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### The Doctrine of the Final Disposition of the Wicked in the Writings of the Reformers

Trevor O'Reggio

Andrews University, [toreggio@andrews.edu](mailto:toreggio@andrews.edu)

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THE DOCTRINE OF THE FINAL DISPOSITION OF THE WICKED IN THE WRITINGS OF  
THE REFORMERS

Trevor O'Reggio

**Introduction**

The question of what happens after we die has been an issue that has plagued humanity from the beginning of time until the present. Every religion, civilization, and culture in every age has wrestled with this important question. Christians believe the righteous and the wicked dead do not end up in the same place. The final dispensation of the wicked has been a subject of inquiry for Christian thinkers for centuries. Their views generally fall into three major categories. Some believe that the wicked are condemned to eternal separation from God in hell and burn forever, experiencing lifelong torment and eternal punishment that never ends. This view argues that the wicked never really die or obliterated, for they suffer a “painful dying” in hell while being alive. This is the traditional view held by most of the church fathers, medieval theologians, the Reformers, and most Evangelical leaders today.<sup>1</sup>

The view of annihilationism teaches that everybody survives death and will be resurrected to receive their reward. The wicked will burn in hell for a while and suffer, but eventually will be burned up<sup>2</sup>. The degree and duration of their suffering are related to their allotted punishment. Since the devil and his angels were the originators and chief instigators of

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<sup>1</sup> Dick Tripp, *Life After Death: Christianity Hope and Challenge* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 106.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

evil, they will suffer more severely and burn the longest, but even they will eventually be burned up and cease to exist. This view has been seen as a legitimate interpretation by a number of respected biblical scholars like Alan Bernstein, William Crocket, Edward Fudge, Michael Green, Frank Guillebaud, Philip Hughes, Clark Pinnock, John Stott, Steven Travis, and John Wenham.<sup>3</sup>

Others hold the view that even the wicked, including the Devil, will eventually come around and will be saved, avoiding the need for hell, in other words, everyone will be saved; no one will be lost and suffer in hell. Origen, a third century church father from Alexandria Egypt, espoused this view. However, his position was never championed in Christianity and remained a minority position. This view is called universalism.

The range and scope of this paper do not cover the historical development of these three main ideas of hell but focuses narrowly on the views of the major Protestant Reformers concerning hell. The majority of the Protestant reformers agreed with the traditional view on hell. I will use a representative group of Reformers from the four major Protestant traditions to illustrate this position.

In the late medieval and early Reformation period, there was a preoccupation with the image of death and hell. This preoccupation caused great anxiety among the population. Luther's personal struggles in some ways epitomize the hopes and fears of his age. His doctrine of justification spoke "powerfully to the primal apprehensions" of his time and "the theology of the reformer was a specific response to the special anxiety of the age."<sup>4</sup> This morbid preoccupation with death was pervasive throughout Europe during this time due to famine, war, and plague.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 107

<sup>4</sup> Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformation* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1988), 23.

The famine was so severe at times, that people resorted to cannibalism. Along with famine was the devastation of the Black Plague that swept away almost one third of Europe's population.<sup>5</sup>

The theme of death manifested itself in sermons, paintings, and sculptures of that day. "One of the most popular pictorial representation was the Dance of Death. Death in form of a skeleton appeared as a dancing figure leading away its victims. No one could escape his grasp—neither the wealthy merchant, the corpulent monk, nor the rich of Paris, nor the poor peasant."<sup>6</sup> One Franciscan monk, preached for ten consecutive days, seven hours a day on the topic of the last four things: death, judgment, heaven, and hell, which he delivered from the most popular burial ground in Paris.<sup>7</sup>

This fear of death could also have positive outcomes as attested by the testimony of Theodore Beza, the successor to John Calvin. He writes,

He approached me through a sickness so severe that I despised my life. Seeing this terrible judgment before me, I could not think what to do with my wretched life. Finally, after endless suffering of body and soul, God showed pity upon his miserable lost servant and consoled me so that I could not doubt his mercy. With a thousand tears, I renewed my former self, implored his forgiveness, renewed my oath to serve his true church, and in sum gave myself wholly over to him. So, the vision of death threatening my soul awakened in me the desire for a true and everlasting life, so sickness was for me the beginning of true health.<sup>8</sup>

For the majority of people, however, this preoccupation with and the proximity of death sent them on a futile quest to avail themselves of all the means the church had set up to deal with their fear, guilt, and anxiety. Through the sacraments, para sacramental aids, indulgences, pilgrimage, relics, feast days and their own self-mortification, they made vain attempts to get

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 23–24.

relief from guilt, the fear of death and removal of their relatives from purgatory or at least the reduction of the punishment in purgatory.

