

A Biblical-Theological and Historical Critique of the Doctrine of Hell as an Impetus in Evangelism

J. Thad Harless¹

Introduction

Editors Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson of *Hell Under Fire*, have written that doctrinally, “hell is under fire”, bemoaning the contemporary attack by liberal scholarship upon the traditional doctrine of hell as known in historical, conservative, and evangelical theologies.² Indeed Clark Pinnock has commented that, “The doctrine once in full flower is drooping.”³ Equally as distressing, is research by Ed Stetzer suggesting that evangelistic practices seem to also be “under fire” as he has recently discovered that “61 percent of people have not shared their faith with anyone in the last 6 months while 20 percent of

¹ Thaddeus Harless., Dmin., is currently senior pastor of New Life Church in Morton, IL.

² R. Albert Mohler, “Modern Theology: The Disappearance of Hell” in *Hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment*, eds. Morgan and Peterson, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 11.

³ Clark H. Pinnock, “The Conditional View” in *Four Views on Hell* eds. Gundry and Crockett, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 136.

people rarely or never pray for the unsaved.⁴ He continues in the same research to state despondently that, “48 percent of Christians have not invited anyone to church in the last 6 months” even though “80 percent of those same individuals studied” believe that evangelism is a biblical requirement.⁵ One therefore immediately wonders if there is a correlation between the waning numbers of conservative evangelicals participating in evangelistic practices and the current eroding of the traditional doctrine of hell.

John Cheeseman, in an article entitled *Hell-A Prime Motive For Evangelism*, writes that the doctrine of hell is, “crucial to the whole subject of mission and evangelism” and believes that, “one of the reasons why Christian missions have lost their impetus in recent years is the fact that evangelical Christians have become uncertain on this very issue and this uncertainty has led to an undoubted

⁴ Ed Stetzer, *New Research: Churchgoers Believe in Sharing Faith, But Most Never Do*, <http://www.edstetzer.com/2012/08/new-research-churchgoers-belie.html> (accessed March 25, 2013).

⁵ Mohler, *Hell Under Fire*.

lessening of concern for those who don't know Christ"⁶
With equal insight Stanley Gundry and William Crockett, editors of *Four Views of Hell*, have acknowledged in this work that so disturbing is the traditional doctrine of hell that "most pastors and church members simply ignore the doctrine of final retribution, preferring to talk in vague terms about a separation of the wicked from the righteous."⁷ Douglas Groothuis in his article, *Effective Evangelism*, goes so far as to write that regarding hell, "many evangelicals are ashamed of this biblical doctrine, viewing it as a blemish to be covered up by the cosmetic of divine love."⁸ He would add that that as Christians we must, "welcome people to find eternal life in Christ, but we must also warn them of the eternal death awaiting those who reject the Gospel."⁹ Therefore, as the doctrine of hell is

⁶ John Cheeseman, "Hell-A Prime Motive for Evangelism," *CrossWay*, no. 33 (Autumn 1989).

⁷ Gundry, *Four Views on Hell*, 7.

⁸ Douglas Groothuis, "Effective Evangelism." <http://www.equip.org/PDF/DH198.pdf> (accessed, March 28)

⁹ Ibid.

understood as imminently important to evangelistic motivation, this paper will focus upon the historical understandings and current debate over the traditional doctrine of hell contra conditionalism or annihilationalism as each of these views secures its meaning from ample Scriptural warrant and are currently competing for doctrinal supremacy. This is not to assert that doctrines such as Universalism are not vying for greater acceptance, yet it is as J.I. Packer writes, “most universalists (granted, not all) concede that Universalism is not clearly taught in the Bible”.¹⁰ Therefore this paper will compare doctrines with greater Scriptural citation as opposed to conjectures predicated on larger theological schemata. As such, it is hoped that this paper will secure the truth of the traditional doctrine of hell so as to regain or encourage an evangelistic emphasis in the contemporary church.

¹⁰ J.I. Packer, *Universalism: Will Everyone Be Saved?*, in *Hell under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2004) 171.

Historically, R. Albert Mohler Jr. writes, “for over sixteen centuries... hell has been understood to be the judgment of God on sinners without faith in Christ. Hell was understood to be spatial and eternal, characterized by the most awful biblical metaphors of fire and torment.”¹¹ He further comments that,

The traditional doctrine of hell now bears the mark of *odium theologium*-a doctrine retained only by the most stalwart defenders of conservative theology, Catholic and Protestant. Its defenders are seemingly few. The doctrine is routinely dismissed as an embarrassing artifact from an ancient age-a reminder of Christianity’s rejected worldview...Based in the New Testament texts concerning hell, judgment, and the afterlife, the earliest Christian preachers and theologians understood hell [and] the early Christian evangelists and preachers called sinners to faith in Christ and warned of the sure reality of hell and the eternal punishment of the impenitent.¹²

¹¹ Mohler, *Hell Under Fire*, 16-17.

¹² *Ibid.*

Indeed, the testimony in the first half of the second century is consistent concerning the destiny of those wicked and unrepentant. William V. Crockett in his essay entitled *The Metaphorical View* (of hell) writes that, “during the time of the early Apostolic Fathers, Christians believed hell would be a place of eternal, conscious punishment.”¹³ Yet there would be a small number of dissenters of this traditional view of Hell.

The first major challenge to the traditional doctrine of Hell came from Origen (ca. A.D. 184-254), whose doctrine of *apokatastasis* promised the total and ultimate restitution of all things and all persons.¹⁴ According to author Dimitris Kyrtatas in, “*The Origins of Christian Hell*”, the church father Origen, understood hell as more a

¹³ Gundry, *Four Views on Hell*, 65.

