

Let's Talk About Hell

Introduction

*Healthy families talk – our disagreement as elders

A truth concerning doctrine has been passed on from our forefathers: “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity.” As we think about hell there are some essentials:

1. Every human being will face a day of judgment after death.
2. After being judged those who have rejected Christ will suffer punishment in the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:15)
3. The punishment is eternal. (Matt. 25:46)

What eternal punishment means is a non-essential that Bible believing people disagree on. Some feel it is conscious torment that continues for eternity while others believe that it is an eternal punishment in the sense that it is irreversible, but that conscious torment is a temporal punishment which eventually leads to annihilation.

*Larger discussion: 1989 J.I. Packer

“It would be wrong for differences of opinion on this matter (eventual annihilation) to lead to breaches of fellowship, though it would be a very happy thing for the Christian world if the differences could be resolved.”

In 1995 a group of British evangelicals commissioned a select group of scholars:

“We recognize that the interpretation of hell in terms of conditional immortality (eventual annihilation) is a significant minority evangelical view. Furthermore, we believe that the traditionalist-conditionalist debate on hell should be regarded as a secondary rather than a primary issue for evangelical theology. Although hell is a profoundly serious matter, we view the holding of either one of these two views of it over against the other to be neither essential in respect of Christian doctrine, nor finally definitive of what it means to be an evangelical Christian.”

I. Have we misrepresented the One we love?

You've got a really good friend from Europe. He's unique in that he is wealthy and powerful, yet also known for his gentleness. When he was in the states you traveled with him and found that he liked everyone he met; even those who hated him because of jealousy. He bluntly exposed hypocrisy whenever he saw it but never for purposes of self-promotion. He just wanted to win people to the truth.

When he went back to Europe, you stayed in touch with him. In fact, when you needed financial help he'd send you money. That time when you needed a job, he used his contacts to open up a new opportunity you hadn't even considered. While he was in the states he made other friends as

well and seemed to have the same effect on them. His friends became your friends to the point that you all felt like a family.

Recently, some of those friends have reported to you something hard to believe about your mutual friend. They maintain that he has hidden torture chambers in the mountains of Europe where he rounds up all his enemies to torture them. These very reliable people, some who know him better than you do, say that he has said this in his letters. They maintain that he rounds them up, tells them their crimes, and then makes sure they have no means to kill themselves so he can subject them to a lifetime of pain.

The fact that he has enemies does not surprise you at all because anyone who was an enemy of truth or given to manipulate or oppress would find him offensive. That he would want to see them come to justice doesn't surprise you either, because of his commitment to the truth. But would he ceaselessly torture his enemies? He often wrote in his letters to love your enemies.

Wouldn't you conclude that someone had their facts wrong? Wouldn't you investigate yourself for the sake of your friend's reputation? Wouldn't you find out if he was misquoted or misinterpreted in his letters? Wouldn't you call and ask him what the truth is? If it is true, wouldn't you want to know the extenuating circumstances that make these seemingly contradictory acts consistent with who you know your friend to be?

Yet the church has embraced the doctrine of conscious eternal torment for centuries without hardly raising an objection. When someone questions the doctrine, they are quickly labeled a heretic or at least on the edge of heresy. I want to challenge you about what is being said about your best friend, Jesus. Does He inflict eternal torment on those who initially were the object of His love? Or has He been misrepresented? I challenge you to reexamine the Scriptures; to join me as I raise the topic of hell, so you can decide for yourself what the truth is.

Heaven is real – so is hell – don't go there and help other people to not go there. "What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?" (Mark 8:36)

II. **What is Hell?**

- a. Hell, Scripture says, is the place of punishment for sin where people are sent to at the time of the final judgment. The word, "Gehenna", translated hell, is a transliteration of the Hebrew, "Valley of Hinnon," located south of Jerusalem. This valley was where 185,000 corpses of Assyrian soldiers were burned in the days of Hezekiah and became the place outside of Jerusalem that garbage was burned until consumed. This word was used by Jesus twelve times to describe the final judgment of the unredeemed.
- b. It is referred to as the lake of fire (Rev. 20:15) and sometimes as the eternal fire (Matt. 18:8). It was created by God for Satan and his angels (Matt. 25:41), yet will be the place unredeemed mankind will be sent, body and soul, although no one is there yet. It is located somewhere other than this earth because Revelation indicates that the final judgment is after earth and sky have fled from the Presence of God. It is a place of "weeping (sadness) and gnashing of teeth (anger)" (Matthew 13:42; 50) where the "worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched." (Mark 9:48 2011 NIV)
- c. Hell is not Hades or Death.