If the present fears and anxieties could be so overwhelming, what of the afterlife? People not only had to worry about their present reality of suffering, guilt, and fear—the afterlife of purgatory and hell only heightened and deepened their fears. The torments of these places were portrayed in terrifying detail in art, sculpture, and preaching. An example of this is Sir Thomas Moore’s description of the horrors of purgatory in his “Supplicia of the Souls” 1529, expressed in the words of the tormented dead.<sup>9</sup>

If purgatory, was bad enough, how about hell? One illustrated catechism portrayed the inhabitants of hell gnawing at their own vitals and added in the commentary, “the pain caused by one spark of hell fire is greater than that caused by a thousand years of a women’s labor in childbirth.”<sup>10</sup> Because God was not seen as merciful and loving, much of the portrayal of hell showed him as a cruel judge, who seems to take pleasure in the punishment and torture of his creatures. No wonder such a God was hard to love. Yes, He was respected, but most of all feared and dreaded. The traditional teachings of the day on purgatory and hell were a gross misrepresentation of the character of God. Not surprisingly, Luther and others had such a hard time loving such a God.

### **Luther on Hell**

Martin Luther’s views on hell are an evolving one. Beginning with his late medieval views of purgatory and the immortality of the soul, he evolved into a Protestant who rejected purgatory and most of the teaching on the immortality of the soul but he never fully relinquished

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 27.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 28.

all his views on the immortality of the soul.<sup>11</sup> On October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1517, Martin Luther nailed his famous ninety-five thesis on the bulletin board of the Wittenberg Castle church attacking the use of indulgences as a substitute for true repentance and the way in which it was been used to exploit the people. Luther unwittingly also began to tear down the super structure of the Catholic theology of purgatory. The doctrine of purgatory was a key part of Roman Catholic sacramental theology and would eventually be universally rejected by most Reformers like Luther, Karlstadt, Bucer, Oecolampadius, and Calvin. From Anglicans to the Radical Reformers, “All of them denounced it as a fable, a depraved invention designed by corrupt clerics to fleece the laity. On the popular level, the flow of money to the cult of the dead came to be seen as one of the sure signs of the falsehood of the Catholic Church... The unmasking of this deception was one of the central messages of the Protestant Reformation.”<sup>12</sup>

Purgatory played an important role in medieval theology because of its connection to the doctrine of penance. Penance was the key sacrament dealing with sin. There were three parts to penance; confession, contrition, and satisfaction. Confession and contrition could be dealt with here on earth; if satisfaction was not completely possible here on earth, it could be completed in purgatory. This unfinished punishment was decreed by the priest as part of the sacrament of penance (satisfaction). Both penances described appropriate satisfaction for different kinds of sin.<sup>13</sup> If satisfaction was not fulfilled during one’s lifetime, it could be completed in purgatory.

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<sup>11</sup> Trevor O’Reggio, “Martin Luther and the State of the Dead,” in *Here We Stand: Luther, Reformation, and Seventh-day Adventism* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2017), 138–139. Although much of what Luther writes about the dead suggests he believes in sleep, however there are places where he contradicts himself and he never completely relinquished the view of the soul survival after death. Until the end of his life Luther, believed in the dualistic view of human nature. This belief that the soul separate from the body at death was view held by most of the Magisterial Reformers.

<sup>12</sup> Carlos Eire, *A Brief History of Eternity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 122.

