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Introduction to Evangelical Conditionalism

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Conditional immortality is a term that just forty years ago most evangelical Christians had never heard.[1] Today it is a familiar guest at theological discussions about human nature and destiny. It is the view that human beings are mortal, that we depend entirely on the grace of God for our existence, that eternal life is made possible only through the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, and that immortality—endless life—is the gift of God that he will bestow upon those who are saved through

1. I include those who do not spend time in the literature on historical theology, otherwise this observation about what "most" evangelicals are familiar with would not be true.

Christ, at the resurrection of the dead. It can be contrasted with a familiar story told widely in churches, a story that it has become convenient to call "traditionalism" because of its broad acceptance and respectable pedigree: that the souls of human beings live on when the mortal body gives up the ghost, to return to the body (or a new one) at the resurrection of the dead in order to be assigned its eternal home—joy in heaven or torment in hell forever.

In recent decades evangelical conditionalism was thrust into the limelight among popular evangelical books with the 1982 publication of Edward Fudge's *The Fire That Consumes*.[2] The responses to Fudge's work have ranged from delight to outrage, along with everything in between. Thirty years later the shape of evangelical discussions about eternal life and judgment has been permanently changed. One of the reasons for that change, evangelical conditionalists maintain, is that many traditionalists, never having been exposed to the case for "the other side," were simply not prepared for how mundane, simply stated, and biblically grounded that case really was, and found themselves not only taken off guard but, like Fudge, won over.

Here the case for evangelical conditionalism is summed up under four of its principle arguments: firstly the question of immortality, secondly the biblical vision of eternity, thirdly the theological explanation of the atoning death of Christ as a substitution, and finally the biblical description of the fate of the lost as destruction.

Immortality

In much of the historical literature on conditional immortality, there has been a sustained focus on the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, especially when the doctrine began to attract renewed attention from the time of the Reformation. By that time things had reached the point where the Fifth Lateran Council (1513) declared, "We do condemn and reprobate all who assert that the intelligent soul is mortal." And asserting it Christians were. For many of them (e.g., William Tyndale, Jon Frith, Martin Luther, George Wishart, Archbishop John Tillotson, Henry Layton, and many others) the central issue was the state of the dead prior to the resurrection, where rejecting the soul's immortality was synonymous with embracing the doctrine of "soul sleep," the view that death is a state

2. The book is now in its third edition.

of total unconsciousness, rather than survival in heaven, hell, or purgatory. For others, however (e.g., William Whiston, John Locke, Bishop William Warburton, and numerous since then), denying the immortality of the soul went hand in hand with recognizing that everlasting life in any shape or form was a gift of God, and the result of separation from God is the denial of that gift and final death. Eternal life in the sense of life without end is not a natural human possession. We are bereft of it because of sin, and God promises to give it to those who are united to Christ. Immortality is therefore not universal or inherent but *conditional*. God alone has immortality in himself and he will give eternal life "to them who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honor and immortality."[3] While "those who belong to Christ" at the resurrection of the dead will "put on immortality," immortality is never promised to those who reject God.[4] This is the significance of that familiar biblical promise of eternal life, and the warning that the wages of sin is death. This, surely, is the point of the Garden of Eden narrative in Genesis 2–3. This is the way in which God's people will have victory over "the final enemy," which is death.[5] Eternal life is made possible and received only through Christ. However, once the widespread doctrine of the immortality of the soul is added to a biblical theology, this picture is distorted. Now the issue is not the biblical one of *obtaining* eternal life. Everyone has eternal life! The issue now must be one of where or how that eternal life will be spent: in the bliss of heaven or the horror of hell?

