

ENDTIME ISSUES NEWSLETTER No. 184**“Hell as Eternal Torment”****Samuele Bacchiocchi, Ph. D.,****Retired Professor of Theology and Church History,
Andrews University****INDEX OF TOPICS OF THIS NEWSLETTER**

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UPDATE ON THE FORTHCOMING BOOK *POPULAR BELIEFS: ARE THEY BIBLICAL?*

The essay of this newsletter “Hell as Eternal Torment,” is Chapter 4 of the forthcoming book, *Popular Beliefs: Are They Biblical?* Each chapter represents for me a significant milestone pointing toward the completion of this project, hopefully by the end of February 2008. Long hours have gone into writing these four chapters.

Since the length of each chapter ranges between 30 to 40 pages, most likely the 320 pages book will consist of 10 chapters, that is, ten 32 pages signatures. You may have noticed that the last three chapters follow a logical sequential order: Immortality of the Soul, Life After Death, and Hell as Eternal Torment. Each chapter builds upon the previous one, by examining a popular unbiblical belief deriving from the immortality of the soul.

A whole cluster of popular heretical beliefs stem from the pagan dualistic view of human nature, consisting of a mortal body and an immortal soul. In the next two chapters, I plan to examine two more heretical beliefs deriving from the immortality of the soul, namely, Purgatory (indulgences), and the Veneration of Mary (and the saints). There is an urgent need to help sincere Christians understand why some of their most popular beliefs are based on Satan’s lie, “You shall not die” (Gen 3:4).

The final four chapters, most likely will examine the following popular heresies: Sunday Sacredness, the Eucharist, Speaking in Tongues, and the Rapture. If space allows, I would like to include also chapters on Infant Baptism, Papal Primacy, and Once Saved Always Saved.

As you can imagine, this is a monumental project that calls for a painstaking biblical analysis of some of the most popular heresies of our time. Please pray that the Lord may grant me divine wisdom and grace to deal with these heresies in a compelling and yet appealing way. I want readers to view the book, not as an Adventist attack against their popular beliefs, but as an invitation to test the validity of their beliefs in the light of Scripture. The ultimate goal is to lead people “out of darkness into his marvellous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

The Financing of this Project

I have never asked for financial support when writing the previous 17 books, though each book represented for me a significant investment of time and money. For 20 years I asked Andrews University to place me on half-teaching and half salary in order to be able to devote more time to research and writing. This means that each book that I wrote cost me between \$25,000.00 to \$50,000.00 of forfeited salary alone, without counting all the editorial expenses. In each instance I have recovered the investment by selling my books at a fair market price.

What makes this project different, is the plan proposed by the sponsors, to offer the book practically free of charge to churches and members interested to use it for witnessing outreach. This means that if sufficient funds are received to cover the editing and printing costs of *Popular Beliefs: Are They Biblical?*, the book will be offered for only the cost of shipping and handling, that is, about \$2.00 to 3.00 a copy, instead of the regular price of \$25.00 for a book of this size. If the funds received cover only part of the printing costs, then the price will be adjusted accordingly.

If you feel impressed to contribute to this project, feel free to contact me. I will tell you where to send your contribution, so that you can receive a tax deductible receipt.

Testing the Potential Interest of *Popular Beliefs: Are they Biblical?*

To test the potential interest for *Popular Beliefs: Are They Biblical?*, I have been sharing some of the highlights of this research with people I meet in my travelling. The responses have been very encouraging. For example, last night in my flight back from Honolulu to Chicago, I interacted with a Christian business man who was seating in a first class behind my seat. (I was upgraded to first class free of charge while already seating in Economy Class because of my K1 status). When I put away my laptop because the battery had run dead, the business man asked me what I had been writing about. I explained to him that I was editing chapter 4 of my forthcoming book that examines popular Christian beliefs from a biblical perspective.

When I told him that the chapter I was working on deals with hellfire, he became so interested that he stepped out of his seat and knelt beside my aisle seat for quite a while. He told me that he had been greatly distressed by the notion of a vindictive God who torments sinners in hell for all eternity. When I explained to him that the Bible teaches not the eternal torment of the lost, but their eternal annihilation, he was greatly relieved. He gave me his business card, asking me to mail him a copy of the book as soon as it comes off the press. I find that there are many sincere people who question some of their beliefs and are sincerely seeking for biblical enlightenment.

A Glimpse of this Chapter “Hell as Eternal Torment”

I wrote most of this 40 pages chapter on “Hell as Eternal Torment” in Honolulu, where I spent 9 days speaking at two major rallies. Last Sabbath I spoke at the Central SDA Church in Honolulu for the annual convocation of all the 18 churches in Oahu. The beautiful sanctuary was packed with over 1000 members. The problem was that it was exceedingly hot and humid (over 90 degrees) inside the sanctuary without any air conditioning. I must confess that my shirt and trousers became so soaked with perspiration that you could have squeezed a lot of juice out of them. Yet, in spite of the oppressive heat, most of the members stayed on

the whole day until 7:00 p. m. Truly I can say that I received a “warm” Hawaiian *Aloha*. The reception and response was marvellous.

During the week I enjoyed the peaceful setting of my hotel room where I wrote this important chapter dealing with the popular view of hell as the place where the lost suffer conscious punishment in body and soul for all eternity. This belief is held in common by Catholic and most Protestant churches. Unfortunately it is a belief that makes God into a sadistic, vindictive Being who delights in torturing sinners for all eternity.

In recent years numerous church leaders and theologians have recognized the serious moral and biblical problems posed by the popular view of hellfire. Consequently, they have attempted to make hell more tolerable by replacing the physical torment of hell with a more endurable mental torment.

For example, Pope John Paul II denied that hell is a place of fire torment, describing it instead as a state of separation from God. Similarly, Billy Graham stated: “I think the [hell] fire that is mentioned in the Bible is a burning thirst for God that can never be quenched.” These creative attempts to lower the pain quotient of hell, by reducing it to mental pain, do not substantially change its nature, since it still remains a place of unending torment. Mental pain can be as excruciating as physical pain.

A more encouraging development is the rejection altogether of the traditional view of hell as eternal conscious torment, and the adoption instead of the annihilation view of hell by an increasing number of respected evangelical scholars. This is the view that the wicked will be resurrected to receive their temporary punishment that will result in their ultimate annihilation.

Until recent times *annihilationism* was regarded as a sectarian belief espoused primarily by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Today leading evangelical scholars like John Stott and Clark Pinnock have accepted *annihilationism*. You will read in this chapter how critics have attempted to defame them by associating them with sectarians Adventists. The acceptance of the annihilation view of hell by leading Evangelical scholars and theologians, should encourage our Adventist church to proclaim more boldly those biblical truths which have been largely obscured by ecclesiastical traditions.

A PLEA FOR HELP TO EDIT THE MANUSCRIPT

When I first called for helpers to clean up the first draft of each chapter, several English “experts” offered their services. Now some of them are discovering that this project takes more time than they had anticipated. This means that I still need two or more editors. I plan to place all the corrected copies in front of me and enter all the corrections in the final draft. If you have the time, the skills, and the interest to correct my manuscript, feel free to contact me by emailing me a message at sbacchiocchi@biblicalperspectives.com. I will send you by return email a MW file attachment of each of the four chapters.

Specifically I am looking for people who can help me in two ways:

(1) To eliminate spelling mistakes and to restructure those sentences that do not sound too good in English.

(2) To shorten sentences or paragraphs without weakening too much the strength of their content.

Remember me in your prayers on this project as you did for my healing from cancer. I believe that the Lord have restored me to greater health and strength, because He wants me to accomplish greater things for Him in this Endtime. Pray that the Lord may give me the wisdom to expose errors and present the truth in a clear and loving way.

“HELL AS ETERNAL TORMENT”

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Chapter 4 of the forthcoming book

POPULAR BELIEFS: ARE THEY BIBLICAL?

Few teachings have troubled the human conscience over the centuries more than the traditional and still popular view of hell as the place where the lost suffer conscious punishment in body and soul for all eternity. The prospect that one day a vast number of people will be consigned to the everlasting torment of hell is most disturbing and distressing to sensitive Christians. After all, almost everyone has friends or family members who have died without making a commitment to Christ. The prospect of one day seeing them agonizing in hell for all eternity can easily lead thinking Christians to question how they can enjoy the bliss of Paradise, while some of their loved ones are suffering conscious punishment for all eternity.

It is not surprising that today we seldom hear sermons on hellfire even from fundamentalist preachers, who are still committed to such a belief. John Walvoord, himself a fundamentalist and staunch defender of the popular view of hellfire, suggests that the reluctance to preach on this subject is due primarily to the fear of proclaiming an unpopular doctrine.¹ This may be partly true, but the problem may also be the awareness that the traditional and popular view of hellfire is morally intolerable and Biblically questionable.

Clark Pinnock, a respected evangelical scholar who has served as President of the *Evangelical Theological Society*, keenly observes: “Their reticence [to preach on hellfire] is not so much due to a lack of integrity in proclaiming the truth as to not having the stomach for preaching a doctrine that amounts to sadism raised to new levels of finesse. Something inside tells them, perhaps on an instinctual level, that the God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is not the kind of deity who tortures people (even the worst of sinners) in this way. I take the silence of the fundamentalist preachers to be testimony to their longing for a revised doctrine of the nature of hell.”² It is such a longing, I believe, that is encouraging some theologians today to revise the traditional, popular view of hell and to propose alternative interpretations designed to make hell more tolerable.

Objectives of This Chapter

The issue addressed in this chapter is not the *fact* of hell as the final punishment of the lost, but the *nature* of hell. The fundamental question addressed is: Does the Bible support the popular belief that impenitent sinners suffer the conscious punishment of hellfire in body and soul for all eternity? Or, Does the Bible teach that the wicked are annihilated by God at the second death after suffering a temporary punishment? To put it differently: Does hellfire torment the lost eternally or consume them permanently?

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part examines the traditional and popular view of hell as

eternal torment. We trace this belief historically and then consider some of the main Bible texts and arguments used to support it.

The second part of this chapter presents the *annihilation* view of hell as a place of the ultimate dissolution and annihilation of the unsaved. Some call this view *conditional* immortality, because our study of the Biblical wholistic view of human nature shows that immortality is not an innate human possession; it is a divine gift granted to believers on condition of their faith response. God will not resurrect the wicked to immortal life in order to inflict upon them a punishment of eternal pain. Rather, the wicked will be resurrected mortal in order to receive their punishment which will result in their ultimate annihilation.

PART 1 THE TRADITIONAL AND POPULAR VIEW OF HELL

With few exceptions, the traditional view of hell has dominated Christian thinking from the time of Augustine to our time. Simply stated, this popular belief affirms that immediately after death the disembodied souls of impenitent sinners descend into hell, where they suffer the punishment of a literal eternal fire. At the resurrection, the body is reunited with the soul, thus intensifying the pain of hell for the lost and the pleasure of heaven for the saved. This popular belief has been held historically not only by the Catholic Church, but also by most Protestant churches.

The Origin of Hell

The doctrine of the hellfire derives from and is dependant upon the belief in the immortality of the soul. The dualistic view of human nature consisting of a mortal body and an immortal soul that survives the death of the body, presupposes a dual destiny for the soul, either to Paradise or to Hell.

In chapter 2 we noted that the belief in the immortality of the soul is usually traced back to Egypt, which has been rightly called the “Mother of Superstitions.” The same holds true for the belief in Hell as a place of eternal punishment. Greek and Roman philosophers freely credit Egypt for the invention of the bliss and terrors of the invisible world.³

The Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans shared the view that hell is located deep down under the earth. It was known by various names, as *Orcus*, *Erebus*, *Tartarus*, and *Infernus*, from which derives our expression “infernal regions.” The gate of Hell was guarded by the three-headed dog Cerberus, who prevented any exit from the infernal regions. To ensure that there would not be any escape from the horrid prison of hell, a river of fire, called Phlegethon, and a triple wall surrounded it.