Purgatory, not hell was the normal place for enduring Christian to settle account of sin and forgiveness. The church had no influence on hell or heaven, only over purgatory; hence, letters of indulgences were issued to reduce punishment in purgatory. For the Catholic church purgatory was more important than hell.<sup>14</sup> For the great majority of Christians, the most relevant place for punishment for sin was purgatory. Purgatory, though a place of punishment for ordinary Christians, was not a place of eternal punishment but of fiery cleansing from sin. It was a temporary stopping place on the way to heaven. Shorter or longer periods depended on sins to be cleansed- forgivable sins.<sup>15</sup>

Tarald Rasmussen argues that,

as a consequence of Luther's critique of indulgences and of the use of the sacrament of penance, purgatory was removed from the theology and religious life of Protestants. The dualism of heaven and hell of the gospel was restored, and the religious involvement of the church with the details of the afterlife was abolished. Through this rearrangement of the topography of life after death, hell gained a new importance—though not in the sense that it became a central in Reformation theology and preaching.<sup>16</sup>

Luther's understanding of the nature of sin influenced his idea of hell. For Luther, salvation was rescue from sin, which saved us from the ultimate penalty of sin, which is hell. Therefore, the function of hell within the discourse of abhorrent sin, salvation, and damnation changed fundamentally within Reformation theology.<sup>17</sup> Redefining sin would be critical before one could articulate a theology of hell.

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<sup>13</sup> Tarald Rasmussen, "Hell Disarmed? The Function of Hell in Reformation Spirituality," *Numen* 56.2/3 (2009): 366–384.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 371.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 372

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 372

Late medieval theology made careful distinctions about sin. There were three main types: original sin, deadly sin, and forgivable sins. These distinctions suggested different levels of culpability; hence, different sacraments were necessary to deal with the different kinds of sins. Luther reinterpreted original sin as part of the condition of human beings that we will live with until we die. He made irrelevant, the distinctions between deadly and forgivable sins, asserting that every sin had the potential to be both deadly and forgivable.<sup>18</sup>

Luther describes original sin in the following: “Original sin accompanies man constantly throughout this life, every sin is potentially deadly and neither baptism, nor penance can give any kind of safety through this life, and therefore hell threatens man throughout life.”<sup>19</sup> However, because Luther now had a new view of salvation, hell no longer held the same terrors as before, “Salvation from hell is certain because the Gospel of God is certain, in contrast to the ability of man to accomplish the prescribed *contritio* and *satisfactio*, which is not at all certain.”<sup>20</sup> Thus even though hell is still present as a topic in the theological discourse of Reformation Theology, it was now a reality to be feared less than before, because the teaching about salvation provided better protection against hell and more comfort against the fear of hell.<sup>21</sup>

The preoccupation with death and hell was so pervasive among Christians, as mentioned earlier that Luther describes it as the devils’ attempt to drive God’s love from men’s mind and focus his attention on God’s wrath. He calls it an assault by “hell.” He describes Hell not just a geographical location but also “a state of mind.” It is a psychological condition induced by the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 373.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.373

<sup>20</sup> Ibid 375

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 375.



devil to create despair and hopelessness. What advice does Luther give to fight the images of sin, death, and hell? One needed “to drop them and have nothing to do with them—you must look at death while you are alive and see sin in the light of grace and hell in the light of heaven, permitting nothing to divert you from the view.”<sup>22</sup>

In 1528, Luther was still ambivalent regarding prayers for the dead and determined that it was not a sin in one’s devotion to ask God to help that soul only once or twice. However, by 1530, Luther does away with purgatory, for he publishes a tract that denounces the whole business of purgatory and prayers for the dead.<sup>23</sup> However, he does not minimize hell, on the contrary, he actually brings it in greater focus, but he now counters the reality of hell with the greater reality of heaven, which is present, powerful, and certain. The late medieval uncertainty about salvation is replaced for the certainty of salvation, which in effect removes the fear of hell. In other words, the only antidote for hell is the assurance of salvation in Jesus Christ. Justification has removed the fear of hell. Having refocused the reality of hell in the context of the greater reality of heaven. What does Luther say about how long the wicked burn in hell ? Do they burn eternally or do they burn for a while until they are burned up?