“Then I saw a great white throne and Him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from His presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” (Revelation 20:11-15)

III. Concerning Hades

- a. The Old Testament name for Hades is Sheol. Sheol is used sixty-six times and is translated “Hades” in the Greek version of the Old Testament called the Septuagint. Sheol was the place all people went to, good or bad; the wicked were punished there (Deut. 32:22), while the righteous waited there for redemption (Hosea 13:14). The sons of Korah went down alive into Sheol (Numbers 16:30); and Samuel was raised from there assuring Saul that he and his sons would join him there before that day was finished. (1Samuel 28:19)
- b. Most of our information about Hades comes from the New Testament. Vines Expository Dictionary defines Hades as, “a probable derivation from ‘hado’, signifying, ‘all receiving.’” In the story of Lazarus and the rich man (Appendix Two) we get a glimpse into this place. (Luke 16:19-31) In one region we have those who are waiting for redemption in the bosom of Abraham; in the other we have a man suffering in a “place of torment.” (16:28) A chasm is fixed there that does not allow any to go back and forth between the two regions. Jews also referred to the region where the souls of the righteous dead are held as Paradise.
- c. It was to Hades that Jesus went after He died on the cross. Acts 2:27 quoting Psalms 16:10 states: “You will not abandon Me to Hades, nor will you let Your Holy One see decay.”
- d. We learn the location of Hades from no one less than Jesus Himself. “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” (In the way the Jewish people considered days, any part of a day was considered twenty-four hours – night and day – so Jesus spending part of Friday, all day Saturday, and part of Sunday was three days and three nights by Jewish reckoning.) He said He would be in the “heart”, or, in other words, the middle of the earth. This would be consistent with the sons of Korah being swallowed down to Hades and Samuel rising up from Hades. It is also consistent with what Paul said in Ephesians 4:8-9: “Therefore it says, ‘When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives, and He gave gifts to men.’ Now this expression,

‘He ascended,’ what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth?”

- e. On His resurrection Jesus said He now held the keys of death and Hades. Rev. 1:18 “I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades.”
- f. After the resurrection, Hades continued to be a place of incarceration, but now, only for the unrighteous where they are being held until the day of final judgment, even though their punishment has already begun. 2Peter 2:9 reads: “The Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment.” The fire of Hades punishes and torments, but it does not consume those affected by its flames. (Luke 16:24)

IV. Concerning Death.

- a. Jesus also obtained the keys of death. His authority over death was proven by His resurrection. Jesus died on Passover, as the Lamb of God, but He rose on first fruits as the Promise that everyone who believes in Him will eventually receive resurrected bodies. Paul writes, “But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep.” (1Cor. 15:20) The fact the Jesus rose from the dead is evidence that we will; He is the first fruits of the coming harvest of resurrected bodies.
- b. Later in the same chapter, Paul writes: “Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality.” (1Cor. 15:51-53) First, those who have died, those who have physically perished, will be raised and the seed of that first body will be transformed into a new imperishable body like Christ’s resurrected body. Those who are alive at that time, the mortals, will in the twinkling of an eye have their bodies transformed into an immortal, imperishable body as well.
- c. But Jesus’ authority over death doesn’t just extend to the redeemed. He will also raise again the bodies of the unredeemed. John tells us that death will be forced to give up its bodies before the final judgment. They will be judged according to their works and then thrown into the lake of fire.
- d. Some must believe that their resurrected bodies are imperishable because they believe that they are to be tormented forever, and never consumed. The difficulty of this position is that Jesus, Paul, and Peter all taught that those who didn’t believe would eventually perish (John 3:16; 1Cor. 1:18; 2Peter 2:9).
- e. Those who defend eternal conscious torment aren’t usually thinking of bodies, but of souls. The idea that all souls are eternal has been widely accepted by the church but is it really the teaching of Scripture?

