

## A TRADITIONALIST RESPONSE TO JOHN STOTT'S ARGUMENTS FOR ANNIHILATIONISM

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Let me say at the outset that I consider the concept of hell as endless torment in body and mind an outrageous doctrine, a theological and moral enormity, a bad doctrine of the tradition which needs to be changed. How can Christians possibly project a deity of such cruelty and vindictiveness whose ways include inflicting everlasting torture upon his creatures, however sinful they may have been? Surely a God who would do such a thing is more nearly like Satan than like God, at least by any ordinary moral standards, and by the gospel itself. Surely the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is no fiend, torturing people without end is not what our God does.<sup>1</sup>

Strong words, indeed. Not all annihilationists, however, engage in such heated polemic. And ultimately it is not the temperature of the writing but the cogency of the arguments that matters. My goal in this paper is to weigh on the scales of Scripture the best arguments set forth by annihilationists.

Of the books that espouse annihilationism, the four best have been written during this century. Anglican missionary-translator Harold E. Guillebaud completed *The Righteous Judge: A Study of the Biblical Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment* shortly before his death in 1941. In the late 1960s Basil Atkinson, under-librarian in the Cambridge University library, penned *Life and Immortality: An Examination of the Nature and Meaning of Life and Death as They Are Revealed in the Scriptures*. Seventh-Day Adventist historical theologian LeRoy Edwin Froom's massive two-volume work, *The Conditional Faith of Our Fathers*, was published in 1965-66. Edward Fudge, an attorney and Churches of Christ layman, produced *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of Final Punishment* in 1982.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> C. H. Pinnock, "The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent," *Criswell Theological Review* 4/2 (1990) 246-247. M. J. Erickson issues a needed word of caution: "It is one thing to speak emphatically about one's sense of injustice and moral outrage over the idea of God's condemning persons to hell. If, however, one is going to describe sending persons to endless punishment as 'cruelty and vindictiveness,' and a God who would do so as 'more nearly like Satan than God,' and 'a bloodthirsty monster who maintains an everlasting Auschwitz,' he had better be very certain he is correct. For if he is wrong, he is guilty of blasphemy. A wiser course of action would be restraint in one's statements, just in case he might be wrong" (*The Evangelical Mind and Heart* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993] 152).

<sup>2</sup> The first two books were privately published and are obtainable from the Reverend B. L. Bateson, 26 Summershard, S. Petherton, Somerset, U.K. TA13 5DP. Froom's book was published by Review and Herald Publishing Association in Washington, DC, and Fudge's by Providential Press in Houston, TX.

The four books mentioned above combine to exceed 3,000 pages. None of them, however, offers a succinct summary of the best case for annihilationism. Instead, that is found in John Stott's tentative defense of the doctrine in his nine-page response to liberal theologian David L. Edwards.<sup>3</sup> I will, therefore, use Stott's summary as an outline and in footnotes cite the four books and quote from them throughout this paper to fill out Stott's arguments. I will add one argument that Stott mentions in passing and that features prominently in the annihilationist literature: the argument based on conditional immortality.

#### I. THE ARGUMENT BASED ON "THE VOCABULARY OF DESTRUCTION"

Stott contends that we should understand the Bible literally when it speaks of the damned as "perishing" or suffering "destruction." He assumes that these words speak of annihilation, as is evident from his assertion: "It would seem strange, therefore, if people who are said to suffer destruction are in fact not destroyed." Addressing Edwards, his partner in dialogue, he adds: "And, as you put it, it is 'difficult to imagine a perpetually inconclusive process of perishing.'"<sup>4</sup>

How are we to evaluate these claims? First, I will examine the NT passages that Stott maintains teach the extinction of the wicked. I admit that it is possible to construe many of these passages as teaching annihilationism. Jesus' words in Matt 10:28, for example, could be taken this way: "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."

Likewise Jesus' presentation of stark alternatives in the sermon on the mount could be interpreted in the same way: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (7:13-14).

And John 3:16 could be understood as teaching the final obliteration of the wicked: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

In fact many passages that contain "the vocabulary of destruction" could, if considered by themselves, be construed to teach the extermination of the wicked (John 10:28; 17:12; Rom 2:12; 9:22; Phil 1:28; 3:19; 1 Thess 5:3; Heb 10:39; 2 Pet 3:7, 9; Jas 4:12). If Scripture gave us no other teaching on the final destiny of the wicked than that provided by these and similar passages, annihilationism would be a viable option.