I am not so sure what hell is like before the Day of Judgment. The notion that hell is a specific place, now tenanted by the souls of the damned, as artists portray it and the belly servers preach it, I consider of no value, for we know that the devils are not yet in hell, but as Peter declares (2 Pet 2:4), they are ‘in ropes of nether gloom.’ And St. Paul speaks of ‘powers and world rulers in the heavenly places’ (Eph 6:12). Christ also terms the devil ‘the ruler of this world’ (John 14:30). To dominate the world, to commit so much villainy, and to create so much misery would be impossible for the devils if they were confined to hell. The agony of hell would surely deter them from this. Scripture also says of many saints that they went down into hell, as Jonah does here. Thus we hear this of Job (Job 17:13), and Jacob laments (Gen 37:35): ‘I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.’ Scripture uses the word ‘Sheol’ graphically to describe the anxiety and the agony of the dying. It adapts itself to their mood and feelings. And the dying do feel as

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 381.

<sup>23</sup> Ian Hazzlet, “Was Bucer an Arian? The question of Prayers for the Dead,” 144–145?

though they were descending into hell, that is, into God's wrath, although they know of no specific place to which they are departing. Everybody carries his hell with him wherever he may be so long as he feels the final anguish of death and God's anger. In conformity with this, St. Peter in Acts 2:27 interprets Ps 16:10 as spoken by Christ: 'Though dost not give Me up to Sheol, etc.,' and he says (v. 24) that God 'loosed the pangs of death.' St. Peter wants us to think of Sheol as the pain of death that Christ felt when He died on the cross and when He departed this life and passed into the power of God. However, on the Last Day this will assume a different aspect. Then hell will be a particular place and the abode of those consigned to it and the eternal wrath of God. But let this suffice. It is not very important whether or not one pictures hell as it is commonly portrayed and described. The fact remains that hell is far worse now—and will be even worse than it is now---than anyone is able to say, depict, or imagine.<sup>24</sup>

This is probably one of the most definitive and extensive statement by Luther on hell.

First, it must be noted that Luther did not hold the traditional view that hell presently existed containing the damned and the devils. The devils to be sure were not in hell, but present in the world causing misery everywhere. Luther describes hell also as a psychological state of being when one feels God's wrath. He describes Jesus entering hell on our behalf. However, Luther does believe that at the end of the age, at the time of judgment, hell will be a real place where rebellious humans will suffer God's wrath. He describes it as far worse than imagined.

Regarding the duration of the punishment of the wicked in hell, he is silent here.

Much of what Luther writes about hell is practical, ethical and pastoral, but on one occasion, he remarked, "To think about the punishments of the wicked as lasting without end, and equally lasting joys of the good causes the soul to be horrified and stunned in a remarkable way,"<sup>25</sup> Is it possible that Luther here believes in an eternally burning hell? Maybe. However much of what Luther writes about hell is how hell enters our everyday lives. He describes how God's wrath uses the law to turn man's conscience into a bad conscience and that becomes the

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<sup>24</sup> LW 19:74.

<sup>25</sup> Eire, *A Brief History of Eternity*, 130.

real trouble and punishment of hell. Such a conscience ignites the flames of hell and awakens the most fearful tortures and memories in ye heart... the wrath of God is the hell of the devil and of all the damned. Hell first becomes hell through the wrath of God, which strikes a man inwardly in the form of an evil conscience. This means that hell is just as much present and inner reality as a bad conscience and man's experience of Gods' wrath through the law striking his conscience. Everyone carries his own hell with him wherever he is as long as he does not feel the final disasters of death and Gods' wrath.<sup>26</sup>

Therefore, for Luther, the focus of hell is not geographical, but psychological.<sup>27</sup> This kind of hell is one in which we exclude ourselves from Gods' presence, but hell here is not a permanent state for it is possible to be led out of hell, if we trust God<sup>28</sup>.

Philip Melancthon, close associate of Luther and author of the Augsburg Confession in Article 17 writes that Christ will appear for judgment to raise the dead. "He will give to the godly and elect everlasting joys, but ungodly men and devils he will condemn to be tormented forever."<sup>29</sup> It appears that Melancthon is more explicit in holding to the view of the eternal torment of the wicked.

Zwingli, a contemporary of Luther also adamantly rejected the Catholic's teachings on purgatory calling it a "baseless invention"<sup>30</sup>. He also denied the Anabaptists' doctrine of soul sleep as contrary to the scriptures and reason.<sup>31</sup> Like Luther and Calvin, he affirmed the existence of hell and eternal punishment of the wicked<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1966), 177.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 177.

