

THE FIRE THAT CONSUMES

The Fire That Consumes

A Biblical and Historical Study
of the Doctrine of Final Punishment

Third Edition

EDWARD WILLIAM FUDGE



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This work is humbly and worshipfully dedicated

as the offering of an unworthy servant

to God's Son, my Savior,

the LORD JESUS CHRIST,

who alone is able to deliver us from the Wrath to Come.

“Where a very serious crime is punished by death
and the execution of the sentence takes only a minute,
no laws consider that minute as the measure of the punishment,
but rather the fact that the criminal is forever removed
from the community of the living.”

St. Augustine

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Foreword to Third Edition

SINCE THE PUBLICATION OF its first edition in 1982, Edward Fudge's book *The Fire that Consumes* has been the fullest and most thorough exposition and defense of the view that the fate of the unsaved will be final destruction, not (as in the traditional doctrine of hell) eternal torment. In the meantime the issue has been more widely discussed among Evangelical Christians than ever before and the view that Fudge advocates is undoubtedly now favored by more Evangelical Christians than ever before. Some prominent Evangelical leaders have endorsed it and there is a widespread sense that this is an issue on which discussion and disagreement among Evangelical Christians is entirely legitimate.

A new edition of the book is therefore amply justified, especially as Fudge's work has been frequently cited and critiqued by those who have defended the traditional doctrine. He has taken the opportunity to engage with these critics and thereby to clarify and strengthen his case at many points. He also chronicles the main developments—the growing acceptability of conditional immortality and the controversies and discussions—that have occurred since 1982.

A major strength of Fudge's work, in my view, is that he takes full account of the Old Testament and the continuity in concepts and images of divine judgment between the two testaments. It is all too easy to suppose that, because the Old Testament rarely speaks of judgment after death, it is largely irrelevant to the issue of hell. That view is too simplistic and ignores the New Testament's pervasive allusions to the Old Testament in its treatment of this, as of every other, topic. Here, as in every respect, we need a truly biblical, not a purely New Testament theology. This is not to downplay the importance of Second Temple Judaism as the immediate context within which Jesus and the New Testament writers thought and taught, for the Jewish tradition was overwhelmingly one of exegesis and interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. When New Testament writers reflect the Judaism of their time, they are engaged with it in reading and understanding the Old Testament Scriptures.

Fudge's work is very focused. He himself puts it thus: "One issue alone divides traditionalists and conditionalists: Does Scripture teach that God will make the wicked

immortal, to suffer unending conscious torment in hell? Or does the Bible teach that the wicked will finally and truly die, perish, and become extinct forever, through a destructive process that encompasses whatever degree and duration of conscious torment God might sovereignly and justly impose in each individual case?" His consistent focus on this issue is what enables him to deal so fully and thoroughly with all the relevant texts and the discussions of their interpretation. In my view, we very much also need a fully theological study of the wider contexts and implications of this particular issue within biblical theology. Especially I find it impossible to ignore its relationship to the doctrine of God. But not everything can be done at once and we can be very grateful for what Fudge has achieved.

I commend this book warmly. It is likely to remain a standard work to which everyone engaged with this issue will constantly return.

Richard Bauckham
Cambridge, England, 2011

Foreword to First Edition

WHILE THE SUBJECT OF this study by Mr. Fudge is one on which there is no unanimity among evangelical Christians, it is at the same time one on which they have often engaged in fierce polemic with one another.

If there is no unanimity here among people who are agreed in accepting the Bible as their rule of faith, it may be inferred that the biblical evidence is not unambiguous. In such a situation polemic should have no place. What is called for, rather, is the fellowship of patient Bible study. It is the fruit of such study that Mr. Fudge presents here.

All immortality except God's is derived. The Father, who has life in himself, has shared with the Son this privilege of having life in himself. All others receive life in the Son. This is true in a measure even of natural life. "In him was life, and the life was the light of mankind." But it is of spiritual and eternal life that we are now thinking.

Nor are biblical writers alone in insisting that God only has inherent immortality. Plato in the *Timaeus* points out that, if there is a morally good creator of the world, then all souls apart from himself exist by his will, even if his will decrees their immortality. It is a truism that Plato's teaching has profoundly influenced Christian anthropology. But the main difference between Plato's teaching and the biblical doctrine lies here: whereas Plato predicates immortality (albeit derived immortality) of the soul, when the New Testament writers speak of immortality in relation to human beings they predicate it of the body—of the body revived or transformed in the resurrection age.

Christian theologians chiefly disagree over the destiny in the Age to Come of those who live and die without God. The New Testament answer to this question is much less explicit than is frequently supposed. Paul is reported in Acts as declaring before Felix that he looked for "a resurrection of both the just and the unjust." But the only resurrection on which he enlarges in his letters is the resurrection of believers, viewed as their participation in the resurrection of Christ. "If we believe that Jesus died and rose again" provides a far more secure basis for the Christian hope than any theory of the innate immortality of the soul, but it throws little light on the destiny of unbelievers.