In his book *Aeneid*, Virgil, a famous Roman Poet (70-19 B.C.), gives us this brief description of hell’s agonizing punishments:

“And now wild shouts, and wailings dire,
And shrieking infants swell the dreadful choir.”
Here sits in bloody robes the Fury fell,
By night and day to watch the gates of hell.
Here you begin terrific groans to hear,
And sounding lashes rise upon the ear.
On every side the damned their fetters grate,

And curse, ‘mid clanking chains, their wretched fate.’⁴

Virgil’s images of hell were refined and immortalized by the famous fourteenth-century Italian poet, Dante Alighieri. In his *Divina Commedia* (*Divine Comedy*), Dante portrays hell as a place of absolute terror, where the damned writhe and scream while the saints bask in the glory of paradise. In Dante’s hell, some sinners wail loudly in boiling blood, while others endure burning smoke that chars their nostrils, still others run naked from hordes of biting snakes.

Michelangelo used his talent to paint scenes of Dante’s *Inferno* on the wall of the Sistine chapel, which is the pope’s private chapel. On the left of Christ the risen saints receive their resurrection bodies as they ascend towards heaven. On the right of Christ, devils with pitchforks drag, push, and hurl impenitent sinners into cauldrons of burning fires. Finally, at the bottom the Greek mythical figure Charon with his oars, together with his devils, makes the damned get out of his boat pushing them before the infernal judge Minos—another Greek mythical figure. Hateful fiends are gnawing at the skulls of suffering sinners, while watching hellish cannibalism going on. These graphic pictures of hell—depicted between 1535 and 1541 in the most important papal chapel—reflect the prevailing popular belief of the horrors of Hell fire.

When did Hell Catch Fire in the Christian Church?

When did such a horrible belief in the eternal punishment of the lost by Hell fire, enter the Christian Church? A survey of the writings of the early Church Fathers, suggest that this belief was gradually adopted beginning from the latter part of the second century, that is, at approximately the same time as the belief in the immortality of the soul. Passing references to the punishment of the wicked in “everlasting fire,” are found in the writings of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian of Carthage, Lactantius, Jerome, Chrysostom, and Augustine, to name a few.⁵

But the writer who has exercised the greatest influence in defining the Catholic doctrine of hellfire, is Augustine (354-430), the Bishop of Hippo. He is rightly regarded as one of the most influential Catholic theologian. He defined the doctrine of Hell in such a clear and well-structured way that it has become the standard teaching of the Catholic Church to this very day.

Augustine’s Definition of Hell

Much of what Augustine wrote about Hell, was already believed by many Christians in his time. But he systematized and defended the prevailing beliefs in an unprecedented way. Simply stated, Augustine view of Hell consists of five major components.⁶

First, Hell is a real eternal destiny that awaits the majority of the human race. “For as a matter of fact,” Augustine stated, “not all, nor even a majority, are saved.”⁷ “The eternal damnation of the wicked is a matter of certainty.”⁸

Second, Hell is severe. “The torments of he lost” will be “perpetual” and “unintermitted.”⁹ “No torments that we know of, continued through as many ages as the human imagination can conceive, could be compared with it.”¹⁰

Third, Hell is endless, because the lost are ‘not permitted to die.’ For them ‘death itself dies not.’¹¹ The lost are flung into an eternal fire “where they will be tortured for ever and ever.”¹²

Fourth, Hell is the penalty of eternal damnation. It does not allow for repentance because the time for repentance has passed. As “eternal chastisement, it is inflicted exclusively in retribution for sins.”¹³

Fifth, Hell is the just punishment for the wickedness of sins against God. No one has the right to complain against the justice of God. ‘Who but a fool would think that God was unrighteous, either in inflicting penal justice on those who had earned it, or in extending mercy to the unworthy?’¹⁴

God has the right to consign sinners to eternal death by denying them eternal salvation. “Assuredly there was no injustice in God’s not willing that they should be saved, though they could have been saved had he so willed it.”¹⁵ Augustine’s reasoning that salvation or damnation depends solely on the sovereign and inscrutable will of God, (a view adopted by Calvin) ultimately makes the God of the Bible an irrational, capricious, and unjust Being to be despised rather than to be worshipped.

Catholic Definition of Hell

Augustine’s articulation of the Doctrine of Hell has remained definitive for the Catholic Church to the present day, in spite of recent attempts to put the fire out of Hell. In 1999, Pope John Paul II threw a figurative pail of cold water on the popular image of hell as a place of unending flame, when he denied that hell is a place of fiery torment. He described it rather as “the pain, frustration and emptiness of life without God.”¹⁶ He further claimed that the “lake of fire and sulfur” referred to in the Book of Revelation was symbolic.¹⁷ These statements set off a brief but intense firestorm, particularly among fundamentalist Christians who firmly believe that hell is a place of eternal fiery torment.

The attempt of Pope John Paul II to take the fire out of Hell, has not changed the traditional Catholic doctrine of Hell, which is clearly stated in the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity. Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, ‘eternal fire.’ The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs.”¹⁸

This traditional Catholic view of Hellfire was reaffirmed by Pope Benedict XVI on March 28, 2007, during the celebration of the Mass at the Church of St. Felicity & Martyred Sons, in northern Rome. He said: “Hell is a place where sinners really do burn in an everlasting fire, and not just a religious symbol designed to galvanise the faithful. . . . Hell really exists and is eternal, even if nobody talks about it much any more”¹⁹

Protestant Views of Hell

Faced with imaginations that had run riot over Purgatory and Hell, the Reformers Luther and Calvin, not only rejected the popular beliefs about Purgatory, but they also declined to speculate on the literal torment of hell. For example, Luther could talk about the wicked burning in hell and wishing for “a little drop of water,”²⁰ but he never pressed for a literal interpretation of hell. He believed that “it is not very important whether or not one pictures hell as it is commonly portrayed and described.”²¹

John Calvin preferred to understand the references to “eternal fire” metaphorically. “We may conclude from the many passages of Scripture, that eternal fire is a metaphorical expression.”²² The more cautious

approach of Luther and Calvin did not deter later prominent Protestant preachers and theologians from portraying hell as a sea of fire, in which the wicked burn throughout eternity.

During the following centuries, Protestant preachers were inspired more by Dante and Michelangelo's frightening depictions of the torments of hell, than by the language of Scripture. They terrorized their congregations with sermons that were themselves pyrotechnic events. Not satisfied with the image of fire and smoke of the New Testament, some preachers with more creative minds pictured hell as a bizarre horror chamber, where punishment is based on a measure-for-measure principle. This means that whatever member of the body sinned, that member would be punished in hell more than any other member.

"In Christian literature," writes William Crockett, "we find blasphemers hanging by their tongues. Adulterous women who plaited their hair to entice men dangle over boiling mire by their neck or hair. Slanderers chew their tongues, hot irons burn their eyes. Other evildoers suffer in equally picturesque ways. Murderers are cast into pits filled with venomous reptiles, and worms fill their bodies. Women who had abortions sit neck deep in the excretions of the damned. Those who chatted idly during church stand in a pool of burning sulphur and pitch. Idolaters are driven up cliffs by demons where they plunge to the rocks below, only to be driven up again. Those who turned their back on God are turned and baked slowly in the fires of hell."²³

Renowned eighteenth-century American theologian Jonathan Edwards, famous for his sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," pictured hell as a raging furnace of liquid fire that fills both the body and the soul of the wicked: "The body will be full of torment as full as it can hold, and every part of it shall be full of torment. They shall be in extreme pain, every joint of them, every nerve shall be full of inexpressible torment. They shall be tormented even to their fingers' ends. The whole body shall be full of the wrath of God. Their hearts and bowels and their heads, their eyes and their tongues, their hands and their feet will be filled with the fierceness of God's wrath. This is taught us in many Scriptures. . . ." ²⁴ Newspapers reported people leaving his sermons and committing suicide from the fear he instilled in them.

A similar description of the fate of the wicked was given by the famous nineteenth-century British preacher Charles Spurgeon: "In fire exactly like that which we have on earth thy body will lie, asbestos-like, forever unconsumed, all thy veins roads for the feet of Pain to travel on, every nerve a string on which the Devil shall for ever play his diabolical tune of hell's unutterable lament."²⁵ It is hard to comprehend how the Devil can torment evildoers, when he himself will be "thrown into the lake of burning sulphur" (Rev 20:10).

Renewed Protestant Defence of Literal Hellfire

In recent years the traditional, popular doctrine of literal hellfire, has come under fire by respected conservative Evangelical scholars like F. F. Bruce, Michael Green, Philip E. Hughes, Dale Moody, Clark H. Pinnock, W. Graham Scroggie, John R. W. Stott, John W. Wenham and Oscar Cullman. These men and others have embraced *annihilationism*, a view that the wicked will be resurrected to receive their punishment that will result in their ultimate annihilation. This is our view that will be discussed in the last part of this chapter.

Defenders of the traditional view of Hell did not remain silent. Some came out with pistols flaring like John H. Gerstner, *Repent or Perish* (1990). Other were less combative but equally opposed to annihilationism: J. J. Packer, Larry Dixon, Kendall Harmon, Robert A. Peterson, and Donald Carson.

Today, defenders of a literal eternal hellfire are more circumspect in their description of the suffering

experienced by the wicked. For example, Robert A. Peterson concludes his book *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment*, saying: “The Judge and Ruler over hell is God himself. He is present in hell, not in blessing, but in wrath. Hell entails eternal punishment, utter loss, rejection by God, terrible suffering, and unspeakable sorrow and pain. The duration of hell is endless. Although there are degrees of punishment, hell is terrible for all the damned. Its occupants are the Devil, evil angels, and unsaved human beings.”²⁹

A comprehensive response to all the texts and arguments used to defend the traditional view of the eternal punishment of the wicked, would take us beyond the limited scope of this chapter. Interested readers can find such a comprehensive response in *The Fire that Consumes* (1982) by Edward Fudge and in my book *Immortality or Resurrection?* Our response is limited to a few basic observations, some of which will be expanded in the second part of this chapter.

The Witness of the Old Testament

The witness of the Old Testament for eternal punishment largely rest on the use of *sheol* and two main passages, Isaiah 66:22-24 and Daniel 12:1-2. Regarding *sheol*, John F. Walvoord says: “*Sheol* was a place of punishment and retribution. In Isaiah [14:9-10] the Babylonians killed in divine judgment are pictured as being greeted in *sheol* by those who had died earlier.”³⁰

Regarding *sheol*, our study of the word in chapter 3 shows that none of the texts supports the view that *sheol* is the place of punishment for the ungodly. The word denotes the realm of the dead where there is unconsciousness, inactivity, and sleep. Similarly, Isaiah’s taunting ode against the King of Babylon is a parable, in which the characters, personified trees, and fallen monarchs are fictitious. They serve not to reveal the punishment of the wicked in *sheol*, but to forecast in graphic pictorial language God’s judgment upon Israel’s oppressor and his final ignominious destiny in a dusty grave, where he is eaten by worms. To interpret this parable as a literal description of hell means to ignore the highly figurative, parabolic nature of the passage, which is simply designed to depict the doom of a self-exalted tyrant.

Isaiah 66:24: The Fate of the Wicked

The description of the fate of the wicked found in Isaiah 66:24 is regarded by some traditionalists as the clearest witness to eternal punishment in the Old Testament. The setting of the text is the contrast between God’s judgment upon the wicked and His blessings upon the righteous. The latter will enjoy prosperity and peace, and will worship God regularly from Sabbath to Sabbath (Is 66:12-14, 23). But the wicked will be punished by “fire” (Is 66:15) and meet their “end together” (Is 66:17). This is the setting of the crucial verse 24, which says: “And they shall go forth and look on the dead bodies of the men that 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.”