¹⁴ Mohler, *Hell under Fire*, 17.

place of refinement than punishment.”¹⁵ Origen wrote in

Contra Celsum that,

It is not right to explain to everybody all that might be said on this subject [i.e. of purifying fire]. . . It is risky to commit to writing the explanation of these matters, because the multitudes do not require any more instruction than that punishment is to be inflicted upon sinners. It is not of advantage to go on the truths which lie behind it because there are people who are scarcely restrained by fear of everlasting punishment from the vast flood of evil and the sins that are committed in consequence of it” (*Contra Celsum* 6.25–6).¹⁶

Constable¹⁷ and Froom¹⁸, clearly overlooking Origen and misinterpreting the fathers, disclose in their research that supposedly all the apostolic fathers supported the views of conditional immortality, the understanding that immortality is God’s gift through the redemption of Jesus and that only the saved will live forever while the damned will

¹⁵ Dimitris J. Kyrtatas, “The Origins of Christian Hell,” *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions*, no. 2/3 (2009): 282-97. EBSCO host (accessed March 25,2013)

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 282-97.

¹⁷ Henry Constable, *Duration and Nature* (Tyger Valley, South Africa: Ulan Press, 2012), 167-70.

¹⁸ LeRoy Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1965), I: 757-802.

eventually exist no more. In objection of such outlandish considerations is the weight of overwhelming scholarship and church Council declarations. Consider also S.D.F Salmond as he strenuously objected to any church father beyond Origen accepting non-traditionalists conclusions writing that Constable and Froom's finds are, "either incidental statements which have to be balanced by others that are at once more definite and more continuous; or they are popular statements and simple repetitions of the terms of Scripture; or they mean that the soul is not absolutely self-subsistent, but depends for its existence and its survival on God; or they have in view only the sensitive soul as distinguished from the rational soul or responsible spirit."¹⁹ In other words, Constable and Froom have greatly taken the patristics understandings of hell out of context or else indeed do not correctly comprehend the early father's writings in their entirety. More recent scholarship agrees

¹⁹ Steward DF Salmond. *The Christian Doctrine of Immortality* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1895), 593-94.

with Salmond as John R. Sachs in *Current Eschatology: Universal Salvation and the Problem of Hell*, has clarified that early Christian theologians clearly concurred with the traditional views of eternal and everlasting punishment, although he mentions that Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa argued for some extremely mild form of *apocatastasis*, but were not condemned.²⁰ Further, to cement the patristic's ideas of hell, consider these correspondences from early church fathers:
Epistle to Diognetus (ca A.D. 138)

...when you fear the death which is real, which is kept for those that shall be condemned to the everlasting fire, which shall punish up to the end those that were delivered to it. Then you will marvel at those who endure for the sake of righteousness (10:7-8)

2 *Clement* (ca A.D. 150)

²⁰ John R. Sachs, "Current Eschatology: Universal Salvation and the Problem of Hell," *Theological Studies* 52, no. 2 (June 1991): 227. *Religion and Philosophy Collection*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 26, 2013)

Nothing shall rescue us from eternal punishment, if we neglect his commandments (6:7)

Martyrdom of Polycarp (ca. A.D. 156-160)

And the fire of their cruel torturers had no heat for them, for they set before their eyes an escape from the fire which is everlasting and is never quenched (2:3)

In addition, in the *Apocalypse of Peter*, a work belonging to the literature of the apocryphal apocalypses, there is further and explicit confirmation regarding early attestation to an eternal hell. The *Apocalypse of Peter*, written between A.D. 125 and A.D.150 is extremely valuable to the “history of hell as it is the first major Christian account of postmortem punishment outside of the New Testament” and paints a most lurid and gruesome picture of an eternal hell.²¹

Further, the famous church father Augustine (A.D. 354-430) in, *The City of God*, wrote regarding Matthew 25:46

²¹ Jan N. Bremmer, “Christian Hell: From the Apocalypse of Peter to the Apocalypse of Paul,” *Numen: International Review For The History of Religions* 56, no. 2/3 (2009): 298-325. *Religion and Philosophy Collection*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 26,2013)

usage of the word “eternal” (*aionios*) in regards to heaven and hell that,

If both are “eternal”, it follows necessarily that either both are to be taken as long-lasting but finite, or both as endless and perpetual. The phrases “eternal punishment” and “eternal life” are parallel and it would be absurd to use them in one and the same sentence to mean: “Eternal life will be infinite, while eternal punishment will have an end.” Hence, because the eternal life of the saints will be endless, the eternal punishment also, for those condemned to it, will assuredly have no end.²²

Clearly then, Origen’s teaching was markedly a rejection of the patristic consensus and the church responded in 553 at the fifth ecumenical council (Constantinople II) with a series of anathemas against Origen and his teachings. The ninth anathema against Origen in refutation of his belief on Hell states that, “If anyone says or thinks that the punishment of demons and of impious men is only temporary, and will one day have an end and that a restoration [*apokatastasis*] will take place of demons and of

²² Augustine, *City of God* (n.p.: trans Bettenson, n.d.).

impious men, let him be anathema.”²³ Thomas Oden summarizes succinctly that the definite patristic consensus concerning hell as that which, “expresses the intent of a holy God to destroy sin completely and forever. Hell says not merely a temporal no but an eternal no to sin. The rejection of evil by the holy God is like a fire that burns on, a worm that dies not.”²⁴ Therefore it can be concretely established that the patristic era prodigiously viewed hell as an eternal and retributive judgment against the devil and all unrepentative mankind. This general consensus of the early fathers was held well through the Reformation era of the church with only minimal rejections of this doctrine posed by small sects and heretics.²⁵ It is the brief examination of the two key figures of the Reformation that will now follow in further cementing the idea of hell from a distinctly

²³ “The Anathemas against Origen,” in *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church*, ed. Henry R. Percival (NPNF; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 320.