<sup>28</sup> Hans Schwarz, "Luther's Understanding of Heaven and Hell" in *Interpreting Luther's Legacy* edited by Fred W. Meuser and Stanley D. Schneider. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing house, 1967), 88

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.apuritansmind.com/creeds-and-confessions/the-augsburg-confession-by-philip-melancthon>

<sup>30</sup> Ulrich Zwingli, *Fides Esposito* (1531), James T. Dennison Jr. *Reformed Confessions of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries in English Translations*, vol., 1523-1552 (Grand Rapids, MI : Reformation Heritage Books, 2008), 185-186

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 205,207

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 205, 206

## Calvin on Hell

John Calvin, systematic theologian of the Reformation and founder of the Reform branch of the Reformation, view's on hell are related to his views on the soul of man. Calvin believed that the "conditional" immortality of the soul has the stamp of God's image. In his very first scholarly work—*Psychopannychia*, this is Calvin's entry into the scholarly world, is a vigorous polemic against the teachings of the Anabaptists on soul sleep. He describes this teaching as an "absurd dogma", "this insanity", this "evil like cancer". Calvin makes two central points in this work. The first is that the soul has a substance separate from the body and secondly, it survives the body after death and possesses both sense and understanding.<sup>33</sup>

Calvin argues for the conditional immortality of the soul. The soul survives physical death, but is not inherently immortal. Nothing that has a beginning can be inherently immortal. Calvin sees the soul as conditional immortal because of its dependence on God<sup>34</sup>

Calvin, like the Fathers of earlier centuries, expressly and repeatedly stated that the soul depends on God for its existence and that God can put it out of existence if he so desires. Calvin argues: "although the soul after it has departed from the prison of the body remains alive, yet its so doing does not arise from any inherent power of its own. Were God to withdraw his grace, the soul would be nothing more than a puff or a blast, even as the body is dust; and thus there would doubtless be found in the whole man nothing but mere vanity."<sup>35</sup>

Calvin was especially vehement in his denunciation of the 'Anabaptist' doctrine of 'soul-sleeping'.<sup>36</sup> He felt this called the hope of eternal life into question. "He attacked soul sleep with

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<sup>33</sup> Edward Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes, A Biblical and Historical study of Final Punishment* 3<sup>RD</sup>. Edition (Eugene, OR. :Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), 317, 318

<sup>34</sup> T.F. Torrance, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man* (London: Lutherworth, 1949), 27

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*

a special passion in his first theological work mentioned earlier. Calvin argues that our ultimate hope for life and blessedness rests on Christ, the Second Advent and the resurrection to come. In addition, in a sermon on 1Tim 1:17ff: Calvin argues that “our souls are not immortal of their power, nor is the life in them enclosed in themselves, as though it had roots there. Where is their life then In God?”<sup>37</sup> The soul’s immortality, he said in another sermon, is “not natural. For whatsoever had a beginning may have an end, and may come to decay, and even perish utterly.”<sup>38</sup> Calvin taught that the “soul survives the death of the body only at the mercy of God, and has no durability in itself.”<sup>39</sup> Fudge, quoting from Torrance, argues that Calvin’s view means that if God were to withdraw for even an instant the presence of this Spirit, “we would drop into the nothingness from which we are called into being.”<sup>40</sup>

The church fathers of the first five centuries faced Platonic and Neo-Platonic adversaries who denied the Christian resurrection but affirmed the inalienable immortality of the soul. These philosophers themselves disagreed on some of the fine points. In this setting, the apologists reasoned for bodily resurrection of all, both good and evil. The common doctrine of the soul’s immortality was a convenient tool.<sup>41</sup> Platonic views the soul as a component separable from the body and unhurt by physical death. In this, they agreed with their opponents, but on the eternity for the soul, church fathers and philosophers parted company. To the soul’s *immortality* (survival

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<sup>36</sup> Edward William Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes: The Biblical Case for Conditional Immortality* (Carlisle, UK: The Paternoster Press, 1994), 36.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 38,

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 38,

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.38,

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 39

<sup>41</sup> Ibid 39.

of the death of the body) the Platonists generally added *eternality*. There the church fathers stood firm, insisting that although the soul enters and leaves the body, and even survives its death, it is not eternal. It had its beginning by the creation of God, and God – if he pleases – can also make it extinct. Only God possesses that kind of immortality.<sup>42</sup> Immortality did not mean eternality.