Peterson interprets the phrase “their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched” as meaning that “the punishment and shame of the wicked have no end; their fate is eternal. It is no wonder that they will be loathsome to all mankind.”³¹

Isaiah’s description of the fate of the wicked was possibly inspired by the Lord’s slaying of 185,000 men of the Assyrian army during the reign of Hezekiah. We are told that “when men arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies” (Is 37:36). This historical event may have served to foreshadow the fate of the wicked. Note that the righteous look upon “dead bodies” (Hebrew: *pegerim*), not living people. What they see is destruction and not eternal torment.

The “worms” are mentioned in connection with the dead bodies, because they hasten the decomposition and represent the ignominy of corpses deprived of burial (Jer 25:33; Is 14:11; Job 7:5; 17:14; Acts 12:23). The figure of the fire that is not quenched is used frequently in Scripture to signify a fire that consumes (Ezek 20:47-48) and reduces everything to nothing (Am 5:5-6; Matt 3:12). Worms and fire represent a total and final destruction.

To understand the meaning of the phrase “the fire shall not be quenched,” it is important to remember that keeping a fire live, to burn corpses required considerable effort in Palestine. Corpses do not readily burn and the firewood needed to consume them was scarce. In my travels in the Middle East and Africa, I often have seen carcasses partially burned because the fire died out before consuming the remains of a beast.

The image of an unquenchable fire is simply designed to convey the thought of being completely burned up or consumed. It has nothing to do with the everlasting punishment of immortal souls. The passage speaks clearly of “dead bodies” which are consumed and not of immortal souls which are tormented eternally. It is unfortunate that traditionalists interpret this passage, and similar statements of Jesus in the light of their conception of the final punishment rather than on the basis of what the figure of speech really means.

Daniel 12:2: “Everlasting Contempt”

The second major Old Testament text used by traditionalists to support everlasting punishment is Daniel 12:2, which speaks of the resurrection of both good and evil: “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.” Peterson concludes his analysis of this text, by saying: “Daniel teaches that whereas the godly will be raised to never-ending life, the wicked will be raised to never-ending disgrace (Dan 12:2).”³²

The Hebrew term *deraon* translated “contempt” also appears in Isaiah 66:24 in which it is translated “loathsome” and describes the unburied corpses. In his scholarly commentary on *The Book of Daniel*, André Lacocque notes that the meaning of *deraon* both “here [Dan 12:2] and in Isaiah 66:24 is the decomposition of the wicked.”¹⁴ This means that the “contempt” is caused by the disgust over the decomposition of their bodies, and not by the never-ending suffering of the wicked. As Emmanuel Petavel puts it: “The sentiment of the survivors is disgust, not pity.”¹⁵

To sum up, the alleged Old Testament witness for the everlasting punishment of the wicked is negligible, if not non-existent. On the contrary, the evidence for utter destruction of the wicked at the eschatological Day of the Lord is resoundingly clear. The wicked will “perish” like the chaff (Ps 1:4, 6), will be dashed to pieces like pottery (Ps 2:9, 12), will be slain by the Lord’s breath (Is 11:4), will be burnt in the fire “like thorns cut down” (Is 33:12), and “will die like gnats” (Is 51:6).

The clearest description of the total destruction of the wicked is found on the last page of the Old Testament English Bible: “For behold, the day comes burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch” (Mal 4:1). Here the imagery of the all-consuming fire which leaves “neither root nor branch” suggests utter consumption and destruction, not perpetual torment.

The Witness of Jesus

Traditionalists believe that Jesus provides the strongest proof for their belief in the eternal punishment of the wicked. Kenneth Kantzer, a most respected evangelical leader, who served as Editor of *Christianity*

Today, states: “Those who acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord cannot escape the clear, unambiguous language with which he warns of the awful truth of eternal punishment.”³⁵

Did Jesus teach that hell—*gehenna* is the place where sinners will suffer eternal torment or permanent destruction? To find an answer to this question, let us examine what Jesus actually said about hell.

What Is Hell—*Gehenna*?

Before looking at Christ’s references to hell—*gehenna*, it is helpful to consider the derivation of the word itself. The Greek word *gehenna* is a transliteration of the Hebrew “Valley of (the sons of) Hinnon,” located south of Jerusalem. In ancient times, it was linked with the practice of sacrificing children to the god Molech (2 Kings 16:3; 21:6; 23:10). This earned it the name “Topheth,” a place to be spit on or abhorred. This valley apparently became a gigantic pyre for burning the 185,000 corpses of Assyrian soldiers whom God slew in the days of Hezekiah (Is 30:31-33; 37:36).

Jeremiah predicted that the place would be called “the valley of Slaughter” because it would be filled with the corpses of the Israelites when God judged them for their sins. “Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when it will no more be called Topheth, or the valley of Hinnom, but the valley of Slaughter: for they will bury in Topheth, because there is no room elsewhere. And the dead bodies of this people will be food for the beasts of the air, and for the beasts of the earth; and none will frighten them away” (Jer 7:32-33).

Josephus informs us that the same valley was heaped with the dead bodies of the Jews following the A. D. 70 siege of Jerusalem.³⁶ We have seen that Isaiah envisions the same scene following the Lord’s slaughter of sinners at the end of the world (Is 66:24). During the intertestamental period, the valley became the place of final punishment, and was called the “accursed valley” (1 Enoch 27:2,3), the “station of vengeance” and “future torment” (2 Bar 59:10, 11), the “furnace of *Gehenna*” and “pit of torment” (4 Esd 7:36).

Jesus and Hell’s Fire

With this background in mind, let us look at the seven references to *gehenna*—hell fire that we find in the Gospels. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus states that whoever says to his brother “‘you fool!’ shall be liable to the hell [*gehenna*] of fire” (Matt 5:22; KJV). Again, He said that it is better to pluck out the eye or cut off the hand that causes a person to sin than for the “whole body go into hell [*gehenna*]” (Matt 5:29, 30). The same thought is expressed later on: it is better to cut off a foot or a hand or pluck out an eye that causes a person to sin than to “be thrown into eternal fire . . . be thrown into the hell [*gehenna*] of fire” (Matt 18:8, 9). Here the fire of hell is described as “eternal.”

The same saying is found in Mark, where Jesus three times says that it is better to cut off the offending organ than “to go to hell [*gehenna*], to the unquenchable fire . . . to be thrown into hell [*gehenna*], where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:44, 46, 47-48). Elsewhere, Jesus chides the Pharisees for traversing sea and land to make a convert and then making him “twice as much a child of hell [*gehenna*]” (Matt 23:15). Finally, he warns the Pharisees that they will not “escape being sentenced to hell [*gehenna*]” (Matt 23:33).

In reviewing Christ’s allusions to hell—*gehenna*, we should first note that none of them indicates that hell—*gehenna* is a place of unending torment. What is eternal or unquenchable is not the punishment, but the fire. We noted earlier that in the Old Testament this fire is eternal or unquenchable in the sense that it

totally consumes dead bodies. This conclusion is supported by Christ's warning that we should not fear human beings who can harm the body, but the One "who can destroy both soul and body in hell [*gehenna*]" (Matt 10:28). The implication is clear. hell is the place of final punishment, which results in the total destruction of the whole being, soul and body.

"Eternal Fire"

Traditionalists challenge this conclusion because elsewhere Christ refers to "eternal fire" and "eternal punishment." For example, in Matthew 18:8-9 Jesus repeats what He had said earlier (Matt 5:29-30) about forfeiting a member of the body in order to escape the "eternal fire" of hell—*gehenna*. An even clearer reference to "eternal fire" is found in the parable of the Sheep and the Goats in which Christ speaks of the separation that takes place at His coming between the saved and the unsaved. He will welcome the faithful into His kingdom, but will reject the wicked, saying: "Depart from me, you cursed, into *eternal fire* prepared for the devil and his angels; . . . And they will go away into *eternal punishment*, but the righteous into eternal life" (Matt 25:41, 46).³⁷

Traditionalists attribute fundamental importance to the last passage because it brings together the two concepts of "eternal fire" and "eternal punishment." The combination of the two is interpreted to mean that the punishment is eternal because the hellfire that causes it is also eternal. Peterson goes so far as to say that "if Matthew 25:41 and 46 were the only two verses to describe the fate of the wicked, the Bible would clearly teach eternal condemnation, and we would be obligated to believe it and to teach it on the authority of the Son of God."³⁰

Peterson's interpretation of these two critical texts ignores four major considerations. First, Christ's concern in this parable is not to define the nature of either eternal life or of eternal death, but simply to affirm that there are two destinies. The nature of each of the destinies is not discussed in this passage.

Second, as John Stott rightly points out, "The fire itself is termed 'eternal' and 'unquenchable,' but it would be very odd if what is thrown into it proves indestructible. Our expectation would be the opposite: it would be consumed for ever, not tormented for ever. Hence it is the smoke (evidence that the fire has done its work) which 'rises for ever and ever' (Rev 14:11; cf. 19:3)."³⁹

Third, the fire is "eternal—*aionios*," not because of its endless duration, but because of its complete consumption and annihilation of the wicked. This is indicated clearly by the fact that the lake of fire, in which the wicked are thrown, is called explicitly "the second death" (Rev 20:14; 21:8), because, it causes the final, radical, and irreversible extinction of life.

Eternal as Permanent Destruction

"Eternal" often refers to the *permanence of the result* rather than the *continuation of a process*. For example, Jude 7 says that Sodom and Gomorrah underwent "a punishment of *eternal [aionios] fire*." It is evident that the fire that destroyed the two cities is eternal, not because of its *duration* but because of its *permanent results*. In the same way, the fire of the final punishment is "eternal" not because it lasts forever, but because, as in the case of Sodom and Gomorra, it causes the complete and permanent destruction of the wicked, a condition which lasts forever.

Fourth, Jesus was offering a choice between *destruction* and *life* when He said: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to *destruction*, and many enter through it.

But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to *life*, and only few find it” (Matt 7:13-14).⁴⁰ Here Jesus contrasts the comfortable sinful life which leads to *destruction* in hell with the narrow way of trials and persecutions which leads to *eternal life* in the kingdom of heaven. The contrast between *destruction* and *life* suggests that the “eternal fire” causes the eternal destruction of the lost, not their eternal torment.

“Eternal Punishment”

Christ’s solemn declaration: “They will go away into *eternal punishment*, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matt 25:46), is generally regarded as the clearest proof of the conscious suffering the lost will endure for all eternity. Is this the only legitimate interpretation of the text? John Stott rightly answers: “No, that is to read into the text what is not necessarily there. What Jesus said is that both the life and the punishment would be eternal, but he did not in that passage define the nature of either. Because he elsewhere spoke of eternal life as a conscious enjoyment of God (John 17:3), it does not follow that eternal punishment must be a conscious experience of pain at the hand of God. On the contrary, although declaring both to be eternal, Jesus is *contrasting* the two destinies: the more unlike they are, the better.”⁴¹

Traditionalists read “*eternal punishment*” as “*eternal punishing*,” but this is not the meaning of the phrase. As Basil Atkinson keenly observes, “When the adjective *aionios* meaning ‘everlasting’ is used in Greek with nouns of *action* it has reference to the *result* of the action, not the process. Thus the phrase ‘everlasting punishment’ is comparable to ‘everlasting redemption’ and ‘everlasting salvation,’ both Scriptural phrases. No one supposes that we are being redeemed or being saved forever. We were redeemed and saved once for all by Christ with eternal results. In the same way the lost will not be passing through a process of punishment for ever but will be punished once and for all with eternal results. On the other hand the noun ‘life’ is not a noun of action, but a noun expressing a state. Thus the life itself is eternal.”⁴²

Punishment of Eternal Destruction

A fitting example to support this conclusion is found in 2 Thessalonians 1:9, where Paul, speaking of those who reject the Gospel, says: “They shall suffer the *punishment of eternal destruction* and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.”³⁶ It is evident that the destruction of the wicked cannot be eternal in its duration, because it is difficult to imagine an eternal, inconclusive process of destruction. Destruction presupposes annihilation. The destruction of the wicked is eternal—*aionios*, not because the *process* of destruction continues forever, but because the *results* are permanent. In the same way, the “eternal punishment” of Matthew 25:46 is eternal because its *results* are permanent. It is a punishment that results in their eternal destruction or annihilation.

