

## A KINDER, GENTLER THEOLOGY OF HELL?

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*Annihilationism has, as the Niagara Creed of 1878 foresaw, become a doctrine that plagues the evangelical church of the late twentieth century. It comprises a multifaceted compromise of biblical systematic theology, affecting most major doctrines of the Christian faith, not just the area of eschatology. Its compromise stems from the influence of postmodernism as proponents of annihilationism bring to the text unwarranted theological preunderstandings. Their emphasis on God's nature to love disregards His many other attributes such as holiness, justice, truth, grace, and omnipotence and thereby sentimentalize God's love. Further, their preunderstandings distort biblical teaching about man's immortality of the soul that is derived from God. A third affected area is the doctrine of sin when they assert that God would be vindictive to mete out eternal punishment for finite sin. In addition, the system of annihilationism undervalues Christ's atonement for sin by claiming that His death only paid the price for man's temporary rather than our eternal punishment.*

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In midsummer of 1878, several hundred enthusiastic Christian ministers and lay people gathered at a hospital in Clifton Springs, New York, for a week of Bible conference. The founder of the hospital, a Methodist layman named Dr. Henry Foster, had erected a 50x80 foot tabernacle that seated about 650 people. Dr. Foster invited missionaries, teachers, pastors, and evangelists to stay in the hospital facilities free of charge for the purpose of rest and relaxation, and to use the tabernacle for Christian services.

The Christians who conducted the Bible conference in the summer of 1878 were known as the Believers' Meeting for Bible Study.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>James H. Brookes, "Believers' Meeting at Clifton Springs," *The Truth* 4 (1878):402.

They continued to meet at Clifton Springs for two more years, but eventually held their annual meetings at Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, Canada, and became better known as the Niagara Bible Conference. Some historians consider the Niagara Bible Conference, and the First and Second American Bible and Prophecy Conferences which it spawned, to be the primary sources from which the American fundamentalist and premillennial evangelical movements came.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, the Bible conference at Clifton Springs in 1878 was somewhat of a disappointment to the leaders. Among other reasons, “there were those hanging upon the outskirts who had no sympathy with the objects of the meeting, and there was danger of controversy, which always grieves the Holy Ghost.”<sup>2</sup> Postmillennialists and annihilationists had apparently caused the controversy. So in the following months, the Believers’ Meeting for Bible Study adopted a fourteen-point confession of faith, later known as the Niagara Creed, as a basis for their meetings.<sup>3</sup> Significant for this study of annihilationism is Article 13 of the Niagara Creed. It reads,

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<sup>1</sup>For examples, see Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970) 132-61, and David O. Beale, *In Pursuit of Purity* (Greenville, S. C.: Unusual Publications, 1986) 23-67.

<sup>2</sup>Brookes, “Believers’ Meeting at Clifton Springs” 402.

<sup>3</sup>The first historian to write a book about the fundamentalist movement, Stewart Cole, somehow came up with the incorrect idea that the Niagara Bible Conference had adopted a five-point creed in 1895 (*The History of Fundamentalism* [Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1931] 34). Ernest Sandeen corrected his mistake in 1970 (*Roots of Fundamentalism* xviii), but it continues to be repeated even in recent studies of fundamentalism and evangelicalism.

We believe that the souls of those who have trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation do at death immediately pass into His presence, and there remain in conscious bliss until the resurrection of the body at His coming, when soul and body reunited shall be associated with Him forever in the glory; but the souls of unbelievers remain after death in conscious misery until the final judgment of the great white throne at the close of the millennium, when soul and body reunited shall be cast into the lake of fire, not to be annihilated, but to be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power: Luke 16:19-26; 23:43; 2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23; 2 Thess. 1:7-9; Jude 6:7; Rev. 20:11-15.<sup>1</sup>

In one of his reports of the 1878 meeting, Niagara's president, James H. Brookes, gives a summary of the participants' doctrinal position and concludes with this admonition to those who might want to participate in future conferences:

Such in brief is the simple ground on which we meet, and any who accept it are welcome to attend. If they do not stand upon it, and yet choose to attend, they are expected to keep silent. We do not deny the right of those who hold what are known as "annihilation views," to assemble when and where they please; but we do deny their right to thrust these views upon a meeting that rejects their dangerous errors.<sup>2</sup>

For the leaders of this historic Bible Conference, annihilationism was considered such a "dangerous" doctrinal error that it excluded its adherents from participation with them.