Some of the passages Stott cites, however, are difficult to reconcile with annihilationism. 2 Thessalonians 1:9 is one example. Paul says of the disobedient, "They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out

<sup>3</sup> J Stott, *Evangelical Essentials A Liberal Evangelical Dialogue* (Downers Grove InterVarsity, 1988) 312-320

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* 315-316 Cf Guillebaud, *Judge* 14-19, Atkinson, *Life* 85-100, Froom, *Faith* 1 105-111, 286-302, 404-414, 486-497, Fudge, *Fire* 173-178, 243-250, 295-307

from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power." Annihilation is an unlikely meaning for the words "everlasting destruction."<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, does it make sense for the apostle to describe unbelievers' extinction as their being "shut out from the presence of the Lord"? Does not their being shut out from his presence imply their existence? Not according to Atkinson, whose explanation, however, is far from convincing: "All will agree that the presence of the Lord is everywhere. To be destroyed from the presence of the Lord can therefore only mean to be nowhere."<sup>6</sup> On the contrary, as Scot McKnight argues, "Paul has in mind an irreversible verdict of eternal nonfellowship with God. A person exists but remains excluded from God's good presence."<sup>7</sup>

The word "destruction" cannot bear the meaning Stott assumes in Rev 17:8, 11. There "destruction" is prophesied for "the beast." Two chapters later the beast and false prophet are "thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur" (19:20). Although Fudge categorically states that "in the case of the beast and false prophet . . . the lake of fire stands for utter, absolute, irreversible annihilation,"<sup>8</sup> they are still there "one thousand years" later (20:7, 10). Furthermore John teaches that the beast, the false prophet and Satan "will be tormented day and night for ever and ever" (20:10). The beast's "destruction," therefore, is not annihilation. It is eternal punishment.<sup>9</sup>

Consequently annihilationists err when they claim that the words "destruction," "perish" and their synonyms signify the final extinction of the wicked. This claim cannot be established from all of the judgment passages that use these words.

A second way of evaluating Stott's claim that the vocabulary of destruction teaches annihilationism is to give attention to theological methodology. Even if one could show that every passage that uses the language of destruction is compatible with annihilationism, this still would not prove that it is true. In addition one would have to show that the other passages that speak of hell are consistent with annihilationism. And this cannot be done.

<sup>5</sup> Annihilationists claim that *aiōnios* in this and similar expressions refers to eternal results and not eternal existence (see Guillebaud, *Judge* 7–11, Atkinson, *Life* 101, Froom, *Faith* 1 224, 288–291, 294–295, 441–443, Fudge, *Fire* 44–50). This claim is arbitrary and unsubstantiated. On the meaning of *aiōnios* see W G T Shedd, *The Doctrine of Endless Punishment* (2d ed., New York: Scribners, 1887) 82–89, S McKnight, "Eternal Consequences or Eternal Consciousness?", *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard* (ed W V Crockett and J G Sigountos, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) 147–157.

<sup>6</sup> Atkinson, *Life* 101. Further, he would prove too much if his claim were true that "the occurrence of the word [*olethros*, "destruction"] in 1 Thess 5:3 refers to the same thing as in 2 Thess 1:9." If 1 Thess 5:3 refers to annihilation it is the annihilation of Bertrand Russell, not that of the evangelical annihilationists.

<sup>7</sup> McKnight, "Eternal" 155–156.

<sup>8</sup> Fudge, *Fire* 304.

<sup>9</sup> Atkinson therefore errs when he claims that "the use of the word 'drown' in 1 Tim 6:9 may perhaps be felt on the whole to strengthen our view of perdition, and the two verses (8 and 11) of Rev 17 make it reasonably certain. They speak of a great political and ecclesiastical power going into perdition, and this can mean nothing but its total destruction and extinction" (*Life* 89).

The Bible uses five main pictures to speak of hell: darkness and separation, fire, "weeping and gnashing of teeth," punishment, and death and destruction. Only the last fits with the view that the wicked will be blotted out, and not even every passage in that category fits, as we have seen. I will postpone study of the fire imagery until consideration of Stott's second argument. For now I will examine one passage from each of the remaining three categories.

1. *Darkness and separation.* Jesus describes the fate of the wicked in terms of separation in Luke 13:27–28. Jesus, "the owner of the house" (v. 25), will have hard words for false believers: "I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!" Jesus rejects them and expels them from his presence. He continues: "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" when you hypocrites see the patriarchs and even Gentiles feasting in the kingdom of God, "but you yourselves [will be] thrown out." Jesus here presupposes the existence of the wicked. They are alive and experience great pain of loss. John Wenham, therefore, errs when he insists that the NT language of separation from God "is another way of describing destruction."<sup>10</sup>

2. *"Weeping and gnashing of teeth."* Weeping signifies sorrowful crying, the gnashing of teeth "extreme suffering and remorse."<sup>11</sup> Jesus uses this expression to explain the pictures of darkness (Matt 8:12; 22:13; 25:30; Luke 13:28), fire (Matt 13:42, 50), and being cut to pieces (24:51). In each of its seven occurrences "weeping and gnashing of teeth" is preceded by the adverb *ekei*, which means "there, in that place,"<sup>12</sup> indicating the suffering of the wicked in hell itself. Weeping and gnashing can only be done by people who exist. It is not possible for those annihilated to cry and grind their teeth.