Christian writers have used the concept as an illustration for their apologetics and as a weapon against anti-supernaturalists who denied the resurrection. Only by a kind of reflex action have they used it as the basis for argument concerning final punishment. Then, like some hidden footlight, the doctrine has tinted exegesis, its own scriptural legitimacy frequently a matter of doubt. Ironically, the writer with the most *biblical* defense of the soul's immortality was probably Origen, who likely bought into the Platonic system further than any Christian theologian before him or since did.<sup>43</sup> On the other side, traditional advocates of the immortal soul have faced biblical theologians who charged them with denying God's unique immortality.<sup>44</sup> Calvin—conditional immortality dependent on God for its existence and can put it out of existence if chooses too.<sup>45</sup>

Calvin argues for the resurrection, not just of the righteous, but also of the wicked. He calls it, the resurrection of the judgment and that of the righteous, the resurrection of life.<sup>46</sup> So what happens then to the wicked who are resurrected? Do they suffer indefinitely? Calvin asserts that they deserve to be destroyed, but God's "wonderful plan will allow them to exist in an

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian the Religion*, Library of Christian Classics 21 (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 997.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 997.

intermediate state apart from life they should live in death.” He feels that this is necessary because if they were simply consumed by death, this punishment would be too light, for they must be punished for their obstinacy.<sup>47</sup> Calvin would go on and describe in very severe language the judgment that would be meted out to the wicked. “No description can deal adequately with the gravity of God’s vengeance against the wicked, their torments and tortures are figuratively expressed to us by physical things, that is by darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth, Matt. 8:12, 22; 22:13; unquenchable fire, Matt 3:12; Mark 9:43; Isa 66:24 an undying gnawing of the heart, Isa 66:24. By such expressions of the Holy Spirit certainty intended to confound our senses with dread.”<sup>48</sup> Calvin is quite explicit in describing the torments of the wicked that is ultimately caused by their separation from God. Since this separation is eternal, then the punishment is also eternal.

### **Protestant Confessions**

During the Reformation era, there was a variety of theological confessions that reflected differences from the various regions. However, the majority of them agreed on what happened to the wicked. The 17<sup>th</sup> Article of the Augsburg Confession reaffirmed the doctrine of resurrection, the final judgment, the eternal happiness of the holy and the endless misery of wicked men and devils.<sup>49</sup> The 42<sup>nd</sup> Article written in 1553 during the reign of Elizabeth the first, copied many of its ideas from the previous Augsburg Confession, and also affirmed the resurrection of the righteous and condemns the doctrine of the eventual restoration of all men as

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 998.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 1007.

<sup>49</sup> Charles Hardwick, *A History of the Articles of Religion: To which is Added a Series of Documents from A.D. 1536 to A.D. 1615, Together with Illustrations from Contemporary Sources* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1859), 21.

a dangerous and destructive error.<sup>50</sup> Although not explicitly stated, this confession seems to follow the views of the Augsburg Confession regarding the final state of the wicked.

The Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 in questions 10 and 11 affirmed that God would bring punishment against the wicked in time and eternity. In answer to the question about the mercy of God, the catechism also asserts that God is both merciful and just and that his justice demands that sin will be punished with “extreme”. This “extreme” is described as the everlasting punishment of both body and soul.<sup>51</sup>

The Westminster Confession in chapter 32 describes what happens to both the righteous and the wicked. “The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption: but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them: the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies”.<sup>52</sup>

The same Confession in chapter 33 further elaborates on the final state of the wicked in the following: “The end of God's appointing this day is for the manifestation of the glory of his mercy, in the eternal salvation of the elect; and of his justice, in the damnation of the reprobate, who are wicked and disobedient. For then shall the righteous go into everlasting life, and receive that fullness of joy and refreshing, which shall come from the presence of the Lord; but the wicked who know not God, and obey not the gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast into eternal

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>51</sup> The Heidelberg Catechism (1563) in <https://www.ligonier.org>

<sup>52</sup> <https://students.wts.edu/resources/creeds/westminsterconfession.html>”chapter 32



torments, and be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power”<sup>53</sup>