Were these nineteenth-century evangelicals justified in their fear of annihilationism? In recent years a renewed effort has arisen among some who call themselves evangelicals to reassert the doctrine of annihilationism—that the wicked who reject Christ will not have to spend eternity in hell, but after some time of suffering will be annihilated. This is somewhat puzzling in light of the many Scriptures that teach the eternal punishment of the wicked in hell.<sup>3</sup> "If exegesis is the final factor," writes John Walvoord, "eternal punishment is the only proper conclusion; taken at its face value, the Bible teaches eternal punishment."<sup>4</sup>

It is the purpose of this paper, therefore, to demonstrate by a survey of

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<sup>1</sup>James H. Brookes, "Believers' Meeting for Bible Study," *The Truth* 4 (1878):452-58. Others who include the full text of the Niagara Creed include Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism* 273-77, and Beale, *Pursuit of Purity* 375-79.

<sup>2</sup>Brookes, "Believers' Meeting at Clifton Springs" 404.

<sup>3</sup>Such clear Scriptures include Dan 2:2; Matt 3:12;18:8; 25:41,46; Mark 9:43-48; 2 Thess 1:9; Heb 6:2; Jude 12-13; Rev 14:11. The other writers in this issue have explained some of these and other important Scriptures.

<sup>4</sup>John Walvoord, "The Literal View," in *Four Views on Hell*, ed. by William Crockett (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 27.

the doctrinal categories that annihilationists often come to the Scriptures with cultural and theological preunderstandings that negate the historical-grammatical meaning of the passages. The result is, in fact, a multi-faceted compromise of a biblical systematic theology that infects most of the major doctrines of the Christian faith.<sup>5</sup>

### PROLEGOMENA: THE IMPACT OF POSTMODERNISM

It is true that no one can or should totally rid himself of presuppositions. For Christians the entire worldview stands on the biblically based epistemological presupposition that “the one living and true God has self-attestingly revealed Himself in the Christian Scriptures.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, every Bible student must come to God’s Word believing the soteriological teachings of Scripture (1 Cor 1:14-15). Otherwise, he would be denying the faith even as he studies it. The basic presuppositions of the Christian faith certainly do not prohibit interpreting a text accurately.

But other preunderstandings can make it difficult to interpret a passage of Scripture correctly. Some preunderstandings are cultural.<sup>7</sup> Postmodernism, for example, has had its impact on evangelical thinking.<sup>8</sup> Postmodernism teaches “that there is no objective truth, that moral values are relative, and that reality is

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<sup>5</sup>Some annihilationists are a part of the post-conservative evangelical movement (see further Millard J. Erickson, *The Evangelical Left* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997] 123-30). Post-conservative evangelicals claim to be evangelicals, but not conservative in their theology.

<sup>6</sup>Robert L. Reymond, *The Justification of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979) 72.

<sup>7</sup>The recurring accusation of some of the historians of the fundamentalist and evangelical movements is that these movements have been held in intellectual bondage by early modern rationalism—more specifically to Scottish Common Sense Rationalism. For typical discussions, see Ernest Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism* 103-31; James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) 272-79; Jack Rogers and Donald McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979) 185-379, especially 236-60; Douglas Frank, *Less Than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 15-16, 48, 83; Mark Noll, *The Disaster of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 90-93; idem, “The Common Sense Tradition and American Evangelical Thought,” *American Quarterly* 37 (Summer 1985):216-38; and George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University, 1980) 14-17. The suggestion is that those who believe in such doctrines as inerrancy accept it not because the Bible teaches it, but because of the influence of a rationalistic worldview. But those who make these kinds of assertions must be aware of the impact of culture on their own thinking. Cultural preunderstandings are not limited to fundamentalists.

<sup>8</sup>For discussions of evangelicalism and postmodernism, see Roger Olson, “Whales and Elephants,” *Pro Ecclesia* 4/2 (Spring 1995):165-80; idem, “Postconservative Evangelicals Greet the Postmodern Age,” *The Christian Century* (May 3, 1995):480-83; and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Exploring the World, Following the Word: The Credibility of An Evangelical Theology in An Incredulous Age,” *Trinity Journal* 16/1(Spring 1995):3-27.

socially constructed by a host of diverse communities.”<sup>9</sup> It does not see religion as a set of beliefs about what is real and what is not. Rather, religion is a choice—something to be incorporated into one’s worldview if he chooses. Thus, postmodernism leads a person to believe in what he likes rather than what the Bible presents as universal truth.