V. Human Beings: Eternal like God or Merely Mortal?

- a. My story and theology.
 - i. God made men and women in His own image.
 - ii. Part of being in God's image means that you are an eternal being like God.
 - iii. Because of this, the stakes of rejecting the gospel are that people will go to hell where they will be tormented for all eternity. Rejecting eternal life means being eternally alive in the wrong place.
- b. The problem I have now with this line of argument is the presupposition that being in God's image means people are eternal beings. "He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever." Genesis 3:22b The reason He gives is so they won't eat of the tree of life and "live forever." If they needed to eat of the tree of life to live forever then it means that although they were created with the capacity to live forever, it wasn't a sure thing. God left them a choice, and when they ate of the wrong tree, His heart was that they wouldn't be allowed to eat of the tree of life and live apart from Him forever.
- c. The idea that being in the image of God means that man is automatically eternal seems false to me, even though it has been traditionally taught. Paul says in 1Tim. 6:16 that God alone possesses immortality. Why do we think mankind automatically possesses it from birth?
- d. Did the early church fathers get the idea of the immortality of the soul from the Old Testament or from Greek philosophy; specifically from Plato? Does everyone already have eternal life and will either spend that life in heaven or hell; or did Jesus come to bring eternal life, and those without it will eventually perish? (John 3:16)

VI. The traditional view of the soul.

- a. Plato (429-347 BC) had taught that the soul was eternal and his influence is seen in what has become the church's traditional view of man's nature. Although the early fathers were careful not to say the soul was preexistent, as Plato did, they accepted most of his views to promote the idea that the soul outlives the body. Their theology about the soul was not based on the Old Testament, therefore, but on Greek philosophy.

- b. Tertullian, (155-222 AD) an early apologist for the faith writes: "I may use, therefore, the opinion of Plato when he declares, 'Every soul is immortal.'" (Tertullian; Resurrection of the Flesh; 3) Many later fathers followed him in this thought and eventually it became established dogma.
- c. Perhaps no one was more responsible for this than Augustine. (354-430 AD) Edward Fudge writes in The Fire that Consumes: "Augustine the philosopher speaks from the viewpoint of Plato, who took for granted the maxim that 'all souls are immortal.' Augustine accepts Plato's axiom with the common Christian qualifications that souls had a beginning because God created them." (300)
- d. However important it is to honor those who have gone before (Appendix Three), and to value how the church has traditionally interpreted Scripture, it is our responsibility to measure everything by Scripture, not by tradition, or by philosophy. This was the lesson of the Protestant Reformation, and of the Bereans who checked the Scriptures to see if what was being taught was right. (Acts 17:11) Do the Scriptures teach the immortality of the soul?
- e. Peter wrote: "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring Word of God. For all men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever. And this is the word that was preached to you." (1Peter 1:23-25) In this passage Peter quotes from Isaiah 40:6-7 which was how the Old Testament pictured man: frail, temporal, and transient unless God saved them.
- f. Here are a few references about what will eventually happen to the wicked from just the Psalms:
 - a. Psalm 37:10 "They will be no more so they cannot be found."
 - b. Psalm 37:20 "They will perish like the beauty of the fields and vanish like smoke."
 - c. Psalm 58:7 "They will vanish like water that flows away."
 - d. Psalm 68:2 "As smoke is blown away by the wind, may you blow them away; as wax melts before the fire, may the wicked perish before God."
 - e. Psalm 73:27 "Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you."
- g. Josephus, a Jewish historian who wrote late in the first century, told us that some of the Essenes, a group that existed at the time of Christ, had embraced Greek "fables" and built "on the supposition that souls are immortal" the doctrine that "bad men...suffer immortal punishment after death." He calls such beliefs, "an unavoidable bait for such as have once had

a taste for their (Greek) philosophy.” (Josephus, *War of the Jews* 2, 9, 11, cited from *Josephus Complete Works*, trans. William Whiston (Grand Rapids, 1974), p. 478.) In other words, this group of people didn’t start with what the Scriptures taught about the final state, but started with what the Greeks taught about the immortal soul. Because they embraced the immortal soul as a presupposition, eternal torment was the only option the Scripture could allow for the wicked.

