

A LOVING CHALLENGE TO THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH

By

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Dear Colleague:

For 1500 years, most Christians have assumed as true a doctrine which...

1. *is nowhere found in the Word of God;*
2. *sprang from explicitly pagan presuppositions;*
3. *slanders the character of God and the blessed Trinity;*
4. *prevailed in Protestantism for political, not biblical, reasons; and*
5. *has been rejected by an increasing number of such faithful scholars as W. Graham Scroggie, John R.W. Stott, Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, F.F. Bruce, John W. Wenham, Dale Moody and Clark Pinnock.*

That unbiblical tradition is the notion that God will make the wicked immortal for the purpose of suffering unending conscious torment in hell.

FIVE ASSUMPTIONS OF THE TRADITIONAL VIEW

The tradition of everlasting torment, as expressed by its most able advocates, depends on five undergirding assumptions:

1. *That the OT is silent about the wicked's final end;*
2. *That the doctrine of unending conscious torment was the uniform Jewish view of Jesus' day;*
3. *That Jesus' references to Gehenna all presuppose this supposed "uniform" view;*
4. *That NT language on this subject demands unending conscious torment; and*
5. *That historic Christian orthodoxy requires unending conscious torment.*

These were my assumptions a dozen years ago, as I began a year-long research project on the subject. That investigation ultimately led me through the OT, the Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha and Dead Sea Scrolls, the NT, the apostolic fathers, the Greek and Latin fathers, the ancient creedal statements of the undivided Church, medieval and Reformation theologians, and pertinent works from then until now. It also

revealed, to my total surprise and consternation, that all five of my traditional assumptions were wrong!

The product of that work is *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*. This 500-page book examines 1,00 passages of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation, interacts with nearly 200 other works in 1,600 footnotes, and analyzes in two appendices the considerable historical influence of Augustine and Calvin on the development of the traditional doctrine.

WOULD YOU BE AS STARTLED AS I WAS TO DISCOVER THESE FACTS OF SCRIPTURE AND CHURCH HISTORY?

1. The OT utilizes some 50 Hebrew verbs and 75 figures of speech to describe the ultimate end of the wicked — and every one sounds exactly like total extinction.
2. The notion of unending conscious torment arose for the first time in anything resembling biblical literature in the non-canonical book of Judith — in a clear “twisting” or words taken straight from Isaiah.
3. By Jesus’ day, there were at least *three* “Jewish” ideas about the end of the wicked: (a) annihilation at the grave; (b) resurrection for everlasting torture; and (c) resurrection for judgment followed by total and irreversible extinction in hell.
4. When our Lord taught on this subject, he generally used Old Testament language which most naturally describes complete disintegration of the entire person in the fire of the Age to Come.
5. New Testament writers choose the word “hell” (Gehenna) to describe the fate of the lost *only* in the Gospels, *only* speaking to Jews, and *only* when addressing people familiar with the geography of Jerusalem.
6. Most often, NT authors use the words *die*, *death*, *destroy*, *destruction*, *perish* and *corruption* to describe the end of the wicked — in contexts which suggest the normal, straightforward meaning of these ordinary terms.
7. All NT expressions thought to teach eternal torment come from earlier biblical literature — where they regularly describe destruction that is irresistible, total, and which cannot be reversed.
8. No passage of Scripture teaches the inherent or natural immortality of the “soul” or of any other aspect of the human creature.
9. Although Scripture clearly affirms a resurrection of both just and unjust, the Bible nowhere says the *lost* will be raised *immortal*, as the saved will be.

10. The notion of everlasting torment appears explicitly in Christian literature for the first time in the writings of the Apologists, who expressly base it on the Platonic assumption that the soul is “immortal” and *cannot* be destroyed.

11. No creedal formulation of the undivided Church requires eternal conscious torment.

I was so shocked initially at the fruit of this research that I considered boxing it in the closet and never mentioning it again. Yet I know that I must offer this to Christian brothers and sisters for critical review.

Eight years have passed and *The Fire That Consumes* is now in its fourth printing. To this day, no one has stepped forward and shown from Scripture where it goes astray. Indeed, thoughtful evangelicals in increasing numbers have felt compelled to reject the traditional notion of unending torment because of such scriptural and historical evidence as this book presents.

The evangelical church today faces a challenge which it can no longer ignore — the challenge to prove its alleged “high view” of Scripture by putting it into practice. *The Fire That Consumes* throws down that challenge with these closing words:

“Eternal conscious torment is either true or it is not. God’s Word gives the only authoritative answers...We were reared on the traditionalist view — we accepted it because it was said to rest on the Bible. A more careful study has shown that we were mistaken in that assumption. Both the OT and NT instead clearly teach a resurrection of the wicked for divine judgment, the fearful anticipation of a consuming fire, irrevocable expulsion from God’s presence into a place where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth, such conscious suffering as the divine justice individually requires — and finally, the total, everlasting extinction of the wicked with no hope of resurrection, restoration or recovery. Now we stand on that, on the authority of the Word of God.

We have changed once and do not mind changing again, but we were evidently wrong once through lack of careful study and do not wish to repeat the same mistake. Mere assertions and denunciations will not refute the evidence presented...nor will a mere recital of ecclesiastical tradition.

This case rests finally on Scripture, Only Scripture can prove it wrong.”

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Note: *The Fire That Consumes* is now being reprinted by iUniverse Publishers and can be purchased from them at www.iuniverse.com and other online booksellers.