and Orthodox were divided on many things, but not on this. The consensus existed not because the doctrine was congenial – Charles Hodge called it 'a doctrine which the natural heart revolts from and struggles against, and to which it submits only under stress of authority' – but because Bible-believers of all schools of thought and all church allegiances found it inescapable. But when the European Enlightenment, with the Romantic movement riding on its shoulders, invaded the Protestant churches in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it elbowed biblical authority aside, reconceived God's moral character in terms of benevolence without judgment, exalted man against the Bible as the real measure of all things – and, with increasing emphasis, rejected any thought of endless existence for anyone in hell. Universalism, which had hardly been heard of since its condemnation at the fifth general council in 543, re-emerged and gathered strength, and today it is a widespread and potent view among both Protestant and Roman Catholics. It is worth our while to pause for a moment and take a look at it.

Universalism, the doctrine that every human being, no matter how sinful, perverse, and guilty at this moment, will ultimately be brought to eternal life, has occasionally been formulated as an optimism of nature – 'no-one is really bad enough for God to condemn' – but it is generally stated as an optimism of grace. Its exponents do not question that all human beings deserve hell; but, they say, God's love is such that he will not finally damn any of us, or lose any of us, and Christ's cross is the guarantee of everyone's final salvation. Nothing less than a doctrine of universal salvation, so they claim, can do justice to the reality of God's love, and the magnitude of Christ's victory, and the wisdom of God in making a world into which sin could enter. Wishful thinking gives universalism a strong appeal: who would not like it to be true? Who can take pleasure in the thought of people being eternally lost? If you want to see folk damned, there is something wrong with you! Universalism is a comfortable doctrine in a way that the alternatives to it are not. But is universalism true? Only Scripture can tell us that; and when universalists move from general theological notions to the specific study of texts, insuperable difficulties arise to explode their hopeful and generous guesswork.

The universalist's problem is to circumvent the seemingly solid New Testament witness to the fate of unbelievers, whom Paul declares to be under sin, law, wrath, and death (so says Romans: 3:9, 19; 1:18; 5:17), alienated from God and without hope (so says Ephesians 2:12), and facing exclusion from God's presence for non-subjection to what they knew of his truth (Rom. 1:18 – 2:16), and for whom Jesus himself, as we have seen, predicts only fire and darkness. The problem is tackled in different ways by different universalists.

Thus, some Protestants simply jettison the dominical and apostolic



teaching about future retribution as a bad dream, effectively contradicted by a set of texts taken to affirm that universal salvation will one day be a fact. This solution depends on setting Scripture against Scripture.

Other Protestants affirm that those who leave this world in unbelief do indeed go to hell, but eventually come out of it, having been brought to their senses, and to a positive response to Christ who has met them there. Hell, on this view, does for unbelievers what Roman Catholics claim that purgatory does to believers – that is, it prepares them for heaven. What is being affirmed is salvation out of what the New Testament calls ‘eternal destruction’, ‘eternal punishment’, and ‘perdition’, through post-mortem encounter with Christ (a ‘second chance’ for some, a ‘first chance’ for others). This solution depends on relativizing an apparent biblical absolute, namely the fixed character of one’s destiny after this life ends.

Roman Catholic universalists go another way: they refuse to believe that any human beings fail to receive grace that moves them to seek God inwardly here and now, or that any form of religion in this world fails to bring its faithful adherents into God’s salvation. In the famous phraseology of Karl Rahner, the claim is that every human being is an ‘anonymous Christian’, so that the biblical threat of retribution for unbelievers does not touch any real people. This solution depends on positing grace in the heart where no sign of it appears in the life.

Older evangelicalism equated universalist teaching with the world’s first lie, the devil’s assurance to Eve in Eden, ‘You will not surely die’ (Gen. 3:4). In this the older evangelicalism, in my view, was right. But universalist speculations, hazardous and unconvincing as they are, continue to gain ground, especially among Protestants of liberal and ecumenical outlooks, and they undermine evangelistic concern wherever they take root. This is the increasing uncertainty that I see regarding the finality of condemnation of judgment day, and I confess that it troubles me greatly. So does the second uncertainty that I see around me, to which I now turn. Here it is.

(2) *Evangelicals in particular are increasingly uncertain about the ongoing existence of those who leave this world in unbelief.*

That one aspect of the hellishness of hell will be its endlessness has been a traditional evangelical conviction, often proclaimed in evangelistic and pastoral sermons, and never queried with any seriousness until the twentieth century. Evangelicals regretted the appearance in the last century of sects (Seventh-Day Adventists, Christadelphians, Jehovah’s Witnesses, to which must now be added Herbert W. Armstrong’s World-wide Church of God) which, along with some otherwise orthodox Christian teachers, affirmed the

extinction of unbelievers either at death or at the moment of final judgment or after a period in hell; all forms of this extinction idea were at first rated heretical. Recently, however, persons who may fairly be called accredited evangelicals of the main stream have written in favour of extinction, which they call either annihilationism or conditional immortality. These writers include John Wenham, veteran of the Tyndale Fellowship, the theological research unit of Britain’s UCCF (IVF under its new name), in *The Goodness of God*, 1974 (retitled in the USA *The Enigma of Evil*); Edward Fudge, member of America’s Evangelical Theological Society, in *The Fire that Consumes*, 1982; the late Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, senior Anglican Reformed theologian, in *The True Image*, 1988; and John Stott, one of the best-known and most admired evangelical leaders anywhere in the world, in *Essentials*, 1988.