It gives me pleasure to commend Mr. Fudge's exposition of this subject. All that he has to say is worthy of careful consideration, but there is special value in those chapters where he examines the testimony of successive sections of the Holy Scriptures.

I suppose that, as the terms are defined in this work, I would be regarded as neither a traditionalist nor a conditionalist. My own understanding of the issues under discussion would be very much in line with that of C. S. Lewis. Lewis did not systematize his thoughts on the subject (and I have not done so either); Mr. Fudge would no doubt ask (and rightly so) if our exegetical foundation is secure.

"It is a fearful thing," we are assured by the writer to the Hebrews, "to fall into the hands of the living God." True—and yet into whose hands could anyone more confidently fall? King David knew how fearful a thing it was; but when it came to the crunch, he made the right choice: "Let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercy is great." Christians have the assurance, both for themselves and for others, that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ will never do anything unjust or unmerciful: he cannot deny Himself.

F. F. Bruce
Manchester, England, 1982

Foreword to Second Edition

FOR SIXTY YEARS I have believed and taught what Edward Fudge so lucidly expounds in this book, but in all these sixty years it has been difficult in Britain to get hold of any publication which sets out the case for conditional immortality in a thorough and systematic way. Now this book, first published in the United States in 1982, has become available in a British edition, which has been skillfully revised and slightly abridged by Peter Cousins.

Christians in general and evangelicals in particular have in recent years become confused about the inspiration of the Bible and it has become all too easy to let the awful doctrine of hell disappear from sight in this general confusion. Fudge believes in the inspiration of the canonical scriptures of the Old and New Testaments without reserve and has researched the whole subject with painstaking care, trying to extricate the pure doctrine of the Bible from the accretions of later centuries. Fudge's clear-headedness and fair-mindedness are apparent throughout. He rejects the notion that humans have immortality without new birth, they *gain* immortality by becoming partakers of the nature of the God "who alone has immortality." The terror of the fires of hell is that they burn up all that is unfit for heaven. God's world in the end will have no place where sinners live on unreconciled to their maker; all will be light and glory.

I believe that this book will help many to worship God more wholeheartedly and to proclaim the gospel more confidently.

John Wenham
Oxford, England, 1994

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Edward William Fudge

Abbreviations

Reference Works

- ANF* *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989.
- APOT* *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English*. I–II. Edited by R. H. Charles. Oxford: Clarendon, 1913.
- BAG* *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Edited by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich. Translated and adapted from Walter Bauer's *Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der übrigen urchristlichen Literatur*. 4th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957.
- BDT* *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*. Edited by Everett F. Harrison et al. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960.
- BEC* *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*. 3rd ed. Everett Ferguson. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987.
- BH* *Biblia Hebraica*. Edited by Rudolph Kittel. Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1937.
- CD* *A Catholic Dictionary*. Edited by Donald Attwater. 2nd ed. New York: Macmillan, 1957.
- DCB* *A Dictionary of Christian Biography, Literature, Sects, and Doctrines. Being a Continuation of The Dictionary of the Bible*. Edited by William Smith and Henry Wace. London: Murray, 1880.
- DCG* *A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*. Edited by James Hastings. 2 vols. New York: Scribner's, 1906.
- DM* *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*. Edited by H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey. New York: Macmillan, 1960.
- DRE* *A Dictionary of Religion and Ethics*. Edited by Shailer Mathews and Gerald Birney Smith. London: Waverley, 1921.
- DSS* Dead Sea Scrolls

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- EB* *Encyclopaedia Biblica*. Edited by T. K. Cheyne and J. Sutherland Black. London: Black, 1901.
- ECE* *The Englishman's Critical and Expository Bible Cyclopaedia*. Compiled and written by A. R. Fausset. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1878.
- EGT* *Expositor's Greek Testament*. Edited by W. Robertson Nicoll. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961.
- ER* *Encyclopaedia of Religion*. Edited by Vergilius Ferm. New York: Philosophical Library, 1945.
- ERE* *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*. Edited by James Hastings. New York: Scribner's, 1912.
- ERR* *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Religions*. E. Royston Pike. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1951.
- HDB* *Dictionary of the Bible*. Edited by James Hastings. 2nd ed. Revised by F. C. Grant and H. H. Rowley. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963.
- HR* *A Concordance to the Septuagint*. Edited by Edwin Hatch and Henry A. Redpath. London: Clarendon, 1879–1906. Reprinted, 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998.
- ICC* *The International Critical Commentary*
- IDB* *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. 4 vols. Edited by George Arthur Buttrick. New York and Nashville: Abingdon, 1962.
- ISBE* *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*. Chicago: Howard-Severance, 1937.
- JE* *The Jewish Encyclopedia*. Edited by Isidore Singer et al. New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1925.
- LXX* *Septuaginta*. 7th ed. 2 vols. Edited by Alfred Rahlfs. Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1966.
- M–M* *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources*. Edited by James Hope Moulton and George Milligan. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1963.
- NBD* *The New Bible Dictionary*. Edited by J. D. Douglas. Reprint. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974.
- NCE* *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1967.
- NICNT* *New International Commentary on the New Testament*
- NIDNTT* *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. Edited by Colin Brown. Translated from *Theologisches Begriffslexikon zum Neuen Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975.
- NIGTC* *New International Greek Testament Commentary*
- NSHE* *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*. Edited by Samuel Macauley Jackson. New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1911.
- NT* *New Testament*
- OT* *Old Testament*