Some contemporary spokespeople for the traditional view of hell distance themselves from the issue of the soul's immortality, insisting that it is not a driving force in their outlook. Robert Peterson, for example, reassured readers that

> I do not accept traditionalism because I believe in the immortality of the soul. Rather, I believe in the immortality of human beings (united in body and soul after the resurrection of the dead) because the Bible teaches that there will be "eternal punishment" for the lost and "eternal life" for the saved (Matt 25:46).[6]

The truth is, however, that like many traditionalists Dr. Peterson believes in the immortality of the soul, body or not, for he maintains that

3. Rom 2:7. See also 1 Tim 6:16.
4. 1 Cor 15:23, 53.
5. 1 Cor 15:26.
6. Fudge and Peterson, *Two Views*, 89.

the soul lives on when the body dies, entering what is frequently called the "intermediate state." That the soul will be reunited with a body at the resurrection is not, in the traditional Reformed view, what grants a person immortality, but rather a person's soul is immortal already. This is clearly taught in Peterson's own doctrinal standard (that held by Covenant Theological Seminary), the Westminster Confession of Faith:

> After God had made all other creatures, He created man, male and female, with reasonable and immortal souls . . . (Chapter 4)
>
> The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption: but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them: the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect of holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies. And the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day. (Chapter 23)

Historically, many of the proponents of the doctrine of the eternal torments of the lost—in fact those who were responsible for cementing the place of that view within Christian theology—did indeed argue from the immortality of every human soul to the doctrine of eternal torment in hell. Clement of Alexandria made the argument in approximately AD 195: "All souls are immortal, even those of the wicked, for whom it were better that they were not deathless. For, punished with the endless vengeance of quenchless fire, and not dying, it is impossible for them to have a period put to their misery."[7] But it was Augustine of Hippo, more than any other theologian of the first half millennium of Christian history, who galvanized the doctrine of the immortality of all human souls, as well as the role that this belief was to play in the doctrine of hell. How can the lost live forever in hell when immortality is the gift of God to his people? One answer was that of Marcus Minucius Felix in the third century: "That clever fire burns the limbs and restores them, wears them away and yet sustains them, just as fiery thunderbolts strike bodies but do not consume them."[8] The fire had strange properties so that it did not devour its fuel like normal fire. Augustine's solution was the same as that

7. A Post-Nicene Fragment from "The Book on the Soul."

8. Felix, Marcus Minucius, *Octavius*, chapter 35. Cited in Jürgens, *Early Fathers*, 1:110.

of Clement. The fire cannot destroy that which is immortal. Augustine argued that his opponents, those who say anything that can suffer in fire is not really immortal, are overlooking one crucial thing: "there is something which is greater than the body," namely the soul. This is his key response: "For the spirit, whose presence animates and rules the body, can both suffer pain and cannot die. Here then is something which, though it can feel pain, is immortal." Since the spirit of the living is immortal but can still suffer pain when the body suffers without being harmed, so too the soul in eternity can suffer forever but not die.[9] Thus began a mainstay for proponents of what became the traditional view of hell. William Shedd used the argument explicitly when arguing that the suffering of the age to come must be endless: "Scripture speaks of but two aeons, which cover and include the whole existence of man, and his whole duration. If, therefore, he is an immortal being, one of these must be endless."[10] Today, while retaining the fruit of this argument, proponents of the traditional view of hell increasingly distance themselves from it.

There were, however, other voices among the church fathers who did not share the stance of Clement of Alexandria and Augustine.[11] Among writers like Ignatius of Antioch, the author of the *Epistle of Barnabas*, Irenaeus of Lyons, Arnobius of Cicca, and even Athanasius the Great, modern conditionalists find a view much more like their own than like that of many Christians. In the view of these fathers—representing the earliest post-apostolic perspective, Christ came so that he could save people from the impending consequences of sin, and thereby "breathe immortality into His church" so that those within would not "perish,"[12] saying that if God did not save us and chose instead "to reward us according to our works, we should cease to be."[13] They taught that instead of living forever, the one who rejects God's kingdom in favor of other things "shall be destroyed with his works."[14] They taught Christians that we are like God's other creations in the sense that they "endure as long as God wills that they should have an existence and continuance," and that "it is

9. *City of God* 21.3.2; *NPNF* 1.2:453.

10. Shedd, *Theology*, 687.

11. Athenagorus, earlier than these two, overtly taught the immortality of the soul (and appears to be the earliest Christian writer to do so). However he did not make an argument for the doctrine of eternal torment on this basis.