In 1986 Peter Toon wrote, with reference mainly to Britain and North America: ‘In conservative circles there is a seeming reluctance to espouse publicly a doctrine of hell, and where it is held there is a seeming tendency towards a doctrine of hell as annihilation.’ He went on to refer to ‘conditional immortality, which appears to be gaining acceptance in evangelical orthodox circles’. His words, I guess, are truer in 1990 than when they first appeared. John Stott wrote: ‘The ultimate annihilation of the wicked should be accepted as a legitimate biblically founded alternative to their eternal conscious torment.’ But we need to ask: are the biblical foundations of conditionalism solid? Its advocates appear to back into it in horrified recoil from the thought of billions in endless distress, rather than move into it because the obvious meaning of Scripture beckons them. Let us look at the biblical arguments that are used. They reduce to four.

First, it is said that the New Testament terms for the fate of the lost – destruction and death, perdition and punishment, the worm and the fire – could mean annihilation; and various exegetical expedients are developed to show this. I will not say that these expedients are impossible, though none of them convinces me; but I will say, as emphatically as I can, that none of them is natural. In all the contexts, the natural meaning of the death-destruction-punishment-fire language is entry upon ruin and distress, not non-existence; and in all Bible study it is surely the natural meaning that should be embraced. Conditionalists’ attempts to evade the natural meaning of some dozens of relevant passages impress me as a prime case of avalanche-dodging.

Second, it is said that everlasting retribution would be needless cruelty, since God’s justice does not appear to require it. Reverence, I think, will leave it to God to know that his justice requires a means to his own fullest glory; but I would point out that this argument, if it proves anything, proves too much. For if it is needlessly cruel for God to keep the lost in being after judgment, no

reason can be given why it is not needlessly cruel for him to keep the lost in the conscious misery of the interim state (which Jesus' story of Dives shows that he does, Luke 16:23ff.), and then to raise them bodily in what Jesus calls 'the resurrection of judgment' (John 5:28). What God ought to do, on conditionalist principles, is annihilate unbelievers at death – but, as biblical conditionalists confess, he does not do this. So the conditionalist argument, which sought to clear God of the suspicion of needless cruelty, actually puts him under it. And in fact, the only way to dispel this suspicion is to affirm that every moment of the unbeliever's continuance after death, in the experience of reaping what he has sown and learning the bitterness of the choice he made, furthers the glory of God's holy justice: which is what I, for one, do affirm. But if that is so, then no reason can be given why the unbeliever's continuance should ever be thought to cease – particularly when, as I said when dealing with the first point, the natural implication of the New Testament language is that it does not cease.

Third, it is said that the harmony of the new heaven and earth will be marred if somewhere the lost continue to exist in impenitence and distress. But how can the conditionalists possibly know this? Their argument is pure speculation.

Fourth, it 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.

In *The True Image*, Philip Hughes sets these considerations within the frame of the thesis that God's one and only purpose in creating human beings was to perfect us in the image of his Son, who was later incarnate as Jesus Christ to be our Saviour from sin. God's re-creation of his sin-spoiled world now involves him in eliminating all traces of sin, and it is as part of that activity that he annihilates the lost. This is a kind of universalism in reverse, ensuring not that all who exist will be saved, but that only those who are saved will exist. But clearly, the logic of Hughes' view of God's sovereign purpose requires full universalism, and makes it inexplicable that God should not save everyone! There is real incoherence in Hughes' argument at this point.

Are the biblical foundations of conditionalism secure? I think not. Does it matter whether an evangelical is a conditionalist or not? I think it does: for a conditionalist's idea of God will miss out on the glory of divine justice, and his idea of worship will miss out on praise for God's judgments, and his idea of heaven will miss out on the thought that praise for God's judgments goes on

(cf. Rev. 16:5–7; 19:1–5), and his idea of man will miss out on the awesome dignity of our having been made to last for eternity, and in his preaching of the gospel he will miss out on telling the unconverted that their prospects without Christ are as bad as they possibly could be – for on the conditionalist view they aren't! These, surely, are sad losses. Conditionalism, logically thought through, cannot but impoverish a Christian man, and limit his usefulness to the Lord. That is why I am concerned about the current trend towards conditionalism. I hope it may soon be reversed.

If you think of this lecture as a dissuasive from universalism and conditionalism, and particularly from conditionalism, since that is the more tempting by-path for evangelicals at this moment, you will be correct.

### III

One final admonition. Do not speculate about the retributive process. Do not try to imagine what it is like to be in hell. The horrific imaginings of the past were hardly helpful, and often in fact proved a stumbling-block, as people equated the reality of hell with the lurid word-pictures drawn by Dante, or Edwards, or C. H. Spurgeon. Not that these men were wrong to draw their pictures, any more than Jesus was wrong to dwell on the fire and the worm; the mistake is to take such pictures as physical descriptions, when in fact they are imagery symbolizing realities of possible experience of which we can only say they are far, far worse than the symbols themselves. The words used by theologians, on the basis of Scripture, to describe hell – loss of all good, all pleasure, all rest, and all hope; exclusion from God's favour and exposure to his anger; remorse, frustration, fury, despair; self-hate as a form of self-absorption; introversion to the point of idiocy – are formal category-words only; what they might mean in actual experience for anyone is more than we can imagine, and we shall not be wise to try. Our wisdom is rather to spend our lives finding ways of showing gratitude for the saving grace of Christ which ensures that we shall not in fact ever go to the hell that each of us so richly deserves, and to school our minds to dwell on heaven rather than on the other place, except when we are seeking, in Jude's phrase, to snatch others from the fire. Let us labour to be wise.

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### Questions for study

1. What general considerations does Packer consider to underlie the erosion of belief in eternal punishment within evangelical circles in the late