PD	<i>The Protestant Dictionary</i> . Edited by Charles Henry Hamilton Wright and Charles Neil. London: Hodder & Staughton, 1904.
RE	<i>The Religious Encyclopaedia: or Dictionary of Biblical, Historical, Doctrinal, and Practical Theology</i> . Based on the <i>Real-Encyklopadie of Herzog, Plitt and Hauck</i> . Edited by Philip Schaff. 3rd ed. New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1891.
Str-B	<i>Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud and Midrasch</i> . Edited by Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck. München: Beck, 1928. Excursus in volume 2 on Sheol, Gehenna and the Garden of Eden.
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. Translated by G. W. Bromiley from <i>Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament</i> . Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964.
TGW	<i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament. Being Grimm's Wilke's Clavis Novi Testamenti Translated, Revised and Enlarged</i> . Translated by Joseph Henry Thayer. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963.
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
ZPBD	<i>The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by Merrill C. Tenney. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963.

PERIODICALS

<i>AngThRev</i>	<i>Anglican Theological Review</i>
<i>BQ</i>	<i>Baptist Quarterly</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>CCen</i>	<i>Christian Century</i>
<i>ChrTod</i>	<i>Christianity Today</i>
<i>CTM</i>	<i>Concordia Theological Monthly</i>
<i>CRJ</i>	<i>Christian Research Journal</i>
<i>CTJ</i>	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
<i>CTR</i>	<i>Criswell Theological Review</i>
<i>DDSR</i>	<i>Duke Divinity School Review</i>
<i>EQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>EvT</i>	<i>Evangelische Theologie</i>
<i>ExAu</i>	<i>Ex Auditu</i>
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
<i>FGB</i>	<i>Free Grace Broadcaster</i>
<i>HDSB</i>	<i>Harvard Divinity School Bulletin</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JRel</i>	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>

xx *Abbreviations*

<i>Kairos</i>	<i>Kairos: Zeitschrift Fur Religionswissenschaft und Theologie</i>
<i>LQ</i>	<i>Lutheran Quarterly</i>
<i>LQHR</i>	<i>London Quarterly and Holborn Review</i>
<i>ModCh</i>	<i>Modern Churchman</i>
<i>ModRef</i>	<i>Modern Reformation</i>
<i>NT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>RTR</i>	<i>Reformed Theological Review</i>
<i>RR</i>	<i>Reformed Review</i>
<i>RL</i>	<i>Religion in Life</i>
<i>RS</i>	<i>Religious Studies</i>
<i>RevExp</i>	<i>Review & Expositor</i>
<i>RQ</i>	<i>Restoration Quarterly</i>
<i>RR</i>	<i>Riff Review</i>
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
<i>ThTod</i>	<i>Theology Today</i>
<i>TMSJ</i>	<i>The Master's Seminary Journal</i>
<i>TrinJ</i>	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
<i>VE</i>	<i>Vetus Evangelische</i>
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>

SCRIPTURES AND OTHER ANCIENT SOURCES

<i>ASV</i>	<i>American Standard Version</i>
<i>CEV</i>	<i>Contemporary English Version</i>
<i>ESV</i>	<i>English Standard Version</i>
<i>HCSB</i>	<i>Holman Christian Standard Bible</i>
<i>KJV</i>	<i>King James Version</i>
<i>NASB</i>	<i>New American Standard Bible</i>
<i>NIV</i>	<i>New International Version</i>
<i>NLT</i>	<i>New Living Translation</i>
<i>RSV</i>	<i>Revised Standard Version</i>

SCRIPTURES

Hebrew Bible / Old Testament

Gen	Judg	Neh	Song	Hos	Nah
Exod	Ruth	Esth	Isa	Joel	Hab
Lev	1–2 Sam	Job	Jer	Amos	Zeph
Num	1–2 Kgs	Ps (<i>pl.</i> Pss)	Lam	Obad	Hag
Deut	1–2 Chr	Prov	Ezek	Jonah	Zech
Josh	Ezra	Ecc (or Qoh)	Dan	Mic	Mal