<sup>10</sup> J. Wenham, "The Case for Conditional Immortality," *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (ed. N. M. de S. Cameron, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992) 172

<sup>11</sup> T. McComiskey, "brygmos," *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (ed. C. Brown, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 2:421

<sup>12</sup> So BAGD 239. Atkinson's rendering of *ekei* in Matt 24:51 as "on that occasion" in an attempt to avoid the idea of hell as a place is arbitrary and unsupported by any lexicon. "Four times in the Gospel of Matthew we are told that on the day of judgment there will be 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matt 8:12, 22:13, 24:51, 25:30). The first, second and fourth of these passages speak of 'the outer darkness' and continue immediately, 'there' (Greek *ekei*) will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' Those who believe in the eternal conscious existence of the lost believe that this weeping will be heard for ever in the outer darkness, which they rightly identify with hell. If however we look at the third passage (Matt 24:51), we shall see that no place is mentioned. 'There' means 'on that occasion.' It is at the throne of judgment, as the real nature of the wicked is revealed to them in all hideousness, in despair and misery because of what they have lost and missed, as they hear the sentence, perhaps through the temporary suffering, which, as we shall see, precedes their destruction, that the weeping and gnashing of teeth are heard" (*Life* 100). On the contrary, the expression "there there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" is exactly the same in the four texts cited above.

Fudge's claim that this expression speaks of "conscious suffering which precedes final destruction" is gratuitous.<sup>13</sup> Darkness, fire, and being cut to pieces are pictures of final punishment in the the texts cited above, not of suffering precedent to final punishment.

3. *Punishment.* Our Lord contrasts the fates of the wicked and righteous: "Then they [the wicked] will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life" (Matt 25:46). Augustine's comments deserve full quotation:

Is it not folly to assume that eternal punishment signifies a fire lasting a long time, while believing that eternal life is life without end? For Christ, in the very same passage, included both punishment and life in one and the same sentence when he said, "So those people will go into eternal punishment, while the righteous will go into eternal life" (Matt 25 46) If both are "eternal," it follows necessarily that either both are to be taken as long-lasting but finite, or both as endless and perpetual. The phrases "eternal punishment" and "eternal life" are parallel and it would be absurd to use them in one and the same sentence to mean "Eternal life will be infinite, while eternal punishment will have an end." Hence, because the eternal life of the saints will be endless, the eternal punishment also, for those condemned to it, will assuredly have no end.<sup>14</sup>

Augustine's conclusion is fortified by the fact that five verses earlier Jesus said that the wicked will share the same destiny as the devil, who according to Rev 20:10 will suffer endlessly in the lake of fire.

Good theological method dictates taking into account the whole Bible when constructing a doctrine. Annihilationism, however, can only accommodate a portion of the Biblical passages that describe the final destiny of the wicked.<sup>15</sup>

Some may be troubled by the number of passages I earlier conceded were compatible with annihilationism. It helps to look at the way we reach conclusions concerning other doctrines. Take, for example, that of the person of Christ. Jesus' statement in John 14:28—"The Father is greater than I"—is sometimes used to deny Christ's deity. Taken by itself, that verse is compatible with such a denial. In fact some claim that scores of passages that teach the humanity of Christ disprove his deity. This claim is false, however, because the Bible clearly and repeatedly teaches the deity of Christ. Notice that the fact that many passages are compatible with a denial of

<sup>13</sup> Fudge, *Fire* 171–172, 428. Cf. Guillebaud, *Judge* 12–14, Atkinson, *Life* 100, Froom, *Faith* 1 287 n 1. K. S. Harmon refutes this error ("The Case Against Conditionalism: A Response to Edward William Fudge," *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* 210–212).

<sup>14</sup> Augustine *City of God* 21 23–24. Nevertheless Froom and others claim that "according to the witness of Christ, then, there is eternity of result but not of process, of punishment but not of punishing of men" (*Faith* 1 288). This is an example of importing a distinction into the text of Scripture in order to justify theological conclusions.

<sup>15</sup> This exposes the fallacy of Wenham's relying too heavily on vocabulary counts ("Case" 169–174).

Christ's deity does not disprove his deity. The key to a correct understanding of the person of Christ lies in studying all of the Bible's passages.

It is the same for the doctrine of hell. The fact that many passages could be interpreted as teaching annihilationism does not prove that doctrine. To be true, annihilationism has to account for all of the passages. And at this point it fails.

One loose end remains: What does the vocabulary of destruction signify? I applaud the honesty of Guillebaud, who admitted: "It is not denied, that *if* it were clear beyond question from Bible teaching elsewhere that the doom of the lost will be everlasting torment, it would be quite possible to understanding 'death', 'destruction' and the like, as meaning a wretched and ruined existence."<sup>16</sup>

## II. THE ARGUMENT BASED ON HELL-FIRE IMAGERY

Stott's second argument involves Scripture's hell-fire imagery. Unfortunately we have been misled by the experience of being burned into associating fire with pain, for "the main function of fire is not to cause pain, but to secure destruction, as all the world's incinerators bear witness."<sup>17</sup> Hot stoves have led us astray. Incinerators are more trustworthy guides.