Probably no one really likes to include the doctrine of eternal hell in his belief system. Veith observes, “Today even conservative and evangelical ministers seldom mention Hell. . . . People have never liked to hear about Hell. The difference is that today, unlike any other time in history, many people are *unwilling* to believe . . . what they do not *enjoy* (as if aesthetic considerations determined questions of fact).”<sup>10</sup> The influence of postmodernism on the theology of Clark Pinnock, one of the leading evangelical annihilationists, seems to be clear in statements such as the following:

There is a powerful moral revulsion against the traditional doctrine of the nature of hell. 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>11</sup>

Is not Pinnock saying that people believe in what they enjoy, and since they do not enjoy the thought of eternal hell, they can dismiss it, and thus construct their own narrative, their own reality? With such cultural preunderstandings, it is impossible for one to interpret Scripture accurately.<sup>12</sup>

Some preunderstandings are theological. If one already has His mind made up about what God is like, what man is like, what sin and salvation are like, he may bring those preunderstandings to the passage of Scripture he is trying to understand. In other words, one’s larger theological system will probably impact his interpretation of an individual passage of Scripture. The purpose in the rest of this study, therefore, is to demonstrate that annihilationism is not an isolated deviation from orthodoxy, but is only a part of a larger theological breakdown. Annihilationists thus have not only departed from a biblical understanding of eschatology, but also from the doctrines of God, man, sin, and salvation.

### **THEOLOGY PROPER: A REDUCTIONIST VIEW OF GOD**

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<sup>9</sup>Gene Veith, *Postmodern Times* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1994) 193.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>11</sup>Pinnock, “The Conditional View,” in *Four Views of Hell* 149.

<sup>12</sup>See further, Larry D. Pettegrew, “Liberation Theology and Hermeneutical Preunderstandings,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148/591 (July-September 1991):274-87.

In Theology Proper, annihilationists have nearly reduced God's nature to love. In the words of Pinnock and Brow, "Love, then is not just something that God decides to do, not just an occasional attribute. Love is what characterizes God essentially—as a dynamic livingness, a divine circling and relating."<sup>13</sup>

Of course, Scripture does emphasize the love of God (John 3:16; 1 John 4:8), and evangelicals from the days of John Wesley have given proper recognition to it. Some have even elevated love over God's other attributes. Lewis Sperry Chafer, in a burst of enthusiasm insisted that "as no other attribute, love is the primary motive in God, and to satisfy His love all creation has been formed."<sup>14</sup> But clearly Chafer was not teaching that "love is what characterizes God essentially," nor that love is "ontologically ultimate."

For evangelical annihilationists, however, God's love serves as a preunderstanding to the study of hell. Pinnock calls the love of God one of his "control beliefs." "The foundation of my theology of religion," he says, "is a belief in the unbounded generosity of God revealed in Jesus Christ."<sup>15</sup> This means, therefore, that "the nature of hell must not contradict what we know about God's love. . . ."<sup>16</sup> "God is not vindictive and does not practice sadism. The lurid portrayals of hellfire in the Christian tradition contradict God's identity, according to the gospel."<sup>17</sup> Thus it is impossible for the annihilationists to believe in eternal hell, because God's love serves as an immovable roadblock to such a doctrine.

In fact, logically, a God who is essentially love could never send people to an eternal hell. Thomas Talbot uses the following set of beliefs to prove that eternal hell is absolutely illogical.<sup>18</sup>

- (1) God exists.
- (2) God is both omniscient and omnipotent.
- (3) God loves every created person.

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<sup>13</sup>Clark Pinnock and Robert C. Brow, *Unbounded Love* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994) 45. This is consistent with how some non-evangelical theologians have viewed God's nature and attributes. Liberation theologian, Jose Miguez Bonino, for example, claims that "love is ontologically ultimate" in God (*Christians and Marxists: The Mutual Challenge to Revolution* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976] 105).

<sup>14</sup>Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947) 205.

<sup>15</sup>Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 18.

<sup>16</sup>Pinnock and Brow, *Unbounded Love* 88.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 89-90.

<sup>18</sup>Thomas Talbot, "The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment," *Faith and Philosophy* 7:1 (January 1990):21.

- (4) Evil exists.
- (5) God will irrevocably reject some persons and subject those persons to everlasting punishment.