The only way the punishment of the wicked could be inflicted eternally is if God resurrected them with immortal life so that they would be indestructible. But according to the Scripture, only God possesses immortality in Himself (1 Tim 1:17; 6:16). He gives immortality as the gift of the Gospel (2 Tim 1:10). In the best known text of the Bible, we are told that those who do not “believe in him” will “perish [*apoletai*],” instead of receiving “eternal life” (John 3:16). The ultimate fate of the lost is destruction by eternal fire and not punishment by eternal torment. The notion of the eternal torment of the wicked can only be defended by accepting the Greek view of the immortality and indestructibility of the soul, a concept which we have found to be foreign to Scripture.

The Witness of Revelation

The theme of the final judgment is central to the book of Revelation, because it represents God's way of overcoming the opposition of evil to Himself and His people. Thus, it is not surprising that believers in eternal hell fire find support for their view in the dramatic imageries of Revelation's final judgment. The visions cited to support the view of everlasting punishment in hell are: (1) the vision of God's Wrath in Revelation 14:9-11, and (2) the vision of the lake of fire and of the second death in Revelation 20:10, 14-15. We briefly examine them now.

The Vision of God's Wrath

In Revelation 14, John sees three angels announcing God's final judgment in language progressively stronger. The third angel cries out with a loud voice: "If any one worships the beast and its image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also shall drink the wine of God's wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and he shall be tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of his holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever; and they have no rest, day or night, these worshippers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name" (Rev 14:9-11).

Traditionalists view this passage together with Matthew 25:46 as the two most important texts which support the traditional doctrine of hell. Peterson concludes his analysis of this passage, by saying: "I conclude, therefore, that despite attempts to prove otherwise, Revelation 14:9-11 unequivocally teaches that hell entails eternal conscious torment for the lost. In fact, if we had only this passage, we would be obligated to teach the traditional doctrine of hell on the authority of the Word of God."⁴⁴

This dogmatic interpretation of Revelation 14:9-11 as proof of a literal, eternal torment reveals a lack of sensitivity to the highly metaphorical language of the passage. In his commentary on *Revelation*, J. P. M. Sweet, a respected British New Testament scholar, offers a most timely caution in his comment on this passage: "To ask, 'what does Revelation teach, eternal torment or eternal destruction?' is to use (or misuse) the book as a source of 'doctrine,' or of information about the future. John uses pictures, as Jesus used parables (cf. Matt 18:32-34; 25:41-46), to ram home the unimaginable disaster of rejecting God, and the unimaginable blessedness of union with God, while there is still time to do something about it."⁴⁵ It is unfortunate that this warning is ignored by those who choose to interpret literally highly figurative passages like the one under consideration.

"No Rest, Day or Night"

The phrase "they have no rest, day or night" (Rev 14:11) is interpreted by traditionalists as descriptive of the eternal torment of hell. The phrase, however, denotes the *continuity* and not the *eternal duration* of an action. John uses the same phrase "day and night" to describe the living creatures praising God (Rev 4:8), the martyrs serving God (Rev 7:15), Satan accusing the brethren (Rev 12:10), and the unholy trinity being tormented in the lake of fire (Rev 20:10).

In each case, the thought is the same: the action continues while it lasts. Harold Guillebaud correctly explains that the phrase "they have no rest, day or night" (Rev 14:11) "certainly says that there will be no break or intermission in the suffering of the followers of the Beast, *while it continues*; but in itself it does not say that it will continue forever."⁴⁶

Support for this conclusion is provided by the usage of the phrase “day and night” in Isaiah 34:10, where Edom’s fire is not quenched “night and day” and “its smoke shall go up for ever” (Is 34:10). The imagery is designed to convey that Edom’s fire would continue until it had consumed all that there was, and then it would go out. The outcome would be permanent destruction, not everlasting burning. “From generation to generation it shall lie waste” (Is 34:10).

The Lake of Fire

The last description in the Bible of the final punishment contains two highly significant symbolic expressions: (1) the lake of fire, and (2) the second death (Rev 19:20; 20:10, 15; 21:8). Traditionalists attribute fundamental importance to “lake of fire” because for them, as stated by John Walvoord, “the lake of fire is, and it serves as a synonym for the eternal place of torment.”⁴⁷

To determine the meaning of “the lake of fire,” we need to examine its four occurrences in Revelation, the only book in the Bible where the phrase is found. The first reference occurs in Revelation 19:20, where we are told that the beast and the false prophet “were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulphur.” The second reference is found in Revelation 20:10, where John describes the outcome of Satan’s last great assault against God: “The devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.” God’s throwing of the devil into the lake of fire increases its inhabitants from two to three.

The third and fourth references are found in Revelation 20:15 and 21:8, where all the wicked are also thrown into the lake of fire. It is evident that there is a crescendo as all evil powers, and people eventually experience the final punishment of the lake of fire.

The fundamental question is whether the lake of fire represents an ever-burning hell where the wicked are supposed to be tormented for all eternity or whether it symbolizes the permanent destruction of sin and sinners. Three major considerations lead us to believe that the lake of fire represents the final and complete annihilation of evil and evildoers.

First, the beast and the false prophet, who are cast alive into the lake of fire, are two symbolic personages who represent not actual people but persecuting civil governments and corrupting false religion. Political and religious systems cannot suffer conscious torment forever. Thus, for them, the lake of fire represents complete, irreversible annihilation.

Second, the fact that “Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire” (Rev 20:14) shows again that the meaning of the lake of fire is symbolic, because Death and Hades (the grave) are abstract realities that cannot be thrown into or consumed with fire. By the imagery of Death and Hades being thrown into the lake of fire, John simply affirms the final and complete destruction of death and the grave. By His death and resurrection, Jesus conquered the power of death, but eternal life cannot be experienced until death is symbolically destroyed in the lake of fire and banished from the universe.

“The Second Death.”

The third and decisive consideration is the fact that the lake of fire is defined as “the second death:” “The lake of fire is the second death” (Rev 20:14; cf. 21:8).

Since John clearly explains that the lake of fire is the second death, it is crucial for us to understand the meaning of “the second death” in New Testament times. This phrase occurs four times only in Revelation. The first reference is found in Revelation 2:11: “He who conquers shall not be hurt by the second death.”

Here “the second death” is differentiated from the physical death that every human being experiences. The implication is that the saved who receive eternal life, will not experience eternal death.

The second reference to “the second death” occurs in Revelation 20:6, in the context of the first resurrection of the saints at the beginning of the millennium: “Over such the second death has no power.” Again, the implication is that the resurrected saints will not experience the second death, that is, the punishment of eternal death, obviously because they will be raised to immortal life.

The third and the fourth references are in Revelation 20:14 and 21:8, where the second death is identified with the lake of fire into which the devil, the beast, the false prophet, Death, Hades, and all evildoers are thrown. In these instances, the lake of fire is the second death in the sense that it accomplishes the eternal death and destruction of sin and sinners.

The Jewish Usage of the Phrase “Second Death”

The meaning of the phrase “second death” is clarified by its usage in the Targum, which is the Aramaic translation and interpretation of the Old Testament. In the Targum, the phrase is used several times to refer to the final and irreversible death of the wicked. According to Strack and Billerbeck, the Targum on Jeremiah 51:39, 57 contains an oracle against Babylon, which says: “They shall die the second death and not live in the world to come.”⁴⁸ Here the second death is clearly the death resulting from the final judgment which prevents evildoers from living in the world to come.

In his study *The New Testament and the Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch*, M. McNamara cites the Targums (Aramaic commentary) of Deuteronomy 33:6, Isaiah 22:14 and 65:6, 15 where the phrase “second death” is used to describe the ultimate, irreversible death. The Targum on Deuteronomy 33:6 reads: “Let Reuben live in this world and die not in the second death in which death the wicked die in the world to come.”⁴⁹ In the Targum on Isaiah 22:14, the prophet says: “This sin shall not be forgiven till you die the second death, says the Lord of Host.”⁵⁰ In both instances, “the second death” is the ultimate destruction experienced by the wicked at the final judgment.

The Targum on Isaiah 65:6 is very close to Revelation 20:14 and 21:8. It reads: “Their punishment shall be in Gehenna where the fire burns all the day. Behold, it is written before me: ‘I will not give them respite during (their) life but will render them the punishment of their transgressions and will deliver their bodies to the second death.’”⁵¹ Again, the Targum on Isaiah 65:15 reads: “And you shall leave your name for a curse to my chosen and the Lord God will slay you with the second death but his servants, the righteous, he shall call by a different name.”⁵² Here, the second death is explicitly equated with the slaying of the wicked by the Lord, a clear image of final destruction and not of eternal torment.

In the light of its usage in Jewish literature, the phrase “second death” is used by John to define the nature of the punishment in the lake of fire, namely, a punishment that ultimately results in eternal, irreversible death. To interpret the phrase as eternal conscious torment in hell fire, means to negate its current usage and the Biblical meaning of “death” as cessation of life.

Conclusion

Three major observations emerge from the preceding examination of the traditional view of hell as the place of a literal, everlasting punishment of the wicked. First, the traditional view of hell largely depends upon a dualistic view of human nature, which *requires* the eternal survival of the soul either in heavenly

bliss or in hellish torment. We have found such a belief to be foreign to the wholistic Biblical view of human nature, where death denotes the cessation of life for the whole person.

Second, the traditionalist view rests largely on a literal interpretation of symbolic images such as *gehennah*, the lake of fire, and the second death. These images do not lend themselves to a literal interpretation because, as we have seen, they are metaphorical descriptions of the permanent destruction of evil and evildoers. Incidentally, lakes are filled with water and not with fire.

Third, the traditional view fails to provide a rational explanation for the justice of God in inflicting endless divine retribution upon unbelievers for sins they committed during the space of a short life. The doctrine of eternal conscious torment is incompatible with the Biblical revelation of divine love and justice. This point is considered shortly in conjunction with the moral implications of eternal torment.

In conclusion, the traditional view of hell was more likely to be accepted during the Middle Ages, when most people lived under autocratic regimes of despotic rulers, who could and did torture and destroy human beings with impunity. Under such social conditions, theologians with a good conscience could attribute to God an unappeasable vindictiveness and insatiable cruelty, which today would be regarded as demonic.

Today, theological ideas are subject to an ethical and rational scrutiny that forbids attributing to God the moral perversity presupposed by the popular belief of the eternal punishment of the unsaved. Our sense of justice requires that the penalty inflicted must be commensurate with the evil done. This important truth is ignored by the popular view of hell that requires eternal punishment for the sins committed even during a short lifetime.

PART 2

THE ANNIHILATION VIEW OF HELL

Until recent times, the annihilation view of hell has been regarded by most Christians as a sectarian belief associated mostly with my own the Seventh-day Adventist church. This fact has led many evangelicals and Catholics to reject annihilationism a priori, simply because it was seen as a “sectarian” Adventist belief and not a traditional, popular Protestant and Catholic belief.

Tactics of Harassment

The strategy of rejecting a doctrine a priori because of its association with “sectarian” Adventists, is reflected in the tactics of harassment adopted against those evangelical scholars who in recent times have rejected the traditional view of hell as eternal conscious torment, and adopted instead the annihilation view of hell. The tactics consist in defaming such scholars by associating them with liberals or with sectarians Adventists.