Some hell-fire passages can be understood as teaching annihilationism. John the Baptist's warning is one example: "The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. . . . His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matt 3:10, 12).

A number of Jesus' sayings could be put in this category. "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (7:19). "If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned" (John 15:6).

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

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

Verse 30 of Jesus' parable of the weeds sounds like the verses cited above: "Collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned" (Matt 13:30). The picture of the burning of the weeds was built into the parable. If Jesus had wanted to teach annihilationism, here was an ideal occasion. He, however, concludes his explanation of the parable: "As the weeds are

<sup>16</sup> Guillebaud, *Judge* 16

<sup>17</sup> Stott, *Evangelical Essentials* 316 Cf Guillebaud, *Judge* 13-14, Atkinson, *Life* 104-112, Froom, *Faith* 1 264, 291-295, 313-315, 371-372, 405-413, Fudge, *Fire* 99-106, 110-116, 183-187, 192-202, 285-287, 295-307

pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (13:40–42).

When Jesus explained the meaning of the weeds being cast into the furnace he did not speak of consumption. Instead he warned of suffering. He described the "fiery furnace" as a place marked by "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (v. 42). It is a place of crying and of grinding the teeth in pain. Hell-fire here speaks of anguish, not of extinction.

I do not claim that this parable is incompatible with annihilationism. An annihilationist could hold that after their crying and gnashing, the damned will cease to exist. I do claim, however, that statements like the following are irresponsible: "Penal suffering comes into the application of the parables, for a death by fire is necessarily a very awful death, but it surely is not the main point."<sup>18</sup> On the contrary, Jesus is capable of telling us what the main points of his parable are, and he has done so here. He uses fire to speak of pain.

At the end of the parable of the net, our Lord offers a similar description of hell: "This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt 13:49–50). Again, Jesus uses hell-fire to signify anguish.

Historically the most important passage on hell in the gospels is the parable of the sheep and the goats. Jesus, the Son of Man, banishes the accursed to "the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (25:41). Does this "eternal fire" denote pain or extinction? John answers this question: "And the devil . . . was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur . . . [and] will be tormented day and night for ever and ever" (Rev 20:10). Here fire denotes torment. And this torment, not obliteration, lies ahead for the devil, evil angels, and evil human beings alike.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus uses fire imagery in the same way. The rich man died and found himself "in hell where he was in torment." He gives the reason for his plea for mercy: "I am in agony in this fire" (Luke 16:23–24). Plainly, fire here speaks of the "agony" that one suffers in the "place of torment" (16:25, 28).

It will not do, as some annihilationists have tried, to exclude this parable from the discussion because it speaks of the intermediate rather than the final state of the wicked.<sup>19</sup> Regardless of its precise focus we can learn from its use of hell-fire imagery. And that imagery unmistakably equates fire with torment.

The book of Revelation does the same when it says that the wicked "will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into

<sup>18</sup> Guillebaud, *Judge* 14

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid* 12 Atkinson's interpretation is no better "The flame of *haidees* is the loss of life" (*Life* 50)

the cup of his wrath” Is this an indication of the blotting out of the ungodly? Hardly John continues “He will be tormented with burning sulfur” (Rev 14 10) Here fire (“burning sulfur”) is the instrument used by God to punish the wicked

Annihilationists, however, claim that the next verse favors their cause “And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever” (v 11) Stott, for example, writes

The fire itself is termed “eternal” and “unquenchable,” but it would be very odd if what is thrown into it proves indestructible Our expectation would be the opposite it would be consumed for ever, not tormented for ever Hence it is the smoke (evidence that the fire has done its work) which “rises for ever and ever”<sup>20</sup>

On the contrary, our expectation would be that the smoke would die out after the fire had finished its work How could the smoke from the fire rise forever if its fuel had been consumed? And the rest of the verse confirms our interpretation “And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name”

It is incorrect for Stott to claim that “it is not the torment itself but its ‘smoke’ (symbol of the completed burning) which will be ‘for ever and ever’”<sup>21</sup> because John says “there is no rest day or night” for the wicked

When annihilationists assert that John here means to say that the wicked have no relief “so long as their suffering lasts” they evade the plain meaning of the text, in addition to reading into the text something that is not there<sup>22</sup> The conclusion is irresistible In Rev 14 10–11 the imagery of burning conveys the eternal conscious torment of the ungodly

So does the picture of the lost being thrown into the lake of fire The lake of fire first comes into view in Rev 19 20, where the “beast” and “false prophet” were thrown alive into it A “thousand years” later they are still there when the devil is thrown in to join them (20 7, 10) John explains what this means for all three “They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever” (20 10)