Talbot insists that either (3) or (5) is illogical. He writes, “When the doctrine of everlasting punishment is conjoined with other doctrines essential to the Christian faith, a logical paradox arises that proponents of the doctrine have failed to appreciate; as a consequence, a Christian theist must either reject the doctrine as incompatible with Christianity or else admit that Christianity is itself logically inconsistent.”<sup>19</sup> Such arguments from “control beliefs” and logical negations clearly demonstrate that evangelical annihilationists cannot take the Scripture passages on hell at face value. They have already decided that a God of love could not send people to an eternal hell.

### ***God Revealed with Many Attributes***

Some theologians have suggested other attributes of God as primary or ultimate. Augustus Hopkins Strong, in his early-twentieth-century theology book nominated holiness as God’s “preeminent” attribute. Strong was concerned about the liberal developments in theology that infected the doctrines of sin, law, and the atonement. He wrote:

There can be no proper doctrine of the atonement and no proper doctrine of retribution, so long as Holiness is refused its preeminence. Love must have a norm or standard, and this norm or standard can be found only in Holiness. The old conviction of sin and the sense of guilt that drove the convicted sinner to the cross are inseparable from a firm belief in the self-affirming attribute of God as logically prior to and as conditioning the self-communicating attribute. The theology of our day needs a new view of the Righteous One.<sup>20</sup>

Certainly God’s holiness defined as God’s self-affirming purity is a worthy possibility for the primary attribute of God if there were one.<sup>21</sup> But can any one

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>20</sup> Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson, 1907) x-xi.

<sup>21</sup> Stephen Charnock says that holiness “is the crown of all His attributes, the life of all His decrees, the brightness of all His actions” (*The Existence and Attributes of God* [1977 reprint, Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, n.d.] 452). However, one vital question in this discussion is how should holiness be defined? Strong’s and Charnock’s understanding of holiness is that it is moral purity. The word “holiness” does carry implications of moral purity, but the basic idea is that of “unapproachableness,” “separation” from His creation, “godness” (see A. B. Davidson, *The Theology of the Old Testament* [New York: Scribner’s, 1904] 145). Roy Beacham writes, “Holiness is that in God which is self-asserting and self-differentiating. The term came to be used as an appellative of deity itself (Isa. 5:16, cf. 5:19, 24). Therefore, to speak of God’s holiness is to speak of His ‘Godness.’ God’s holiness distinguishes Him from His creation (Isa. 40:25,26). It marks Him off from men (1 Sam. 2:2), angels (Job 15:15), and other supposed deities (Exod. 15:11). God is entirely unique” (“The

attribute be elevated above the others? Should one minimize God's justice, truth, grace, or omnipotence? Are they any less important in God than holiness or love? Even the terminology as to what to call God's most important attribute can be confusing. Gerald Bray, in his otherwise excellent study of the doctrine of God, says that "there is good reason for regarding omnipotence as God's most fundamental attribute."<sup>22</sup> But he also claims that holiness is the "most fundamental characteristic of God,"<sup>23</sup> and that love is "the greatest of God's personal attributes."<sup>24</sup> How can anyone tell the difference between "the most fundamental attribute," the "most fundamental characteristic," and "the greatest of God's personal attributes"? Grudem is right in proposing that "all such attempts seem to misconceive of God as a combination of various parts, with some parts being somehow larger or more influential than others. It is even difficult to understand exactly what 'most important' might mean."<sup>25</sup> In the words of Lewis and Demarest, "God's love is always holy love, and God's holiness is always loving holiness. It follows that arguments for the superiority of one attribute over another are futile. Every attribute is equally essential in the divine Being."<sup>26</sup> Evangelical annihilationists, therefore, have erred in their extreme reductionism of God's nature.

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Purification Ritual: A Preliminary Study" [unpublished paper, Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, Ind., 1985] 22-23). The holiness of God therefore speaks more of His divine distinctiveness than of His moral purity.

<sup>22</sup>Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1993) 103.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>25</sup>Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 180.

<sup>26</sup>Bruce Demarest and Gordon Lewis, *Integrative Theology*, vol.1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 197.



***Annihilationists Sentimentalize Love***

They have also sentimentalized God's love. "Love" in Scripture is clearly defined in its meaning and expression. God loves Israel in His election of her (Deut 7:7-9). God loves the world in the sense that He providentially rules over it with mercy (Matt 5:45). God loves the fallen, wicked moral order "with specifically salvific intent."<sup>27</sup> God peculiarly loves His elect (Eph 5:25). Scripture consistently presents love as ultimately expressed in the giving of His Son to die on the cross (John 3:16; Rom 5:8).

