

## THE CURRENT THEOLOGICAL DEBATE REGARDING ETERNAL PUNISHMENT IN HELL AND THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL

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Heaven and hell preoccupy thoughts of humanity from antiquity. These themes are extremely attractive, because they deal with issues of eternal life or death. Lisa Miller strikingly entitles her book, *Heaven: Our Enduring Fascination with the Afterlife*.<sup>1</sup> Carol Zaleski ironically points out that “our ancestors were afraid of Hell; we are afraid of Heaven. We think it will be boring.”<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, it is also true that the majority of people would like to avoid thinking about hell. Martin Marty fittingly entitled his article on hell: “Hell Disappeared. No One Noticed. A Civic Argument.”<sup>3</sup> Gordon Kaufman speaks of “irreversible changes” and adds: “I don’t think there can be any future for heaven and hell.”<sup>4</sup> Richard Niebuhr expressed similar feelings when he criticized theological liberalism of being a social gospel by pointing out that they believe in “a God without wrath [who] brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministration of a Christ without a cross.”<sup>5</sup> However, the topic of hell has had a dramatic comeback, and there is probably no more heated debate in biblical and theological studies than the one over the eternal punishment in hell. R. C. Sproul claims that “there is no topic in Christian theology more difficult to deal with, particularly on an emotional level, than the doctrine of hell.”<sup>6</sup> The recent literature on this subject and closely related issues is abundant and reveals the intense debate.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Published in New York: Harper, 2010.

<sup>2</sup>Carol Zaleski, “In Defense of Immortality,” *First Things* 105 (September 2000): 42.

<sup>3</sup>Martin Marty, “Hell Disappeared. No One Noticed. A Civic Argument,” *Harvard Theological Review* 78 (1985): 381-398.

<sup>4</sup>Cited by Kenneth L. Woodward, “Heaven,” in *Newsweek*, Mar. 27, 1989, 54.

<sup>5</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 193.

<sup>6</sup>R. C. Sproul, *Unseen Realities: Heaven, Hell, Angels and Demons* (Lake Mary, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2011), 51.

<sup>7</sup>See, for example, the following representative literature: Sharon L. Baker, *Razing Hell: Rethinking Everything You’ve Been Taught about God’s Wrath and Judgment* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 37; Joel Bunting, *The Problem of Hell* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010); Nigel M. de S. Cameron, ed., *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell: Papers Presented at the Fourth Edinburgh Conference on Christian Dogmatics, 1991* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992); David Clotfelter, *Sinners in the Hands of a Good God: Reconciling Divine Judgment and Mercy* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2004); Edward W. Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, 3d ed., fully

*Primary Issue*

What we believe about hell has a direct impact on our understanding of God, His person, values, image, reputation, and character. “When we say something about heaven or hell we are also saying something specifically about God.”<sup>8</sup> The reverse statement is also true: Our picture of God dramatically influences our view of hell. Jeremy LaBorde rightly states: “What you believe to be true will control you, whether it’s true or not.”<sup>9</sup> What we believe about God profoundly influences our life and defines our conduct. What we say about ourselves has a direct impact on our understanding of the image of God, because He is our Creator. Richard Rice aptly observes: “Our understanding of God has enormous practical significance. . . . What we think of God and how we respond to Him are closely related. An inaccurate view of God can

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updated, rev., and exp. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011); Edward W. Fudge and Robert A. Peterson, *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical and Theological Dialogue* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000); Norman L. Geisler, *If God, Why Evil?: A New Way to Think About the Question* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2011); David Hilborn, et al., *The Nature of Hell: A Report by the Evangelical Alliance Commission on Unity and Truth Among Evangelicals* (London: Evangelical Alliance, 2000); Randy Klassen, *What Does the Bible Really Say About Hell: Wrestling with the Traditional View* (Telford, PA: Pandora, 2001); Daniel Knauft, *Search for the Immortal Soul* (Nampa, ID: Torchlight Intel, 2006); David George Moore, *The Battle for Hell: A Survey and Evaluation of Evangelicals’ Growing Attraction to the Doctrine of Annihilationism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995); Chris Morgan, *Jonathan Edwards and Hell* (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2004); Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds., *Hell Under Fire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007); idem, *Is Hell for Real or Does Everyone Go to Heaven?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004); Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1995); Richard D. Phillips, *What Happens After Death?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013); Clark H. Pinnock, “The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent,” *Criswell Theological Review* 4 (Spring 1990): 243-260; idem, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992); David Powys, *‘Hell’: A Hard Look at a Hard Question* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1997); Sproul, *Unseen Realities*; Stephen H. Travis, *The Jesus Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1976); idem, *Christian Hope and the Future*, vol. 3, *Issues in Contemporary Theology*, ed. I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1980); John Walvoord, et al., *Four Views on Hell* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996); Jerry L. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992); idem, *Heaven: The Logic of Eternal Joy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); John W. Wenham, *The Goodness of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1974); Michael E. Wittmer, *Christ Alone: An Evangelical Response to Rob Bell’s Love Wins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Edenridge, 2011).

<sup>8</sup>Klassen, *What Does the Bible Really Say About Hell?*, 28.

<sup>9</sup>See citation of Jeremy LaBorde’s quotation by Richard Oakes, cited August 9, 2009, accessed September 5, 2014, [http://bigthink.com/ideas/what-you-believe-to-be-true-will-control-you-whether-it-is-true-or-not-jeremy-laborde\\_](http://bigthink.com/ideas/what-you-believe-to-be-true-will-control-you-whether-it-is-true-or-not-jeremy-laborde_)

have a disastrous effect on personal religious experience. We could never love a hostile, tyrannical being. . . . And we could not respect a mild, indulgent figure who never took us seriously. Our personal religious experience can be healthy only if we hold an adequate conception of God.”<sup>10</sup> Sharon Baker concurs: “The image of God we hold in our heads and hearts matters because that image dictates our behavior.”<sup>11</sup> The goal of this article is to present contemporary principal views on hell and put them into a reciprocal dialogue, and demonstrate that the understanding of the mortality or immortality of the soul plays an integral part in interpreting the nature of hell or life in heaven.

*Fertile Ground for Atheism*

The traditional teaching of the Christian Church regarding eternal punishment in hell, where immortal souls are tortured forever, produces atheists and religious schizophrenia. For many this teaching presents God as being unjust, immoral, bloodthirsty, unfair, and behaving as a monster and sadist.<sup>12</sup> It stands directly against the view of the biblical God—the God of love, justice, truth, holiness, and freedom.

Russian theologian Nicholas Berdyaev declared: “I can conceive of no more powerful and irrefutable argument in favor of atheism than the eternal torment in hell.”<sup>13</sup> In his autobiography, Charles Darwin eloquently wrote: “I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so, the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my Father, Brother and almost all my best friends, will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine.”<sup>14</sup> He plainly rejected the doctrine of divine eternal punishment for unbelievers.

Bertrand Russell rejected Christianity because of the doctrine of hell: “There is one very serious defect to my mind in Christ’s moral character, and that is that He believed in hell. I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Richard Rice, *God’s Foreknowledge and Man’s Free Will* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1985), 10.

<sup>11</sup>Baker, 37.

<sup>12</sup>Popular pictures of hell are often drawn from Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: The Inferno, The Purgatorio, and The Paradiso* (New York: New American Library, 2003).

<sup>13</sup>Quoted from Robert Short, *Short Meditations on the Bible and Peanuts* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 127.

<sup>14</sup>Nora Barlow, ed., *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin 1809-1882*, 2d ed., with original omissions restored; app. and notes by his granddaughter Nora Barlow (London: Collins, 1958), 87.

<sup>15</sup>Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian, and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects*, ed. Paul Edward (London: Allen & Unwin, 1957), 12.

Russell continues: "I must say that I think all this doctrine, that hell-fire is a punishment for sin, is a doctrine of cruelty. It is a doctrine that put cruelty into the world and gave the world generations of cruel torture; and the Christ of the Gospels, if you could take Him as His chroniclers represent Him, would certainly have to be considered partly responsible for that."<sup>16</sup>

Neo-atheists have also attacked God and His character, and one reason among others is the doctrine of eternal punishment in hell. Daniel Dennett states: "Christians fabricate terror, psychological abuse, create phobia."<sup>17</sup> Richard Dawkins writes with a deep sense of abhorrence, and rightly so, about the "Hell Houses" of Pastor Keenan Roberts,<sup>18</sup> who preaches to his congregation eternal conscious torment in hell and creates massive phobia in children by walking them through the very imaginative Hell House which, describes Dawkins, "is a place where children are brought, by their parents or their Christian schools, to be scared witless over what might happen to them after they die."<sup>19</sup> According to Roberts, the optimum age to visit such a "theater" is twelve. This description of the "horribleness of hell" is inexcusable. The Hell House might be fitted for Hollywood zombie movies (not recommended), but certainly not for the representation of biblically-oriented religion. This is a drastic distortion of truth and the character of God. Because of these and many other misunderstandings and misrepresentations of the gospel, Richard Dawkins sharply criticized biblical religion by claiming that "the God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."<sup>20</sup> Long before Dawkins, classical atheist Karl Marx wrote: "Religion is opium for the masses!"<sup>21</sup>

Many Christian thinkers are guilty for this unfortunate attitude toward Christianity due to their distorted theology. The colorful preaching about eternal punishment of some preachers helped to develop such animosity.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 3.

<sup>17</sup>Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 279-283.

<sup>18</sup>Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: A Mariner Book, 2006), 359-362.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 359.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 31, also in an edition with a new introduction (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 51.

<sup>21</sup>Karl Marx, *Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, Collected Works*, vol. 3 (New York: 1976), 1 (originally published in 1844).

For example, on July 8, 1741, Jonathan Edwards preached a very famous and starkly graphic sermon entitled: “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”<sup>22</sup> Edwards’ eloquent work for defending the eternal conscious torment in hell is used even today by many evangelicals.<sup>23</sup> Other preachers and authors expressed similar horrific thoughts about the nature of hell.<sup>24</sup>

Some theologians even expounded the atrocious idea that the eternal torment of the lost will add to the blessed state of the redeemed. Thomas Aquinas wrote that the redeemed “will, in fact, rejoice at the pains of those who are condemned. Their own bliss will be all the more enjoyable in contrast with the misfortune of the lost.”<sup>25</sup> This sounds like a description of a sadistic joy in heaven by the saved over seeing the suffering of the wicked. Edwards similarly claims: “The saints in heaven will behold the torments of the damned. . . . Every time they looked upon the damned, it will excite in them a lively and admiring sense of the grace of God, in making them so to differ. . . . The view of the misery of the damned will double the ardor of the love and gratitude of the saints in heaven. The sight of hell’s torments will exalt the happiness of the saints forever. When they see others who are of the same nature and born under the same circumstances, plunged in such misery, and they so distinguished, it will make them sensible of how happy they are.”<sup>26</sup> This creates an awful picture of heaven and also of the Lord, the Creator of heaven.

<sup>22</sup>Reprinted in Jonathan Edwards, *On Knowing Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1990). See also statements of some advocates of eternal punishment in hell quoted by Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1950), 535. The statement about an angry God goes directly against the overall picture and teaching of the Bible about who God is, describing Him as love (1 John 4:16), never as anger or wrath, and abounding in love (Exod 34:6). The loving God can be angry, but He is not anger or wrath. God’s anger is His passionate reaction to evil, a clear no to iniquity; it is His uncompromised condemning reaction toward sin. His burning attitude toward evil does not change, because He is the *summum bonum*.