²⁴ Thomas Oden, *Systematic Theology* Vol. 3: *Life in the Spirit* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1992), 450.

²⁵ Mohler, *Hell under Fire*, 18.

Protestant viewpoint, as much theology splintered between the Catholic and Protestant church during this historic parting of ways.

The Reformation era of church history was indeed revolutionary and held, as mentioned above, to the general consensus of the early fathers within the Catholic church. Yet the views of these Protestant fathers concerning the doctrine of hell will be instructive cumulatively and so they must be reviewed briefly. Martin Luther (1483-1536), the father of the Reformation, agreed with Augustine that the future destiny of the wicked involves eternal punishment as opposed to temporal judgment.²⁶ We learn from Luther's commentary on Psalm 21 that,

The fiery oven is ignited merely by the unbearable appearance of God and endures eternally. For the Day of Judgment will not last for a moment only but will stand throughout eternity and will thereafter never come to an end. Constantly the damned will be judged, constantly they will suffer pain, and constantly

²⁶. Edward William Fudge, and Peterson, *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical & Theological Dialogue* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000). 122

they will be a fiery oven, that is, they will be tortured within by supreme distress and tribulation.²⁷

John Calvin (1509-1564), the key leader of the Reformed branch of the Reformation also recognized that Scripture uses language consistent with the eternity of hell.²⁸ In his commentary of 2 Thessalonians 1:9 he writes that the eternity of hell's sufferings corresponds to the eternity of Christ's glory in this verse. Calvin writes that, "The phrase which he adds in apposition [to Christ's eternal glory] explains the nature of punishment which he had mentioned- it is eternal punishment and death which has no end. The perpetual duration of this death is proved from the fact that its opposite is the glory of Christ. This is eternal and has no end. Hence the violent nature of that death will never cease."²⁹ Even leading conditionalists such as Edward

²⁷. Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says, 3 Vols.* (Louis: Concordia, 1959), 2:625-27.

²⁸. Edward William Fudge, and Peterson, *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical & Theological Dialogue*, 122.

²⁹. John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians, Calvin's Commentaries, Ed. D.W. Torrance and T.F. Torrance, Trans. R. Mackenzie* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 392.

Fudge understand that Calvin, more than any other, “put the Protestant stamp of approval on the traditional understanding of unending conscious torment and indestructible souls [and that]...Calvin’s views became the tradition of the overwhelming majority.”³⁰

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed the consolidation of Protestant theology as the children and grandchildren of the Reformers formalized and systematized their doctrines.³¹ However, these centuries gave rise to the first major stirrings against the traditional doctrine of hell as multitudinous currents of understanding flowed into the larger river of European thought. For example, a belief in the annihilation of the wicked became apparent among the Socinians, which earned them the commendation of Pierre Bayle, a radical French

³⁰ Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 328.

³¹ Mohler, *Hell under Fire*, 19.

polemicist.³² Bayle considered the doctrine of hell as the, “greatest scandal of our theology for philosophical minds”.³³ The Socinians, who had their origins under Fausto Socinius, argued that the character of God would not allow eternal torment for temporal sins; this simply was unjust of God in the mind of the Socinians.³⁴ However, other heretical beliefs held by the Socinians, such as their belief that the Son was not consubstantial with the Father along with the understanding that they denied the resurrection of the wicked largely curtailed their influence on the church and others except for perhaps among the upper elite.³⁵ D. P. Walker summarizes the general feeling of the more liberal leaning theologies of the seventeenth century regarding hell as enigmatic conjectures that had not

³² Ibid.

³³ Cited in D.P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell: Seventeenth Century Discussions of Eternal Torment* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), 77.

³⁴ Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, 332.

³⁵ Walker, *The Decline of Hell*, 5. *Seventeenth Century Discussions of Eternal Torment*, 5.

become concrete objections to hell such as they were to

become in the eighteenth century. He writes,

Thus people who had doubts about the eternity of hell, or who had come to disbelieve in it, refrained from publishing their doubts not only because of the personal risk involved, but also because of genuine moral scruples. In the 17th century disbelief in eternal torment seldom reached the level of a firm conviction, but at the most was a conjecture, which one might wish to be true; it was therefore understandable that one should hesitate to plunge the world into moral anarchy for the sake of only conjectural truth.³⁶

Indeed, Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) might serve as an example or a throwback of the still stalwart, yet retreating convictions of the larger population of his day concerning the doctrine of hell. Edwards, the great colonial theologian-preacher warned that,

Consider that if once you get into hell, you'll never get out. If you should unexpectedly one of these days drop in there; [there] would be no remedy. They that go there return no more. Consider how dreadful it will be to suffer such an extremity forever. It is dreadful beyond

³⁶ Ibid.

expression to suffer it half an hour. O the misery,
the tribulation and anguish that is endured.³⁷

In reflection however, if the seventeenth century gave rise to quiet conjectures over the duration of hell, the eighteenth century saw the raucous explosion of Enlightenment skepticism regarding this doctrine.