But God limits the expression of His love to those who refuse to accept Christ as their Savior. According to the Scriptures, "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him"<sup>28</sup> (John 3:36). From the original pair's expulsion from the Garden of Eden through the Book of Revelation, the plot-line of the biblical message includes God's judgment of sin. "The point that cannot be escaped," writes D. A. Carson, "is that God's wrath is not some minor and easily dismissed peripheral element to the Bible's plot-line. . . . It is not going too far to say that the Bible would not have a plot-line at all if there were no wrath."<sup>29</sup>

What one understands God to be like is a determining factor in his theology. It is extremely dangerous to minimize or nullify any of God's attributes. If people are not careful at this point, they may find themselves worshipping a God other than the God of Scripture. As John MacArthur warns, "Several of the very worst corruptions of Christian truth are based on the notion that God can be understood solely in terms of His love."<sup>30</sup>

**ANTHROPOLOGY: A DEPRECIATION OF THE HUMAN SOUL*****Annihilationism: Conditional Immortality***

Anthropology is another doctrine involved in the theological breakdown of those who hold to annihilationism. Annihilationists teach conditional immortality, which may be defined as "the idea that humans were made mortal with everlasting life being a gift, not a natural capacity."<sup>31</sup> Of course, physically human beings are mortal and will die unless the Lord's returns first. But the question being debated is, Is the human *soul* inherently immortal (as the traditionalists teach), or does it become immortal only through salvation (as the

<sup>27</sup>D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 240.

<sup>28</sup>All quotations of Scripture are from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>29</sup>Carson, *The Gagging of God* 223.

<sup>30</sup>John MacArthur, *The Love of God* (Dallas: Word, 1996) xiv.

<sup>31</sup>Pinnock and Brow, *Unbounded Love* 91.

Annihilationists typically teach that immortality is bestowed on the righteous at the resurrection. Clark Pinnock explains,

The Bible does not teach the natural immortality of the soul; it points instead to the resurrection of the body as God's gift to believers. . . . The Bible teaches conditionalism: God created humans mortal with a capacity for life everlasting, but it is not their inherent possession. Immortality is a gift God offers us in the gospel, not an inalienable possession.<sup>32</sup>

***Immortality in Scripture and Theology***

Part of the difficulty in the debate over the immortality of the soul is that the term, "immortal" is used somewhat differently in theology than it is in Scripture. Scripture tends to use the words, "everlasting," or "eternal" instead of "immortal." Through these words, the immortality of the soul is clearly taught. The following charts attempt to clarify the use of "immortality" in Scripture and theology.

**Biblical Use of "Immortality"**

**God**—1 Tim 6:16

"Only God has immortality."



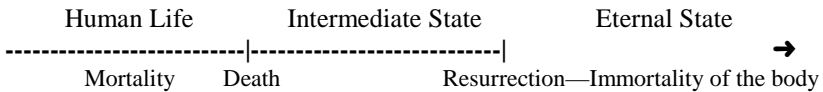
God is the source of life and immortality for all.  
God has no experience with sin or death.

**The Body of Man**—1 Cor 15:54

"But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, 'Death is swallowed up in victory.'"

Point: Immortality of the Resurrected Body

**Believer**



<sup>32</sup>Pinnock, "Conditional View" 148.





done more than anything else (specifically more than the Bible) to give credibility to the doctrine of the everlasting conscious punishment of the wicked. This belief, not holy Scripture, is what gives this doctrine the credibility it does not deserve.<sup>33</sup>

But this argument is not convincing. First of all, the traditional Christian understanding of the immortality of the soul is different from Greek philosophy. Plato taught that souls were inherently immortal. Christians have taught that souls are derivatively immortal, that God grants immortality to human beings because they are made in His likeness.

Second, traditionalists insist that the doctrine of the everlasting nature of the soul comes from Scripture, not philosophy. In the Old Testament, the immortality of the soul is clearly implied at the creation of the human race. When God created the first man and woman, He said, “Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness. . . . So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. . . . And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Gen 1:26-27; 2:7, personal translation).