<sup>23</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1979 reprint). For evangelicals who heavily quote Edwards, see for example, John Gerstner, *Jonathan Edwards on Heaven and Hell* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Ministries, 1999); Chris Morgan, *Jonathan Edwards and Hell* (Scotland: Mentor, 2004); and Geisler, *If God, Why Evil?*, 102-112. See also Peterson, *Hell on Trial*, 122-124, 136-137.

<sup>24</sup>For other examples, see the collection of sermons compiled by Warren W. Wiersbe, *Classic Sermons on Heaven and Hell* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1994).

<sup>25</sup>See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Suppl. Q. 94), quoted in Jan Bonda, *The One Purpose of God: An Answer to the Doctrine of Eternal Punishment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 26.

<sup>26</sup>Excerpt from the sermon of Jonathan Edwards published in Wiersbe, *Classic Sermons*, 154-155.

Ellen G. White mentions the offensive rhetoric of another preacher: “While the decree of reprobation is eternally executing on the vessels of wrath, the smoke of their torment will be eternally ascending in view of the vessels of mercy, who, instead of taking the part of these miserable objects, will say, Amen, Alleluia! praise ye the Lord!”<sup>27</sup> She condemns the unbiblical teaching about eternal torment in hell as a “dreadful blasphemy.”<sup>28</sup> One can add that it is a terrible plague, an open wound, and a cancerous ulcer in Christian theology. She solemnly declares: “It is beyond the power of the human mind to estimate the evil which has been wrought by the heresy of eternal torment,”<sup>29</sup> adding: “How repugnant to every emotion of love and mercy, and even to our sense of justice, is the doctrine that the wicked dead are tormented with fire and brimstone in an eternally burning hell; that for the sins of a brief earthly life they are to suffer torture as long as God shall live.”<sup>30</sup>

Randy Klassen correctly states, according to the foreword by Robert K. Johnston, that “the goal of God’s justice is closure, not torture.”<sup>31</sup> Hans Küng poses a pertinent question: “What would we think of a human being who satisfied his thirst for revenge so implacably and insatiably?”<sup>32</sup> Clark Pinnock well articulates another relevant question: “Torturing people without end is not the sort of thing the ‘Abba’ Father of Jesus would do. Would God who tells us to love our enemies be intending to wreak vengeance on his enemies for all eternity?”<sup>33</sup>

<sup>27</sup>White, *The Great Controversy*, 535, describing such sentiments on pp. 534-535 as part of the devil’s strategy of deception: “Satan is seeking to overcome men today, as he overcame our first parents, by shaking their confidence in their Creator and leading them to doubt the wisdom of His government and the justice of His laws. Satan and his emissaries represent God as even worse than themselves, in order to justify their own malignity and rebellion. The great deceiver endeavors to shift his own horrible cruelty of character upon our heavenly Father, that he may cause himself to appear as one greatly wronged by his expulsion from heaven because he would not submit to so unjust a governor. He presents before the world the liberty which they may enjoy under his mild sway, in contrast with the bondage imposed by the stern decrees of Jehovah. Thus he succeeds in luring souls away from their allegiance to God.”

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 536.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 535.

<sup>31</sup>In the foreword by Robert K. Johnston to Randy Klassen, *What Does the Bible Really Say About Hell?* (Telford, PA: Pandora, 2001), 12 (see also p. 91).

<sup>32</sup>Hans Küng, *Eternal Life? Life After Death as a Medical, Philosophical, and Theological Problem* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 136.

<sup>33</sup>Clark H. Pinnock, “The Conditional View,” *Four Views on Hell*, ed. William Crockett (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 140.

*Ongoing Debate: Three Basic Views of Hell*

Many biblical scholars and theologians recognize that the doctrine of eternal punishment in hell is problematic and unethical. Why would a loving God send anyone to hell forever? Again, Pinnock makes the point: “Everlasting torture is intolerable from a moral point of view because it pictures God acting like a bloodthirsty monster who maintains an everlasting Auschwitz for his enemies whom he does not even allow to die. How can one love a God like that?”<sup>34</sup> This leads us to search for a more relevant and biblically sound interpretation. Nevertheless, heated debate on this topic continues, with three major views being advanced: the traditional view of a never-ending hell fire, the conditional view that the lake of fire irreversibly and totally consumes the damned, and the restorationist position that hell fire purifies and ultimately enables everyone to be saved.

A. Traditionalists: Hell Fire That Torments  
Forever Without Ceasing

Traditionally, hell exists as a real place somewhere in the underworld where real fire torments immortal souls forever (this opinion was for the first time expressed among Christians by Tertullian) and asserts that the conscious suffering of the wicked comes right after death and lasts throughout all eternity. A good number of contemporary Bible scholars and theologians adhere to this view of hell as eternal conscious torture or punishment (with some nuances and modifications), claiming that their interpretation can be supported by the biblical data. These include Gregory K. Beale, John Blanchard, Daniel I. Block, D. A. Carson, Eryl Davies, Larry Dixon, Sinclair B. Ferguson, John Gerstner, Kendall S. Harmon, Paul Helm, Bruce Milne, Albert Mohler, Jr., Douglas J. Moo, Christopher W. Morgan, James I. Packer, Robert A. Peterson, John F. Walvoord, Robert W. Yarbrough, et al.<sup>35</sup> Norman

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 149.

<sup>35</sup>Gregory K. Beale, “The Revelation on Hell,” in *Hell Under Fire*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 111-134; John Blanchard, *Whatever Happened to Hell?* (Durham, UK: Evangelical, 1993); Daniel I. Block, “The Old Testament on Hell,” in *Hell Under Fire*, 43-65; D. A. Carson, *The Gaging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 515-536; Eryl Davies, *An Angry God? The Biblical Doctrine of Wrath, Final Judgment and Hell* (Bridgend, Wales: Evangelical, 1991); Larry Dixon, *The Other Side of the Good News: Confronting the Contemporary Challenges to Jesus’s Teaching on Hell* (Wheaton, IL: BridgePoint, 1992); Sinclair B. Ferguson, “Pastoral Theology: The Preacher and Hell,” in *Hell Under Fire*, 219-237; John Gerstner, *Repent or Perish* (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1990); Kendall S. Harmon, “The Case Against Conditionalism: A Response to Edward William Fudge,” in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, ed. Nigel M. De S. Cameron (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992), 193-224; Paul Helm, *The Last Things: Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1989); Bruce Milne, *The Message of Heaven and Hell: Grace and Destiny* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002); R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “Modern Theology: The Disappearance of Hell,” in *Hell Under Fire*, ed.

Geisler in his book *If God, Why Evil?* summarizes crucial arguments for this position, arguing that “the evidence for hell is biblical, rational, and moral.”<sup>36</sup> Robert A. Peterson and Christopher W. Morgan are probably the most outspoken defenders of this position.<sup>37</sup> The best recent multi-author book in support of this interpretation is *Hell Under Fire*.<sup>38</sup> In spite of the absurdity and horribleness of hell that this view describes, the authors defend the eternal conscious torture of the wicked in hell in contrast to and parallel in time with the eternal life of the righteous in heaven.

B. Conditionalists (or Annihilationists):  
The Lake of Fire that Irreversibly  
and Totally Consumes

The conditionalist view is built on the biblical conviction that human beings are not inherently immortal, that they do not possess immortal souls. On the contrary, they are mortal because they are created beings (immortality comes as a pure gift from God by staying in relationship with him) and because they are sinners. As sinners they are thus doomed to eternal death unless and until they accept Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. Immortality is conditioned on receiving God’s grace and exercising faith in Jesus (John 3:16; 5:24; Rom 3:21-31; Eph 2:1-10). In this explanation, death is understood as a *sleep* (Ps 7:5; 13:3; Dan 12:2; John 11:11-15; Acts 13:36) or *resting* in the grave (Job 3:13; Isa 57:1-2; Rev 14:13) until the resurrection, whether to eternal life or eternal destruction (Matt 10:28; John 5:28-29). Hell is not a place where wicked souls or spirits go immediately after death but is understood as a “lake of fire” in which, at the end of human history, the wicked will be totally consumed (Mal 4:1; Matt 25:41; 2 Thess 1:7-10; Rev 20:9-10, 14-15). This fire prepared for the devil and the fallen angels will annihilate them together with the wicked at the last or executive judgment. It is final. No one can quench it. It has eternal results, and it will accomplish its purpose—the destruction of evil, sin, death,

Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 15-41; Douglas J. Moo, “Paul on Hell,” in *Hell Under Fire*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 91-109; Christopher W. Morgan, “Biblical Theology: Three Pictures of Hell,” in *Hell Under Fire*, 135-151; idem, “Annihilationism: Will the Unsaved Be Punished Forever?” in *Hell Under Fire*, 195-218; James I. Packer, “Universalism: Will Everyone Ultimately Be Saved?” in *Hell Under Fire*, 169-194; idem, “Evangelical Annihilationism in Review,” *Reformation Review* 6 (1996): 37-51; Peterson, *Hell on Trial*; idem, “Systematic Theology: Three Vantage Points of Hell,” in *Hell Under Fire*, 153-168; John F. Walvoord, “The Literal View,” in *Four Views on Hell*, ed. William Crockett (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 11-42; and Robert W. Yarbrough, “Jesus on Hell,” in *Hell Under Fire*, 67-90.

<sup>36</sup>Norman L. Geisler, *If God, Why Evil?*, 96. See esp. pp. 95-114.

<sup>37</sup>See esp. Peterson, *Hell on Trial*, and “Systematic Theology.”

<sup>38</sup>Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds., *Hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvests Eternal Punishment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004).



the wicked, rebellious angels, and Satan himself. This first-phase judgment is partially executed at the second coming of Jesus Christ upon the “beast and the false prophet” (Rev 19:20-21) and then ultimately at the end of the millennium upon all the wicked (Rev 20:9-10, 14-15). It is described as “the second death” from which there is no redemption or escape; it is the total eradication of evil.

Even before describing that everything will be made new after evil is eradicated (Rev 21–22), God pronounces his final word on his enemies thus: “Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (Rev 20:14-15; repeated in 21:8).

In other words, annihilationism teaches that whoever refuses to be saved by God’s ultimate love and sacrifice will, after God’s final judgment, cease to exist. In this view, life is perceived as a special gift from God. The worst sin of all is the refusal to accept Jesus Christ as the solution to our sin problem and not living according to Christ’s Spirit (John 16:8-11; see also John 1:9; Rom 1:16-20; 2:14-16; 8:1-4, 14). The final destruction of unrepentant, wicked people is not God’s arbitrary decision, but his verdict against their wrong choices and destructive activities, as experienced in type by the antediluvians before the flood (see Gen 6:3, 5-6, 11-13; Matt 24:37-38; Luke 17:26-27; Rev 11:18).

This understanding of the final destinies of the righteous and the wicked described positively as the *conditionalist* view (and those who stand for this position are known as *conditionalists*), which emphasizes that immortality can be received only as a gift of God’s grace through faith in Christ Jesus. When described negatively, in terms of the final destiny of the wicked, it is called *annihilationism* (and its defenders are known as *annihilationists*), because they teach that sinners who stubbornly refuse to accept Jesus Christ as their Savior will, after the final judgment, be annihilated—completely destroyed—and they will be no more. This divine judgment is irreversible. Both positive and negative aspects are crucial to this position.