- h. In the book, Erasing Hell, Francis Chan gives the traditional view of hell in a response to Rob Bell’s recent book, Love Wins, that embraces Universalism (Universalism is the idea that everyone will eventually be saved. “Love wins” concluded that in the end God’s love for people will win them all back from hell and bring them to heaven). When he writes about what the Jews of Jesus’ day believed about hell, Chan gives three points:
 - i. Hell is a place of punishment after judgment.
 - ii. Hell is described in imagery of fire and darkness, where people lament.
 - iii. Hell is a place of annihilation or never-ending punishment. (Deleting Hell; Francis Chan; 50)
- i. Some Jews in the days of Jesus, like the group of Essenes Josephus referenced, did teach never-ending punishment, but the norm was eventual annihilation.
- j. The Apostle John reflected the majority position at the time when he wrote: “The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.” (1John2:17) We have two options as mortal, corruptible, perishable people: to live for the world and eventually pass away; or to live for God and live forever. Could it be that simple? If you accept man as less than eternal, yes, but if you don’t, you are led to either universalism or the traditional doctrine of eternal torment.
- k. For five centuries and four church councils there was no official position on the nature of hell. But in the sixth century, in the Second Council of Constantinople (553 AD), a condemnation was made against Origen who taught the restoration of all things (Universalism). The relevant text comes from Anathematism IX:
 - a. “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 will take place of demons and of impious men, let him be an anathema.”
 - b. Origen, like Tertullian and many of the early fathers, believed in the immortal soul. As he contemplated the goodness of God and the sufficiency of Christ’s death, he felt that eventual restoration was a

better fit than eternal torment. Unfortunately, many today, like Rob Bell, have been driven to the same conclusion.

VII. The Traditional Doctrine of eternal torment.

- a. Jesus warned repeatedly of hell where “their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.” (Mark 9:48) He warns people that “it is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire.” (Matt. 18:8) He clearly states after dividing the sheep and the goats: “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.” (Matt. 25:46)
- b. Jesus warned repeatedly of hell where “their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.” (Mark 9:48) He warns people that “it is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire.” (Matt. 18:8) He clearly states after dividing the sheep and the goats: “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.” (Matt. 25:46)
- c. The writer of Hebrews calls “eternal judgment” one of the foundational truths of the faith. Paul warns that those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel will experience the punishment of “everlasting destruction.” Finally, and most conclusively, John says in Revelation 14:11 that those who take the mark of the beast will be “tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises forever and ever. There is no rest day or night.” (This punishment is also promised to the devil, the anti-Christ, and the false prophet in Revelation 20:10)
- d. Traditionalists argue that the word, “perish”, used in John 3:16 and in many other places about the final state of the unredeemed, does not have to mean cease to exist, but as in the case of the wineskins, can simply mean to be “ruined” for their intended purpose. Thus perishing doesn’t have to mean annihilation, it can mean that people who were created for a relationship with God have been ruined for that purpose even though they are still conscious beings.
- e. Yet the strongest argument for the position of eternal torment is that the majority of the church through the ages, both Protestant and Catholic, has maintained that this is what Scripture teaches. Is it?

VIII. Jesus and the Final Judgment

- a. Because we don’t judge God, but rather, seek to “tremble at His Word,” (Isaiah 66:2) the verses used to support eternal torment need to be taken seriously. We better not twist them to make them more tolerable for man, nor seek to change God or His judgments because of “itching ears” that want to tame God and make Him into man’s image.

- b. All of the above Scriptures and reasoning were mine for many years, so I am in great sympathy with those who feel they have to believe this way because it is the “clear truth.” The reason I’ve left this position is because of all the other Scriptures about the final judgment that need to be included before we interpret the ones quoted above. We are not supposed to make our own interpretation of the Bible but must let Scripture interpret Scripture whenever possible. Instead of projecting what we think on a particular passage (Reading what you already believe), we are supposed to take all the passages referring to a topic together and then make an interpretation that fits them all.
- c. What else did Jesus say about the state of souls at the final judgment that has caused me to change my opinion?
 - i. Destruction. In Matthew 7:13 Jesus admonishes His disciples to “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it.” He promises eternal life for those who are on the narrow road and warns of eventual destruction for those who are on the wide road. He gives a similar warning in Matthew 10:28: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” Jesus says that hell (the lake of fire) will destroy both body and soul. Paul warns the unredeemed that “they will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the Presence of the Lord.” (2Thes. 1:9) Everlasting destruction means that this destruction will never be reversed but will last for all eternity.
 - ii. Fire that consumes.
 - 1. In Matthew 13:30 Jesus is giving a parable of the final judgment and the final state of the wheat and the tares: “Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, ‘First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn.’” The picture here is of weeds being burned up and wheat being preserved. One annihilated, one saved. However weeds don’t just disappear all at once, they experience the fire before their complete destruction. Jesus says that those thrown into this fire will experience “weeping and gnashing of teeth” before being burned up. (13:42)
 - 2. The truth of this parable is stated by John the Baptist earlier in Matthew’s gospel in this way: “The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will clear His threshing floor, gathering the wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” (Matt. 3:10; 12) Notice that the fire is unquenchable, but the chaff isn’t.