Church historian Gerald R. Cragg would comment that this century was, “secular in spirit and destructive in effect. It diffused a skepticism which gradually dissolved the intellectual and religious patterns which had governed European thought since Augustine.”³⁸ He would further write that this era was, “a deliberate challenge to accepted beliefs. The theology and ethics of the churches were subjected to a criticism more merciless than any which they had hitherto faced.”³⁹

³⁷ Jonathan Edwards, “The Torments of Hell Are Exceedingly Great” in *Sermons and Discourses, 1723-1729* ed. Kenneth P. Minkema (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol.14* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1997), 326.

³⁸ Gerald R. Cragg, *The Church and the Age of Reason, 1648-1789* (London: Penguin, 1960), 234.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 236-37.

The eighteenth century was certainly eventful as revolution swept France in Europe and the British colonies in America. Many who prided themselves as intellectuals dismissed organized religion as an authority unsuitable for a modern and enlightened age—all things in this age [must be] measured by the rule of reason.⁴⁰ Indeed, rationalism had reached its zenith in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the powers of reason were thought to be capable of understanding all that was needful and beneficial to be understood.⁴¹ Yet the enthusiasm of this century chafed over the terrible doctrine of hell as Rowell records that, “apart from anything else, [hell] was so grossly offensive to the optimism characteristic of eighteenth-century natural religion”.⁴² And so the battle between a belief in Biblical teaching and the optimism of reason

⁴⁰ Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, 333.

⁴¹ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: The Reformation to the Present Day Vol. 2* (New York: Harper Collins, 1985), 185.

⁴² Geoffrey Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians: A Study of the Nineteenth-Century Theological Controversies Concerning Eternal Punishment and the Future Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), 28-29.

sprang forth and created a great friction between religion and modern thought. Voltaire and other Enlightenment philosophers rejected Christianity outright, yet not just the doctrine of hell, but the entirety of Christian theology and the very idea of divine revelation.⁴³ However, the greatest negative doctrinal impact upon commoners, or the true beginning of the crisis of faith for the church, emerged in the pews of the nineteenth century, in the lauded Victorian era of England.

Often sentimentalized, the Victorian age was an era of great churchgoing as attendance at churches both rural and urban were at all-time highs.⁴⁴ This century saw the rise of Charles Spurgeon and the famed mega-church, the Metropolitan Tabernacle. Spurgeon would preach concerning the awful eternity of hell that,

Suffice it for me to close up by saying, that the hell of hells will be to thee poor sinner, the thought, that it is to be forever. Thou wilt look

⁴³ Mohler, *Hell under Fire*, 20.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

up there on the the throne of God, and it shall be written “forever”! When the damned jingle the burning irons of their torments, they shall say, “forever”! When they howl, echo cries “forever”!⁴⁵

However, the conservatism of Spurgeon was not shared by all Victorians. Indeed, the nineteenth century was an age of theological and social debate as Darwin championed natural selection, Marx applied dialectical philosophy to economics leading to desire for a utopian state and German higher criticism was burgeoning, having a deleterious effect upon the trustworthiness of the Bible. Therein became the Victorian “crisis of faith” regarding Christian doctrine as it was understood, and which has sense captured the interests of many modern historians. A.N. Wilson has said regarding this era that, “Perhaps only those who have known the peace of God which passes all understanding can have any conception of what was lost between a hundred and a

⁴⁵ Charles H. Spurgeon, “Paul's First Prayer” a Sermon Preached March 25, 1855, at Exeter Hall in London, *The New Park Street Pulpit* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1856), 124.

hundred and fifty years ago when the human race in Western Europe began to discard Christianity”.⁴⁶

The Victorian “crisis of faith” spread throughout the aristocracy and the educated classes, and some theologians and preachers added their voice to the calls for doctrinal reformulation as hell was the center of their attention.⁴⁷

This nineteenth century saw the emergence of the Advent and Seventh-day Adventist Church as well as the formulation of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, with each group denying either the eternal nature of suffering in Hell for the sinner or hell as a doctrine proper. Historian James Turner summarizes in a quipping fashion that the “gift” of nineteenth century theology to twentieth theology is that, “God must be a humanitarian”.⁴⁸ Hence, the concept of a humanitarian God would have grandiose repercussions upon the theological reformulations of the twentieth

⁴⁶ A.N. Wilson, *God's Funeral: A Biography of Faith and Doubt in Western Civilization* (New York: Random House, 1999), 4.

⁴⁷ Mohler, *Hell under Fire*, 21.

⁴⁸ James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1985), 71.

century deriving from the stigma of this earlier era.

Forevermore liberal theology would commend that God's love and "humanity" are His dominant attributes and therefore cringe at notions suggesting that a God of love and virtue could punish men forever in hell.

In 1989 John Stott, one of the most prominent and important evangelical leaders of the twentieth century reassessed his views of hell, creating shockwaves throughout conservative theological evangelicalism. Stott confessed, responding to a challenge from well-known Anglican and liberal theologian David Edward, that he found, "the concept [of hell] intolerable and did not understand how people can live with it without cauterizing their feelings or cracking under the strain."⁴⁹ Yet Stott sedated his emotions and insisted that he must submit his theology to Scripture and not the voice of his heart.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ David L. Edwards and John R. Stott, *Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 314.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

However, Stott would soon construct an argument for annihilationism based on language, imagery, justice and universalism and even claimed that famed that Greek scholar F.F. Bruce considered annihilationism an acceptable interpretation of the Biblical text.⁵¹

This affirmation by Stott fueled the energies of conservative theology as in 1989, during the “Deerfield Evangelical Affirmations Meeting,” sponsored by the National Association of Evangelicals and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, J.I. Packer responded to the attacks upon the traditional doctrine of hell. Packer’s paper was entitled “*Evangelicals and the Way of Salvation: New Challenges to the Gospel: Universalism, and Justification by Faith*,” in which he called Stott’s argument “flimsy special pleading”.⁵² Packer would continue and commented in this meeting that,

⁵¹ Mohler, *Hell under Fire*, 30-31.