The first known advocate of annihilationism was Arnobius of Sicca (d. ca. 330 A.D.), who was followed by others throughout Christian history.<sup>39</sup> LeRoy Froom labored hard to demonstrate this in his massive work, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers*.<sup>40</sup> Recently, a plethora of writers has emerged

<sup>39</sup>Prior defenders of conditionalism/annihilationism include John Wycliffe, William Tyndale, John Biddle, William Whiston, Richard Whately, Edward White, Henry Dobney, Henry Constable, Harold Guillebaud, Basil F. C. Atkinson, and LeRoy Edwin Froom. See Morgan, “Annihilationism,” 197-198; Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes*, 3<sup>d</sup> ed., 85-115, 253-359; Hilborn, et al., *The Nature of Hell*, 60-67; Kim Papaioannou, *The Geography of Hell in the Teaching of Jesus: Gehena, Hades, the Abyss, the Outer Darkness Where There Is Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), xiii-xv.

<sup>40</sup>LeRoy Edwin Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1965). For a response to Froom’s careful reading of the early fathers, see Robert A. Morey, *Death and the Afterlife* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 1984), 58-60, 273-279, who questions Froom’s treatment of the church fathers.

who hold this view. A growing number of contemporary and influential evangelical scholars have voiced disagreement with the traditional view of hell. Those especially deserving mention include (with the year of their publications) Harold Guillebaud (1941), Basil F. C. Atkinson (1962), F. F. Bruce (1971), John W. Wenham (1974, 1991), Edward W. Fudge (1976, 1982, 2011), Stephen H. Travis (1976, 1980, 1982, 1986), Michael Green (1982), Clark Pinnock (1987, 1990, 1992, 2008), David L. Edwards (1988), John R. W. Stott (1988, 1994), Phillip E. Hughes (1989), Joel B. Green (1990, 2004, 2005, 2008), Robert Brow (1994), Nigel Wright (1996), E. Earle Ellis (1997), Richard Bauckham (1998; 2004), David Powys (2000), Hilborn, et al., *The Nature of Hell* (2000, combining the traditionalist and conditionalist views in order to present a united front against universalism), I. Howard Marshall (2003), F. LaGard Smith (2003), Ben Witherington III (2011), and John Zens (2011).<sup>41</sup>

<sup>41</sup>Basil F. C. Atkinson, *Life and Immortality: An Examination of the Nature and Meaning of Life and Death as They Are Revealed in the Scriptures* (Taunton, UK: Phoenix Press, [1962]); Richard Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum 93 (Leiden: Brill, 1998); idem, "Judgment in the Book of Revelation," *Ex Auditu* 20 (2004): 1-24; idem, "Hell," n.d. accessed Sept. 5, 2014, <http://richardbauckham.co.uk/uploads/Accessible/Hell.pdf>; F. F. Bruce, "Paul on Immortality," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 24 (1971): 457-472; David L. Edwards and John R. W. Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 312-320; E. Earle Ellis, "New Testament Teaching on Hell," in *Eschatology in Bible and Theology: Evangelical Essays at the Dawn of a New Millennium*, ed. Kent E. Brower and Mark W. Elliott (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 199-205; Edward W. Fudge, "Putting Hell in Its Place," *Christianity Today* (August 6, 1976): 14-17; idem, *The Fire that Consumes*, 3d ed., the first edition was published in 1982 (*The Fire that Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of Final Punishment* [Houston, TX: Providential Press, 1982]); idem, "The Final End of the Wicked," *JETS* 27 (September 1984): 325-334; idem, "'The Plain Meaning': A Review Essay," *Henceforth* 14 (1985): 18-31; Joel B. Green, *Evangelism through the Local Church: A Comprehensive Guide to All Aspects of Evangelism* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1990; repr., Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1992); idem, ed., *What about the Soul? Neuroscience and Christian Anthropology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004); idem, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2008), 177-180; idem, ed., *In Search of the Soul: Perspectives on the Mind-Body Problem—Four Views of the Mind-Body Problem*, 2d ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005); Michael Green, *The Day Death Died: Did Jesus Christ Really Rise from the Dead?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1982); Harold Guillebaud, *The Righteous Judge: A Study of the Biblical Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment* (Taunton, UK: Phoenix Press, [1941]); Hilborn, et al., *The Nature of Hell*; Phillip E. Hughes, *The True Image: The Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989); I. Howard Marshall, "The New Testament Does Not Teach Universal Salvation," in *Universal Salvation?: The Current Debate*, ed. Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Partridge (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2003), 55-76; Clark H. Pinnock, "Fire, Then Nothing," *Christianity Today* (March 20, 1987): 40-41; idem, "The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent," 243-260; idem, *A Wideness*

Roger Olson argues that annihilationism is “simply a reinterpretation of hell” within the acceptable “mosaic of Christian belief” and laments over “its harsh condemnation by a few fundamentalists” and proposes that it “should not deter Christians from accepting one another as equally believers in the gospel of Jesus Christ.”<sup>42</sup> Gregory Boyd affirms: “The joy of heaven is only conceivable if the damned have been annihilated and are remembered no more. When all the biblical evidence is viewed together, it must be admitted that the case for annihilationism is quite compelling.”<sup>43</sup>

The intense theological debate between traditionalists and conditionalists continues unabated. The first Rethinking Hell conference was held in Houston, Texas, July 11-12, 2014. As Clark Pinnock graphically explains: “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.”<sup>44</sup>

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*in God's Mercy*; idem, “The Conditional View,” 135-178; idem, “Annihilationism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry L. Walls (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 462-475; Clark H. Pinnock and Robert C. Brow, *Unbounded Love: A Good News Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994); Powys, *Hell*; F. LaGard Smith, “The Tormenting Conundrum of Hell,” in *AfterLife: A Glimpse of Eternity Beyond Death's Door* (Nashville, TN: Cotswold, 2003), 165-197; John R. S. Stott, “The Logic of Hell: A Brief Rejoinder,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 18 (January 1994): 33-34; Travis, *The Jesus Hope*; idem, *Christian Hope and the Future*; idem, *I Believe in the Second Coming of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 196-199; idem, “The Problem of Judgment,” *Themelios* 11 (January 1986): 52-61; idem, *Christ and the Judgment of God: The Limits of Divine Retribution in the New Testament*, 2d ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009), 1st ed. pub. 1986; Wenham, *The Goodness of God*, 27-41, reprinted as *The Enigma of Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985); idem, “The Case for Conditional Immortality,” in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell: Papers Presented at the Fourth Edinburgh Conference on Christian Dogmatics, 1991*, ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992), 161-191; Ben Witherington III, “And Now—The Case for Permanent Residence in Hell,” accessed Sept. 5, 2014, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/bibleandculture/2011/03/19/and-now-the-case-for-permanent-residence-in-hell/>; Nigel Wright, *The Radical Evangelical: Seeking a Place to Stand* (London: SPCK, 1996); and John Zens, *Christ Minimized? A Response to Rob Bell's Love Wins* (Omaha, NE: Ekklesia, 2011). See also Greg Boyd, “The Case for Annihilationism,” accessed Sept. 5, 2014, <http://reknew.org/2008/01/the-case-for-annihilationism>, who admits: “While I am not completely convinced of this position, I think it is worthy of serious consideration” (par. 1).

<sup>42</sup>Roger E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity & Diversity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 329.

<sup>43</sup>Gregory A. Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 336.

<sup>44</sup>Pinnock, “The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent,” 246-247.

Michael Green uncompromisingly writes: “What sort of God would be he who could rejoice eternally in heaven with the saved, while downstairs the cries of the lost make an agonizing cacophony? Such a God is not the person revealed in Scripture as utterly just and utterly loving.”<sup>45</sup> Gregory MacDonald asserts that such a God would be a “cosmic torturer.”<sup>46</sup> John Wenham emphasizes: “I cannot see that endless punishment is either loving or just. . . . It is a doctrine which I do not know how to preach without negating the loveliness and glory of God.”<sup>47</sup> Stephen Travis concurs that endless torture in hell is “incompatible with the love of God in Christ.”<sup>48</sup>

C. Restorationists (or Universalists):  
Hell Fire that Ultimately Purifies  
and Saves Everyone

Restorationists claim that all people will ultimately be saved, including the wicked, because hell fire will purify them; that is, while in it, the wicked will grow in their understanding of God’s unselfish love for them, accept it, and so at the end be restored and receive eternal life. This understanding is built on the recognition that after death the immortal soul of the wicked cannot go immediately to heaven but will suffer in the fire of God’s judgment. This fire will gradually cleanse them and then, at some future time (the precise moment will depend on the individual’s response to this purification process), everyone will finally be saved. Those who defend this position speak about God’s last judgment in terms of God’s restorative (rather than retributive) justice, which is understood as another side of God’s love.

It needs to be stressed, however, that there are various opinions regarding restorationism, depending on one’s understanding of the nature of God, the authority of Scripture, the role of retributive judgment, predestination, and free will.<sup>49</sup> Gregory MacDonald argues for three different groups of universalists.<sup>50</sup> Proponents of universalism stress the biblical hope that God’s love will save us all. Richard Bauckham affirms: “Only the belief that all men will ultimately be saved is common to all universalists”<sup>51</sup> They claim that at the end all people will be saved, even though some adherents allow for the final destruction of those who resist God’s loving work for them and, after

<sup>45</sup>Green, *Evangelism Through the Local Church*, 69, 72.

<sup>46</sup>Gregory MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist*, 2d ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 136.

<sup>47</sup>Wenham, “The Case for Conditional Immortality,” 185-187.

<sup>48</sup>Travis, *Christian Hope*, 135.

<sup>49</sup>Trever Hart, “Universalism: Two Distinct Types,” in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*; Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 3d ed., 279-286.

<sup>50</sup>MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist*, 134-135.

<sup>51</sup>Richard Bauckham, “Universalism: A Historical Survey,” *Themelios* 4, no. 2 (January 1979): 49.

their suffering in hell, will end up in the lake of fire.<sup>52</sup> Generally speaking in this universalistic interpretation the devil and the fallen angels will also be ultimately saved. This redemptive judgment takes some time and will be different for each individual soul. Classical universalism affirms that the *hell* texts do not speak about eternal condemnation or damnation but underscores that hell's existence is only temporary, that after a certain period of time hell ceases to exist and everyone is saved.

Advocates of universalism begin to appear in the third century A.D. Hell as the place where the fire will actually purify is introduced by Clement of Alexandria and then further refined by Origen of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa, who stress that the love of God is a process that continues after death and that the decisions of people in this life are not final. This position is defended by many contemporary universalists. The *soul* ultimately chooses its own fate in heaven after undergoing this fiery purification process. Recently, there has been a revival of universalism with Rob Bell's *Love Wins*,<sup>53</sup> provoking more discussion on this topic with books written in reaction to his position.<sup>54</sup> The conviction that, after death, God gives another chance for people to be saved is very appealing and has gained great popularity lately.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, some prominent theologians like Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Hans Küng, and Karl Rahner have been sympathetic toward universalism.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>52</sup>See Baker, *Razing Hell*, 106-124. Her view is unique, allowing for the possibility that not all people will be saved. Thus she seeks to combine annihilationism and universalism.