Respected Canadian theologian Clark Pinnock writes: “It seems that a new criterion for truth has been discovered which says that if Adventists or liberals hold any view, that view must be wrong. Apparently a truth claim can be decided by its association and does not need to be tested by public criteria in open debate. Such an argument, though useless in intelligent discussion, can be effective with the ignorant who are fooled by such rhetoric.”⁵³

Despite the tactics of harassment, the annihilation view of hell is gaining ground among evangelicals. The public endorsement of this view by John R. W. Stott, a highly respected British theologian and popular preacher, is certainly encouraging this trend. “In a delicious piece of irony,” writes Pinnock, “this is creating a measure of accreditation by association, countering the same tactics used against it. It has

become all but impossible to claim that only heretics and near-heretics [like Seventh-day Adventists] hold the position, though I am sure some will dismiss Stott's orthodoxy precisely on this ground."⁵⁴

John Stott expresses anxiety over the divisive consequences of his new views in the evangelical community, where he is a renowned leader. He writes: "I am hesitant to have written these things, partly because I have great respect for long-standing tradition which claims to be a true interpretation of Scripture, and do not lightly set it aside, and partly because the unity of the worldwide evangelical community has always meant much to me. But the issue is too important to be suppressed, and I am grateful to you [David Edwards] for challenging me to declare my present mind. . . . I do plead for frank dialogue among evangelicals on the basis of Scripture."⁵⁵

An Appeal to Take a Fresh Look at Hell

Emotional and Biblical reasons have caused John Stott to abandon the traditional view of hell and adopt the annihilation view. Stott writes: "Emotionally, I find the concept [of eternal torment] intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterizing their feelings or cracking under the strain. But our emotions are a fluctuating, unreliable guide to truth and must not be exalted to the place of supreme authority in determining it. As a committed Evangelical, my question must be—and is—not what my heart tells me, but what does God's Word say? And in order to answer this question, we need to survey the Biblical material afresh and to open our minds (not just our hearts) to the possibility that Scripture points in the direction of annihilationism, and that 'eternal conscious torment' is a tradition which has to yield to the supreme authority of Scripture."⁵⁶

In response to Stott's plea to take a fresh look at the Biblical teaching on the final punishment, we briefly examine the witness of the Old and the New Testament by considering the following points: (1) death as the punishment of sin, (2) the language of destruction, (3) the moral implications of eternal torment, (4) the judicial implications of eternal torment, and (5) the cosmological implications of eternal torment.

Death as the Punishment of Sin

"The Wages of Sin Is Death"

A logical starting point for our investigation is the fundamental principle laid down in both Testaments: "The soul that sins shall die" (Ezek 18:4, 20); "The wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23). The punishment of sin, of course, comprises not only the first death which all experience as a result of Adam's sin, but also what the Bible calls the second death (Rev 20:14; 21:8), which, as we have seen, is the final, irreversible death experienced by impenitent sinners. This basic principle tells us at the outset that the ultimate wages of sin is not eternal torment, but permanent death.

Death in the Bible, as noted in chapter 3, is the cessation of life not the separation of the soul from the body. Thus, the punishment of sin is the cessation of life. Death, as we know it, would indeed be the cessation of our existence were it not for the fact of the resurrection (1 Cor 15:18). It is the resurrection that turns death into a sleep, from being the final end of life into being a temporary sleep. But there is no resurrection from the second death. It is the final cessation of life.

This fundamental truth was taught in the Old Testament, especially through the sacrificial system. The penalty for the gravest sin was always and only the death of the substitute victim and never a prolonged

torture or imprisonment of the victim. James Dunn perceptively observes that “The manner in which the sin offering dealt with sin was by its death. The sacrificial animal, identified with the offerer in his sin, had to be destroyed in order to destroy the sin which it embodied.”⁵⁷ To put it differently, the consummation of the sin offering typified in a dramatic way the ultimate destruction of sin and sinners.

The *separation* that occurred on the Day of Atonement between genuine and false Israelites typifies the separation that will occur at the Second Advent. Jesus compared this separation to the one that takes place at harvest time between the wheat and the tares. Since the tares were sown among the good wheat, which represents “the sons of the kingdom” (Matt 13:38), it is evident that Jesus had His church in mind. Wheat and tares, genuine and false believers, will coexist in the church until His coming. At that time, the drastic separation typified by the Day of Atonement will occur. Evildoers will be thrown “into the furnace of fire,” and the “righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matt 13:42-43).

Jesus’ parables and the ritual of the Day of Atonement teach the same important truth: False and genuine Christians will coexist until His coming. But at the Advent judgment a permanent separation occurs when sin and sinners will be eradicated forever and a new world will be established.

The Language of Destruction in the Bible

The most compelling reason for believing in the annihilation of the lost at the final judgment is the rich vocabulary and imagery of “destruction” often used in the Old and New Testaments to describe the fate of the wicked.

The Language of Destruction in the Old Testament

The writers of the Old Testament seem to have exhausted the resources of the Hebrew language at their command to affirm the complete destruction of impenitent sinners. According to Basil Atkinson 28 Hebrew nouns and 23 verbs are generally translated “destruction” or “to destroy” in our English Bible. Approximately half of these words are used to describe the final destruction of the wicked.⁵⁸ A detailed listing of all the occurrences would take us beyond the limited scope of this chapter, beside proving to be repetitious to most readers. Interested readers can find an extensive analysis of such texts in the studies by Basil Atkinson and Edward Fudge. Only a sampling of significant texts are considered here.

Several Psalms describe the final destruction of the wicked with dramatic imagery (Ps 1:3-6; 2:9-12; 11:1-7; 34:8-22; 58:6-10; 69:22-28; 145:17, 20). In Psalm 37, for example, we read that the wicked “will soon *fade like grass*” (v. 2), “they shall be *cut off* . . . and will *be no more*” (vv. 9-10), they will “*perish* . . . like smoke they *vanish away*” (v. 20), “transgressors shall be altogether *destroyed*” (v. 38). Psalm 1, loved and memorized by many, contrasts the way of the righteous with that of the wicked. Of the latter it says that “the wicked shall not stand in the judgment” (v. 5). They will be “like chaff which the wind drives away” (v. 4). “The way of the wicked will *perish*” (v. 6). Again, in Psalm 145, David affirms: “The Lord preserves all who love him; but all the wicked he will *destroy*” (v. 20). This sampling of references, on the final destruction of the wicked is in complete harmony with the teaching of the rest of Scripture.

The Destruction of the Day of the Lord

The prophets frequently announce the ultimate destruction of the wicked in conjunction with the eschatological Day of the Lord. In his opening chapter, Isaiah proclaims that “rebels and sinners shall be

destroyed together, and those who forsake the Lord shall be *consumed*" (Is 1:28). The picture here is one of total destruction, a picture that is further developed by the imagery of people burning like tinder with no one to quench the fire: "The strong shall become tow, and his work a spark, and both shall burn together, with none to quench them" (Is 1:31).

We noted earlier that in the last page of the Old Testament English Bible, we find a most colorful description of the contrast between the final destiny of believers and unbelievers. For the believers who fear the Lord, "the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings" (Mal 4:2). But for unbelievers the Day of the Lord "comes, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all the evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes *shall burn them up*, says the Lord of host, so that *it will leave them neither root nor branch*" (Mal 4:1).

The message conveyed by these symbolic images is clear. While the righteous rejoice in God's salvation, the wicked are consumed like "stubble," so that no "root or branch" is left. This is clearly a picture of total consumption by destroying fire, and not one of eternal torment. This is the Old Testament picture of the fate of the wicked, total and permanent destruction and not eternal torment.

Jesus and the Language of Destruction

The New Testament follows closely the Old Testament in describing the fate of the wicked with words and pictures denoting destruction. The most common Greek words are the verb *apollumi* (to destroy) and the noun *apoleia* (destruction). In addition, numerous graphic illustrations from both inanimate and animate life are used to portray the final destruction of the wicked.

Jesus used several figures from inanimate life to portray the utter destruction of the wicked. He compared it to the following: weeds that are bound in bundles to be *burned* (Matt 13:30, 40), bad fish that is *thrown away* (Matt 13:48), harmful plants that are *rooted up* (Matt 15:13), fruitless trees that are *cut down* (Luke 13:7), and withered branches that are *burned* (John 15:6).

Jesus also used illustrations from *human life* to portray the doom of the wicked. He compared it to: unfaithful tenants who are *destroyed* (Luke 20:16), an evil servant who will be *cut in pieces* (Matt 24:51), the Galileans who *perished* (Luke 13:2-3), the eighteen persons *crushed* by Siloam's tower (Luke 13:4-5), the antediluvians *destroyed* by the flood (Luke 17:27), the people of Sodom and Gomorrah *destroyed by fire* (Luke 17:29), and the rebellious servants who were *slain* at the return of their master (Luke 19:14, 27).

All of these figures denote capital punishment, either individually or collectively. They signify violent death, preceded by greater or lesser suffering. The illustrations employed by the Savior very graphically depict the ultimate *destruction* or *dissolution* of the wicked. Jesus asked: "When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen?" (Matt 21:40). And the people responded: "He will miserably *destroy* [*apollumi*] those wicked men" (Matt 21:41).

Jesus taught the final destruction of the wicked not only through illustrations, but also through explicit pronouncements. For example, He said: "Do not fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him [God] who can *destroy both soul and body in hell*" (Matt 10:28). John Stott rightly remarks: "If to kill is to deprive the body of life, hell would seem to be the deprivation of both physical and spiritual life, that is, an extinction of being."⁸⁰ In our study of this text in chapter 3 we noted that Christ did not consider hell a the place of eternal torment, but of permanent destruction of the whole being, soul and body.

Often Jesus contrasted eternal life with death or destruction. "I give them eternal life, and they shall never *perish*" (John 10:28). "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to

destruction, and those who enter it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few” (Matt 7:13-14). Here we have a simple contrast between life and death. There is no ground in Scripture for twisting the word “perish” or “destruction” to mean everlasting torment.

Earlier we noted that seven times Christ used the imagery of *gehenna* to describe the destruction of the wicked in hell. In reviewing Christ’s allusions to hell—*gehenna*, we found that none of them indicates that hell is a place of unending torment. What is eternal or unquenchable is not the punishment but the fire which, as the case of Sodom and Gomorra, causes the complete and permanent destruction of the wicked, a condition that lasts forever. The fire is unquenchable because it cannot be quenched until it has consumed all the combustible material.

Paul and the Language of Destruction

The language of destruction is used frequently also by the New Testament writers to describe the doom of the wicked. Speaking of the “enemies of the cross,” Paul says that “their end is *destruction* [*apoleia*]” (Phil 3:19). In concluding his letter to the Galatians, Paul warns that “The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap *destruction* [*phthora*]; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from that Spirit will reap eternal life” (Gal 6:8, NIV). The Day of the Lord will come unexpectedly, “like a thief in the night, . . . then sudden *destruction* [*olethros*] will come upon them [the wicked]” (1 Thess 5:2-3). At Christ’s coming, the wicked “shall suffer the punishment of eternal *destruction* [*olethron*]” (2 Thess 1:9). We noted earlier that the destruction of the wicked cannot be eternal in its duration because it is difficult to imagine an eternal inconclusive process of destruction. Destruction presupposes annihilation.

In view of the final destiny awaiting believers and unbelievers, Paul often speaks of the former as “those who are being saved—[*hoi sozomenoi*] and of the latter as “those who are perishing—[*hoi apollumeno*]” (1 Cor 1:18; 2 Cor 2:15; 4:3; 2 Thess 2:10). This common characterization is indicative of Paul’s understanding of the destiny of unbelievers as ultimate destruction and not eternal torment.

Peter and the Language of Destruction

Peter, like Paul, uses the language of destruction to portray the fate of the unsaved. He speaks of false teachers who secretly bring in heresies and who bring upon themselves “swift *destruction*” (2 Pet 2:1). Peter compares their destruction to that of the ancient world by the Flood and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah which were burned to ashes (2 Pet 2:5-6). God “condemned them to *extinction* and made them an example to them who were to be ungodly” (2 Pet 2:6). Here Peter states unequivocally that the extinction by fire of Sodom and Gomorrah serves as an example of the fate of the lost.