⁵² J.I. Packer, *Evangelicals and the Way of Salvation in Evangelical Affirmations*, eds. Kenneth S. Kantzer and Carl F.H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 126.

What troubles me most here, I must confess, is the assumption of superior sensitivity by the conditionalists. Their assumption appears in the adjectives (awful, dreadful, terrible, fearful, intolerable, etc.) that they apply to the concept of eternal punishment, as if to suggest that holders of the historic view have never thought about the meaning of what they are saying...[this reflects] not superior spiritual sensitivity, but secular sentimentalism.⁵³

Yet the wave of liberal notions regarding the doctrine of hell continued as in a 1999 General Audience at the Vatican, Pope John Paul II redefined hell as, “not a punishment imposed externally by God, but the condition resulting from attitudes and actions which people adopt in this life” thereby denying that God imposes hell as a permanent punishment to the wicked.⁵⁴ However, no two authors of this century have made the case for annihilationism with more intensity than theologians Clark Pinnock and Edward Fudge.

⁵³ Ibid., 125-26.

⁵⁴ Cited in Mohler, *Hell under Fire*, 27.

Pinnock, an accomplished theologian, writes in *A Wideness in God's Mercy* that caring people, “cannot accept that God would subject anyone, even the most corrupt sinners, to unending torture in both body and soul as Augustine and Jonathan Edwards taught. If that is what hell means, many will conclude that there should not be a doctrine of hell in Christian theology.”⁵⁵ Certainly, with such outright candor in the denial of the traditional doctrine of hell by Stott and Pinnock, the twentieth century is the era in which the evangelical identity had become tenuous and traditional doctrines such as the doctrine of hell were being questioned and reformulated by many of their theologians.

Edward Fudge, another leading conditionalist, would write in his highly influential work of that century entitled, *The Fire That Consumes*, that, “Evangelicals can rejoice that, in the providence of our gracious and

⁵⁵ Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 157.

sovereign God, the recovery of a more Biblical understanding of hell is well underway”.⁵⁶ And with Fudge’s comments, theologians and churchmen can without question historically understand that the war for the traditional doctrine of hell has spilled over into the twenty-first century, the era now unfolding. Indeed, the twenty-first century is an era where conservative theology and the doctrine of hell is under fire and disintegrating in the heat of liberal argumentation.

There are primarily three views of hell, especially if one discounts the doctrine of Catholic purgatory or that the Bible is essentially mythological. Of course, there is the conservative, evangelical, traditional or classical view of hell that describes hell as the endless punishment of unrepentant sinners. There is also the annihilationalist or conditionalist view which understands that those who die apart from saving faith in Jesus Christ will one day

⁵⁶ Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, 359.

essentially cease to exist. And finally, Universalists, who hold that ultimately all human beings created by God will be saved and enter into God's rest with the number of already glorified in heaven. The following polemics will cover only a brief survey of the core Biblical-Theological arguments surrounding the traditional and conditionalist understandings of hell for reasons already written in the introduction of this work.

Theologians who insist against the Biblical notion of an eternal hell often claim that conservative convictions regarding hell stem from an ancient reliance upon the acceptance of improper, non-Biblical philosophies. Edward Fudge, a leading conditionalist as mentioned above, insists that it was Greek Platonic thought that drove the engine of the doctrine of the soul's immortality, thereby subsequently influencing the ancient church fathers, such as Augustine, to believe first in an immortal soul and then a logically

following eternal hell.⁵⁷ Indeed, if the soul is immortal then the hell for which it will reside must also be eternal.

Pinnock asserts that, “I believe that the real basis of the traditional view of the nature of hell is not the Bible’s talk of the wicked perishing but an unbiblical anthropology that is read into the text...If souls are naturally immortal, they must necessarily spend a conscious eternity somewhere and, if there is a *Gehenna* of fire, they would have to spend it alive in fiery torment.”⁵⁸ Fudge writes in furthering his views that the fathers were heavily influenced by Hellenistic thought in *The Fire That Consumes* that,

Many Christian writers of the second and third centuries wanted to show their pagan neighbors the reasonableness of the Biblical faith. They did that the same way the Jewish apologist, Philo of Alexandria, had done it long before. They wrapped their understanding of Scripture in the robes of

⁵⁷ Edward William Fudge, and Peterson, *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical & Theological Dialogue*, 185.

⁵⁸ Clark H. Pinnock, “The Conditional View” in *Four Views on Hell* eds. Gundry and Crockett, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 147.

philosophy, choosing from the vocabulary of worldly wisdom the words that sparkled and adorned it best...these apologists...zealous for their new found faith, set out to battle the pagan thinkers on their own turf...⁵⁹

Fudge quotes the father Tertullian as an example as Tertullian in explanation of the eternal soul writes, “I may use, therefore, the opinion of Plato...Every soul is immortal.”⁶⁰ However, Fudge himself admits that while most of the fathers saw the soul as contingent upon God and not inherently immortal, they viewed punishment as eternal, and were therefore in his mind inconsistent.⁶¹ However interestingly, as evidence for Fudge’s conclusion that the early fathers discernments were clouded regarding the immortality of the soul and were heavily influenced by Hellenistic thought, he quotes only one father in one paragraph within his magnum opus (*The Fire That Consumes*) regarding hell to this end. This is extremely

⁵⁹ Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, 28-30.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 30. Taken from Tertullian’s *Resurrection of the Flesh*, 3.