<sup>53</sup>Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (New York: HarperOne, 2011). See also Rob Bell, *The Love Wins Companion: A Study Guide for Those Who Want to Go Deeper*, ed. David Vanderveen (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

<sup>54</sup>See, for example, Francis Chan and Preston Sprinkle, *Erasing Hell: What God Said About Eternity, and the Things We Made Up* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2011); Kevin DeYoung's blog, "God is Still Holy and What you Learned in Sunday School is Still True: A Review of 'Love Wins,'" accessed Sept. 5, 2014, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2011/03/14/rob-bell-love-wins-review/>; Mark Galli, *God Wins: Heaven, Hell, and Why the Good News Is Better than Love Wins* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2011); Larry Dixon, "Farewell, Rob Bell": *A Biblical Response to Love Wins* (Columbia, SC: Theomedian Resources, 2011); James K. Wellman, Jr., *Rob Bell and a New American Christianity* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2012); Zens, *Christ Minimized?*

<sup>55</sup>The principal evangelical defenders of this view are Jan Bonda (1998), Thomas Talbott (1999), Randy Klassen (2001), Gregory MacDonald (2006), Sharon Baker (2010), and Rob Bell (2011); MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist* (Gregory MacDonald is a pseudonym of Robin Parry); idem, ed. *All Shall Be Well: Explorations in Universalism and Christian Theology, from Origen to Moltmann* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011); Thomas Talbott, *The Inescapable Love of God* (Boca Raton, FL: Universal, 1999).

<sup>56</sup>For details, see MacDonald, ed., *All Shall Be Well*, 23-24; Packer, "Universalism," 172-173. John MacQuarrie asserts: "A doctrine of conditional immortality is at least

Rob Bell summarizes:

And so a universal hugfest where everybody eventually ends up around the heavenly campfire singing “Kumbaya,” with Jesus playing guitar, sounds a lot like fantasy to some people. . . . There must be some kind of “second chance” for those who don’t believe in Jesus in this lifetime. . . . “Who could doubt God’s ability to do that?” . . . And then there are others who ask if you get another chance after you die, why limit that chance to a one-off immediately after death? And so they expand the possibilities, trusting that there will be endless opportunities in an endless amount of time for people to say yes to God. As long as it takes, in other words. At the heart of this perspective is the belief that, given enough time, everybody will turn to God and find themselves in the joy and peace of God’s presence.<sup>57</sup>

R. C. Sproul sharply criticizes universalism: “A prevailing notion is that all we have to do to enter the kingdom of God is to die. God is viewed as so ‘loving’ that he really doesn’t care too much if we don’t keep his law. The law is there to guide us, but if we stumble and fall, our celestial grandfather will merely wink and say, ‘Boys will be boys.’”<sup>58</sup>

The universalist view stands in total opposition to both the traditional view of eternal torment in hell and the conditionalist position stressing that immortality is received as a gift on the basis of faith in Christ Jesus.

*Evaluation of the Three Approaches:  
Issues and Brief Answers*

The scope of this article allows only for a summary evaluation (without going into a detailed argumentation) and is written from the annihilationism point of view. It is significant to recognize that there is practically no middle road among these three views; they are mutually exclusive. There is no way to harmonize or reconcile them.

The understanding of biblical truth is often difficult to discern because of long traditions of interpretation and our emotions attached to them. It is useful to be reminded that people are devoted to interpretations that are dear to them. God gives His revelation in order for believers to discern the truth that needs to be accepted and lived by. Our reason, common sense, and feelings should not dictate our understanding of biblical truth, but neither should they be neglected for they can be helpful for checking to make sure our interpretation is in harmony with God’s revealed Word.

The unending torture or punishment in hell is not consistent with the biblical understanding of God’s love, His justice, and His final victory over evil! It is impossible to believe in the existence of eternal hell and at the same

preferable to the barbarous doctrine of an eternal hell. . . . But perhaps the Christian hope can carry us further even than a belief in conditional immortality. . . . We prefer a doctrine of ‘universalism’ to one of ‘conditional immortality.’” (*Principles of Christian Theology*, 2d ed. [New York: Scribner’s, 1977], 361).

<sup>57</sup>Bell, *Love Wins*, 105-107.

<sup>58</sup>Sproul, *Reason to Believe*, 99-100.

time speak about the restoration of the universe to its original state where there will be no devil, evil, sin, suffering, and death.

Christians who believe in the immortality of the soul but do not hold to the eternal conscious torture in hell are in a maze and stand at a dead-end street. Only one option remains for them, namely universalism, a belief that God will work after death with the “souls of the wicked” and in the end all will be saved, thus the torture and suffering will one day end.

On the one hand, universalism is rightly criticized by traditionalist and annihilationists for the absence of God’s retributive judgment and for a second chance for conversion and change after death.<sup>59</sup> On the other hand, universalists join annihilationists/conditionalists against traditionalists in rejecting the awfulness of eternal conscious punishment in hell. However, traditionalists and annihilationists passionately criticize each other’s views on different grounds.

If universalism or traditional views are correct, then Satan’s lie uttered in the Garden of Eden would be true: “You will not surely die” (Gen 3:5), and not God’s declaration: “. . . when you eat from it you will surely die” (Gen 2:17). Adam and Eve did not die immediately after eating from the forbidden fruit because God’s grace was proleptically applied to them in anticipation of Christ’s victory on the cross (Gen 3:15, 21; Rev 13:8; see also Eph 1:3-4; 1 Pet 1:20). When they died, they died in view of the Messiah who will come as their Savior, and bring victory over Satan through His death (Gen 3:15, 21; 4:1; cf. John 5:28-29; 12:31-32) and salvation for those who believe (John 3:16; Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7). However, those who do not accept God’s amazing grace manifested fully in Christ remain under God’s wrath and will perish (John 3:36; 2 Thess 2:8-9; Rev 20:14-15). Paul rightly affirms: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 6:23). Our choices ultimately have eternal consequences.

#### Central and Critical Issue: Immortality of the Soul

Both, the traditional as well as universal views stand or fall on the premise that each individual has an immortal soul as an integral part of his or her existence.<sup>60</sup> However, if this presupposition regarding the immortal soul

<sup>59</sup>See, for example, Packer, “Universalism,” 169-194; G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ (Studies in Dogmatics)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 387-423.

<sup>60</sup>Pascal underlines: “The immortality of the soul is something of such vital importance to us, affecting us so deeply, that one must have lost all feelings not to care about knowing the facts of the matter. All our actions and thoughts must follow such different paths according to whether there is hope of eternal blessings or not, that the only possible way of acting with sense and judgment is to decide our course in light of this point, which ought to be our ultimate objective” (Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* [London: Penguin, 1966], 156). Current most popular books on the immortality of the soul are Eben Alexander, MD, *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon’s Journey into the Afterlife* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012) and Todd Burpo, with Lynn Vincent, *Heaven Is for Real: A Little Boy’s Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back* (Nashville, TN: Thomas

does not hold, both interpretations collapse. On the other hand, if humans have an immortal soul which can live independently of one's body, then the annihilationist's view is automatically ruled out. Pinnock correctly discerns and claims: "Why would anybody have turned the notion of destruction into everlasting life in hell, creating this monstrous problem? We attribute it to the influence on theology of the Greek idea of the immortality of the soul. With that view entering the picture, the shift is logical and inevitable. If souls are immortal and hell exists, it follows that the wicked will have to suffer consciously forever in it. If the soul is naturally immortal, it has to spend eternity somewhere."<sup>61</sup>

Recent studies in theological anthropology present new excellent views on the human being and the notion of soul that impact our understanding of our being and immortality. At least three such in-depth research studies can be commended: the scholarly work of David P. Gushee, Nancy Murphy, and Joel B. Green. Gushee declares: "Unlike the Greek notion that the body decays while the self floats off to heaven, a biblical (especially a Jewish) understanding seems to envision no such separable existence between body and soul or spirit. When we die, all of us dies."<sup>62</sup> Murphy describes the non-reductive physicalism of anthropology that seriously accepts biblical monism in contrast to dualism. She wholeheartedly embraces physical and relational functions of our existence and also stresses human moral responsibility. Instead of a soul, she uses the notion of self: "The term *self* is used in a variety of ways in psychology and philosophy. What is at issue here is not the question of what it means to be a self. Rather the issue is that of having a self-concept."<sup>63</sup> She claims that humans are physical and that "it is the brain that does the work once attributed to the mind or soul."<sup>64</sup>

The expression *immortal soul* and the teaching that humans are born immortal or with immortal souls or spirits are not found in the Bible. Humans or souls are not inherently immortal. Human immortality is always derived from God: "Who [God] alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen" (1 Tim 6:16 NIV). Eternal life is God's gift to believers only (John 3:16; 10:27-28; 17:3; Rom 2:7; 6:22-23; Gal 6:8). Man has no conscious existence apart from the body, and after he dies his consciousness ceases to operate. Death is a sleep or rest (Psalm 13:3; John 11:11-15; Acts 13:36; Rev 14:13). Immortality is conditional and depends on our positive response to

Nelson, 2010). The latter book was made into a movie in 2014.

<sup>61</sup>Pinnock and Brow, *Unbounded Love*, 92.

<sup>62</sup>David P. Gushee, *Only Human: Christian Reflections on the Journey Toward Wholeness* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 49.

<sup>63</sup>Nancey Murphy, "Nonreductive Physicalism," in *In Search of the Soul: Perspectives on the Mind-Body Problem. Four Views of the Mind-Body Problem*, ed. Joel B. Green, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 124.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, 132.



God's goodness, on the acceptance of the gospel. This immortality is God's gift given to believers at the second coming of Christ (1 Cor 15:51-55; 1 Thess 4:13-18).

Joel Green, using his background in neuroscience and biblical studies, states that we need a better understanding of biblical anthropology. He argues for the biblical wholistic view of humankind. He is for monism, is against Greek dualism, and stresses that humans are a unit and do not possess an ontologically distinct soul; therefore he rightly denies that after physical death the soul lives in an "intermediate state."<sup>65</sup> He ends his study with the hope of resurrection<sup>66</sup> and powerfully declares: "Nothing in the created human being is intrinsically immortal. Resurrection and embodied afterlife are God's doing, divine gift."<sup>67</sup> F. F. Bruce powerfully declares:

In biblical usage immortality belongs inherently to God alone; otherwise it belongs only to those to whom God gives it. Again, where human beings are concerned, immortality in the Bible is predicated of the body, not of the soul.

In our western culture, thought and language about immortality have been largely determined by Plato's doctrine of the immortality of the soul. But any attempt to combine Plato's doctrine with the teaching of the Bible can lead only to confusion. For Plato did not mean by immortality what the biblical writers mean by it, and what Plato meant by the soul is not what the biblical writers mean by the soul.

For the Christian, the hope of immortality is bound up with the resurrection of Christ.<sup>68</sup>

Why do many Christians believe in a conscious eternal torture? Because eternal punishment in hell goes hand to hand with the belief in the immortality of the soul. From the historical perspective, there was (1) first invented the teaching about the immortal soul, and then (2) eternal torment in hell because the soul cannot die. This kind of thinking about the soul is well demonstrated by Billy Graham's statement:

How important is your soul? Jesus said our souls are more valuable than all the rest of the world put together. One reason is because our souls will never die. Your body will die, but your soul (or spirit) will live forever. Your soul is so valuable that Christ was willing to give His life to redeem it (Matt 16:26). . . . If we realize we were created in God's image and have a God-given soul, we won't live like animals. Our souls make us uniquely human,

<sup>65</sup>Joel Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life*, 177-180. See idem, *In Search of the Soul*. Also see Gushee, *Only Human*, contra John W. Cooper who argues for the existence of an intermediate state for the human soul on the basis of his holistic dualism (*Body, Soul, Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989]).