In this passage, there are two significant statements. First, God addresses Himself when He creates man—“Let us. . . .” This is different from the way He creates animals. The great nineteenth-century theologian, William Shedd, noted that “when God creates man, he addresses himself: ‘Let us . . . ,’ Gen. 1:26. But when he creates animals, he addresses the inanimate world: ‘Let the waters bring forth the moving creature,’ Gen. 1:20.”<sup>34</sup> The immortality of the soul is implied in the divine personal relationship with mankind.

The second significant statement in this passage is that God breathes the breath of life into man’s lungs. Again, this is totally unlike the way God brings life to the animals. There is an intimate inbreathing of God’s breath into man. In the opinion of Robert Landis, “The usage of the word (‘breathed’) cannot be mistaken. As used in the text, it is descriptive of imparting the immortal spirit. . . .”<sup>35</sup>

Many NT passages also teach immortality of the soul. The many Scriptures that the other writers emphasize in this issue of *The Master’s Seminary Journal* all teach the immortality of the soul. Matthew 25:46, for example, says that at the judgment, some “will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” Only an immortal soul can suffer eternal punishment

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<sup>33</sup>Clark Pinnock, “The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent,” *Criswell Theological Review* 4:2 (1990):254.

<sup>34</sup>William G. T. Shedd, *Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy* (New York: Scribner’s, 1893) 5.

<sup>35</sup>Robert W. Landis, *The Immortality of the Soul* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1859) 142.

or enjoy eternal life. As Robert Peterson testifies, "I do not believe in the traditional view of hell because I accept the immortality of human beings, but the other way around. I believe in the immortality of human beings because the Bible clearly teaches everlasting damnation for the wicked and everlasting life for the righteous."<sup>36</sup>

### ***Annihilationism: Only God Has Immortality***

Annihilationists also support the doctrine of conditional immortality with 1 Tim 6:16, that "only God has immortality." If only God has immortality, they argue, humans do not. But traditionalists have a number of responses to this argument. First, the argument proves too much because it would also prove that believers do not have immortality and cannot live forever. Second, it proves too much because it would prove that the elect angels would not live forever. Third, it misses the point of the verse, which is that "the essential difference between the Creator and all His works [is] that he alone by Himself subsists."<sup>37</sup> God is an invisible, personal, living Spirit. "Living" simply means that God has energy of intellect, emotions, and will in Himself, and the source of life is in Him, not in any other being or thing external to Himself. God's very nature is to exist. He does not have to will it. Fourth, this verse is emphasizing that only God has lived from eternity past as well as into the eternity future. And fifth, this verse teaches that only God has innate and essential immortality. Human immortality is dependent upon and derived from God.

The traditional view of the immortality of the soul is correct. The Westminster Confession states the doctrine simply: "After God had made all other creatures, he created man, male and female, with reasonable and immortal souls" (IV, 2).

## **HAMARTIOLOGY: A DEVALUATION OF THE NATURE OF SIN**

Another change in the theological system of annihilationism relates to the doctrine of sin. Annihilationists boldly teach that human sin is not wicked enough to be punished eternally. Sin against an infinite God, they say, does not justify infinite penalty. Pinnock explains:

Anselm tried to argue that our sins are worthy of an infinite punishment because they are committed against an infinite majesty. This may have worked in the Middle Ages, but it will not work as an argument today. We do not accept inequality in judgments on the basis of the honor of the victim, as if stealing from a doctor is worse than stealing from a beggar. The fact that we have sinned against an infinite God does not

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<sup>36</sup>Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995) 178.

<sup>37</sup>Frederick Grant, *Life and Immortality* (London: Robert L. Allan, 1871) 113.

justify an infinite penalty.<sup>38</sup>

Pinnock insists, moreover, that eternal punishment would be vindictive on God's part. "What purpose of God would be served by the unending torture of the wicked except sheer vengeance and vindictiveness?"<sup>39</sup>

Once again, however, it is important to note that this is not a matter for human evaluation but of understanding Scripture. God alone, after all, can tell us what punishment for sin is appropriate, and we can learn that only in Scripture. Blanchard well asks, "Does anyone seriously claim to know how enormous an evil sin is in God's eyes?"<sup>40</sup>

The biblical view teaches that sins against an infinite God do require eternal punishment. To begin with, the argument that something done finitely cannot have infinite consequences is not consistent. The Christian's finite good works here on earth are graciously rewarded infinitely. Likewise, an unbeliever's wickedness can be punished infinitely.