⁶¹ Ibid., 22.

curious bearing in mind the level of merit he concedes to this assertion and proof of evidence.

There is no escaping the conclusion, as seen from the above historical review, that early Christian writers overwhelmingly held to the view that hell's punishments would be forever. However, is this view truly derived from Platonic thought regarding the immortality of the soul as Fudge, Pinnock and other conditionalist's contend, or is it more reasonable to maintain that these views of hell derive from the Scriptures?

To answer such a question one must also consider the non-platonic ideas also held by the early patristics. Indeed, many of the father's views have firm Scriptural attestation over and against Platonic ideas. Consider the fathers views over Jesus' uniqueness as the divine son of God, the necessity of faith in Jesus Christ for salvation alone, the resurrection of the body after death, *ex nihilo* creationism, Christian millenarianism, the authority of the Old and New Testaments, the *imago dei* of the human

being, and the doctrine of the fall of man which all stem from Scriptural citation yet was strikingly absent where comparable in Platonic thought.⁶²

While it is inevitable that the early church fathers were influenced by Greek thought, wrote in Greek and some were converted from Hellenistic paganism, their anti-platonic ideas stemming from their obvious appeals to Scripture must take greater precedence over other subservient influences Hellenistic or otherwise. Indeed, should one not first consider the effects and influence of Old Testament passages such as Isaiah 66:24 and Daniel 12:1-3 along with inter-testamental Jewish understandings of hell such as seen in Ezra 4:7, and 1 Enoch 22:10-13, as primary in informing the fathers doctrine in combination with the New Testament teachings of Jesus on hell. Certainly, it is much more probable that it was the

⁶² Robert W. Yarbrough, Jesus on Hell, in *Hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment*, eds. Morgan and Peterson, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 85-86.

Scriptures and the Lord Jesus, not Plato through surreptitious historical influences that bequeathed the discomfiting doctrine of hell to the church.⁶³ Such Platonic argumentation seems to be a gasping for air in an ocean of prominent historical evidence and immense Scriptural citation.

Conditionalist's such as Fudge also relish claiming the inappropriate and incorrect translation of the Koine Greek language in the New Testament to account for the long-lasting and misleading traditional doctrine of hell as understood historically.⁶⁴ The word hell (Gr. *Gehenna*), as translated in the New Testament in passages such as Matthew 5:22-26, 29-30, is the ultimate difference between the views of traditionalists and conditionalists (cf. also Matt. 23:33). Fudge writes that, "Gerstner speaks for traditionalists in saying that it [*Gehenna*] is a 'place of

⁶³ Ibid., 87.

⁶⁴ Edward William Fudge, and Peterson, *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical & Theological Dialogue*, 37-39.

everlasting burning’... [and] I speak for conditionalists and for most other annihilationists in saying it is a ‘place of everlasting destruction’.”⁶⁵ Here then are some of Jesus’ first teachings about hell using the Greek word *Gehenna* and are key passages regarding this debate.

Matthew 5:22-26 (HCSB)

22 But I tell you, everyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Fool!’ will be subject to the Sanhedrin. But whoever says, ‘You moron!’ will be subject to hellfire. 23 So if you are offering your gift on the altar, and there you remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift. 25 Reach a settlement quickly with your adversary while you’re on the way with him, or your adversary will hand you over to the judge, the judge to the officer, and you will be thrown into prison. 26 I assure you: You will never get out of there until you have paid the last penny!

Matthew 5:29–30 (HCSB)

29 If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. For it is better that

⁶⁵ Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, 122.

you lose one of the parts of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of the parts of your body than for your whole body to go into hell!

Matthew 23:33 (HCSB)

33 “Snakes! Brood of vipers! How can you escape being condemned to hell?”

In regards to context in these verses, Preston Sprinkle aptly writes in *Erasing Hell* that the phrase being “condemned to hell” in Matthew 23:33 is reminiscent of something you would hear in a courtroom.⁶⁶ Fudge picks up on this judicial slant and writes regarding the contextual meaning of these passages and the usage of *Gehenna* that, “the debtor [in these passages] will never come out of prison until he repays his debt in full, something that is impossible, some traditionalists argue that the person who goes to hell must suffer conscious torment forever. But such reasoning is misguided”.⁶⁷ Fudge here maintains the

⁶⁶ Francis Chan and Preston Sprinkle, *Erasing Hell: What God Said about Eternity, and the Things We've Made Up* (Colorado Springs: David Cook, 2011), 76.

⁶⁷ Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 121.

argument of fellow conditionalist Harold Guillebaud towards his understanding of these verses in that, “A prisoner who never comes out of prison does not live there eternally. The slave who was delivered to the tormentors till he should pay two million pounds would not escape from them by payment, but he would assuredly die in the end: why should not the same be at least a possibility in the application?”⁶⁸ The conditionalist or annihilationist point here is that Jesus, in these passages, is threatening the loss of the total self or person (annihilation or extinction) in a hell sentence, not an unending punishment in hell.⁶⁹ Sprinkle also adds to this discussion in claiming that Jesus, in almost every passage where He mentions hell, never explicitly states that it will last forever.⁷⁰ Fudge and Pinnock would agree with Sprinkle as Fudge would

⁶⁸ Harold E. Guillebaud, *The Righteous Judge: A Study of the Biblical Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment* (Phoenix: Taunton U.K., n.d.), 21.

⁶⁹ Edward William Fudge, and Peterson, *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical & Theological Dialogue*, 43.