New Testament

Matt	Acts	Eph	1–2 Tim	Heb	1–2–3 John
Mark	Rom	Phil	Titus	Jas	Jude
Luke	1–2 Cor	Col	Phlm	1–2 Pet	Rev
John	Gal	1–2 Thess			

Apocrypha/deuterocanonical books

Tob	Wis	1–2 Esd	Jdt	Sir	1–2 Macc	3–4 Macc	Bar
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Old Testament Pseudepigrapha

<i>As. Mos.</i>	Assumption of Moses
CD	Damascus Document / Zadokite Fragments
<i>1 En.</i>	1 Enoch / Ethiopic Enoch
<i>2 En.</i>	2 Enoch / Slavonic Enoch
<i>Jub.</i>	Jubilees
<i>L.A.E.</i>	Life of Adam and Eve
<i>3 Macc.</i>	3 Maccabees
<i>4 Macc.</i>	4 Maccabees
<i>Pss. Sol.</i>	Psalms of Solomon
<i>Sib. Or.</i>	Sibylline Oracles
<i>T. Ash.</i>	Testament of Asher
<i>T. Benj.</i>	Testament of Benjamin
<i>T. Reu.</i>	Testament of Reuben

Apostolic Fathers

<i>Barn.</i>	Epistle of Barnabas
<i>1 Clem.</i>	First Clement
<i>2 Clem.</i>	Second Clement
<i>Did.</i>	Didache
<i>Diogn.</i>	Letter of Diognetus
<i>Ign. Eph.</i>	Ignatius' Letter to the Ephesians
<i>Ign. Magn.</i>	Ignatius' Letter to the Magnesians
<i>Ign. Phld.</i>	Ignatius' Letter to the Philadelphians
<i>Ign. Pol.</i>	Ignatius' Letter to Polycarp
<i>Ign. Smyrn.</i>	Ignatius' Letter to the Smyrneans
<i>Ign. Trall.</i>	Ignatius' Letter to the Trallians
<i>Mart. Pol.</i>	Martyrdom of Polycarp
<i>Pol. Phil.</i>	Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians

Introduction

THIS YEAR OF 2011 begins the thirtieth year since the publication of the original edition of *The Fire That Consumes*. University and seminary professors are teaching today who then were not yet born. That original edition was something of a groundbreaker. As mainline evangelicals, we were at home with the majority interpretation of hell as unending conscious torment (the “traditionalist” view), and we assumed that it was thoroughly biblical and beyond dispute.

For most of us, the understanding of hell as a place of total, everlasting destruction (the “conditionalist” view) was still completely new—as was the five-hundred-page case that *The Fire That Consumes* presented in its support. It was appropriate for the tone of that original edition to be didactic rather than argumentative.

God’s Power and Glory

That was 1982, and God’s hand had been evident in this book from the beginning. Written by an unknown author with no prestigious institutional connection, and privately published by a small and obscure Verdict Publications, the original edition of *The Fire That Consumes* nevertheless carried a commendatory foreword by the highly-respected New Testament commentator, F. F. Bruce. The second, British, edition included a second foreword by John W. Wenham of Oxford. A new foreword by Richard Bauckham crowns this third edition.

The first printing sold out in five months and the publisher turned the book over to me. Two elders in my church cosigned a bank note to finance the second printing and, in view of all the circumstances, I registered the trade name “Providential Press” for this book alone. The Evangelical Book Club chose it as an Alternate Selection, and, since 1982, our gracious and sovereign God has used *The Fire That Consumes* to help stimulate a rethinking of hell around the world.

My Weakness

The apostle Paul tells us that God sometimes uses what is foolish, weak, and despised in this world to accomplish his purposes and to glorify himself. This book provides one more

example. Six years after *The Fire That Consumes* was published, I received a doctorate in jurisprudence and began more than two decades of practicing law. When a major book defending traditionalism appeared with the title *Hell on Trial*, it seemed appropriate that at least one participant in the theological conversation should also be an attorney.

Some readers, learning of my profession but confused on the chronology, imagined a modern Simon Greenleaf and accorded me unwarranted respect. Little did they know that while researching and writing *The Fire That Consumes*, I was working as a typesetter in an Alabama print shop and serving as volunteer pastor for a thirty-person nondenominational congregation who regularly met in a renovated barn. Happily, none of those things presented any problem for God, whose providential arrangement of circumstances and timing of events accomplished results that would have been impossible through human planning, means and effort.

Feedback

Since this book's publication in 1982, at least a dozen books have been written in response, in addition to multiple Master's theses and at least two doctoral dissertations, including one at the University of Oxford.

Throughout this new edition, I interact with seventeen traditionalist authors. In addition, I welcome every opportunity to present the conditionalist case at any school or church, and to interact in person with responsible persons of good will who hold a different view. My website is www.EdwardFudge.com and my email address is Edward@EdwardFudge.com.