The verses that immediately follow speak of all human beings standing before God at the last judgment People are judged, and the wicked are cast into the lake of fire (20 14) The city of God is the final abode of the godly By contrast, the lake of fire is the place for the ungodly (21 8) Does the lake of fire mean unceasing torment for the devil, but annihilation for lost human beings? Hardly As Beasley-Murray explains

John’s use of the symbol [of the lake of fire] shows that he views it as the alternative to the city of God, the new Jerusalem (see 21 7f) Its significance for humanity thus begins with the new creation That it does not have the meaning of annihilation is indicated by 20 10 The lake of fire signifies not ex

<sup>20</sup> Stott *Evangelical Essentials* 316

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid* 318

<sup>22</sup> Fudge *Fire* 300 Cf Atkinson *Life* 109 Guillebaud *Judge* 24



inction in opposition to existence, but torturous existence in the society of evil in opposition to life in the society of God<sup>23</sup>

Annihilationist attempts to argue otherwise are contrived, as is, for example, Guillebaud's. He contends that the lake of fire should be interpreted in light of the second death because of the word order in Rev 20:14 and 21:8 ("the lake of fire is the second death"). He then defines the second death as annihilation and concludes that the lake of fire means annihilation too.<sup>24</sup>

This will not do. Instead we should allow John's description of the lake of fire, given four verses earlier, to govern our understanding of it in 20:14. The second death, therefore, is another name for the lake of fire, which John teaches lasts forever. I conclude that John uses the imagery of the lake of fire to portray condemned human beings forever experiencing the wrath of God, away from his blessed presence.

I have weighed the argument that hell-fire signifies unbelievers' extermination and found it wanting. Although some hell-fire passages could be interpreted in this way, they should not be. This is proved by the fact that fire signifies the suffering of pain, not consumption, in the six judgment passages that were examined. I conclude, therefore, that the Bible's hell-fire imagery is better illustrated by stoves than by incinerators.

### III. THE ARGUMENT BASED ON GOD'S JUSTICE

Stott's third argument concerns justice. The Bible teaches that "God will judge people 'according to what they have done' (e.g. Rev 20:12), which implies that the penalty inflicted will be commensurate with the evil done." But eternal conscious torment is seriously disproportionate to sins consciously committed in time. It clashes with the Biblical revelation of divine justice.<sup>25</sup>

At first glance this argument is appealing. How are we to respond? First, by pointing out that, measured against Biblical standards, few people take sin very seriously. As evidence of this I will look at God's judgments against what might be called "little sins."

An impressive list can be drawn up. Because Lot's wife looked back at Sodom and Gomorrah "she became a pillar of salt" (Gen 19:26). The death penalty for a glance?

Because of irregularities in their priestly service in the tabernacle, Nadab and Abihu "fell dead before the Lord" (Num 3:4; see also Lev 10:1-2). Capital punishment for faulty worship?

<sup>23</sup> G R Beasley-Murray, *Revelation* (rev ed, Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1978) 304

<sup>24</sup> Guillebaud, *Judge 14* Incredibly, Atkinson concludes his discussion of Rev 20 10 as follows "Thus to be tormented for ever means to be tormented with the *result* of everlasting destruction" (*Life* 112)—which he understands as annihilation

<sup>25</sup> Stott, *Evangelical Essentials* 318-319 For discussion of wider ramifications of this issue see C F H Henry, "Is It Fair?", *Through No Fault* 245-255, H Blocher, "Everlasting Punishment and the Problem of Evil," *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* 283-312

Because he gathered sticks on the Sabbath, an unnamed man was stoned to death at God's command (Num 15:32–36). Death by stoning for picking up sticks?

Because Moses struck the rock twice instead of speaking to it, he was denied entry to the promised land (20:11). God's faithful servant disqualified for such a minor offense?

Because Achan coveted and then stole a robe, silver and gold, he and his family were stoned and burned (Josh 7:25). A whole family destroyed due to one person's greed?

Because Uzzah steadied the ark with his hand, "the Lord's anger burned against Uzzah. . . . Therefore God struck him down and he died" (2 Sam 6:6–7). Punishment by death for trying to keep the ark of God from falling?

Because Ananias and Sapphira lied to the apostles, God struck them dead (Acts 5:1–10). Capital punishment for lying?

Our first response upon hearing these things is that justice has not been served. Repeatedly, it seems, God has been overly severe. God's assessment, however, is far different.

Lot's wife disobeyed God's command and failed to heed his warning: "Don't look back, and don't stop anywhere in the plain! Flee to the mountains or you will be swept away!" (Gen 19:17). Is God unjust to repay disobedience with previously announced penalty? Evidently Jesus did not think so, for he admonished his hearers: "Remember Lot's wife!" (Luke 17:32).

Leviticus informs us that Nadab and Abihu acted "contrary to his [God's] command" (Lev 10:1). God regarded their disobedient priestly service as dishonoring to himself, as is evident from his evaluation of it: "Among those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored" (v. 3). Will we question God's right to keep his worship pure?