12. *Ign. Eph.* 17; *ANF* 1:56.

13. *Ign. Magn.* 10; *ANF* 1:63.

14. *Barn.* 21; *ANF* 1:149.

the Father of all who imparts continuance for ever and ever on those who are saved." The one who rejects the gift of life, however, "deprives himself of continuance for ever and ever," and he "shall justly not receive from Him length of days for ever and ever."[15] This is a punishment which is eternal, but not because the lost themselves will live forever. Instead the punishment is eternal insofar as what the lost will miss out on is eternal. "That punishment falls upon them because they are destitute of all that is good. Now, good things are eternal and without end with God, and therefore the loss of these is also eternal and never-ending."[16] Among these fathers we read that a being "cannot be immortal which does suffer pain," and that those who are finally lost, regardless of whether their souls survive the death of their bodies in this world, will finally die "man's real death, this which leaves nothing behind," and "being annihilated, pass away vainly in everlasting destruction."[17]

Evangelical conditionalists share this outlook, finding in it a major theme of biblical theology. The biblical salvation history begins with the tree of life. Human sin results in a loss of access to the tree, sealing the fate of mortal humans: "For dust you are, and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:19). God engages in a soliloquy about what to do next.

> "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—" therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. (Gen 3:22–24)

The divine pronouncement is cut short. God's reticence is seen in that he will not even express the possibility of the immortality of those who are in rebellion against him. Humanity is driven from Eden with little hope in sight. Death, rather than hell, has become part of the human story, and, to borrow the phraseology of Athanasius, humanity is being undone and "the handiwork of God was in process of dissolution."[18] The first man was created when the dust of the earth and the breath of God were brought together (Gen 2:7), and just as surely as the man did not exist prior to creation, he does not exist when the spirit returns to God who gave it and the dust returns to the earth (Eccl 12:7).

15. *Against Heresies*, 2.34.3; *ANF* 1:412.
16. Ibid., 5.27.2; *ANF* 1:556.
17. *Against the Heathen* 2.14; *ANF* 6:439–40.
18. *De Inc.* 6.1; *NPNF* 2.4:39.

But immortality is not entirely out of sight, out of mind. In Scripture it is a promise that emerges from the mist, obscure at first. Proverbs 12:28 promises that "In the way of righteousness there is life; along that path is immortality" (literally *no dying*). More clearly still in Dan 12:2 the hope of resurrection to eternal life appears, where "many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."[19] The biblical doctrine of immortality emerges most fully in the New Testament, where Jesus not only affirms the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, but claimed to *be* "the resurrection and the life," and promised that all who believe in him will have eternal life, and to that end will be raised up on "the last day" (John 6:40).

What conditionalists point out, however, is that eternal life in all of its verbal expressions—and in particular when it is described in terms of "immortality"—is exclusively promised as a gift to those who are saved through Christ. Ongoing life is portrayed as lost in Adam, and recovered in Christ—but only *through* Christ. St. Paul described the grace of God as follows:

> This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. (2 Tim 1:9b–10)

Similarly, although the resurrection of the lost is mentioned a number of times in the New Testament, the contrast between their resurrection and that of the people of God is precisely the fact that while they take part in the "resurrection of judgment," it is only the people of God who will take part in the "resurrection of life" (John 5:29). In his great chapter on the resurrection (1 Cor 15), all of Paul's talk of the mortal putting on immortality falls within the context of describing the resurrection of "those who belong to Christ" (v. 23). He similarly speaks to the Romans of immortality as something sought out by those who do good: "to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life" (Rom 2:7). Although immortality is seldom mentioned by name in the New Testament, whenever it is, it is either a

19. Evangelical conditionalists are careful to point out that although this passage in Daniel is often quoted as though it described the eternal sufferings of the damned in hell, in reality it does no such thing, saying only that they will forever be held in "contempt." The same is true of many individuals who are no longer alive; Hitler, Stalin, Vlad the Impaler, and so on. These are all still held in contempt in spite of their no longer being alive to appreciate the fact.

reference to God's immortality or a reference to immortality as a gift to those who will receive it through Christ.