But it is also certain that ongoing rebellion demands ongoing punishment, and there is no evidence in Scripture that a depraved person ever of his own initiative or power gives up his sinful autonomy. The evidence is actually to the contrary (Rev 9:20-21; 21:27; 22:15). No one can, in fact, repent of his sin without the grace of God, so there can be no repentance in hell. Strong observes, "Since we cannot measure the power of the depraved will to resist God, we cannot deny the possibility of endless sinning. . . . Not the punishing, but the non-punishing, would impugn his justice; for if it is just to punish sin at all, it is just to punish it as long as it exists."<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, endless guilt requires eternal punishment. Strong writes, "However long the sinner may be punished, he never ceases to be ill-deserving. Justice, therefore, which gives to all according to their deserts, cannot cease to punish. Since the reason for punishment is endless, the punishment itself must be endless."<sup>42</sup> The quality of God's justice is at stake here. Eternal punishment is the only punishment that could satisfy a perfectly holy and just God.

### **SOTERIOLOGY: A MINIMIZING OF CHRIST'S ATONEMENT FOR SIN**

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<sup>38</sup>Pinnock, "Conditional View" 152-53. See further, Frank Burch Brown, "The Beauty of Hell: Anselm on God's Eternal Design," *The Journal of Religion* 73 (1993):329-55.

<sup>39</sup>Pinnock, "The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent" 254.

<sup>40</sup>John Blanchard, *Whatever Happened to Hell?* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1995) 223.

<sup>41</sup>Strong, *Systematic Theology* 1048.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*

As noted above, annihilationists teach that finite human sin is not deserving of eternal punishment. "Is it not plain," says Pinnock, "that sin committed in time and space cannot deserve limitless divine retribution."<sup>43</sup> However, if it were temporary punishment that Christ paid for, His death was certainly less significant than if he took our eternal punishment. Shedd says,

If sin is punishable and to be punished for only one thousand years, is it probable that one of the persons of the Trinity would submit to such an amazing humiliation as to become a worm of the dust, and undergo the awful passion of Calvary, in order to deliver his rebellious creature from a transient evil which is to be succeeded by billions of millenniums of happiness? A thousand years is indeed a long time, and a thousand years of suffering is indeed a great woe; but it shrinks to nothing in comparison with what is involved in the humiliation and agony of God incarnate.<sup>44</sup>

Again, this is a vital theological point, as Shedd notes, "A suffering that in time would cease, surely would not justify such a strange and stupendous sacrifice as that of the only-begotten and well-beloved Son of God. We affirm therefore that the doctrine of Christ's atonement stands or falls with that of endless punishment."<sup>45</sup>

## CONCLUSION

It has been the purpose of this essay to demonstrate by a survey of the doctrinal categories that the doctrine of annihilationism as taught by a few contemporary evangelicals is a significant part of a multifaceted compromise of a biblical systematic theology. I have also suggested that annihilationists often come to the Scriptures with cultural and theological preunderstandings that negate the historical-grammatical meaning of the passages. Carson is right in his observation:

Despite the sincerity of their motives, one wonders more than a little to what extent the growing popularity of various forms of annihilationism and conditional immortality are a reflection of this age of pluralism. It is getting harder and harder to be faithful to the "hard" lines of Scripture. And in this way, evangelicalism itself may contribute to the gagging of God by silencing the severity of his warnings and by minimizing the awfulness of the punishment that justly awaits those untouched by his redeeming grace.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Pinnock, "Conditional View" 39.

<sup>44</sup>Shedd, *Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy* 184.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>46</sup>Carson, *Gagging of God* 536.



Moreover, the doctrinal compromises of annihilationism have serious consequences. J. I. Packer concludes this study with this penetrating question:

Does it matter whether an evangelical is a conditionalist or not? I think it does: for a conditionalist's idea of God will miss out on the glory of divine justice, and his idea of worship will miss out on praise for God's judgments, and his idea of heaven will miss out on the thought that praise for God's judgments goes on (cf. Rev. 16:5-7, 19:1-5), and his idea of man will miss out on the awesome dignity of our having been made to last for eternity, and in his preaching of the gospel he will miss out on telling the unconverted that their prospects without Christ are as bad as they possibly could be—for on the conditionalist view they aren't! These, surely, are sad losses. Conditionalism, logically thought through, cannot but impoverish a Christian man, and limit his usefulness to the Lord. That is why I am concerned about the current trend towards conditionalism. I hope it may soon be reversed.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>James I. Packer, "The Problem of Eternal Punishment," *Evangel* 10/2 (Summer 1992):18.