In the larger picture, all disputants in the present debate are on the same side. I hope always to treat all of God's image-bearers, and especially his children, with courtesy and respect. As believers, we all trust in, belong to, and seek to serve the same Lord Jesus Christ. God holds each of us accountable for how we handle the light we have been given, and for how we respond to new light that breaks forth from his holy Word.

Profession Vindicated by Action

As evangelicals, we profess commitment to a high view of Scripture. Translating that commitment into our daily work is easier said than done, especially when, as here, we start our journey entangled in centuries of Catholic and Protestant traditions. For many Christians, those traditions are reinforced by denominational or ecclesiastical confessions and by institutional statements of faith. How we work through these competing interests will depend on, demonstrate, and/or determine the sincerity of our profession and the mettle of our commitment.

Edward William Fudge
Houston, Texas
In the Year of Grace 2011

I

Rethinking Hell: Apostasy or New Reformation?

“**W**HATEVER HAPPENED TO HELL?” asks British evangelist John Blanchard.¹ “First it was there, then it wasn’t,” satirical novelist David Lodge chimes in.² “Hell disappeared,” American church historian Martin E. Marty repeats, then adds wryly, “No one noticed.”³ As a specialist in popular culture and religion, Marty should know better than most.

In the public square, fire and brimstone are definitely out of vogue. Hell still shows up in conversation often enough, but generally as an expletive rather than as a serious subject. Hell is not unique in this regard—the same can be said of Jesus Christ.

More troubling than hell’s absence from secular society is its general disappearance from many Christian pulpits. Interestingly, although nearly all evangelical pastors and teachers firmly believe that Jesus will “come to judge the living and the dead,” a considerable number of them cannot remember when they last preached or taught on the subject. Might those missing sermons reflect a deeper, widespread problem with the traditional interpretation of hell?

The Rethinking of Hell

Book titles tell the story: *Hell on Trial*⁴ and *Hell Under Fire*.⁵ A banner headline on the front of *Modern Reformation* magazine asks: “Hell: Putting the Fire Out?”⁶—a reference to the international discussion now underway among evangelical Christians. This debate

1. Blanchard, *Whatever Happened to Hell?*

2. Lodge, *Souls and Bodies*.

3. Marty, “Hell Disappeared,” 381–98.

4. Peterson, *Hell on Trial*.

5. Morgan and Peterson, *Hell Under Fire*.

6. *Modern Reformation* (May–June 2002).

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is defined more clearly by *Christianity Today's* cover story titled “Hell: Annihilation or Eternal Torment?”⁷

The worldwide restudy of the biblical doctrine of final punishment did not begin by accident or without good reason. It resulted from the writings of such respected scholars as John W. Wenham⁸ of Oxford, a major British advocate of biblical authority for over half a century and the author of the most widely-used Greek textbook for many years throughout the English-speaking world.

Similar encouragement came from F. F. Bruce,⁹ one of the most trusted New Testament commentators of the twentieth century. And we must not forget John Stott¹⁰—the noted London pastor beloved worldwide for his books, leadership in world missions, and unsurpassed preaching—who urged a fresh investigation of biblical teaching on this subject.

When leaders of this caliber call for a more serious study of hell, or even announce that they have rejected parts of the traditional view and urge others to follow suit, it is enough (borrowing a phrase from the erudite J. I. Packer) to “put the cat among the pigeons.”¹¹ Other notables include E. Earle Ellis of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Reformed Anglican visiting professor Philip E. Hughes of Westminster Seminary (and elsewhere), long-time professor Homer Hailey of the Churches of Christ, and Canadian Baptist Clark Pinnock.

Joining these very visible authors are thousands of committed and thoughtful evangelicals—pastors, teachers, professors, and other serious Bible students—who, privately or publicly, question the traditional doctrine of unending conscious torment, denounce it as an unbiblical hindrance to evangelism, or consider it an unnecessary slander against God himself.

What Is Behind the Change?

Albert H. Mohler voices the question many are now thinking: “How did a doctrine so centrally enshrined in the system of theology suffer such a wholesale abandonment?”¹²

7. *ChrTod* (Oct 23, 2000).

8. Wenham argued “The Case for Conditional Immortality,” in a paper so titled, at the Fourth Edinburgh Conference on Christian Dogmatics in 1991. In it, he described the traditional doctrine of endless torment as “a hideous and unscriptural doctrine which has been a terrible burden on the mind of the church for many centuries and a terrible blot on her presentation of the gospel.” The conference papers were published the following year as *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, and Wenham’s quote above appears on page 190. He repeats it in the introduction to his autobiography, *Facing Hell*, on page vii.

9. Bruce contributed a foreword to the original edition of *The Fire That Consumes*, in which he noted the lack of evangelical unanimity on the subject of hell and called for “the fellowship of patient Bible study.” See page vii.

10. Stott first expressed his views publicly in a debate with Anglican liberal David Edwards, published in 1988 as *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal–Evangelical Dialogue*.