None of this suggests to evangelical conditionalists that those who receive eternal life will be inherently immortal in a way that implies that God would be literally incapable of ending their lives. But whether inherent or not—that distinction is not made explicit in Scripture—immortality, living forever, "continuance" forever (to use the language of Irenaeus), is something that is the gift of God.[20] This outlook contrasts strongly with the view of many theologians. Article 37 of the Belgic confession makes this explicit: "The evil ones will be convicted by the witness of their own consciences, and shall be made immortal—but only to be tormented in the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels." Similarly, when responding to evangelical conditionalist Edward Fudge who observes the biblical teaching that immortality is a gift to God's people only, Robert Peterson frankly admits that the Bible only ever explicitly attributes immortality to God and the saved. And yet, he claims that since the Bible teaches eternal torment, it must be the case that "Fudge errs when he rejects the immortality of the lost."[21] This is an issue where conditionalists set aside such claims and confessions in favor of what we see as the clearly expressed teaching of the biblical writers that immortality in any shape or form is something that is conditional. God gives it to some and not others, and as a direct consequence, those who in the end find themselves on the outside cannot and will not live forever.

20. This distinction is sometimes abused in responses to conditionalists. Christopher Morgan, for example, claims that, contrary to the conditionalists, "Satan, the beast and the false prophet are punished forever," by which he means tormented forever. He goes on, "Do they somehow have inherent immortality? Of course not. God will keep them in existence endlessly in order to punish them. Similarly, the wicked will be punished consciously forever in hell, not because they exist as immortal souls but because God will sustain them" (Morgan, "Annihilationism," 205). The innuendo is that conditionalists use an argument that depends on the claim that God is *capable* of destroying the lost in hell since they are not inherently immortal. But in the first place, as seen above, the argument from the immortality of the soul to the doctrine of eternal torment was clearly made by Augustine, a fact that many today might prefer to forget. Secondly, the conditionalists' point is not simply that God is able to destroy the lost (as though we accuse proponents of the traditional view of denying this), but rather than immortality *per se*, regardless of whether it is had inherently or simply in virtue of being sustained forever, is claimed in Scripture to be a gift to God's people that is not a universal expectation.

21. Fudge and Peterson, *Two Views*, 103.

A World Without Evil

A second biblical consideration that drives the conditionalist position is the vision of eternity spelled out by the biblical writers. "Spelled out" may be too strong a term, because the details of what eternity will be like are not spelled out, but in broad strokes Scripture does address the question. Its answer, conditionalists observe, includes the claim that all sin and all remnants of evil will be no more. There are a couple of ways to think about this. One way is to ask the Barthian line: *How much more!* How much more it would be beautiful, good, harmonious, or elegant that there is no eternal duality of good and evil. How much simpler and more pleasing it would be if evil was no more and everything that existed was good! As do many conditionalists, I agree with all of this, but that is not the argument to which evangelical conditionalists would appeal. The point is not to make a judgment about what we think would be better, but instead to appeal to biblical material describing the way things will be, whether one thinks it better or not.

The biblical writers anticipate a time when everything that exists will be united under Christ. St. Paul told the Ephesians that our own redemption is part of a wider plan, regarding which God has "made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfilment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ."[22] Using an accountant's terminology, Paul says that all the totals will be summed up, the accounts settled, and all ownership will be in Christ's name. As Lincoln observes, this is "a restoration of harmony with Christ," and even more, "Christ is the one in whom God chooses to sum up the universe, in whom he restores the harmony of the cosmos."[23]

There is a similar idea—also from St. Paul—in his first letter to Corinth.

> Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority, and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he "has put everything under his feet." . . . When he has done this,

22. Eph 1:9–10.

23. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 34.