The punishment of the man gathering sticks reveals that in Israel God brought the previously announced penalties upon violators of the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:8; 31:15; 35:2). Is he unjust to bring covenant blessings upon covenant keepers and to visit covenant curses upon covenant breakers?

God evaluated Moses' act as unfaithfulness, dishonor and ungodliness: "Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them" (Num 20:12). Do we really want to offer an alternative evaluation?

Achan "acted unfaithfully" (Josh 7:1) and, when confronted, confessed: "I have sinned against the Lord, the God of Israel" (7:20). Do we still want to denounce God's punishing him?

Uzzah was guilty of what Scripture calls "his irreverent act" (2 Sam 6:7). God demands to be worshiped in truth. Israel, however, had followed the Philistines' example instead of obeying God's instructions for transporting the ark (compare 2 Sam 6:3 with Exod 25:12–14 and Num 4:5–6, 15). Shall we criticize God for giving only one person what David and many others deserved?

If we are offended by God's bringing capital punishment on Ananias and Sapphira because they merely lied to the apostles, we are missing Luke's

whole point The husband and wife were ultimately guilty of lying not to men but to God (Acts 5 3–4)

Luke's words serve as a paradigm "not to men but to God" Our difficulty in recognizing God's justice in his punishment of "little sins" lies with the fact that we adopt a man-centered perspective rather than a God-centered one If people lied to us, disobeyed us, or spoke against us, would they be worthy of death? Of course not If they do these things against God, do they deserve capital punishment? The Bible's consistent answer is yes The Bible views sin as an attack on God's character and therefore deserving of great punishment

Readers may agree with me in principle but protest that all of these examples illustrate temporal punishment, not eternal This criticism is fair I have, however, saved the most scandalous example for last Because Adam ate the forbidden fruit, he plunged the human race into sin with all of its terrible consequences Paul writes with reference to Adam's sin "The many died by the trespass of the one man The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation By the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man The result of one trespass was condemnation for all men Through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners" (Rom 5 15–19) Is this penalty proportionate to the crime committed? Notice the penalty Paul repeatedly says that Adam's one sin brought death and condemnation There is no mistaking Paul's meaning in the context of Romans Due to Adam's sin, physical and spiritual death—even eternal condemnation—came to the human race "The result of one trespass was condemnation for all men" (5 18) Damnation of the world due to one man's eating a piece of fruit?

Perhaps we have misunderstood the significance of Adam's eating the forbidden fruit John Calvin thinks so

To regard Adam's sin as gluttonous intemperance (a common notion) is childish As if the sum and head of all virtues lay in abstaining solely from one fruit, when all sorts of desirable delights abounded everywhere, and not only abundance but also magnificent variety was at hand in that blessed fruitfulness of earth!

Calvin advises us to look more deeply into the account of the fall of Adam in Genesis 3

Augustine speaks rightly when he declares that *pride* was the beginning of all evils For if ambition had not raised man higher than was meet and right, he could have remained in his original state But we must take a fuller definition from the nature of the temptation which Moses describes It is already clear that *disobedience* was the beginning of the Fall This Paul also confirms, teaching that all were lost through the disobedience of one man Yet it is at the same time to be noted that the first man revolted from God's authority because, contemptuous of truth, he turned aside to falsehood *Unfaithfulness*, then, was the root of the Fall<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> J Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (LCC, ed J T McNeill, Philadelphia Westminster 1960) 20 245 (italics mine)

Pride, disobedience, unfaithfulness. These words summarize the significance of Adam's primal sin if viewed from a God-centered perspective. Adam pridefully wanted to be like his Maker. He disobeyed God's prohibition. And he was unfaithful to his Lord (Gen 3:1-6). Will we charge him with injustice who warned that "you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (Gen 2:17)? Do we accept the evaluation of him who declared, "The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation" (Rom 5:16)? Or will we follow Adam's footsteps and revolt against our Maker?

If we are to submit to the authority of God's Word, we must accept the fact that God is not unjust for punishing the human race with condemnation for Adam's sin—and not only for Adam's sin, but for our individual sins as well. Before Paul treats original sin in Romans 5 he deals with actual sin in the earlier chapters: "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men. . . . Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them. . . . Because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. . . . 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. . . . There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who . . . seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one. . . . All have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom 1:18, 32; 2:5, 12; 3:10-12, 23).

We must learn about divine justice from the Bible itself. It will not do to protest God's revealed judgments on the basis of what seems fair or unfair to us. Instead we must adjust our thinking, including our view of God's justice, to God's truth.

Annihilationist Guillebaud wisely calls for restraint:

For the words of the Lord Jesus Christ with regard to the condemned are so terrible, so final in excluding any idea that mercy may be open to them, that we dare not presume to set limits in advance as to what He might see fit to ordain as their punishment. The character of God is safe in the hands of His Son, who came to reveal Him, and we must trust Him, and receive what He tells us. The question is simply, *What do His words mean?*<sup>27</sup>

Although Guillebaud reaches different conclusions than I concerning the fate of the ungodly, I respect his refusal to argue for annihilationism based on a preconceived notion of divine justice.