Peter alludes again to the fate of the lost when he says that God is “forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should *perish*, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Pet 3:9). Peter’s alternatives between repentance or perishing remind us of Christ’s warning: “unless you repent you will all likewise *perish*” (Luke 13:3). The latter will occur at the coming of the Lord when “the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be *burned up*” (2 Pet 3:10). Such a graphic description of the destruction of the earth and evildoers by fire hardly allows for the unending torment of hell.

Other Allusions to the Final Destruction of the Wicked

Several other allusions in the New Testament imply the final destruction of the lost. We briefly refer to some of them here. The author of Hebrews warns repeatedly against apostasy or unbelief. Anyone who

deliberately keeps on sinning “after receiving the knowledge of the truth,” faces “a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire which will *consume* the adversaries” (Heb 10:27). The author explicitly states that those who persist in sinning against God ultimately experience the judgment of a raging fire that will “*consume*” them. Note that the function of the fire is to consume sinners, not to torment them for all eternity. This truth is reiterated consistently throughout the Bible.

Jude is strikingly similar to 2 Peter in his description of the fate of unbelievers. Like Peter, Jude points to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah “as an example of those who suffer the *punishment of eternal fire*” (Jude 7, NIV). We noted earlier that the fire that destroyed the two cities is eternal, not because of its *duration*, but because of its *permanent results*.

We noted earlier that the language of destruction is present, especially in the book of Revelation, because it represents God’s way of overcoming the opposition of evil to Himself and His people. A text not mentioned earlier is Revelation 11:18, where at the sounding of the seventh trumpet John hears the 24 elders saying: “The time has come for judging the dead . . . and for *destroying* those who destroy the earth.” Here, again, the outcome of the final judgment is not condemnation to eternal torment in hell, but destruction and annihilation. God is severe but just. He does not delight in the death of the wicked, let alone in torturing them for all eternity. Ultimately, He will punish all evildoer, but the punishment will result in their eternal extinction, not eternal torment.

This is the fundamental difference between the Biblical view of final punishment as utter extinction and the traditional, popular view of hell as unending torment and torture. The language of destruction and the imagery of fire that we have found throughout the Bible clearly suggests that the final punishment of the wicked is permanent extinction and not unending torment in hell. In the light of this compelling Biblical witness, I join Clark Pinnock in stating: “I sincerely hope that traditionalists will stop saying that there is no Biblical basis for this view [annihilation] when there is such a strong basis for it.”⁶⁰

The Moral Implications of Eternal Torment

The traditional view of hell is being challenged today not only on the basis of the language of destruction and the imagery of the consuming fire we find the Bible but also for moral, judicial, and cosmological considerations. To these we must now turn our attention. Let us consider, first, the moral implications of the traditional view of hell which depicts God as a cruel torturer who torments the wicked throughout all eternity.

Does God Have Two Faces?

How can the view of hell that turns God into a cruel, sadistic torturer for all eternity be legitimately reconciled with the nature of God revealed in and through Jesus Christ? Does God have two faces? Is He boundlessly merciful on one side and insatiably cruel on the other? Can God love sinners so much as He sent His beloved Son to save them, and yet hate impenitent sinners so much that He subjects them to unending cruel torment? Can we legitimately praise God for His goodness, if He torments sinners throughout the ages of eternity?

Of course, it is not our business to criticize God, but God has given us a conscience to enable us to formulate moral judgments. Can the moral intuition God has implanted within our consciences justify the insatiable cruelty of a deity who subjects sinners to unending torment? Clark Pinnock answers this question in a most eloquent way: “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? I suppose one might be afraid of Him, but could we love and respect Him? Would we want to strive to be like Him in this mercilessness? Surely the idea of everlasting, conscious torment raises the problem of evil to impossible heights.”⁶¹

John Hick expresses the same concern: “The idea of bodies burning for ever and continuously suffering the intense pain of third-degree burns without either being consumed or losing consciousness is as scientifically fantastic as it is morally revolting. . . . The thought of such a torment being deliberately inflicted by divine decree is totally incompatible with the idea of God as infinite love.”⁶²

Hell and the Inquisition

One wonders if the belief in hell as a place where God will eternally burn sinners with fire and sulphur may not have inspired the Inquisition to imprison, torture, and eventually burn at the stake so-called “heretics” who refused to accept the traditional teachings of the church. Church history books generally do not establish a connection between the two, evidently because inquisitors did not justify their action on the basis of their belief in hellfire for the wicked.

But, one wonders, what inspired popes, bishops, church councils, Dominican and Franciscan monks, Christian kings and princes to torture and exterminate dissident Christians like the Albigenses, Waldenses, and Huguenots? What influenced, for example, Calvin and his Geneva City Council to burn Servetus (a Spanish scientist who discovered the circulation of the blood) at the stake for persisting in his anti-Trinitarian beliefs?

A reading of the condemnation of Servetus issued on October 26, 1553, by the Geneva City Council suggests to me that those Calvinistic zealots believed, like the Catholic inquisitors, that they had the right to burn heretics in the same way God will burn them later in hell. The sentence reads: “We condemn thee, Michael Servetus, to be bound, and led to the place of Champel, there to be fastened to a stake and burnt alive, together with thy book, . . . even till thy body be reduced to ashes; and thus shalt thou finish thy days to furnish an example to others who might wish to commit the like.”⁶³

On the following day, after Servetus refused to confess to be guilty of heresy, “the executioner fastens him by iron chains to the stake amidst fagots, puts a crown of leaves covered with sulphur on his head, and binds his book by his side. The sight of the flaming torch extorts from him a piercing shriek of ‘misericordia’ [mercy] in his native tongue. The spectators fall back with a shudder. The flames soon reach him and consume his mortal frame in the forty-fourth year of his fitful life.”⁶⁴

Philip Schaff, a renowned church historian, concludes this account of the execution of Servetus, by saying: “The conscience and piety of that age approved of the execution, and left little room for the emotions of compassion.”⁶⁵ It is hard to believe that not only Catholics, but even devout Calvinists would approve and watch emotionlessly the burning of a Spanish physician who had made significant contributions to medical science simply because he could not accept the divinity of Christ.

The best explanation I can find for the cauterization of the Christian moral conscience of the time, is the gruesome pictures and accounts of hellfire to which Christians constantly were exposed. Such a vision of hell provided the moral justification to imitate God by burning heretics with temporal fire in view of the eternal fire that awaited them at the hands of God.

It is impossible to estimate the far-reaching impact that the doctrine of unending hellfire has had

throughout the centuries in justifying religious intolerance, torture, and the burning of “heretics.” The rationale is simple: If God is going to burn heretics in hell for all eternity, why shouldn’t the church burn them to death now? The practical implications and applications of the doctrine of literal eternal hellfire are frightening. Traditionalists must ponder these sobering facts. After all, Jesus said: “By their fruits ye shall know them” (Matt 7:20, KJV). And the fruits of the doctrine of hellfire are frightening bad.

Attempts to Make Hell More Tolerable

It is not surprising that during the course of history there have been various attempts to make hell less hellish. Augustine invented purgatory to reduce the population of hell. Some Protestant theologians today such as Hendrikus Berkof and Zachary J. Hayes, are proposing a purgatorial view of hell, similar to the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory. After a period of punishment in hell, each inmate will become sufficiently purified to be accepted into Heaven.⁶⁹

Others have tried to take the fire out of hell by replacing the physical torment of hell with a more enduring mental torment. At the General Audience of Wednesday, 28 July 1999, John Paul II explained that hell is not a physical place but “the state of those who freely and definitively separate themselves from God.” He denied that hell is a place of fiery torment and described it rather as “the pain, frustration and emptiness of life without God.”⁶⁷ Surprisingly the Pope’s statement clearly contradicts the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which clearly states: “The souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishment of hell, ‘eternal fire.’” (#1035).

Like John Paul II, Billy Graham believes that “hell essentially is separation from God forever. And that is the worst hell that I can think of. But I think people have a hard time believing God is going to allow people to burn in literal fire forever. I think the fire that is mentioned in the Bible is a burning thirst for God that can never be quenched”⁶⁸

In an interview with Richard Ostling of *Time* magazine, Billy Graham stated: “The only thing I could say for sure is that hell means separation from God. We are separated from his light, from his fellowship. That is going to be hell. When it comes to a literal fire, I don’t preach it because I’m not sure about it. When the Scripture uses fire concerning hell, that is possibly an illustration of how terrible it’s going to be—
—not fire but something worse—a thirst for God that cannot be quenched”⁶⁹ If the fire of hell is “a burning thirst for God that can never be quenched,” then the wicked should not be in hell in the first place. How can God consign to hell people who have a burning thirst for Him?

These creative attempts to lower the pain quotient of hell, by reducing it from a physical condition to a psychological state, does not substantially change its nature, since it still remains a place of unending torment. Ultimately, any doctrine of hell must pass the moral test of the human conscience, and the doctrine of literal unending torment, whether physical or psychological, cannot pass such a test. Annihilationism, on the other hand, can pass the test for two reasons. First, it does not view hell as everlasting torture but permanent extinction of the wicked. Second, it recognizes that God respects the freedom of those who choose not to be saved.

Our age desperately needs to learn the fear of God, and this is one reason for preaching on the final judgment and punishment. We need to warn people that those who reject Christ’s principles of life and His provision of salvation ultimately will experience a fearful judgment and “suffer the punishment of eternal destruction” (2 Thess 1:9). A recovery of the Biblical view of the final punishment will loosen the preachers’ tongues, since they can proclaim the great alternative between eternal life and permanent

destruction without fear of portraying God as a monster.

The Judicial Implications of Eternal Torment

The traditional, popular view of hell is challenged today also on the basis of the Biblical vision of justice. As John Stott concisely and clearly puts it: “Fundamental to it [justice] is the belief that God will judge people ‘according to what they [have] done’ (e.g., Rev 20:12), which implies that the penalty inflicted will be commensurate with the evil done. This principle had been applied in the Jewish law courts in which penalties were limited to an exact retribution, ‘life for life, eye for an eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot’ (e. g., Ex 21:23-25). Would there not, then, be a serious disproportion between sins consciously committed in time and torment consciously experienced throughout eternity? I do not minimize the gravity of sin as rebellion against God our Creator, but I question whether ‘eternal conscious torment’ is compatible with the Biblical revelation of divine justice.”⁷⁰

It is difficult for us to imagine what kind of rebellious lifestyle could deserve the ultimate punishment of everlasting, conscious torment in hell. As John Hick puts it, “Justice could never demand for finite sins the infinite penalty of eternal pain; such unending torment could never serve any positive or reformatory purpose precisely because it never ends; and it renders any coherent Christian theodicy [that is, the defense of God’s goodness in view of the presence of evil] impossible by giving the evils of sin and suffering an eternal lodgment within God’s creation.”⁷¹

Unlimited Retaliation is Unknown to the Bible

The notion of unlimited retaliation is unknown to the Bible. The Mosaic legislation placed a limit on the punishment that could be inflicted for various kinds of harm received. Jesus placed an even greater limit: “You have heard that it was said . . . But I say to you” (Matt 5:38-39). Under the ethics of the Gospel, it is impossible to justify the traditional view of eternal, conscious torment because such a punishment would create a serious disproportion between the sins committed during a lifetime and the resulting punishment lasting for all eternity.

Part of the problem is that as human beings we cannot conceptualize how long eternal torment really is. We measure the duration of human life in terms of 60, 70, and in few cases 80 years. But eternal torment means that after sinners have agonized in hell for a million years, their punishment has hardly begun. Such a concept is beyond human comprehension.

Some reason that if the wicked were to be punished by annihilation, “it would be a happy relief from punishment and therefore no punishment at all.”⁷² Such reasoning is appalling, to say the least. It implies that the only just punishment that God can inflict upon the unrighteous is the one that will torment them eternally. It is hard to believe that divine justice can be satisfied only by inflicting a punishment of eternal torment.