<sup>66</sup>Joel Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Body*, 140-180.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 175.

<sup>68</sup>Thus F. F. Bruce in the "Foreword" for the book of George Wisbrock, *Death and the Soul* (Oakbrook, IL: ZOE-Life Books, 1990), i.

and they give dignity and value to every human life. . . . Most of all, our souls are the part of us that can experience God and have fellowship with Him. Because we have souls, we have the capacity to know God and be His friends forever. We were equipped by our Creator not only to live on this earth, but also to live in touch with heaven. This was the Great Design of the Great Designer.<sup>69</sup>

Mark Galli writes: “Regardless of its location, heaven seems to be the place where the faithful go immediately after they die.”<sup>70</sup> John W. Cooper explains that the soul of the dead people (*soul* is called by him a *person*) departs from them and dwells in Sheol in a kind of lethargic mode of existence. Such “persons are not merely distinguishable from their earthly bodies, they are separable from them and can continue to exist without them.”<sup>71</sup> Cooper states:

The persons who lived in the world—Jacob, Samuel, Job—exist after death in some ghostly (quasi-bodily) state even though their flesh is dust, their bones are buried, and they may not be actively “relational.” By implication, self-identical persons must be distinguished from their earthly bodies and able to exist without them, unnatural as this may be. Contra Green, then, “some essential part of the human being” does survive death.<sup>72</sup>

Belief in the immortality of the soul is taken from Greek philosophy. Pythagoras’s religious teachings (a younger contemporary of Daniel) were based on the teaching of metempsychosis, which claims that the soul never dies and is destined to a cycle of rebirths until it is able to free itself from the cycle through the purity of its life. He believed in transmigration, or the reincarnation of the soul again and again into the bodies of humans, animals, or vegetables until it became immortal. His ideas of reincarnation were influenced by ancient Greek religion. Plato (roughly speaking, a contemporary of the last Old Testament prophet Malachi) enhanced this Hellenistic teaching and made a belief about the human immortal soul so prevailing that it became a popular view. During the intertestamental period, this thought about the eternal torture (Jdt 16:17) and praying for the dead (2 Macc 12:39-45) began penetrating Judaism.<sup>73</sup> Josephus Flavius mentions that Pharisees believed in the immortality of the soul.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>69</sup>Billy Graham, *The Journey: How to Live by Faith in an Uncertain World* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2006), 25-26.

<sup>70</sup>Galli, *God Wins*, 79.

<sup>71</sup>Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, 77.

<sup>72</sup>John W. Cooper, “Exaggerated Rumors of Dualism’s Demise: A Review Essay on Body, Soul, and Human Life,” *Philosophia Christi* 11, no. 2 (2009): 458.

<sup>73</sup>But see Tobit 14:6-8; Sirach 7:17; 19:2-3; 21:9; 36:7-10; Baruch 4:32-35; 1 Maccabees 2:62-64; 2 Maccabees 7:9, 14. For details, see Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 3d ed., 85-97; Jacques B. Doukhan, “Le judaïsme et l’immortalité de l’âme” (Maîtrise en Hébreu thesis, University of Strasbourg, 1967).

<sup>74</sup>Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.8.14; *Antiquities* 18.1.2-3.

Tertullian (ca. 155-222), Christian apologist, was one of the first among Christians<sup>75</sup> who claimed that humans have an immortal soul: “I may use, therefore, the opinion of Plato, when he declares, ‘Every soul is immortal.’”<sup>76</sup> Oscar Cullmann challenges Tertullian’s view and stands in opposition to it. He wrote a very influential book in which he argues that the idea of immortality is of Greek origin.<sup>77</sup> Brevard Childs explains: “It has long been noticed that according to the Old Testament man does not have a soul, but *is* a soul (Gen 2:7). That is to say, he is a complete entity and not a composite of parts from body, soul and spirit.”<sup>78</sup>

Some scholars try to defend life after death by simple appeal to common sense because there is no biblical statement in regard to it. For example, Stewart Goetz states: “Scripture as a whole does not teach that the soul exists. Scripture simply presupposes the existence of the soul because its existence is affirmed by the common sense of ordinary people.”<sup>79</sup>

The Westminster Confession states: “After God had made all other creatures, he created man, male and female, with reasonable and immortal souls.”<sup>80</sup> It directly contradicts Gen 2:7: “Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being [*nefesh chayab*]” (NIV). The basis of biblical anthropology is that we are a soul, we do not have a soul. Hans Wolff asks: “What does *nepheesh* [soul] mean here [in Gen 2:7]? Certainly not soul [in the traditional dualistic sense]. *Nepheesh* was designed to be seen together with the whole form of man, and especially with his breath; moreover man does not

<sup>75</sup>Athenagoras of Athens (ca. 133-190 A.D.), see especially chaps. 12-15 in his *On the Resurrection of the Dead*; and Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-215 A.D.), *Recognitions* 5:28; idem, *Miscellanies* 5:14.

<sup>76</sup>Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, in chap. 3. Quoted in Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 3rd ed., 30.

<sup>77</sup>Oscar Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead? The Witness of the New Testament* (London: Epworth, 1958).

<sup>78</sup>Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 199. Death causes a reversal of God’s creation activity. Our identity is in His hands. Ecclesiastes says it in a poetic language: “Remember him [the Creator]—before the silver cord is severed, and the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, and the wheel broken at the well, and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it (Eccl 12:1, 6-7 NIV). “Spirit” here means “character” (Ps 32:2), our identity. We are not forgotten by God, our names are in the book of life (Phil 4:3; Rev 3:5; 13:8; 20:15; 21:27), and He will resurrect us to a new full life.

<sup>79</sup>Stewart Goetz, “A Substance Dualist Response,” in *In Search of the Soul: Perspectives on the Mind-Body Problem—Four Views of the Mind-Body Problem*, ed. Joel B. Green, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 139.

<sup>80</sup>The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, “Confession of Faith of Creation,” 4.2, accessed Sept. 14, 2014, [http://www.opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter\\_04](http://www.opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_04).

*have nephesh*, he *is nephesh*, he lives as nephesh.”<sup>81</sup> God created us as a vibrant animated body but not as an incarnate soul.

The soul as a human being is mortal.<sup>82</sup> Ezekiel 18:4 states that a soul, i.e., person, who does not live according to God’s will, will perish: “The soul who sins will die” (NAS). It means that a soul (human being) can sin and die. Jesus confirms it: “Be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt 10:28). Note that Jesus speaks about the whole person (“soul and body”) being destroyed in hell (*gehenna*). The soul does not exist without the body and does not survive the death of the body. Only God is able to kill the soul. Soul here means the life of a person (it does not refer to an *immortal soul*), life in his total destiny; meanwhile body represents only a physical temporary existence. Claude Tresmontant correctly asserts: “By applying to the Hebrew *nephesh* [soul] the characteristics of the Platonic *psyche* [soul], . . . we let the real meaning of *nephesh* escape us and furthermore, we are left with innumerable pseudo-problems.”<sup>83</sup>

George Wisbrock aptly comments on the proclamation of Jesus to Mary: “That Jesus did not go up into a Heavenly Paradise to sit at God’s right side on the day He died may also be demonstrated by another very simple to understand act. Shortly after God brought Him up out of His grave *on the third day after His death and burial*, He said to Mary Magdalene, ‘Do not touch Me, for I have NOT YET gone up to My Father.’”<sup>84</sup> The same author also insists that in Jesus’s declaration on the cross to the repentant criminal, which is mistakenly taken as a proof of an immortal soul, the comma should be inserted after the word *today* and that this time expression should be put at the end of the sentence: “For rather than tell the criminal he would be with Him in Paradise on the very day they both died, Jesus instead said, ‘Truly **I SAY** to you **TODAY**, You shall be with Me in Paradise’ (Luke 23:43). In full agreement with the repentant criminals [criminal’s] request, it will happen: ‘**When You come in Your Kingdom**’ (Luke 23:42).”<sup>85</sup>

According to 1 Samuel 28, the rebellious king Saul went to the witch of Endor because God did not communicate with him anymore. Who then spoke to Saul? The careful analysis of this incident demonstrates that Saul did not encounter the soul or spirit of the dead Samuel who at that time was in the grave but experienced the performance of an evil spirit who played the part of the prophet Samuel in order to completely discourage the king.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>81</sup>Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 10.

<sup>82</sup>This is contrary to the common understanding of immortality in relation to the human soul that survives death and continues its endless conscious existence.

<sup>83</sup>Claude Tresmontant, *A Study in Hebrew Thought*, trans. Michael Francis Gibson (New York: Desclee, 1960), 94.

<sup>84</sup>George Wisbrock, *Death and the Soul* (Oakbrook, IL: ZOE-Life Books, 1990), 331 (emphasis his).

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., 332 (emphasis his).

<sup>86</sup>For the important insight, see Eriks Galenieks, *The Nature, Function, and Purpose*

Several pertinent studies of this story lead to this conclusion (see, especially, the outstanding studies of Grenville Kent).<sup>87</sup> Satan is a master of disguise and presented himself in the appearance of Samuel, because he can even come as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14). The next day, lacking God's presence in his life, lost in despair, Saul commits suicide (1 Sam 31:1-6). Because God did not answer Saul, he in his troubling situation went to a forbidden source, a spiritualistic encounter. The narrator of 1 Chronicles clearly states that "Saul died because he was unfaithful to the LORD; he did not keep the word of the LORD and even consulted a medium for guidance, and did not inquire of the LORD. So the LORD put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David son of Jesse" (1 Chr 10:13-14 NIV).

Jesus' parable about the Rich Man and Lazarus as recorded in Luke 16:19-31 does not prove that humans have immortal souls. Christ's story seeks to illustrate that we need to love and obey God presently, because after death there is no second chance to learn how to serve God:

"And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us." He answered, "Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment." Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them." "No, father Abraham," he said, "but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent." He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (NIV).

The penetrating study of Kim Papaioannou brings a correct perspective to this parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus.<sup>88</sup>

#### Traditional View: Key Points

The issues between traditionalist and conditionalists mainly evolve around five areas: (1) linguistic studies on the meaning of words like Sheol, *repha'im*, maggots, fire, eternal, perish, Gehenna, Hades, or Tartarus; (2) exegetical arguments related to several texts (for example, Isa 66:24; Dan 12:2; Rev 14:9-11) and passages (like Matt 25:31-47 or Luke 16:19-31); (3) literary argument (nature of God's judgment; how to interpret parables and the symbolic book of Revelation); (4) moral argument regarding the punishment and torture

*of the Term Sheol in the Torah, Prophets, and Writings*, Adventist Theological Society Dissertation Series, vol. 6 (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 2005), 290-298.

<sup>87</sup>Grenville J. R. Kent, *Say It Again, Sam: A Literary and Filmic Study of Narrative Repetition in 1 Samuel 28* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2011); idem, "'Call Up Samuel': Who Appeared to the Witch at En-Dor? (1 Samuel 28:3-25)," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 52, no. 2 (Autumn 2014): 141-160.