In fact the annihilationists' argument from justice can be turned against their position. On the basis of what universalists deem just and unjust, they reject eternal punishment and annihilationism as unworthy of a loving God. So J. A. T. Robinson:

<sup>27</sup> Guillebaud, *Judge* 47.

Christ, in Origen's old words, remains on the Cross so long as one sinner remains in hell. That is not speculation; it is a statement grounded in the very necessity of God's nature. In a universe of love there can be no heaven which tolerates a chamber of horrors, no hell for any which does not at the same time make it hell for God.<sup>28</sup>

Actually the annihilationist argument based on justice is not a new argument but a very old one. And Thomas Aquinas still offers the best response.

Further, the magnitude of the punishment matches the magnitude of the sin. Now a sin that is against God is infinite, the higher the person against whom it is committed, the graver the sin—it is more criminal to strike a head of state than a private citizen—and God is of infinite greatness. Therefore an infinite punishment is deserved for a sin committed against him.<sup>29</sup>

Aquinas is right. Sin is an attack on the infinitely holy character of God. God therefore justly sets the penalties for sin in this world and the next. He righteously condemns sinners for Adam's sin and for their own sins. And he plainly teaches that he punishes the wicked forever. I conclude that he is just in so doing.

#### IV. THE ARGUMENT BASED ON THE "UNIVERSALIST PASSAGES"

Stott's fourth and final argument for annihilationism is based on supposed universalist passages. Stott cannot endorse universalism because the Bible teaches the reality of hell.

My point here, however, is that the eternal existence of the impenitent in hell would be hard to reconcile with the promises of God's final victory over evil, or with the apparently universalistic texts. These texts lead me to ask how God can in any meaningful sense be called "everything to everybody" [1 Cor 15:28] while an unspecified number of people still continue in rebellion against him and under his judgment.<sup>30</sup>

Once again Stott's argument can be turned against him. 1 Corinthians 15:24–28 is used more than any other Biblical passage to "prove" universalism. "Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all." Stott argues that 1 Corinthians 15 does not teach universalism. On what basis? He correctly accuses universalists of taking this and similar passages apart from the rest of the Bible's teachings. Yet Stott makes the same mistake when he cites these passages in support of annihilationism.

<sup>28</sup> J. A. T. Robinson, *In the End God* (New York: Harper, 1968) 133.

<sup>29</sup> T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1974) Ia2ae 87,4.

<sup>30</sup> Stott, *Evangelical Essentials* 319. Cf. Guillebaud, *Judge* 5–6, Atkinson, *Life* 112, Froom, *Faith* 1:23–25, 269, 301–302, 413–414, 518–519.

In fact, appeal to "universalist" texts proves neither universalism nor annihilationism. Instead we must study the whole Bible to understand the final state of affairs. The crucial question: What does God deem compatible with his being "all in all"? This question is answered by the Bible's final three chapters. God's ultimate victory does not involve the eradication of evil beings from his universe.

Revelation 20:11–15 describes the last judgment. Here John sees "the dead, great and small, standing before the throne" of God. That "the sea, . . . death and Hades" give "up the dead that were in them" (Rev 20:13) refers to the resurrection, because it makes no sense to speak of the sea giving up souls. Rather, this is God's way of affirming the universal resurrection. Even those who died at sea will be raised to stand before God.

Immediately before his presentation of the last judgment, John had taught that the devil, beast and false prophet were thrown into the lake of fire to suffer everlasting torment (Rev 20:10). Now, four verses later, he teaches that wicked human beings share their fate (20:14).

Revelation 21:1–8 confirms this conclusion. There alongside the new heaven and the new earth John describes the final destination of the unrepentant as "the fiery lake of burning sulfur" (21:8). Evidently God does not view unbelievers' being eternally alive in the lake of fire as incompatible with his being "all in all." Moreover the picture of the righteous and unrighteous living forever in bliss and misery, respectively, does not fit either universalism or annihilationism.

That God's ultimate victory does not include the annihilation of the damned is substantiated by the picture of the new Jerusalem in Revelation 21–22. John reveals the bliss of those privileged to live in this city. God will be in their midst to "wipe every tear from their eyes." For them "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain" (21:3–4). Does John here teach the absolute banishment of death and pain? The answer is no, because four verses later he speaks of the wicked in the lake of fire (21:8).