> then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.[24]

This strong thread of Paul's thought finds anticipation among the Old Testament prophets, whose hope in the redemptive work of God in history led them to look, not for heaven rather than hell, but for a world transformed entirely, where nations say, "come and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD," where they will learn and keep his ways, and where "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea."[25]

Such a vision invites the question: What room is left for evil? It is not tucked away on the other side of creation, where sin persists, albeit contained in misery, or simply dormant yet unredeemed.[26] Creation itself will be brought into a state of sinless perfection to the praise of God's glory, and the dualistic portrait of eternity with heaven on one side and hell on the other finds no home in Scripture, as it did in the theology of Aquinas: "In order that the happiness of the saints may be more delightful to them and that they may render more copious thanks to God for it, they are allowed to see perfectly the sufferings of the damned."[27]

Isaac Watts was more succinct:

24. 1 Cor 15:24–28.

25. Isa 2:3; 11:9.

26. At this juncture there is a division of opinion among those who affirm the picture of hell as eternal torment. On the one hand are those who claim that in reality there will *never* be a world without sin, for in fact the perpetual sinful state and continual sinning of those in hell may be what justifies their eternal torment (e.g., Carson, *Gagging*, 533–34). On the other hand there are those who, apparently in harmony with St. Augustine, say that those who find themselves in hell will no longer have any ability to sin. Paul Helm adds his voice to this minority report: "Although hell is a place of sinners, there is no reason to think that it is a heaven for sinners. . . . So hell is a place of pain, but not of defiance or resistance" (Helm, *Last Things*, 114). For a focused defense of the view that there is no sin in hell, see Saville, "Hell without Sin." What the conditionalist observes here is, firstly, that by far the dominant view among traditionalists (as Helm and Saville agree) has been that sinning will not stop in hell, and secondly, that even this modified view where sinning ceases must accept that it allows *sinfulness* to continue forever (for the alternative would involve everyone being sanctified), and suffering and sorrow existing forever (an evil in the classical conception of goodness, for if there is suffering, regret, and sorrow, things are clearly less than ideal) which reduces, rather than resolves, the problem of sin in a world where Christ is "all in all."

27. *Summa Theologica*, Volume 5, Third Part, Supplement, Question 94, "Of the Relations of the Saints Towards the Damned," Article 1.

What bliss will fill the ransomed souls
When they in glory dwell
To see the sinner as he rolls
In quenchless flames of hell.[28]

In Scripture, however, there is no eternal dualism of horror and bliss, good and evil. There is no eternal plan A and plan B, there is only the question of whether we will remain a part of everything that is summed up in Christ or whether we are part of the world that is passing away with its sinful desires.[29]

Substitutionary Atonement

The person of Christ is an illustration of many of the central tenets of the Christian faith. In Christ the character of God is made known to us. In Christ the pattern of Christian sanctification is portrayed. In Christ the resurrection of the dead is both made possible and demonstrated. And, evangelical conditionalists maintain, in Christ the consequences of sin are revealed as Jesus intervened in history and took them upon himself. Jesus died for sinners.

It is true that there are several models of the atonement that deserve to be called mainstream, penal substitution—the view that Jesus was punished instead of those for whom he died—being only one of them. All such views, however, take substitution as an integral part of them. In ransom theories of the atonement (including the *Christus Victor* view currently enjoying a resurgence), Christ pays his life as a ransom for ours, leaving death and hell with no claim on those saved through Christ. In the satisfaction theory of the Western Catholic tradition, Jesus' sacrifice was accepted by the Father instead of the need for punishment.

28. Cited in Bloesch, *Last Things*, 223. If we are looking for examples that emphasize not so much the delight of the righteous as they spectate on the excruciating suffering of the lost, but simply on the eternal existence of evil and suffering, here too Watts obliges only too willingly:

There is a dreadful hell,
And everlasting pains:
There sinners must with devils dwell
In darkness, fire, and chains.

("There is Beyond the Sky" in Watts, *Divine Songs*, 20.)

29. 1 John 2:17.

The common theme in all of this, regardless of the rationale for the atonement (although perhaps especially for the penal substitutionary model), is that Christ, the sinless son of God, is part of an exchange: his life for the lives of others.