<sup>88</sup>Kim Papaioannou, *The Geography of Hell*. See also John A. Szukalski, *Tormented in Hades: The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) and Other Lucan Parables for Persuading the Rich to Repentance* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013).

which is closely related to the image of God; (5) and theological argument regarding the meaning of the justice of God and His final judgment. In this evaluation we deal only with a few crucial terms and concepts (thus adding to those arguments already explained above).

The following principles are important in interpreting Scripture. One needs to proceed: (1) from clear texts to unclear, from known to unknown; (2) from the metanarrative to the sub-stories; and (3) from general to particular. For example, see terms or phrases related to the divinity of Jesus which do not at the first glimpse affirm this biblical truth, like *firstborn, unique Son, Son-Father* relationship, “You are my son, today I have begotten you.” We need always to begin with the plain meaning of the text, like destroy, death, punish, etc., and then to explain symbolic language, metaphors, figures of speech, or idiomatic and poetic expressions.

The same is true for the texts referring to the so-called eternal punishment in hell. First, the term *hell* does not appear in the Hebrew Bible even though some English Bible translations render the word *Sheol* as *hell* (see KJV translation in Deut 32:22; 2 Sam 22:6; Isa 5:14; 14:9; 28:15, 18; and another 25 times). However, this reading is a classic example of eisegesis, i.e., putting one’s own ideas into the biblical text, because the term Sheol does not point to hell.

### 1. *Sheol*

*Sheol* is found 66 times in Old Testament texts. Both the wicked and the righteous descend to *Sheol* (Gen 37:35; 42:38; 44:29, 31; Num 16:30, 33; 1 Kgs 2:6, 9; Job 21:13; Ps 49:17; 89:49; Eccl 9:10; Isa 14:9, 11, 15; 38:10; Ezek 31:15-17). In addition, the Lord redeems the faithful from *Sheol* (Hos 13:14), no one can hide before God in Sheol (Ps 139:8; Amos 9:2), and there is no work or other activity in *Sheol* (Eccl 9:10). Nowhere in the Bible is *Sheol* described as the shadowy underworld where the dead live or where human souls/spirits continue their existence.

The term *Sheol* is a designation for the grave, the place of the dead (see, for example, the consistency of the NIV translation where in the majority of cases the word *Sheol* is translated as *grave* [57 times], but also as *death* [5 times], *realm of death* [once], *deepest depths* [once], *gates of death* [once], and *depth* [once]).<sup>89</sup> Eriks Galenicks unequivocally states in his dissertation that the word *Sheol* is synonymous with the grave and concludes: “The current exegetical investigation clearly demonstrates that the term Sheol not only is synonymous with the grave in its general sense, but also has nothing to do with the so-called underworld, where the spirit or souls of the dead would continue their miserable existence in a disembodied state.”<sup>90</sup> He analyses his findings in the following way:

<sup>89</sup>See the translation summary of the term *Sheol* in Galenicks, *The Nature, Function, and Purpose*, 4-6.

<sup>90</sup>*Ibid.*, 612.

The summary of the current exegesis leads to the basic conclusion that the term Sheol refers to the place of the dead, which by its nature, function, and purpose entirely harmonizes with the anthropological, theological, and eschatological paradigm of the Hebrew Scripture. At the same time, the Hebrew Scripture provides no support for the idea that the term Sheol is somehow associated with one's after-death existence in the so-called underworld.

In spite of the fact that there is slight but extremely important distinction between an individual grave and Sheol, the common noun "grave" functions as the miniature model or prototype for the term Sheol, which, in turn, as the proper noun points to the general place of the dead, regardless of its location, form, type, or content, and that is why it is best to associate it with the grave.<sup>91</sup>

## 2. *Repha'im*

Another term of the Hebrew Scripture which is misapplied is the word *repha'im*. Michael Fox claims that *repha'im* are *ghosts* or *shades* which "are the spirits of the dead."<sup>92</sup> Roland Murphy states that these *shades* should be "identified with the inhabitants of Sheol who have no real 'life,' but only a shadowy existence."<sup>93</sup> Does *repha'im* mean the shadowy existence of the human spirit? This term actually refers to: (1) people/nation—the *Rephaim* (Gen 14:5; Deut 2:11; 2:20); (2) the land of *Rephaim* or the Valley of *Rephaim* (Deut 2:20; 3:13; Josh 15:8; 18:16; 2 Sam 5:18, 22; 23:13; 1 Chr 11:15; 14:9; Isa 17:5); and (3) the dead and not to dead spirits. This term is a synonym for the dead (Job 26:5; Ps 88:10; Prov 2:18; 9:18; 21:16; Isa 14:9; 26:14, 19).

William White plainly explains: "It is clear that this ancient quasi-mythological term was used merely to satisfy the requirements of Hebrew poetic structure and in no way indicates any specific connotation to the root *repa'im* other than as a synonym for 'the dead' and 'the place of the dead.'"<sup>94</sup> Green concludes his study on the *rephaim* in definite words: "*Rephaim* refers to those whose abode is Sheol, the place of the dead. Found in the OT only

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., 621. For further nuances of the term *grave*, see in his dissertation pp. 600-602, 612-615. For the discussion on the New Testament terms of Hades, Gehenna, and Tartarus, see especially, Bradley Jersak, *Her Gates Will Never Be Shut: Hope, Hell, and the New Jerusalem* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 13-67, 185-210; Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes*, 3d ed., 44-50, 116-154, 223-233.

<sup>92</sup>Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 122.

<sup>93</sup>Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 17.

<sup>94</sup>William White, "*repa'im*," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1980), 2:858.

in poetic texts, the ‘shades’ are portrayed through simple parallelism as ‘the dead.’ . . . The *rephaim* are simply the human dead whose place is the grave.”<sup>95</sup>

Biblical texts speak for themselves: “Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the departed rise up to praise you?” (Ps 88:10 ESV). “For her house leads down to death, and her paths to the dead:” (Prov 2:18 NKJV). “Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead [*repha'im*]” (Isa 26:19 ESV).

### 3. *Worms (Maggots) Will Not Die*

How to understand the biblical phrase: “The worms [Heb. *tola'im*] that eat them [the wicked dead] will not die” (Isa 66:24 NIV)? In the context of Isaiah 65–66, the wicked are those who do not serve the Lord and rebelled against Him (Isa 66:3b), and finally they are “slain by the Lord” (Isa 66:16). Gary V. Smith comments on the last verse of the book of Isaiah: “The final verse contrasts the wonderful destiny of God’s servants with the terrible destiny of those sinners who failed to trust God. . . . The sword will devour those who refuse to love God.”<sup>96</sup> First, the description is physical. These wicked are seen, and they have physical bodies. These maggots are not preying on the souls or immaterial spirits of the deceased! Second, nowhere is presupposed that these worms are endowed with immortality. They do not receive a gift of eternal life. No divine miracle is performed on them. Third, this picture of maggots that eat the dead bodies of the wicked is a metaphor of the same sort as the picture of the fire that will not be quenched. The imagery is transparent: these dead persons have no chance to be alive again. The judgment on these wicked is final, and it means that God’s judgment of destruction will not be stopped until complete consummation has been accomplished. There is no escape from this ultimate death. No one can rescue the wicked from this horrible end. No reverse is possible. Judgment is ultimate and destruction is complete. It will not be interrupted until the bodies perish; thus, the final destiny of the wicked is irrevocable and permanent.

### 4. “*Their fire shall not be quenched*” (Isaiah 66:24)

“And they shall go out and look on **the dead bodies** of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall **not be quenched**, and they shall be an **abhorrence** to all flesh” (Isa 66:24 ESV [emphasis mine]; see Isa 66:15, 17). To *quench* a fire is to put it out, to prevent it from burning up or stop it before it accomplishes its task. It means it has not been extinguished but has done what fire naturally does: total destruction. Edward Fudge convincingly states: “Throughout the Bible, from the first appearance of the phrase until its last, ‘unquenchable fire’ always denotes

<sup>95</sup>Joel B. Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life*, 155.

<sup>96</sup>Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 40–66*, The New American Commentary, vol. 15b (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2009), 752.



fire that is not capable of being *extinguished*, and that is therefore *irresistible*.<sup>97</sup> Ezekiel states: Thus says the Lord GOD, “Behold, I will kindle a **fire** in you, and **it shall devour** every green tree in you and every dry tree. The blazing flame shall not be quenched, and all faces from south to north shall be scorched by it. All flesh shall see that I the LORD have kindled it; it shall not be quenched” (Ezek 20:47-48 ESV [emphasis mine]; see Isa 34:10; Jer 7:20). Daniel I. Block writes: “When the doctrine of hell develops in the New Testament, it borrows much of its imagery from the Old Testament, particularly the images of perpetual suffering through maggots and unquenchable fire in Isa 66:24.”<sup>98</sup> I agree that the New Testament borrows imagery from the Old Testament, but it is always consistently in the sense of final destruction. The prophet Isaiah explains the final and total destruction of Edom, and he describes it with the familiar terms that the fire that will consume Edom will burn “night and day” and “will not be quenched,” and that “its smoke will rise forever,” and thus turn into “burning sulfur” (Isa 34:9-10 NIV). This imagery is plainly later taken and applied in Rev 14:10-11 and 20:10 in passages which are full of symbolism. It points to God’s irreversible and total destruction.

The Old Testament explicitly states what will happen to the wicked when they are condemned to death by fire or other means of destruction. For example, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:24-28), the Flood narrative (Gen 6:11-13; chaps. 7-8); Isa 66:24; Matt 13:30, 40; Matt 25:31-47; John 15:6; John 3:16, 36; 2 Thess 1:4-10. See also passages which mention and use different imagery for total and unstoppable desolation (Gen 19:24-28; Deut 29:23; Isa 13:19; Jer 50:40; Lam 4:6; Amos 4:11; Zeph 2:9; Luke 17:28-32; 2 Pet 2:6; Jude 7).

Matthew 25:41, 46 does not teach eternal torment at all, despite repeated claims of the traditionalist’s interpretation. The nature of the *eternal punishment* is not described, and it is set in contrast to eternal life, as an opposite destiny to eternal life. The *eternal fire* is described elsewhere in Matthew as a consuming fire, not a tormenting one: “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 3:12 NIV). Isa 34:8-10 states: “For the LORD has a day of vengeance, a year of retribution, to uphold Zion’s cause. Edom’s streams will be turned into pitch, her dust into burning sulfur; her land will become blazing pitch! It will not be quenched night or day; its smoke will rise forever. From generation to generation it will lie desolate” (NIV).

Gregory Beale ends his article on “The Revelation on Hell” with the following statement: “It still remains true that Revelation 14:11 and 20:10-15 are the Achilles’ heel of the annihilationist perspective. Though some argue that the suffering of unbelievers is temporary, the likelihood is that John believed in an endless judgment of the ungodly.”<sup>99</sup> Ralph Bowles concludes his interpretation of Rev 14:11:

<sup>97</sup>Fudge, 131.

<sup>98</sup>Block, “The Old Testament on Hell,” 65.

<sup>99</sup>Beale, “The Revelation on Hell,” 134.