⁷⁰ Chan and Sprinkle, *Erasing Hell: What God Said about Eternity, and the Things We've Made Up*, 81.

augment his argument over *Gehenna* in these verses stating that it is little wonder that Jesus warned of God who can, “who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28).⁷¹

However, scholars such as Robert Yarbrough object to these conditionalist suppositions and specifically Fudge’s here as he finds that Fudge and other conditionalists are confusing the referent (the Valley of Hinnon outside of Jerusalem) and the sense (a place of extraordinary punishment prepared by God) in these verses.⁷² Yarbrough here seems to reflect that Fudge is overly reliant upon the literalness of Jesus’ use of this metaphor, not understanding that Jesus is pointing to a reality behind the metaphor.⁷³ This scholar (Yarbrough) understands that a more plausible understanding is that, “Jesus uses a despicable, disgusting, and harrowing

⁷¹ Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, 123.

⁷² Yarbrough, *Hell under Fire*, 79.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 104-5.

geographical reference familiar to him and his listeners to warn of an eschatological destiny that his listeners should seek to avoid at all costs.”⁷⁴ Yarbrough calls Fudge’s loss of self a, “feeble psychologicalization of an execrable state in comparison to which bodily mutilation and amputation is much to be preferred [and it] must be asked whether ultimate loss of consciousness can be taken seriously... [in light of] the awful outcome the Lord warns against.”⁷⁵ Yet all scholars seem to indicate that the argument over the translation of *Gehenna* must be secured by studying the cumulative context of all the Scriptures involved in describing hell, especially when hell’s duration is described with another Greek word meaning eternal (*aionios*), such as in Matthew 18:8-9; 25:46 and 2 Thessalonians 1:9.

The Meaning of Eternal (*aionios*)

Matthew 18:8–9 (HCSB)

8 If your hand or your foot causes your downfall, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be

⁷⁴ Ibid., 79.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 80.

thrown into the eternal fire. 9 And if your eye causes your downfall, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, rather than to have two eyes and be thrown into hellfire!

Matthew 25:46 (HCSB)

46 And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

2 Thessalonians 1:9 (HCSB)

9 These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction from the Lord's presence and from His glorious strength

One the major linguistic arguments made by those who stand against the traditional doctrine of hell derives from the supposed true meaning behind the Greek word *aionios*. Some maintain that it connotes that which pertains to the “age to come”. Conditionalists such as Michael Green argues that this word, “does not primarily indicate unending quantity of life or death, but ultimate quality. It means life of the age to come or ruin for the age to come.”⁷⁶ Philip Hughes, on the other hand, argues that

⁷⁶ Michael Green, *Evangelism Through the Local Church* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993), 73.

aionios can mean the permanent result of punishment rather than an ongoing eternal punishment. He writes concerning 1 Thessalonians 1:9 that, “everlasting life is existence that continues without end, and everlasting death is destruction without end, that is destruction without recall, the destruction of obliteration. Both life and death hereafter will be everlasting in the sense that both will be irreversible.”⁷⁷

However, Edward Fudge gives the most credence to the linguistic argument as he purports that *aionios* can have both a qualitative (pertaining to the age to come) or quantitative (unending in time) meaning depending on context.⁷⁸ Fudge finds the use of the word eternal here in the Matthean 18 passage as inconclusive as to meaning as the passage itself does not explain what the “eternal fire” will do to those thrown into it.⁷⁹ In fact, both Matthean

⁷⁷ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 405.

⁷⁸ Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 11-20.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 125.

passages simply state in Fudge's mind that the fire is eternal and comments nothing to the everlasting existence of those punished.⁸⁰ Pinnock offers the same sentiment in his view regarding these passages as he writes that, "Jesus does not define the nature of either of eternal life or of eternal death. He says there will be two destinies and leaves it there."⁸¹ In relation to the passage in 2 Thessalonians 1:9, conditionalists such as Fudge contend that, "Throughout Scripture, the fire that symbolizes God's holiness destroys those who do not reverently respond to it... The wicked are 'punished' with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord"⁸² In every case then, the usage of the word eternal (*aiônios*) in the above verses is descriptive of the fire, and not the continual punishment of those sent there.

Regardless, conservative scholars find that these arguments span a range from a shallow inconclusiveness to a stark lack of poor scholarship. Christopher Morgan

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Pinnock, *Four Views on Hell*, 156.

⁸² Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 11-20, 195-96.

opposes the contention of the non-traditionalist position and remarks that even if *aionios* means the age to come, how long is the age to come?⁸³ Is this coming age not an everlasting, eternal age? Morgan clarifies that since Scripture repeatedly parallels the destinies of the righteous and unrighteous it seems most tenable that hell is equally eternal (Matt. 25:31-46).⁸⁴ Further, Morgan deflates the second argument by writing that, “The biblical portrait of the punishment of the wicked is often connected to their expulsion from the glorious presence of God (2 Thess. 1:5-10). Both punishment and separation from God require conscious existence.”⁸⁵ Clearly, Morgan finds both conditionalist arguments regarding *aionios* inconclusive.