The human sense of justice regards the death penalty as the most severe form of punishment that can be imposed for capital offenses. There is no reason to believe that the divine sense of justice should be more exacting by demanding more than the actual annihilation of the unrighteous. This is not a denial of the principle of degrees of accountability which, as we shall see, determines the “gradation” of the suffering of the lost. The punitive suffering, however, will not last forever; it will terminate with the annihilation of the lost.

Gradation of the Punishment

Extinction does not exclude the possibility of degrees of punishment. The principle of degrees of accountability based on the light received is taught by Christ in several places. In Matthew 11:21-22, Christ says: “Woe to you, Chorazin! woe to you, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you” (cf. Luke 12:47-48). The inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon will be treated more leniently in the final judgment than those of Bethsaida, because they had fewer opportunities to understand the will of God for their lives.

Christ alludes to the same principle in the parable of the Faithful and Unfaithful Servants: “And that servant who knew his master’s will, but did not make ready or act according to his will, shall receive a severe beating. But he who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, shall receive a light beating. Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required; and of him to whom men commit much they will demand the more” (Luke 12:47-48). In the final judgment, each person will be measured, not against the same standard, but against his own response to the light received (see Ezek 3:18-21; 18:2-32; Luke 23:34; John 15:22; 1 Tim 1:13; James 4:17).

Millions of persons have lived and are living today without the knowledge of Christ as God’s supreme revelation and means of salvation. These people may find salvation on account of their trusting response to what they know of God. It is for God to determine how much of His will is disclosed to any person through any particular religion.

In Romans 2, Paul explains that “when Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus” (vv. 14-16).

It is because God has written certain basic moral principles into every human conscience that every person can be held accountable—“without excuse” (Rom 1:20)—in the final judgment. A pleasant surprise will be to meet among the redeemed “heathen” who never learned about the Good News of salvation through human agents. Yet they will not perish because they simply followed the light of their conscience.

The Cosmological Implications of Eternal Torment

A final objection to the traditional view of hell is that eternal torment presupposes an eternal existence of a cosmic dualism. Heaven and hell, happiness and pain, good and evil would continue to exist forever alongside each other. It is impossible to reconcile this view with the prophetic vision of the new world in which there shall be no more “mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away” (Rev 21:4). How could crying and pain be forgotten if the agony and anguish of the lost were at sight distance, as in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)?

The presence of countless millions forever suffering excruciating torment, even if it were in the camp of the unsaved, could only serve to destroy the peace and happiness of the new world. The new creation would turn out to be flawed from day one, since sinners would remain an eternal reality in God’s universe and God would never be “everything to every one” (1 Cor 15:28).

The purpose of the plan of salvation is ultimately to eradicate the presence of sin and sinners from this world. It is only if sinners, Satan, and the devils ultimately are consumed in the lake of fire and experience the extinction of the second death, that we truly can say that Christ’s redemptive mission has been an unqualified victory.

Summing up, we can say that from a cosmological perspective the traditional view of hell perpetrates a cosmic dualism that contradicts the prophetic vision of the new world where the presence of sin and sinners is forever passed away (Rev 21:4).

Conclusion.

The traditional and popular view of hell as eternal torment grew out of the Greek dualistic view of human nature, consisting of a mortal body and immortal soul. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury (1942-1944), rightly acknowledges that “If men had not imported the Greek and unbiblical notion of the natural indestructibility of the individual soul, and then read the New Testament with that already in their minds, they would have drawn from the New Testament a belief, not in everlasting torment, but in annihilation. It is the fire that is called *aeonian* [everlasting], not the life cast into it.”⁷³

For the past 150 years Seventh-day Adventists have been criticized for teaching this important biblical truth, namely, that hellfire in the Bible, does not torment the lost eternally, but consume them permanently. Today, it is encouraging to see that respected scholars and church leaders like Archbishop William Temple, acknowledging that the Adventist belief in the annihilation of the lost, is biblically correct. They are supporting the Adventist belief by challenging and abandoning the popular belief in hell as eternal torment, on the basis of Biblical, moral, judicial, and cosmological considerations.

Biblically, eternal torment negates the fundamental principle that the ultimate wages of sin is death, cessation of life, and not eternal torment. Furthermore, the rich imagery and language of destruction used throughout the Bible to portray the fate of the wicked clearly indicate that their final punishment results in annihilation and not eternal, conscious torment.

Morally, the doctrine of eternal conscious torment is incompatible with the Biblical revelation of divine love and justice. The moral intuition God has implanted within our consciences cannot justify the insatiable cruelty of a God who subjects sinners to unending torments. Such a God is like a bloodthirsty monster and not like the loving Father revealed to us by Jesus Christ.

Judicially, the doctrine of eternal torment is inconsistent with the Biblical vision of justice, which requires the penalty inflicted to be commensurate with the evil done. The notion of unlimited retaliation is unknown to the Bible. Justice could never demand a penalty of eternal pain for sins committed during a mere human lifetime, especially since such punishment accomplishes no reformatory purpose.

Cosmologically, the doctrine of eternal torment perpetuates a cosmic dualism that contradicts the prophetic vision of the new world, free from the presence of sin and sinners. If agonizing sinners were to remain an eternal reality in God’s new universe, then it hardly could be said that there shall be no more “mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away” (Rev 21:4).

We began this chapter by asking: Does the Bible support the popular belief that impenitent sinners suffer the conscious punishment of hellfire in body and soul for all eternity? Our careful investigation of the relevant Biblical texts has shown that this popular view lacks biblical support.

The Bible teaches that the wicked will be resurrected for the purpose of divine judgment. This will involve a permanent expulsion from God’s presence into a place where there will be “weeping and grinding of teeth.” After a period of conscious suffering as individually required by divine justice, the wicked will be consumed with no hope of restoration or recovery. The ultimate restoration of believers and the extinction of sinners from this world will prove that Christ’s redemptive mission has been an unqualified victory. Christ’s victory means that “the former things have passed away” (Rev 21:4), and only light, love, peace, and harmony will prevail throughout the ceaseless ages of eternity.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 4

1. John F. Walvoord, "The Literal View," in *Four Views on Hell*, William Crockett, Editor, (1992), p. 12.
2. Clark H. Pinnock, "Response to John F. Walvoord," in *Four Views on Hell*, William Crockett, Editor (1992), p. 39.
3. In his book *The Origin and History of the Doctrine of Endless Punishment*, Thomas Thayer writes: "In attempting to set out the Egyptian notions on the subject [of Hell], it is difficult to choose between the conflicting accounts of the Greek writers, Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus, Plutarch, etc, as well as of the modern interpreters of the monumental hieroglyphics. Still, with regard to the main question, they are tolerably well agreed . . . that the whole matter of judgment after death, the rewards of a good life, and the punishments of a bad life, with all the formal solemnities of trial and condemnation, originated and was perfected among the Egyptians. From them it was borrowed by the Greeks, who made such changes and additions as fitted the system to the genius and circumstances of that people." (p. 93).
4. Christopher Pitt, Translator, *Aeneid*, 1823, p. 385.
5. For a convenient listing of statements by the Early church Fathers, "The Early Church Fathers Speak on Hell," www.geocities.com/Athens/Rhodes/3543/Hell.htm
6. For an excellent survey of Augustine's view of Hell, see see George Hunsinger, "Hellfire and Damnation: Four Ancient and Modern Views," *The Scottish Journal of Theology* 51 # 4 (1998), pp. 406-434.
7. Augustine, *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love*, ed. Henry Paolucci, 1961, p. 97
8. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. Augustine, *City of God*, ed. David Knowles (1972), XXI, 23.
13. *City of God* XXI, 14.
14. *The Enchiridion*, p. 98
15. *Ibid.*, p. 95
16. Reuters, July 29, 1999.
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18. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994, 1035.
19. Richard Owen, "Pope Says Hell and Damnation Are Real and Eternal," *Timesonline*, March 28, 2007.
20. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works: Commentaries on 1 Corinthians 7, 1 Corinthians 15, Lectures on 1 Timothy* (1873), vol. 28, pp. 144-145.
21. *Luther's Works*, vol. 19, p. 75.
22. John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (1949), pp. 200-201.
23. William V. Crockett, "The Metaphorical View," in *Four Views of Hell*, ed. William Crockett, (1992), pp. 46-47.
24. Jonathan Edwards, in John Gerstner, *Jonathan Edwards on Heaven and Hell* (1980), p. 56.
25. As cited by Fred Carl Kuehner, "Heaven or Hell?" in *Fundamentals of the Faith*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (1975), p. 239.
26. John Stott and David L. Edwards, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (1988);

Philip E. Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (1989); John W. Wenham, "The Case for Conditional Immortality" in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (1992); Edward Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: The Biblical Case for Conditional Immortality* (1994); Clark Pinnock, "The Conditional View," in *Four Views on Hell* (1997); Oscar Cullman, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* (1958).

27. John H. Gerstner, *Repent or Perish* (1990).

28. J. I. Packer in *Evangelical Affirmations* (1990); Larry Dixon, *The Other Side of the Good News: Confronting the Contemporary Challenges to Jesus' Teaching on Hell* (1992); Kendall Harmon, "The Case against Conditionalism: A Response to Edward William Fudge" in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (1992); Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial: the Case for Eternal Punishment* (1995); D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (1996).

29. Robert A. Peterson, (28), pp. 200-201.

30. John F. Walvoord (note 1), p. 15.

31. Robert A. Peterson (note 28), p. 32. See also Harry Buis, *The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment* (1957), p. 13.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

33. André Lacoque, *The Book of Daniel* (1979), p. 241.

34. Emmanuel Petavel, *The Problem of Immortality* (1892), p. 323.

35. Kenneth Kantzer, "Troublesome Questions," *Christianity Today* (March 20, 1987), p. 45. Similarly, W. T. G. Shedd writes: "The strongest support of the doctrine of Endless Punishment is the teaching of Christ, the Redeemer of man. Though the doctrine is plainly taught in the Pauline Epistles, and other parts of Scripture, yet without the explicit and reiterated statements of God incarnate, it is doubtful whether so awful a truth would have had such a conspicuous place as it always has had in the creeds of Christendom. . . . Christ could not have warned men so frequently and earnestly as He did against 'the fire that never shall be quenched,' and 'the worm that dieth not,' had He known that there is no future peril to fully correspond to them" (*Dogmatic Theology* [1888], pp. 665-666).

36. Josephus, *War of the Jews* 6, 8, 5; 5, 12, 7.

37. Emphasis supplied.

38. Robert A. Peterson (note 28), p. 47.

39. John Stott and David L. Edwards, (Note 26), p. 316.

40. Emphasis supplied.

41. John Stott (note 26), p. 317.

42. 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, England, n. d.), p. 101.

43. Emphasis supplied.

44. Robert A. Peterson (note 28), p. 88. The same view is expressed by Harry Buis, who wrote: "These passages from the epistles and Revelation give evidence that the apostles follow their Master in teaching the serious alternatives of life. They teach clearly the fact of judgment, resulting in eternal life or eternal death, which is not cessation of existence, but rather an existence in which the lost experience the terrible results of sins. They teach that this existence is endless" (note 38, p. 48).

45. J. P. M. Sweet, *Revelation* (1979), p. 228.

46. Harold E. Guillebaud, *The Righteous Judge: A Study of the Biblical Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment* (Taunton, England, n. d.), p. 24.

47. John F. Walvoord (note 1), p. 23.

48. As cited by J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation, Introduction, Translation and Commentary*, The

Anchor Bible (1975), p. 393.