The reality, existence, purpose of Hell was not an object of dispute between Protestants and Catholic theologians. This definition put forward by Thomas Phillips was agreeable to English Catholics. “A place of unfortunate and extreme torment, created by God, and appointed for the punishment of the wicked after this life, to the glory and manifestation of his justice.”<sup>54</sup>

“An example of this agreement on hell between Catholics and Protestants was that substantial materials on hell in Catholic texts “were printed or reprinted in Protestant editions. Specific examples of this is found in the famous *The Imitation of Christ* by Kemp that appeared in various Protestant translations and are the chapters in judgment and the punishment of things, a vivid description as given of how sinners “will be drenched in burning pitch and stinky Sulphur, and the envious will howl in pain like mad dogs.”<sup>55</sup>

Peter Marshall describes how Arthur Dent invited his readers to imagine all the mathematics written down to the longest number they could conceive and add them together and yet that would fall short of the length of time the wicked would be tormented. Another writer observed that if “the damned had as many thousand years to endure as there were grains of sand on the shore, fish in the sea or stars in the firmament, then they could entertain some hope and comfort, but alas it was not so.”<sup>56</sup> Since purgatory was eliminated from Protestant vocabulary, hell took on a more central role because now it was the only place of punishment.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, chapter 33

<sup>54</sup> Peter Marshall, *The Reformation of Hell: Protestantism and Catholic Infernalisms in England, 1560–1640*. *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 61, No 2, April 2010, 284

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 284.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 284.

## Anabaptists on Hell

Since the views of the Anabaptists on hell are not uniform, I present them briefly by the voices of leading thinkers of the movement.

### Menno Simons on Hell

Menno Simons seems to take the view of the Annihilationist when he describes what happens to the wicked in the following way: “Then shall those who pursue us be as ashes under our feet and they shall acknowledge too late that emperor, king, duke, prince, crown, scepter, majesty, power, sword, and mandate were nothing but earth, dust, wind, and smoke.”<sup>58</sup> Speaking in another place, Simons describes the fate of the unrepentant apostates who will not be with the blessed in heaven but with the damned in hell unto eternity.<sup>59</sup> Does Simons here describe an eternal punishment, it is not clear. There is more ambiguity when he asserts that there is a difference between “living forever with Christ Jesus in the throne of heaven and with the demons to perish in hell.”<sup>60</sup> In describing the fate of the wicked, Simons claims “the whole Scriptures testify that they shall forever bear the intolerable curse and malediction of the righteous judgment of God and the devouring flames of hell.”<sup>61</sup> Again we cannot be sure if he means that they will be burning forever or if they will eventually be consumed. Simons in describing hell calls it “the unbearable judgment,” the “punishment and wrath of God, suffering forever, tortures

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 285.

<sup>58</sup> Translated and edited by Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources*, Classics of the Radical Reformation 3 (Kitchener, Ontario: Herald Press, 1981), 343.

<sup>59</sup> , Edited by J. C Wenger *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, 1496-1561*, (Kitchener Ontario: Herald Press, 1956), 414.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 530.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 585.

of unquenchable burning, the consuming fire, eternal pain, woe and death.”<sup>62</sup> This is the closest Simons has come to arguing for an eternally burning hell, but even here, there is still room for some ambiguity.

#### Baltazar Hubmaier on Hell

Hubmaier another leading theologian describes the judgment of the last day when every man will receive the reward for his works. ”But the fearful, unbelieving, the accursed, impure, adulterers, gluttons, blasphemers, the proud, the envious, and liars shall have their part in the lake of brimstone.”<sup>63</sup> Hubmaier does not say how long the wicked will burn in the lake of fire so we can make no definitive conclusion here.

#### Dirk Phillips on Hell

Another Anabaptist thinker writes that the wicked will be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the lord and the glory of his power.<sup>64</sup> In the interrogation of Ambrosius Spitelmaier, the sixth judgment concerns the resurrection of all both the wicked and the righteous. “The blessed will be resurrected to life for they have been dead here (Rom 6) and the godless will raised to death, for they have lived here (Ezek 18). They have lived in peace and in the pleasure of this world and have had their kingdom of heaven (Matt19, Lk.12, I Tim.6).” In the seventh judgment, Spitelmaier further describes the fate of the wicked: “The godless must come into condemnation and will go into the eternal fire (Heb.4, Mt.25) which never dies. Then

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<sup>62</sup> Menno Simons, “Epistle to Martin Micron”, in Complete Writings, ed. J.C. Wenger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 921

<sup>63</sup> Balthasar Hubmaier, Twelve Articles in Prayer form,” in Balthasar Hubmaier, Theologian of Anabaptism, ed. H Wayne Pipkin and John Yoder (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989), 238

<sup>64</sup> Walter Klaassen, 339

the biting worm will begin to gnaw in the hearts of the godless and there will be crying, mourning, and gnashing of teeth, for here.”<sup>65</sup> This description suggests eternal suffering.