The New Testament is replete with the language of Jesus dying for sin, for sinners, and for us. Whatever else this might mean, it at least means that in Christ's passion and ultimately his death we see what comes of sin. In order to put himself in the place of sinners, "the just for the unjust" as St. Peter says, humiliation, suffering, sorrow, and even alienation from God were not enough.[30] As Edward Fudge succinctly put it, "Jesus died the sinner's death."[31] In taking human nature to himself and laying down his life, Jesus in his sacrificial death gives us a picture of what would have come to us all were it not for God's saving intervention. Especially if one is favorably disposed towards a penal substitutionary view of the atonement, but even if one is not, the death of Christ shows us what we are saved from, as Christ tasted death for us all.[32] In identifying with sinners and standing in their place, Jesus bore what they would have borne. Abandonment by God, yes. Suffering, yes. But crucially, death.

Destruction

Lastly and perhaps most clearly, evangelical conditionalists observe that Scripture uses a range of language and images to refer to the fate of humanity without salvation through Christ: punishment, darkness, fire, death, destruction, being blotted out, and so on. Without any doubt, however, the overwhelming preponderance of the clearest such language speaks of the final death and destruction of the enemies of God.

Jesus told his disciples that rather than fearing men who can kill the body, they should "be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell."[33] There is no doubt as to what it means for men to kill the

30. 1 Pet 3:18, "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God."

31. Fudge, *Fire that Consume* (2011), 179.

32. Heb 2:9, "But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone."

33. In order to compare the usage of *apollumi* (destroy) in relevantly similar contexts, we may observe that in the Synoptic Gospels whenever this verb is used in the active voice to describe what one person or agent does to another, the intended

body. Here God's power to kill the whole person in Gehenna (unhelpfully translated "hell") is affirmed by Jesus. But this is no isolated proof text. The fact is stressed often and emphatically in Scripture, and a small sample is enough to make the point. In Matt 7:13–14 the Lord warns that we should seek the narrow path that leads to life, and that the way to destruction, by contrast, is wide, and followed by many. In Matt 13:40–42, Jesus interpreted his own parable of the weeds to warn that just as weeds are destroyed in a furnace, so evildoers will be rooted out and destroyed at the end of the age.

The truth is that we are all familiar with evangelistic texts like Rom 3:23, but less often do we pause to think about the simple words they use—"the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life." Conditionalists offer the modest exhortation that we allow such texts to speak, and not subconsciously revise them so that by the time they have passed through our doctrinal filter, they say something else. Second Thessalonians 1:9 speaks of a future time, "when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power." As a final example, 2 Pet 2:6 tells us of God that "by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly." We would be hard pressed to state the conditionalist view of final punishment any clearer than this. As is said in law, *res ipsa loquitur*—the thing speaks for itself!

This evidence is not cherry-picked. This is the normal way that biblical writers spoke of the coming judgment of God, and eternal torment is not part of the picture. After surveying the overwhelming tendency of the New Testament language highlighted here, Clark Pinnock makes what must be considered a very fair observation:

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meaning is always literal killing. This pattern is universal, but seven clear examples are: Matt 2:13 (Herod's intention to kill the baby Jesus), Matt 12:14 (the Pharisees conspired on how to kill Jesus), Matt 21:41 (the vineyard owner kills the wicked tenants), Matt 27:20 (the elders and chief priests urge the people to have Barabbas released and Jesus killed), Mark 3:6 (the Pharisees plot to kill Jesus), Mark 9:22 (an unclean spirit often throws a boy into water or into a fire, trying to kill him), and Luke 6:9 (Jesus asks if it is lawful on the Sabbath to save life or kill). Similarly in Matt 10:28 when Jesus warns of God's ability to destroy both soul and body in Gehenna, the verb is active, in the Synoptics, and being used to describe the actions of one person against another.