11. Packer, “Evangelical Annihilationism in Review,” 38.

12. Mohler, “Modern Theology,” 16.

Mohler blames “theological compromise.”¹³ Alan W. Gomes credits a “desire for a kinder, gentler theology.”¹⁴ D. A. Carson identifies “this age of pluralism” as the cause.¹⁵ Robert A. Peterson says it reflects the fruit of the Enlightenment and the exaltation of human reason.¹⁶ From their perspective, the answers given by these prominent evangelicals, all of whom defend the traditional interpretation of hell as unending conscious torment, make perfect sense.

But what if they all are mistaken, unknowingly distracted from the real answer by centuries of tradition, human assumptions, and denominational creeds?¹⁷ What if the muting of hell is due neither to emotional weakness nor loss of gospel commitment?

What if the biblical foundations thought to support unending conscious torment are less secure than has been widely supposed? What about a growing doubt concerning the idea that God, who gave his Son to die for sinful human beings, will keep billions of those same people alive forever, only to torment them without end?¹⁸

Since publication of *The Fire That Consumes* in 1982, earnest believers throughout the world have voiced suspicions just such as these. I have spoken with evangelical university and seminary professors, and have heard from still others, who have carefully restudied all that the Bible says about the destiny of the wicked and have felt the necessity to reorder their understanding. Not infrequently, they speak of colleagues who share their views but who, for a variety of reasons, presently choose to keep those views to themselves.

Some Biblical Details That Inspire Change

The more deeply one digs into the Scriptures for understanding regarding final punishment, the clearer it becomes why many godly pastors and teachers are taking out their Bibles and restudying matters that they formerly took for granted. For example, Scripture makes it clear that God will resurrect (or transform) the redeemed unto immortality and incorruption, but Scripture never hints that the wicked will be raised either immortal or incorruptible. Instead, the Bible indicates that the wicked will be banished from God’s presence and expelled into the lake of fire, to experience the second death.

13. Ibid.

14. Gomes, “Evangelicals and the Annihilation of Hell,” 15.

15. Carson, quoted by Peterson, “Undying Worm, Unquenchable Fire,” 37.

16. Peterson, *Hell on Trial*, 120.

17. That is always a possibility. Most of the Christian Church was confused about the core doctrine of justification by grace through faith from about the time of Augustine until the Protestant Reformation—a period of more than a thousand years.

18. For non-Calvinist Christians, the moral offense is magnified by three when the traditionalist speaks from a Calvinistic perspective. Not only must the non-Calvinist hearer struggle (1) with the notion of unending conscious torment, but, as the Calvinist is conscience-bound to affirm, (2) the chief (“most ultimate”) reason why one is in hell to begin with is “God’s sovereign decision to pass by many sinners and allow them to suffer the consequences for their sins”; and (3) the only reason the sinner in hell continues to live and suffer for eternity is that God intentionally keeps that person alive for that very purpose. (Peterson, “Systematic Theology,” 164; Helm, *The Last Things*, 118, 120.) I mention this, not to be divisive, but to encourage greater understanding by those on both sides: to the non-Calvinist, that the Calvinist *must* speak from deep convictions; to the Calvinist, that the non-Calvinist *must* be horrified when that happens.

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Jesus warns of everlasting *punishment* in the age to come, and he also explains the nature of that punishment, as do Paul and John among others. It is the second *death*, the wages of sin. It is everlasting *destruction*, at the hands of God who is able to destroy both soul and body. To undergo this punishment is to *perish*—eternally and entirely, fully and forever—and to *forfeit eternal life*, the gift of God that throughout the New Testament always stands as the blessed alternative to death, destruction and perishing.

These details, and scores of others from both Testaments, provide a clearer view of the biblical hell than does the majority tradition of unending conscious torment. They represent an understanding of the divine character more fully in accord with the revelation of God revealed in Scripture and in Jesus Christ, including both his goodness and his severity. They furnish a place to stand with confidence, a position grounded firmly in Scripture, an incentive to forego timidity based on uncertainty, a boldness to declare the whole counsel of God on this important subject.

“But,” someone asks, “if the traditional doctrine of hell does not come entirely from the Bible, how did it originate and why is it almost universally held? And what exactly does the Bible teach, if not what we have always heard? These are very important questions that deserve answers. With these questions clearly in mind, let us journey together through the Scriptures and through centuries of Christian history.

My Perspective: Evangelical Christian Theist

What one learns from a study of the Bible depends largely on where one stands in relation to other things. Is she a theist, an atheist or an agnostic? If a theist, is she a Christian? If she professes to be a Christian, is she liberal, evangelical, or fundamentalist? Is he open to learn on this biblical subject, or does he suppose that the answers are already clear and settled? If he is open to study, what will be his determining authority?