### Pilgram Marpeck on Hell

Yet another noted Anabaptist describes in vivid language the fate of the wicked: “They will suffer eternally, be and remain eternally in the darkness of God’s wrath, yea, in eternal envy, hate, anger, murder, and in agonized crying because the fire which will never depart from them. For all their sin and guilt along with their wickedness remains eternally in them and with them. For salvation and mediation are no longer available so that they do not have even the smallest particle of comfort. Thus, the great of eternal fire together with everlasting despair will far exceed their own torment, and all this in immortality. It would be as though a mortal man had many deadly pains in his body, each pain far exceeding the other, with no surcease. Thus the lesser pain would be small pains would be a small relief compared to the greater torment, but added to the greatest torment, even unto death. Thus, not a single remedy will be available for all those condemned, each according to his deserts”.<sup>66</sup> It is clear that this Anabaptist scholar takes the view that the wicked will suffer eternally.

The Mennonite Confession of faith in 1632 affirms, under the section of the resurrection of the dead and the last judgment, that there shall be two resurrections, one for the godly and the other for the wicked. The godly will reign and triumph with Christ forever. But the destiny of the wicked is described in the following: “And that, on the contrary, the wicked or the impious, shall as the accursed of God, be cast into ‘outer darkness’ yes, into eternal hellish torments;

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<sup>65</sup> Pilgram Marpeck, “Concerning the Love of God in Christ” in *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, ed. William Klassen and Walter Klaassen (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1978) 536-538.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*

‘where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not be quenched,’ and when according to Holy Scriptures, they can expect no comfort nor redemption throughout eternity.”<sup>67</sup> It is clear from this early confession of the Mennonites that they subscribe to the view that the wicked will burn in hell eternally.

### Peter Riedermann on Hell

Riedermann in his *Hutterite Confession of Faith* notes, that all will rise from the grave, some to the resurrection of life and others to the resurrection of judgment. “With an incorruptible body, they will all appear before the terrible judge. He will appoint to each his place and reward, according to the good or evil he has done during his lifetime.”<sup>68</sup> Riedermann does not specify the nature of the reward of the wicked, so we cannot make a determination of his views on the eternal torment of the wicked.

### Conclusion

The majority of the Protestant Reformers argued for an immortal soul that will burn in hell indefinitely. Luther eliminated purgatory as a place of suffering for the Christians who still needed purification before they could enter paradise, but he taught that the wicked would suffer hell’s fire but he was unsure about the duration. Calvin believed in a conditional immortality of the soul but was more explicit about the severity and duration of hell’s fire on the wicked. Most of the other reformers held similar views to Luther and Calvin on this issue. The Radical Reformers had a diversity of views, but the majority taught the eternal suffering of the wicked in

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<sup>67</sup> In Howard John Loewen, *One Lord, One Church, One Hope, and One God, Mennonite Confessions of Faith in North America*, Text Reader Series 2 (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1985), 69.

<sup>68</sup> In *Peter Riedemann's Hutterite Confession of Faith*, translated and edited by John J. Friesen, *Classics of the Radical Reformation* 9 (Kitchener, Ontario: Herald Press, 1998), 82.

hell. It is quite astonishing that although the majority of the reformers held an exalted view of God's compassion and love that he extends freely to sinners without any merit of their own, yet they fail to reconcile this view of God with the one who would allow the eternal burning of sinners forever. How does a God who freely justifies sinners and loves humans unconditionally and expressed that love in giving himself for them, now stands back and watches sinners burn in hell forever. These two sides of God are irreconcilable. By holding on to this doctrine of the eternal burning hell of the wicked, unfortunately, the Protestant reformers allowed for the gross misrepresentation of the true character of God.