> Our Lord spoke plainly of God's judgment as the annihilation of the wicked when he warned about God's ability to destroy body and soul in hell (Matt 10:28) . . .
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> The Apostle Paul creates the same impression when he wrote of the everlasting destruction that would come upon unrepentant sinners (2 Thess 1:9). He warned that the wicked would reap corruption (Gal. 6:8) and stated that God would destroy the wicked (1 Cor 3:17; Phil 1:28). . . . Concerning the wicked, the apostle stated plainly and concisely: "their destiny is destruction" (Phil 3:19). . . .
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> It is no different in any other New Testament book. Peter spoke of the "destruction of ungodly men" (2 Pet 3:7) and of false teachers who denied the Lord, thus bringing upon themselves "swift destruction" (2:1, 3).[34]

In light of these observations it becomes all the more egregious that so many proponents of the traditional view of hell take their view to represent anything like a "literal" interpretation of what Scripture says on the subject. Of the scant few passages that might appear to give credence to a traditional view, the contexts in which they appear are not the places one would normally expect to find important, direct teaching on the nature of the world to come—and certainly not "literal" teaching, as that term is typically used.[35] As evangelical conditionalists see it, the burden of proof demanded of the conditionalist view seems unfairly heavy, for even if conditionalists show that Scripture teaches repeatedly that the lost will die, will be destroyed, will be cut off, will be consumed and the like, our claims are dismissed as "twisting" or taking things out of context, and in the name of a more compelling case we are offered a paltry list of vague references, parables of questionable interpretation, and figurative imagery. Let Bible translator R. F. Weymouth speak for us:

> My mind fails to conceive a grosser misinterpretation of language than when the five or six strongest words which the Greek tongue possesses, signifying "destroy," or "destruction," are explained to mean maintaining an everlasting but wretched existence. *To translate black as white is nothing to this*.[36]

34. Pinnock, "Conditional View," 146.

35. Indeed the only passages of Scripture that have even the *appearance* of prolonged suffering after death for the lost are firstly the tale of Lazarus and the Rich Man in Luke 16:19–31, and secondly some highly symbolic episodes in John's visionary experience in the book of Revelation (chapters 14, 19, and 20).

36. Quoted from a letter to Edward White, in Constable, *Future Punishment*, 55.

Summary Remarks

Together, these four considerations constitute not only a serious case but a clearly *evangelical* case for conditional immortality. That there are still those who label the view "heresy" is extraordinary in light of the evidence. It is possible, of course, to argue for conditionalism—or for any other biblical or orthodox doctrine—in a manner that could not be called evangelical. To appeal to extra-biblical revelation or to require commitment to points of view that clearly fall out of the bounds of historical orthodoxy (for example, denying the bodily resurrection or the resurrection of the lost) would place an argument or the resulting conclusion outside of what could reasonably be called evangelical. In calling this case (and the resulting point of view) evangelical, we are saying that it is one that commends itself to an orthodox Christian point of view that takes the centrality of the gospel and the authority of Scripture seriously. Anyone who is familiar with the literature can be forgiven for having lost count of the times that conditionalists are said to be motivated by pity or some other kindly emotion, or that they would rather suppress the hard biblical truths than face up to them. This is clearly not what is driving these and other arguments. In addition to being undeniably evangelical, the arguments are *thematic* in nature, rather than resting on isolated proof texts. These are themes that are developed throughout Scripture as salvation history unfolds. Thirdly, the case is *perspicuous*. It rests on clear premises that are fairly easily demonstrated or falsified. It is true that at times technical details can be amplified to strengthen the case, and it is also true that many passages of Scripture are complex and require much time and effort to properly explain (a fact that many conditionalists have come to suspect is lost on proponents of the traditional view who confidently and fairly hastily point to proof texts in an apocalyptic vision in John's Revelation). Lastly, the case is *cumulative*, in that none of the arguments depend on the other, but each stands or falls independently. Even if a critic was less convinced of the soundness of one of the arguments, the others would need to be taken seriously in their own right. These four features of the case commend it to an evangelical audience.

The doctrine of conditional immortality, quite contrary to the dire claims of many of its detractors and to the expectations of many as they approach it for the first time, is a point of view that deserves to be taken seriously by anyone with a commitment to the concept of doing theology in a way that is not only systematic, but biblical.