49. M. McNamara, *The New Testament and the Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch* (1958), p. 117.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid., p. 123.
52. Ibid.
53. Clark H. Pinnock (note 2), p.161.
54. Ibid., p. 162.
55. John Stott (note 26), pp. 319-320.
56. Ibid., pp. 314-315.
57. James D. G. Dunn, "Paul's Understanding of the Death of Jesus," in *Reconciliation and Hope: New Testament Essays on Atonement and Eschatology*, Robert Banks, Editor (1974), p. 136.
58. 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, England, n. d.), p. 103.
59. John Stott (note 26), p. 315.
60. Clark H. Pinnock (note 2), p. 147.
61. Ibid., pp. 149-150.
62. John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (1976), pp. 199, 201.
63. As cited by Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (1958), vol. 8, p. 782.
64. Ibid., p. 785.
65. Ibid., p. 786.
66. Zachary J. Hayes, "The Purgatorial View," in *Four Views on Hell*, Stanley N. Gundry, Editor (1992).
67. Reuters, July 29, 1999.
68. "Graham," *Orlando Sentinel*, April 10, 1983.
69. Billy Graham," interview with Richard Ostling, *Time* magazine, Nov. 15, 1993.
70. John Stott (note 26), pp. 318-319.
71. John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (1976), p. 201.
72. Harry Buis, "Everlasting Punishment," *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (1978), vol. 4, p. 956.
73. William Temple, *Christian Faith and Life* (1931), p. 8.

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NEWLY RELEASED DVD ALBUM CALLED ABUNDANT LIFE SEMINAR

At the request of the *World's Woman's Christian Temperance Union*, a special video taping was professionally done at Andrews University last August 8, 2007, of my powerpoint lecture on *The Christian and Alcoholic Beverages*. The lecture summarizes the highlights of my book *Wine in the Bible*. With the help of 125 powerpoint slides, I share the findings of my research which shows that the Bible clearly teaches total abstinence, and not moderation.

This lecture was delivered live at the International Convention of the *World Woman's Christian Temperance Union*, which was held in Indianapolis from September 14-16, 2007. The Grand Ball Room was packed with Temperance Leaders from different parts of the world. I received a standing ovation at the conclusion of my powerpoint presentation.

In order to make full use of the DVD disk, we video taped also my popular powerpoint lecture entitled *How to Build a Happy and Lasting Marriage*. This is one of my favorite sermon where I share the highlights of my book *The Marriage Covenant*, by presenting 10 biblical principles for building a happy and lasting marriage. I use 100 powerpoint slides to deliver this practical lecture, which has been warmly received by congregations in different parts of the world.

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- 5) **Prof. Bacchiocchi's DVD ALBUM containing 10 video powerpoint lectures on the Sabbath and Second Advent**. Some of the lectures show the documents Prof. Bacchiocchi found in Vatican libraries on the role of the papacy in changing the Sabbath to Sunday. This album contains the popular powerpoint **SABBATH/ADVENT** seminars Prof. Bacchiocchi presents in many countries.
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NEWLY RELEASED DVD OF PROF. JON PAULIEN'S LIVE SEMINAR ON *SIMPLY REVELATION*

Prof. Jon Paulien's DVD album on *SIMPLY REVELATION* was released few weeks ago. We have been **airmailing** the DVD album to church leaders, pastors, and lay Adventists in different part of the world. Several pastors have already shown the lectures to their congregations. They wrote to me saying that viewing the lectures was an enlightening experience for their members.

My wife and I viewed *Simply Revelation* on our TV on a Sabbath afternoon. Though I had already watched Prof. Paulien's lectures during the taping session, I was spellbound to hear him again offering so many refreshing insights into the most difficult book of the Bible. For me it is a thrilling experience listening to a scholar like Prof. Paulien, who knows what he is talking about.

Prof. Paulien is rightly regarded as a leading Adventist authority on the book of Revelation which he has taught at the Seminary for the past 25 years. His doctoral dissertation as well as several of his books deal specifically with the Book of Revelation.

The constant demand for Prof. Paulien's CD album with his publications and articles, led me to discuss with him the possibility of producing a live video recording of a mini Revelation Seminar, which he chose to call *Simply Revelation*. As suggested by its title, *Simply Revelation* aims to present *simply* the message of Revelation—not to read into Revelation sensational, but senseless views.

The preparation of this video recording took several months. The *Simply Revelation* seminar consists of **four one-hour live video lectures**, which have just been recorded in the studio of Andrews University. An impressive virtual studio provides the background of the lectures. Each lecture is delivered with about 50 powerpoint slides. This mini Revelation seminar will offer you and your congregation fresh insights into the Book of Revelation. Be sure to inform your pastor about the newly released *Simply Revelation*, if he is

not aware of it.

You will be pleased to know that we have placed on a separate file all the powerpoint slides and the script of the live lecture. This means that if you are a pastor or a lay member who want to use Prof. Paulien's *Simply Revelation Seminar*, you can pick and choose the powerpoint slides that you like.

The file with the powerpoint slides is placed on Prof. Paulien's CD album containing all his publications and articles. The reason is that there was no memory left on the DVD disks. In spite of my pleas, Prof. Paulien was so full of the subject that he used the full 60 minutes of each lecture, leaving no space for the slides' file.

This has been a very expensive project, both in time and money. The regular price of the DVD album is \$100.00, but you can order it now at **the introductory price of only \$50.00**. The price includes the airmailing expenses to any overseas destination.

If you have not ordered before the **CD Album with Prof. Paulien's publications**, we will be glad to add it to your DVD order for only \$20.00, instead of the regular price of \$60.00. This means that you can order **both the DVD album with Prof. Paulien's four live video lectures on *Simply Revelation* and his CD album with all his publications** and the powerpoint slides of *Simply Revelation*, for **only \$70.00**, instead of the regular price of \$160.00.

As an additional incentive, I am offering you together with Prof. Paulien's DVD/CD albums, also my own popular DVD album on *The Mark and Number of the Beast*, for an **additional \$10.00, instead of the regular price of \$100.00**. This means that you can order the **DVD and CD albums by Prof. Paulien, together with my DVD album on *The Mark and Number of the Beast*, for only \$80.00, instead of the regular price of \$260.00**.

This research on *The Mark and Number of the Beast*, was commissioned by Prof. Paulien himself. He asked me to trace historically the origin and use of the Pope's title *Vicarius Filii Dei* and of the number 666. I spent six months conducting this investigation which was professionally taped at the Andrews University Towers Auditorium. I use 200 powerpoint slides to deliver this informative two hours lecture which is warmly received by Adventist church leaders and pastors in many parts of the world. For a detailed description of this DVD album click: <http://www.biblicalperspectives.com/Beast/BeastPromo>

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NEW EDITION OF BRADFORD'S *MORE THAN A PROPHET*

The new edition Prof. Graeme Bradford's book *More than a Prophet* with 20 additional pages, was released few weeks ago. Many churches have ordered the book by the case of 30 copies for only \$150.00, that is, \$5.00 per copy, instead of the regular price of \$25.00. This book is urgently needed to restore confidence in the prophetic ministry of Ellen White by telling the truth about her divine revelations and her human limitations.

The most gratifying responses have come from former Adventist. One lady wrote: "After reading *More than a Prophet*, I am seriously reconsidering returning to the Adventist church." It is unfortunate that many Adventists have left the church, because they felt deceived about Ellen White. They could not reconcile in their mind that prophets do make mistakes. But Prof. Bradford compellingly shows that the mistakes found in the Bible or in the writings of Ellen White, do not negate the divine inspiration of their messages.

For a detailed description of *More than a Prophet*, together with the reviews and a picture of the book, click at this link: <http://www.biblicalpherspectives.com/BradfordOffer/offer.htm>

To facilitate the distribution of this timely book among your church members, we are offering you two things:

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The reason for offering a Free Album of Prof. Bradford's DVD live lecture on Ellen White, is to give your members the opportunity to enjoy the highlights of the *More than a Prophet*. After viewing the DVD, most members are eager to order the book.

Special Offer on *More than a Prophet*

ONE COPY of *More than a Prophet* for \$20.00 (instead of \$25.00), plus \$5.00 for mailing in the USA, or \$10.00 for airmailing overseas.

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THIRTY COPIES of *More than a Prophet* plus the DVD album with Prof. Bradford's live two hours lecture on Ellen White, for only \$150.00, instead of the regular price of \$850.00. The price includes the mailing in the USA. Unfortunately as of May 14, 2007, the USA Post office no longer offers surface mail service for overseas. Everything must be sent **AIRMAIL**. The cost for airmailing a case of 30 books, is \$95.00. Thus, the total cost for a case of 30 copies AIRMAILED overseas is \$245.00. The advantage is that you will receive the case within a week.

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HOW TO CONTACT THE CENTER FOR CANCER CARE

Last February 2007, I was told that I had only a few months to live, because my liver was infested with a three pounds cancer tumor that could not be removed surgically. I contacted several cancer centers, and the verdict of all the oncologists with whom I spoke, was essentially the same: You have a stage four terminal cancer that cannot be operated. We can only prolong your life of a few months with chemotherapy.

In a providential way the Lord lead me to the unique Center for Cancer Care, in Goshen, Indiana that offers clinical trials on different forms of cancer not readily available in most cancer centers. They use a combination of chemo and microspheres. After two treatments, over 80% of the cancer cells were shut down. And now over 98% of the cancer activity has been eliminated. I feel like a new man with a new lease on life.

To express my gratitude to God for His providential healing through the Center for Cancer Care in Goshen, Indiana, I decided to post the information on how you can contact the Center. Over 150 Adventists

have already contacted the Center. The Vice-President is Vladimir Radivojevic, who is a gracious and caring Adventist Christian gentleman. Feel free to contact him by phone or email. These are his addresses:

Vladimir Radivojevic MS, MBA

Vice-President

The Center for Cancer Care

200 High Park Ave.

Goshen, IN 46526

Phone: 574.535.2970 Fax: 574.535.2535

Email: vradivoj@goshenhealth.com

Websites: www.goshenhealth.com or www.cancermidwest.com

If you or someone you know has cancer, feel free to contact Vladimir. He will talk with you personally, gather your information, and place you in contact with an oncologist who can examine your situation and give you a second opinion free of charge. Vladimir told me that he wants to help patients unable to come to their Center for Cancer Care, by asking physicians to evaluate the medical records free of charge to see if the current treatments are adequate or if one of their clinical trials programs could be of special help.

UPCOMING SEMINARS FOR THE MONTHS OF OCTOBER AND NOVEMBER

Gradually I am rescheduling some of the invitations I had to cancel because of liver-cancer treatments. Here is a list of the upcoming weekend seminars for the months of October and November:

OCTOBER 12-13: SUNNYSIDE SDA CHURCH, WA

Location: 1875 East Lincoln Avenue, Sunnyside, WA 98944.

For directions and information call Pastor Larry Mays at (509) 840 1932 or (509) 837 4233 or (509) 837 6411

OCTOBER 19-20: ENGLAND: EAST HAM & STRATFORD

Location: The East Ham SDA Church worships at Bryant Street Methodist Centre, Bryant Street, Stratford, London E14 4RU.

The Stratford SDA Church worships at 58 Janson Road (off Leytonstone Road) Stratford London E15 1TE.

For directions and information, call Pastor Leslie Ackie at 01279 427 558

OCTOBER 26-27: ENGLAND, LEEDS SDA CHURCH

Location: The Leeds SDA Church is located at 169 Meanwood Road corner of Oatland Place, Leeds LS7 1JW, Great Britain.

For directions and information call Pastor Ian Sweeney, 0114 286 9965.

NOVEMBER 2-3: BIRMINGHAM CAMP HILL SDA CHURCH

Location: Camp Hill Sparkbrook, Birmingham, West Midlands B12 OJP, Great Britain.

For directions and information call Pastor Jeffeth Nicholson at 01543 360253.

NOVEMBER 16-17: WALKER MEMORIAL SDA CHURCH

Location: 1410 W. Avon Boulevard, Avon Park, Florida 33825.

For directions and information call Pastor Paul Boling at (863) 453-6641, or (863) 635-6769.

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