Is he committed most of all to a particular Confession, to what he thinks “the church has always taught,” to philosophy and reason, or to the words of the Bible itself? If he professes the latter, does he reason from a specific truth—such as God’s love, wrath, or justice—or from an overall gathering and inductive weighing of passages on the subject from both the Old and New Testaments?

What will be the final criterion when these various standards do not point the same direction—something they do not always do. Is she willing to confess an element of mystery where she cannot find full answers—or does she then bend and stretch some scriptures to cover the gap left by others? The matter of authority is not a simple one, even to the reader with good intentions.

I am a theist, a Christian and an evangelical,¹⁹ persuaded that Scripture is the very Word of God written. For that reason I believe it is without error in anything that it

19. The term “evangelical” itself covers a spectrum of opinions regarding the proper role of tradition vis-à-vis Scripture. Certainly the opinions of our theological ancestors deserve attention, respect, and careful, prayerful, hesitant thought before being rejected—but evangelicals *say* that even those opinions are subject to critique in the light of Scripture, and to rejection when such critique warrants it. However, as Roger E. Olson documents, “[t]he present traditionalist temperament of many conservative evangelical theolo-

teaches, and that it is the only unquestionable, binding source of doctrine on this or any subject.²⁰ This is a negative statement since it eliminates anything else as an unquestionable or binding source of doctrine. It is also a positive statement since it requires me to *use* Scripture as a final authority and not simply to *praise* it for that purpose.

Such a high view of Scripture does not take away from a healthy respect for the common opinion of the universal church throughout the centuries. If someone begins to suspect that he alone has discovered a certain truth, he has good reason to doubt its validity. No uninspired speaker or writer knows anything definitive about final punishment that has not come from the Word of God.

At the same time, the church's greatest theologians and most devout believers have always realized that God can continually cause new light to break forth from the Word that has been there all the time. One of the greatest compliments that can be paid the church is that it is always reforming, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit and under the authority of the Word.

These are not mere words, but standards by which this book is to be critically measured. Not a day passed during its original research and writing, or during its subsequent revisions, without my earnest prayer for divine leading and wisdom. A number of special friends also supported that work in regular prayer.

Any child of God can ask assistance in weighing the message of uninspired authors while beseeching a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of the things God has said (Eph 1:17–18; Jas 1:5–7). This not only comforts; it creates a sense of humility and of responsibility (Jas 3:1). We must open Scripture prayerfully and handle it with care. We must then listen to it without objection or argument. It is the Word of the living God.

Standards That Easily Distract

Before we begin our exploration of Scripture and Christian history, we must acknowledge our common guide and agree to honor his authority. That guide, of course, is the Holy Spirit, who speaks truth through the canonical writings of prophets, apostles, and other holy men, now collected in Scripture. As evangelical Christians, it is very easy to claim the Bible as our authority, but fail to carry out the implications of that claim when dealing with difficult issues—especially if that means standing with the minority.

gians leads them to seek rapid closure to any theological discussion of new proposals . . . [and] to reject any innovative interpretations of Scripture . . . Since most evangelicals have always believed in the eternal suffering of the wicked, conservative evangelical theologians tend to react negatively to any suggestion of annihilationism.” Olson, *Reformed and Always Reforming*, 187. For example, the case for unending conscious torment presented by my co-author Robert A. Peterson in *Two Views of Hell* consists of an endorsement by eleven other theologians through the centuries, an appeal to ten passages of Scripture, and three rationalistic arguments drawn from various areas of systematic theology. Peterson, *Two Views of Hell*, 117–81.

20. I am a full member of the Evangelical Theological Society in good standing, having joined that organization about forty years ago. I have served as an ETS regional vice-president and have been published several times in its scholarly *Journal (JETS)*, as also in *Christianity Today*. The first edition of *The Fire That Consumes* was an Alternate Selection of the Evangelical Book Club.

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Then the tendency is to look for a way out, to grab some passing straw in an effort to escape the whirlpool from which we see no ready exit. It is easy to deceive ourselves under such circumstances. We need to be very sure, therefore, what we are excluding when we say that the Bible is our final authority.

Desires

It is always tempting to read into Scripture what we wish. The nineteenth-century Anglican archbishop, Richard Whately of Dublin, warns us not to confuse our own desires with the Bible's teaching.

In judging of the sense of Scripture, we should be careful to guard against the error of suffering our wishes to bias the mind. If indeed we had to devise a religion for ourselves, we might indulge our wishes as to what is desirable, or our conjectures, as to what seems to us in itself probable, or our judgment, as to what may seem advisable. But when we have before us "Scripture-revelations" on any subject, it is for us to endeavor to make out what it is that Scriptures teaches, and what it does not teach.²¹

Easy Answers

The desire for easy answers can also mislead our minds during difficult Bible study. Edward White, author of the nineteenth-century classic, *Life in Christ*, reminds us of this danger.