The traditional reading of the elements of this verse misses the inverted parallelistic structure of the unit Revelation 14:9-11. When the chiasm is discerned, the meaning of the text is seen to give no confirmation to “eternal torment”. Rather, this text fits well into the Conditional Immortality interpretation. This view holds that God will finally and fully bring his enemies to judgement, with absolute destruction and extinction as the result.<sup>100</sup>

Even Carson who argues for eternal torment in hell, admits: “What is hard to prove, but seems to me probable, is that one reason why the conscious punishment of hell is ongoing is because sin is ongoing.”<sup>101</sup>

John in the book of Revelation states:

A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: “If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives its mark on their forehead or on their hand, they, too, will drink the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. They will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment will rise for ever and ever. There will be no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image, or for anyone who receives the mark of its name.” (Rev 14:9-11 NIV)

Also in the chapter about the final destruction of the devil and the wicked, John proclaims:

They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God’s people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever. (Rev 20:9-10 NIV).

Understood as God’s judgment, the effect of this fire is everlasting and that for evil there is no point of return. Evil will be under God’s control for all eternity, will never occur for a second time, is eternally checkmated, and is no more. The annihilation is total. God will not miraculously keep an eternal fire or in any way sustain the special eternal form of the wicked, fallen angels, and the devil in order to punish them perpetually. This is a very speculative approach to the biblical teaching on the execution of divine judgment. As before the rebellion of Lucifer against God, there was full harmony in heaven so it will be again when evil in all its forms will be destroyed.

H. Guillebaud comments on the New Testament teaching on punishment: “Apart from four or five passages, there is not even an appearance of teaching everlasting torment in the Bible.”<sup>102</sup> The doctrine of eternal torment actually rests on just four *core* texts which appear to teach it: Matt 18:34-35; Mark 9:43-48; Rev14:10-11; and Rev 20:10. For each of these core texts, there are convincing and consistent alternative exegetical interpretations.

<sup>100</sup>Ralph G. Bowles, “Does Revelation 14:11 Teach Eternal Torment? Examining a Proof-text on Hell,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (2001): 36.

<sup>101</sup>D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 533.

<sup>102</sup>Guillebaud, *The Righteous Judge*, 12.

### 5. *Eternal, Forever—‘olam*

The term *forever* or *eternal* (Heb. *‘olam*) is very relative in the Hebrew Scriptures. It may refer to (1) eternity with a beginning and an end (for example, slaves in Exod 21:6 [the NIV rightly translates the term *‘olam* in this context: *for life*]; the priesthood in Exod 40:15; Num 25:13); (2) eternity with a beginning but without an end (eternal life of all redeemed; see Mark 10:30; John 3:16, 36; 5:24); and finally, (3) eternity without a beginning and without an end (only belonging to God Himself; see 1 Tim 6:16; cf. Deut 33:27). The term sometimes refers to *age-old* like in Gen 49:26 (mentioning *age-old mountain*) or a *long time ago* or *those long dead* (Ps 143:3), or *ancient* (Ps 24:7). But always the textual context defines the precise meaning of the term *eternal*. To the believers in God, immortality is given as a gift through Christ Jesus (John 11:26; Col 3:3-4).

### 6. *Wicked Will Perish and Be No More*

On the other hand, there are many indisputable, unequivocal, and unambiguous biblical texts which refer to the total destruction of the wicked, and that after the annihilation they are no more (see especially Ps 1:4, 6; Isa 11:4; Isa 33:12; 51:6). Malachi declares: “Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and the day that is coming will set them on fire,” says the LORD Almighty. “Not a root or a branch will be left to them” (Mal 4:1 NIV). Barry Webb on Isa 66:24 notes: “As it stands, it seems to depict annihilation rather than eternal torment. The bodies are dead.”<sup>103</sup> Hans Küng writes: “In the ‘eternal punishment’ [Matt 25:46] of the Last Judgment the stress lies on the fact that this punishment is definitive, final, decisive for all eternity, but not on the eternal duration of the torment. . . . [T]he ‘eternity’ of the punishment of hell may never be regarded as absolute.”<sup>104</sup>

### 7. *Daniel 12:2*

“And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Dan 12:2 ESV). The word *contempt* (Heb. *dera’on*, abhorrence, aversion, loathsome) is used in the Hebrew Bible only in Dan 12:2 and in Isa 66:24. The meaning of this term is secured by its context: the texts speak about condemnation in relation to judgment and resurrection. Daniel speaks about eternal condemnation and shame for the wicked, and Isaiah explains that the wicked will be destroyed because no one could stop the devouring fire to fulfill its purpose of obliteration; the rebellious unrepentant people are doomed to eternal non-existence, but the righteous to eternal life.

<sup>103</sup>Barry G. Webb, *The Message of Isaiah: On Eagles’ Wings* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 251.

<sup>104</sup>Küng, *Eternal Life?*, 140.

Daniel 12:2 also points to the decomposition of the body; dead are sleeping in the dust but are raised from their sleep. This text does not refer to any intermediate state during or after death. There is no ground for such a claim here or somewhere else in the Old Testament. It is once again confirmed that between death and the resurrection people sleep in the dust because we are dust, and to dust we shall return (Gen 2:7; 3:19).

#### Universalism—Dead-End Street

Universalism is correct by stressing that the conscious eternal torture of the wicked in hell cannot be supported by biblical teaching when explained in its context. This is in harmony with the conditionalist or annihilationist view, but universalists go far beyond. On the basis of God's love and His final victory over evil, they override any objections and questions about the efficacy of the cross, and argue for the salvation of all. Some, like Origen, even argue that the devil and his evil angels will be at the end redeemed from eternal perdition.<sup>105</sup> However, even though Christ died for all sinners (Rom 5:6, 8; 1 Cor 15:3; 2 Cor 5:14-15), only those who believe will be saved (John 3:16; Rom 3:22-28; 5:15). So there is a vast difference between these two interpretations, because conditionalists stress that God's love goes hand in hand with His justice, and underline the importance of personal faith as a response to God's blazing grace demonstrated on Calvary. Thus, universalism is rightly criticized on various biblical grounds. The additional arguments (besides those already mentioned above) involve the following points:

1. The Bible teaches that people will have no new or second chance for salvation after they die (Luke 16:28-31; John 5:25-30; Heb 9:27). The possibility of a postmortem second chance is totally unscriptural. Choices and decisions we make during our lifetime are final and are taken seriously by God. Nobody can alter them. There are no new multiple chances given after death for conversion. There is no additional grace given after a person passes away; there is no salvation beyond the grave.
2. As stated above, universalists presuppose the unbiblical idea of the immortality of the soul. Bell writes: "Prior to that [resurrection], then, after death we are without a body. In heaven, but without a body. . . . Those currently 'in heaven' are not, obviously, here. And so they're with God, but without a body."<sup>106</sup> This conviction is built on the belief that every person has an immortal soul which after death goes either to heaven or hell. Those in hell go through the process of purification, some form of purgatory, which at the end closes with the admittance of everyone into heaven. Thus God's love wins and everyone is saved for eternity. God's redemption will be accomplished, and the Lord will finally be all in all (Eph 1:10). Cross

<sup>105</sup>See Origen, *De Principiis* 3.4.1-5.

<sup>106</sup>Bell, *Love Wins*, 56.

explains regarding the Protestants' view of purgatory that it "was openly rejected by the Reformers, who taught that souls are freed from sin by faith in Christ alone without any works, and therefore, if saved, go straight to heaven."<sup>107</sup> However, evangelical universalists' view becomes very close to the Catholic doctrine of purgatory. In this respect, there is a very engaging book written by Brett Salkeld, *Can Catholics and Evangelicals Agree about Purgatory and the Last Judgment?*, who demonstrates this close affinity.<sup>108</sup> Jerry Walls in the recent book on this topic defends an understanding of purgatory that is, according to him, compatible with Protestant theology and the doctrine of eternal hell.<sup>109</sup> Donald Bloesch speaks about postmortem repentance: "It is my contention that a change of heart can still happen on the other side of death."<sup>110</sup> He further declares: "I believe that the restoration of hades as an intermediate state in which we wait and hope for Christ's salvation may speak to some of the concerns of those who embrace purgatory."<sup>111</sup> Bloesch explains: "Even when one is in hell one can be forgiven."<sup>112</sup> An outstanding evangelical theologian Miroslav Volf states: "Post-mortem change is an essential precondition for the resolution of the problem within the sphere of cultural productivity; without it past cannot be redeemed and history cannot be set right."<sup>113</sup> Volf underlines the necessity

<sup>107</sup>F. L. Cross, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 1145.

<sup>108</sup>See, Brett Salkeld, *Can Catholics and Evangelicals Agree about Purgatory and the Last Judgment?* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2011). It needs to be stressed that both—the Catholic teaching on mortal sins and Miroslav Volf—affirm that some people will be condemned to hell: "We should not, however, shy away from the unpleasant and deeply tragic *possibility* that there *might* be human beings, created to the image of God, who, through the practice of evil, have immunized themselves from all attempts at their redemption" (Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* [Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996], 297).

<sup>109</sup>See Jerry L. Walls, *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory: Rethinking the Things That Matter Most. A Protestant View of the Cosmic Drama* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2015). See also his book, *Purgatory: The Logic of Total Transformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). For a recent Catholic defense of the purgatory doctrine, see Gary A. Anderson, "Is Purgatory Biblical," *First Things* 116 (November 2011): 39-44.

<sup>110</sup>Donald Bloesch, *Last Things: Resurrection, Judgment, Glory* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 146.

<sup>111</sup>Ibid., 152.

<sup>112</sup>Ibid., 227.

<sup>113</sup>Miroslav Volf, "Enter into Joy! Sin, Death, and the Life of the World to Come," in *End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology*, ed. John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2000), 276-277. See also his "The Final Reconciliation: Reflections on a Social Dimension of the Eschatological Transition," *Modern Theology* 16, no. 1 (January 2000): 91-113.

of postmortem change, and he speaks about the “eschatological transition.”<sup>114</sup> James Wellman, Jr., comments: “Without stating it, Bell implies a form of purgatory, a Catholic dogma that has long been rejected by Protestants. The doctrine of purgatory, however, provides a solution to many Christian dilemmas.”<sup>115</sup>

3. Jesus died for all, but only those who believe in Him and accept personally the gift of salvation can be saved. Salvation at the end does not include everybody. There are those who perish eternally. God is the God of life but does not tolerate evil. If He punishes and destroys, it is His *strange work* and *foreign act* and *alien task* (Isa 28:21-22), but it is still His action (like in the case of the flood), judgment at the second coming or at the final judgment at the end of the millennium, because He acts as the Heavenly Surgeon to eradicate the cancer of sin from the Universe. Otherwise evil will spread and destroy everything that is good, beautiful, and meaningful.
4. Joel Green defines God’s wrath as “handing people over to experience the consequences of the sin they choose (Rom 1:18, 24, 26, 28; cf. Wisdom 11:11-16; 12:23).”<sup>116</sup> God’s wrath or punishment does not lead to repentance, only the recognition and acceptance of God’s goodness may change the human heart. The kindness of God leads to a new life and transformation. Only a person overwhelmed with God’s love will let Him be Lord of his or her life. Salvation is presented in the Bible as a result of willful and never-forced capitulation and surrender to God. It is God’s amazing and blazing grace and His incredible compassion that leads people to repentance (Rom 2:4). Saved people obey God out of love and gratitude; this type of obedience is not forced or superficial. Jesus states: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15 ESV). If hell was able to lead people to repentance, Christ would not be needed. There is nothing biblical in the following equation: punishment/torture + time (eternity) = salvation of all sinners!
5. It is also against the gospel teaching from another aspect—what God has done in Christ for sinners. Salvation is only in Christ and does not come as a result of escaping suffering in hell. Faith in Christ is crucial and must be active in order to be saved (John 3:16; Rom 3:21-31). It is closely related to a person’s loving response to the call for repentance, confession of sins, forgiveness, faith, and obedience, resulting in a new life of holiness. Believers are a new creation in Christ Jesus (see 2 Cor 5:17).