Furthermore in chap. 22 he contrasts the joy of those who "may go through the gates into the city" of God with the misery of the godless who are "outside" the city: "Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters, and everyone who practices falsehood" (22:14–15). Plainly the wicked are not annihilated. Instead they are alive but cut off from the happiness of eternal fellowship with God.<sup>31</sup>

If my exegesis of Revelation 20–22 is correct, universalists and annihilationists would have to claim that the end depicted in Scripture's last three

<sup>31</sup> Froom's reasons for holding that the end depicted in Revelation 20–21 "involves the termination of all sinful and estranged life" (*Faith* 1 301) do not hold up to scrutiny. If the words "fire came down out of heaven and devoured them" (Rev 20 9) refers to annihilationism, it is extinction at death, not extinction following resurrection and judgment, as evangelical annihilationists hold. "The former things are passed away" (21 4) refers not to the blotting out of the wicked but to the end of death, sorrow, crying and pain for the righteous, as the first half of the verse indicates. Death and Hades being cast into the lake of fire does not signify the obliteration of the wicked but the end of the power of the first death over human beings.

chapters is not ultimate. There is still more to come after Revelation 22. Later God will save all the wicked (universalism) or annihilate them (annihilationism). But these scenarios will not square with Revelation 21–22, which presents the ultimate end, the new heaven and new earth (21:1–8; 22:12–15).

We conclude that the traditional view of hell better fits the Scriptural vision of the end than does annihilationism. The Bible's concluding chapters will not allow us to understand the "universalist" passages in an absolute sense. God's being "all in all" means that he reigns over the just and the unjust. It does not mean that only the former remain.

I have examined John Stott's four arguments for annihilationism and have not found them compelling. I therefore must respectfully disagree with him when he urges "that the ultimate annihilation of the wicked should at least be accepted as a legitimate, biblically founded alternative to their eternal conscious torment."<sup>32</sup>

#### V. THE ARGUMENT BASED ON CONDITIONAL IMMORTALITY

There is at least one other argument for annihilationism that merits attention. Conditional immortality is sometimes used as another name for annihilationism. This is the view that souls are not naturally immortal but that immortality is a gift given by God only to the righteous who, as a result, live forever. The unrighteous, however, because they lack the gift of immortality are annihilated and cease to exist. Clark Pinnock regards this issue as crucial.

This is clearly an important issue in our discussion because belief in the natural immortality of the soul which is so widely held by Christians, although stemming more from Plato than the Bible, really drives the traditional doctrine of hell more than exegesis does. Consider the logic if souls must live forever because they are naturally immortal, the lake of fire must be their home forever and cannot be their destruction . . . I am convinced that the hellenistic belief in the immortality of the soul has done more than anything else (specifically more than the Bible) to give credibility to the doctrine of everlasting conscious punishment of the wicked<sup>33</sup>

This argument has been vastly overrated. I say this for the following reasons. First, although philosophy has influenced all periods of Church history, those who have argued for a traditional view of hell have done so because they believed that this is what the Bible taught. This is true, for example, of Tertullian, Augustine, Thomas, Luther, Calvin, Edwards and Shedd, to name a few stalwarts of orthodoxy. It is ludicrous to argue that they believed in eternal torment because they were misled by Platonic philosophy. Rather, if we take their own claims seriously they believed in this

<sup>32</sup> Stott, *Evangelical Essentials* 320

<sup>33</sup> Pinnock, "Destruction" 252 Cf Stott, *Evangelical Essentials* 316, Gullebaud, *Judge* 1–4, Atkinson, *Life* 1–53, Froom, *Faith* 1 19–23, 31–41, 145–159, 205–206, 212, 233, 262, 265, 305–308, 319–324, 523–528, Fudge, *Fire* 51–76

terrible doctrine out of fidelity to Biblical teaching and sometimes against their own natural inclinations.

Second, these figures' view of immortality was not Platonic but Biblical. They did not hold that the souls of humans were inherently immortal as did Plato. Rather, acknowledging that God "alone is immortal," as Paul says (1 Tim 6:16), they taught that the immortal God grants immortality to all human beings.

Third, we need to define the concept of the immortality of the soul. In fact, due to widespread confusion it may be wise to abandon the expression. Some use the words "the immortality of the soul" to refer to the survival of the immaterial part of human nature after death. This is a Biblical idea<sup>34</sup> but is better called the survival of the human soul or spirit in the intermediate state. We confuse the intermediate and final states if we refer to the former by the expression "the immortality of the soul."

Most use "the immortality of the soul" to describe our final destiny. This too is misleading because our final state will not be a disembodied spiritual existence in heaven but a holistic resurrected life on the new earth under the new heaven. All things considered, it is better to talk about the immortality of human beings, not of souls. This is in keeping with the language of 1 Corinthians 15, which says of the resurrected righteous: "For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality" (1 Cor 15:53).

Finally, and most importantly, I do not believe in the traditional view of hell because I accept the immortality of human beings but the other way around. I believe in the immortality of human beings because the Bible clearly teaches everlasting damnation for the wicked.

## VI. CONCLUSION

I have set forth the case for annihilationism from the writings of its proponents. I have weighed their arguments on the scales of Scripture and have found those arguments wanting. In the process my conviction that the Church's traditional doctrine of hell is correct has been strengthened.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> For the best recent defense see J W Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1989)

<sup>35</sup> My new book entitled *Hell on Trial The Case for Eternal Punishment* is scheduled for release by Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company in the spring of 1995