Perhaps we never ought to be more suspicious of our arguments than when they are derived from the presumed advantages of the projected conclusion. There can be no doubt that the desire for a neat and simple argument in support of a truth may dispose even able men to offer some little violence to evidence that points in the direction of complexity. What we consider neatness and simplicity is not always a characteristic of Divine working, or Divine teaching. A passion for simplicity of statement has often blinded men to facts that indicated more complexity than might at first have been supposed.²²

This danger is ever-present regarding any subject, but it hovers over a study of hell like some bird of prey. "How will this view affect evangelism?" people may ask. "Which

21. Whately, *A View of the Scripture Revelations*, 185–86. Of the four major Protestant streams since the Reformation, the Anglican has been the most open to conditionalism, followed by the Anabaptists and Lutherans, with the Calvinist tradition holding most tenaciously to the doctrine of unending conscious torment.

22. Edward White, *Life in Christ*, 293. White emphasizes the positive aspect that life is to be had only through Jesus Christ, rather than the negative aspect that contradicts the doctrine of unending conscious torment. White believed that man's soul survives bodily death in an intermediate state. His conditionalist contemporary, Henry Constable, believed that body and soul both die in the first death. Both men affirm a resurrection of good and bad, a universal judgment, and the entire destruction of body and soul in the case of those who are cast into hell. The two men demonstrate that one's view of hell does not require a certain view of temporal death or the intermediate state.

view of hell most motivates sinners to repent?”²³ These questions come to mind, but are secondary and must wait their turn. First we must ask what the Bible teaches. Only when that is settled are we ready to consider the practical implications of such teaching.

Evangelicals who profess great fidelity to Scripture have not always been careful to respect its form and manner of speaking. “Evangelical zeal for literal interpretation has too often resulted in running roughshod over those literary forms for which literal interpretation is inappropriate,” writes J. Julius Scott.²⁴ The problem is compounded, Scott continues, because “some biblical genres, such as Hebrew poetry, wisdom literature and apocalyptic, are strange to western readers.”²⁵

Private Interpretation

We also need to avoid the danger of thinking we have discovered new truth never known or taught before. The great Reformers rejected ecclesiastical tradition as having authority equal to Scripture, and so must we. But they never intended that every man should invent his own interpretation of the Bible, nor did they intend to enslave the church’s corporate interpretation to “the free-lance opinion of any one individual.”²⁶ Robert E. Webber addresses this abuse of a good principle when he exhorts: “Evangelicals should come to grips with the fact that the Bible belongs to the church. It is the living church that receives, guards, passes on, and interprets Scripture. Consequently, the modern individualistic approach to interpretation of Scripture should give way to the authority of what the church has always believed, taught, and passed down in history.”²⁷

Webber was one of a group of evangelical leaders who met in May, 1977, for a period of self-analysis, resulting in a now-classic document known as “The Chicago Call: An Appeal to Evangelicals.”²⁸ In the section, “A Call to Biblical Fidelity,” the group said: “We deplore our tendency toward individualistic interpretation of Scripture . . . Therefore we affirm that the Bible is to be interpreted in keeping with the best insights of historical and literary study, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, with respect for the historic understanding of the church. We affirm that the Scriptures, as the infallible Word of God, are the basis of authority in the church.”²⁹

23. Albert Mohler wisely warns against “watering down” biblical teaching of final judgment, however understood, as a tactic to gain more converts. (Mohler, “Modern Theology,” 40–41.) However, John Stott’s example is undeniable proof that missionary zeal does not depend upon one’s acceptance of the traditional view of hell. Brian A. Hatcher studied the relationship between one’s views of hell and missionary practice, as demonstrated by a generation of missionaries associated with the Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS) from 1845–75, and reached the same conclusion. (Hatcher, “Eternal Punishment and Christian Missions,” 39–61.)

24. Scott, “Some Problems in Hermeneutics,” 74.

25. *Ibid.*, 74–75.

26. Braun, *Whatever Happened to Hell?* 48.

27. Webber, *Common Roots*, 128.

28. The text of “The Chicago Call” is included in Webber’s *Common Roots*, quoted here and below.

29. Webber, *Common Roots*, 252–53. The text continues with a reminder of the fallibility of all human creeds and confessions: “We affirm the abiding value of the great ecumenical creeds and the Reformation

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To a church often dominated by mass-media pastors, magazine editors, parachurch organizations, and free-lance interpreters, these words carry timely wisdom, and we ought to give them careful attention. Even true prophets are subject to discerning by other spiritual people (1 Cor 14:29; 1 Thess 5:20–21), and many false prophets are in the world (1 John 4:1). How important, therefore, that we test everything by Scripture, always remembering that we are not the first to do so, and that we do not read Scripture in isolation apart from the people of God.

confessions. Since such statements are historically and culturally conditioned, however, the church today needs to express its faith afresh, without defecting from the truths apprehended in the past” (ibid., 253).