James Peterson, particularly in the case of Fudge, decries poor scholarship on his understanding of the Greek

⁸³ Christopher Morgan, *Annihilationism: Will the Unsaved Be Punished Forever?* in *Hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment*, eds. Morgan and Peterson, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004, 202.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 203.

word *aionios* in conjunction with nouns of action. Peterson laments that Fudge, “nor any conditionalists he has read, cites a single authority on linguistics...[he is] using a contrived argument to buttress his position.”⁸⁶ He goes on to write that, “conditionalists’ arguments based on the use of eternal with nouns of action leaves much to be desired. Conditionalists apparently have made up a set of categories: telic and atelic nouns. Can they cite legitimate linguistic authority for this? It appears to be a set of categories contrived to get around the Bible’s teaching of everlasting punishment in Matthew 25:46 and everlasting destruction in 2 Thessalonians 1:9.”⁸⁷ Veteran scholar and church statesmen John F. Walvoord found that the consistent placement of *aionios* alongside the duration of life of the godly lends itself to meaning “endless”.⁸⁸ Walvoord even cites respected theologian W.R. Inge’s

⁸⁶ Fudge, and Peterson, *Two Views of Hell*, 96.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁸⁸ Pinnock, *Four Views on Hell*, 24.

critical comment in *What is Hell* that, “No sound Greek scholar can pretend that *aionios* means anything less than eternal”.⁸⁹

However, perhaps theologian Preston Sprinkle concludes the argument over these passages in focusing on one passage in particular, when other passages are debatable. Sprinkle notes that Matthew 25:46 is contextually related to Matthew 25:41 citing that the “eternal punishment” of verse 46 is the “everlasting fire” of verse 41 prepared for the devil and his angels.⁹⁰ Therefore when compared with Revelation 19-20, it is certain that the punishment and the fire are everlasting as the devil and his angels are to be tormented “forever and ever”.⁹¹ In conclusion, Sprinkle, like Augustine, finds that the contrast between “eternal life” and “eternal punishment” in verse 46 is parallel, and therefore will never end.⁹² As such, it would

⁸⁹ Pinnock, *Four Views on Hell*, 6.

⁹⁰ Chan and Sprinkle, *Erasing Hell: What God Said about Eternity, and the Things We've Made Up*, 83.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*, 85.

appear that the traditionalist view of hell is the most coherent when considering the Greek words for hell (*Gehenna*) and eternal (*aiionios*).

Finally, conditionalists, such as John Stott, argue over a vocabulary of destruction in that, “It would seem strange, therefore, if people who are said to suffer destruction are in fact not destroyed; and as you put it, it is difficult to imagine a perpetually inconclusive process of perishing”⁹³ David Powys adds strongly that, “Destruction is the most common way of depicting the fate of the unrighteous within the Synoptic Gospels.”⁹⁴ However, Douglas Moo challenges the conditionalist understanding of destruction language writing that,

Definitive conclusions about the meaning of these words in each case are not easy to attain. But this much can be said: The words

⁹³ David L. Edwards and John R. W. Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (Downers grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 316.

⁹⁴ David J. Powys, *Hell: A Hard Look at a Hard Question: The Fate of the Unrighteous in New Testament Thought* (Paternoster, U.K.: Carlisle, U.K., 1998), 284.

need not mean, “destruction” in the sense of “extinction”. In fact, leaving aside for the moment judgment texts, none of the key terms usually has this meaning in the Old Testaments. Rather, they usually refer to the situation of a person or object that has lost the essence of its nature or function....The key words for “destroy” and “destruction” can also refer to land that has lost its fruitfulness (*olethros* in Ezek. 6:14; 14:16); to ointment that is poured out wastefully and to no apparent purpose (*apoleia* in Matt. 26:8; Mark 14:4); to wineskins that can no longer function because they have holes in them (*apollymi* in Matt. 9:17); to a coin that is useless because it is “lost” (*apollymi* in Luke 15:9); or to the entire world that “perishes,” as an inhabited world, in the Flood (2 Pet. 3:6). In none of these cases do the objects cease to exist; they cease to be useful or exist in their original, intended state.⁹⁵

Therefore the argument of destructive language appears strong only on the surface. Indeed, it would appear that the destructive terminology of the New Testament can at least afford the meaning of loss, ruin, or corruption rather than extinction.

⁹⁵ Douglas J. Moo, “Paul on Hell”, in *Hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment*, eds. Morgan and Peterson, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 104-5.

It would appear then that the arguments of the conditionalist regarding the Greek words translated hell (*Gehenna*) and eternal (*aionios*) along with the destructive language of the New Testament appear unconvincing. Yet when word hell (*Gehenna*) is considered in context, coupled with the information gleaned from passages utilizing the Greek word for eternal (*aionios*), the traditional doctrine of an eternal hell appears to have ascertained the upper hand. However, when judged with the additional historical understanding of the church, there appears to be no real contest between the concerted efforts and at times creative thinking of the conditionalist party. Invariably, the Scriptural, linguistic and historical attestation of the church regarding an eternal state known as hell has secured the better of the argument.

Conclusion

While there remains an intense debate in many theological halls regarding the doctrine of hell, this debate has now in some cases unfortunately spilled over into the

pew. Church members who are ill-equipped to handle certain scholarly declarations are now uncertain about the doctrine of hell and this has undoubtedly stifled their evangelistic zeal. However, it is hoped that this paper has reasonably and briefly defended the historical understanding of hell and has fairly considered the conditionalist argument, to some large degree discrediting it. The best arguments for the conditionalist doctrine of hell have been shown to be in some cases speculative, conjectural, questionable and in most cases largely inconclusive. Indeed, the lack of discernible and credible linguistic citation by the conditionalists coupled with their grasps to cite destructive language motifs or improper Hellenistic influences appear to wane in the light of the substantial evidence regarding traditional views of hell. Historically and Scripturally, the traditional view of an eternal hell seems undeniable in comparison to the conditionalist view. Therefore it is hoped that this traditional doctrine, when appropriately restored in the

lecterns and pulpits of professors and pastors alike, will rekindle the flames of evangelistic zeal and hell will indeed be under fire, not from liberal theologians, but from heavens army on earth, Christ's church.