<sup>114</sup>Volf, “Enter into Joy,” 257.

<sup>115</sup>Wellman, *Rob Bell and a New American Christianity*, 131.

<sup>116</sup>Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 54.

6. God respects our decisions. C. S. Lewis, even though himself a traditionalist, aptly states about our choices: “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’ All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice, there could be no Hell.”<sup>117</sup>
7. Preaching about the Divine judgment is important, but the last judgment brings out the punitive judgment (wicked are condemned on the basis of their evil deeds; everyone is judge according to their acts; see Ps 62:12; Eccl 12:14; Jer 17:10; 32:19; Matt 16:27; Rom 2:17; John 5:28-29; 1 Pet 1:17; Rev 2:23; 18:6; 20:12; 22:12).<sup>118</sup> Divine judgments are not only pedagogical tools to tell us what is right and wrong, what is valuable, and what are the temporal consequences of our sinful behavior, but they also demonstrate what attitudes and evil things are not acceptable by our holy God, and what will be thus terminated forever. They are real warnings of the terrible and dreadful destiny of those who rebel against God, do not accept Jesus as the solution for their sinfulness, and refuse the gift of salvation. At the end, the presence of sin will no longer be tolerated, and the universe will be cleansed of it. God assures that the sinful things will pass away: “I am making everything new!” (Rev 21:5 NIV). Evil will be no more and then God will be all in all (Hab 2:14; 1 Cor 15:24-28; Eph 1:9-10; Phil 2:10-11; Rev 5:13).
8. The love and righteousness of God always go together and the holiness of God has to be seen in the lives of people here and now. Rob Bell’s book *Love Wins* has an excellent and appealing title but an *easy* (cheap), simplistic solution for a deep problem. People either believe in the eternal punishment in hell or in *apokatastasis panton* [= restoration of all], i.e., universalism (salvation of all at the end). The crucial thing is to recognize that the Bible stresses that not only God’s love but also His justice will win. God rightly answered Job: “Will you discredit my justice and condemn me only to prove that you are right?” (Job 40:8; my own translation). God can be trusted because He is love, good, kind, but also truth, and justice. In Him love and justice kiss each other (Ps 101:1) and was manifested in its fullness at the cross. God is the Lover of humanity (Deut 7:8; 33:3), wants to save everyone (1 Tim 2:4), and has no delight in the death

<sup>117</sup>C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York, The Macmillan Company, 1946), 69. In contrast to Lewis, I understand hell as a place of total destruction and annihilation where the unbelievers will eternally perish after the last judgment, and not to be a place of eternal punishment for the immortal souls of the wicked.

<sup>118</sup>Ivan T. Blazen, “Salvation,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen, Commentary Reference Series, vol. 12 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 290-292; Gerhard F. Hasel, “Divine Judgment,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*.

of the wicked (Ezek 18:23, 32; 33:11). But it does not mean that He saves people against their will<sup>119</sup> or sometimes after their death. This life is the only time to decide for or against God. And He does not force anyone to follow Him.

#### *Hope of Resurrection in the OT*

As I have already mentioned, only God is immortal (1 Tim 6:16); and at the second coming of Jesus, God's faithful people will receive immortality as a precious gift from Him (1 Cor 15:51-55; 1 Thess 4:14-17). Hope of eternal life is already presented in the Hebrew Scriptures. Consider carefully the following texts: Job 19:25-27; Ps 49:15; 73:24; Isa 26:19; Ezek 37:1-14; Dan 12:2; Hos 6:1-3; 13:4. Lutheran theologian Paul Althaus aptly stresses: "Death is more than a departure of the soul from the body. The person, body and soul, is involved in death. . . . The Christian faith knows nothing about an immortality of the personality. . . . It knows only an awakening from the real death through the power of God. There is existence after death only by an awakening of the resurrection of the whole person."<sup>120</sup> God's revelation is primarily about life and not death, and this life comes from God's loving intervention on behalf of His people. God is for us, and He longs to take the redeemed home in order to be always with His followers (John 14:1-3; Rom 8:31-39). He will be their God, and they will be His people forever (Rev 21:3; 22:3-4).

#### *Conclusion*

All three views depend on the understanding of the nature of the human soul. If the soul is immortal, only options one or three are possible. However, if we do not have an immortal soul, then in this case there is a better alternative view: conditional immortality and the annihilation of the wicked as demonstrated above. After death, the human's soul or spirit does not go to heaven or hell but the whole person sleeps and waits for the resurrection and judgment. In this view, there is nothing like the salvation of a soul or conversion of an immaterial spirit. The Bible knows nothing about an immortal soul; such a notion does not exist in the Scriptures.

Humans are mortal for two reasons: first, because they were created dependent on their Creator God and do not possess natural immortality; secondly, because of their rebellion and own choice to live an autonomous life without God. Thus sinners are condemned to death (Rom 6:23). However, God desires to give human beings abundant life (John 10:10) and in addition even eternal life (John 3:36; 5:24; Acts 4:12; 1 John 5:11-12). If we repent and come to Him (Joel 2:12-13; John 3:3-5; Acts 2:38; 16:30-31), we are saved (Gal 3:26-29; Eph 2:4-10). The basis for salvation today is identical to the

<sup>119</sup>This is recognized even by the universalist Baker, *Razing Hell*, 106-124, thus allowing for exceptions from universal salvation.

<sup>120</sup>Paul Althaus, *Die Letzten Dinge: Lehrbuch der Eschatologie* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 1957), 157.



original conditions given by God when humanity was created: cultivating a personal trust relationship with God, enjoying His presence, and living in total dependence on Him in obedience (see Gen 1-3; John 1:12; 3:16; Rom 1:16; 3:21-26).

The three views on hell spring from three different understandings of God. Universalists believe that God is love and does not eternally punish but ultimately saves everyone by purifying the wicked by fire and giving them new chances after death. Traditionalists believe in the God of love who demonstrates His justice and holiness by eternally punishing those who rebel against Him. Conditionalists believe in the God of love who ultimately demonstrates His love, truth, and justice by revealing His holiness and glory in the final divine judgment, and then He finally annihilates the unrepentant (Revelation 20) and creates everything new (Revelation 21–22).

Our survey and evaluation of these three understandings of immortality show that each view has a different understanding of God's justice. For traditionalists, justice is punitive in the sense that the wicked will be punished and tortured eternally. For universalists, justice is mainly purificative; God's fire will ultimately result in people accepting God's love and thus all sinners will be saved after their deaths. For conditionalists, ultimate justice is punitive. However, this executive judgment based on their choices (Eccl 12:13-14; Rom 2:6; 2 Tim 4:18; Rev 20:12) is time limited, and at the end it will eliminate all destructive forces that stand against God, His people, and His law. This holy demonstration of God's justice, which is the expression of His love, will have restorative purposes—life without sin, evil, death, crime, or pain but abundant life in love, peace, joy, harmony, and safety.

Our understanding of God and the image we cultivate about Him has a direct impact on our theology of hell and immortality. Whatever we say in biblical studies or in theology reflects our portrayal of God, how we view Him, His character, and actions, and this interpretation of the rich biblical material has tremendous influence on our practical everyday life. We need to always keep in mind what kind of God we present in our presentations and discussions and what kind of character of God we create with our statements about Him and the realities of life.

God respects our choices. He does not force anybody to follow Him. Even though He wants to save everyone only those who believe will actually benefit from His death for us. If we could be reconciled with God and saved after death, why would Jesus need to die for our sins? Force and torment can never produce a true repentance and a love relationship. Maybe it may help to escape some troubles of life, but it does not convert the heart (Rom 2:4).

The main question is not, "If you died today, would you go to heaven?" but "Am I saved in Christ Jesus?" Paul triumphantly proclaims: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1 ESV). C. S. Lewis speaks in a powerful way about three surprises in heaven: "Who's there; who's not; and the fact that you're there."<sup>121</sup> Our assurance of

<sup>121</sup>Stan Mitchell, "Three Surprises in Heaven," posted Oct. 20, 2011, <http://frenchurchofchrist.org/three-surprises-in-heaven> (Sept. 17, 2014). Similar thoughts

salvation springs only from God's firm Word, not from our performance (John 20:31; Rom 5:1-2; 8:1; Gal 2:16; 1 John 1:7-9; 2:28; 4:17; Jude 1:23-24).

At the end, ultimately God wins; His love wins after demonstrating that He treated sinners, evil angels, and Satan with fairness. When He proves to the universe that He is the God of love, truth, justice, freedom, and order, He can exterminate evil forever and all those who associated with evil, thus evil will be no more and all traces of sin will be destroyed. He will triumph in His love and justice: "Let God be true, and every human being a liar. As it is written: 'So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge'" (Rom 3:4 NIV; see also Ps 51:4). The cancer of evil will be removed by the heavenly Surgeon, and all evil will be eradicated and annihilated through God's revelatory judgment. God will be all in all (1 Cor 15:25-28; Eph 1:10).<sup>122</sup> I agree with N. T. Wright who underlines:

The whole point of my argument so far is that the question of what happens to me after death is *not* the major, central framing question that centuries of theological tradition has supposed. The New Testament, true to its Old Testament roots, regularly insists that the major, central concern is God's purpose of rescue and re-creation for the whole world, the entire cosmos.<sup>123</sup>

In summary, God's message is not only about a love that wins, but about Christ who is love, truth, and justice and because of that He wins. Jesus personifies love, truth and justice. Love without truth and justice is a sentimental experience without a border—it is a fluttering butterfly. Truth and justice without love is cold calculation, hard facts, and can kill. The minimization of Christ is the central issue at stake here. Christ in His fullness—not only a construct of love without truth, justice, and freedom. At the end God's justice and righteousness will prevail (see Ps 89:14-15). God's moral power wins, never force. The God of love, truth, justice, freedom, and order rules the Universe. He is the only Warrant of these eternal values. My motto of life expresses this basic biblical truth: *The love, truth, and justice of God will prevail!*

God's grace is amazing in being able to transform sinners into God's responsible children. We will then praise the Lord for His goodness: "Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other" (Ps 85:10 NIV). David expressed it well: "I will sing of your love and justice;

are attributed to Martin Luther (but also by many others) where he speaks about three surprises he will encounter in heaven: (1) there will not be people who he thought would surely be there; (2) there will be people who he thought would never be there; but (3) the biggest surprise will be that he will be there.

<sup>122</sup>Jiří Moskala, "Toward a Biblical Theology of God's Judgment: A Celebration of the Cross in Seven Phases of Divine Universal Judgment (An Overview of a Theocentric-Christocentric Approach)," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 138-165; idem, "The Gospel According to God's Judgment: Judgment as Salvation," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 22, no. 1 (2011): 28-49.

<sup>123</sup>N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 184.

to you, LORD, I will sing praise” (Ps 101:1 NIV). God’s victory through judgment resulting in the eradication of evil will be glorious and triumphant as John states:

And they sing [the redeemed] the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, “Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.” (Rev 15:3-4 ESV)

Paul explains: “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:9-11 ESV). Jesus solemnly declares: “He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels” (Rev 3:5 NKJV).