Wheat is stored; chaff is burned up. The righteous come into the kingdom; the wicked are eventually annihilated.

3. In John 15:6 Jesus gives this warning to those who choose not to remain in Him: “If anyone does not remain in Me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.” Those who remain in Him are promised life; those who don’t remain will be cut off like a branch, become dry, and then be tossed into the fire. A branch doesn’t disappear in a fire all at once. First it burns and then eventually disappears completely.
 4. The writer of Hebrews says that those who don’t remain in Christ have no sacrifice left for their sins, but “only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.” (Hebrews 10:26-27) Vine’s Expository Dictionary gives the word for consume as “esthio” and defines it as: “to eat up.” To say that the fire will continually torment people yet never consume them would be a direct contradiction of what this passage of Scripture teaches.
 5. Jude 7 says that “Sodom and Gomorrah serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.” Sodom and Gomorrah were annihilated not continually tormented. 2Peter 2:6 also references this end for the ungodly: “He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly.” The ungodly are going to be burned to ashes by the eternal fire according to the word of God. Could these passages be any clearer?
- iii. Limited punishment. In Luke 12:46-48 Jesus is warning those who He has put in charge of His people that they are at greater risk of judgment if they backslide: “The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers. (This would be in the lake of fire) That servant who knows his master’s will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know it and does things deserving

punishment will be beaten with few blows.” Those who know more will be more responsible and thus will have a more severe punishment. Everyone being punished here is being treated like an unbeliever, yet neither are given eternal blows, but only a punishment fitting to the sin. Some receive, “many”, others receive, “few”, but there is no mention of eternal torment even though this is about the final judgment.

- iv. Perishing. In John 3:16, the golden text of the Bible, Jesus says: “For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Jesus said that people who didn’t believe will perish. He says twice in Luke 13 that unless people repent, they will perish. (3-4) Paul said that the cross was foolishness “to those who are perishing,” (1Cor. 1:18) and Peter says about blasphemers: “like beasts they too will perish.” (2Peter 2:12) Paul says that believers will be raised with an imperishable body (1Cor. 15:51-54). For eternal torment to be true the bodies of resurrected unbelievers would also have to be imperishable but how could they be when Jesus, Paul, and Peter told us they would perish? *We grant the wineskin argument but it’s used 92 times. John 6 food that perishes.
- v. The main word Jesus uses for the ultimate fate of the unredeemed is death.
 1. He is the Resurrection and the Life, He told us, and “he who believes in Me will live, even though he dies.” (John 11:25) Will those who have not believed in Him live forever in hell, or will they eventually die?
 2. John writes: “Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them.” The first resurrection is the resurrection of the righteous where those who have died are bodily raised imperishable and those who are still alive are changed from mortal to immortal in the twinkling of an eye. The second resurrection, which happens after the millennium, concerns the unredeemed. Death will give up its bodies, Hades will give up its souls and the unredeemed will be judged out of the books that recorded their deeds in life.
 3. They will then be cast into the lake of fire which is called “the second death.” Will they live forever in the lake of fire or will they

eventually die? In the first death their bodies die but their souls live on in Hades. In the second death, Jesus said, both body and soul will be destroyed. The distinction between the first and the second death is that in the second death both body and soul will die in the lake of fire.

- d. To believe in eternal torment one needs to believe that destroy, means something other than destroy; perish means something other than perish; consume means something other than consume; and that death means something other than death.

IX. Reconciling all of the Hell Passages

- a. I used to believe in eternal torment because I let a few Scriptures hold the rest of the Bible's teaching hostage to their seeming interpretation. I now believe that all Scriptures about the final state must be taken together. To be fair, I will now give my understanding on all of the traditional proof texts that have led the majority of Christians to believe that hell is a place of eternal conscious torment.
- b. The first thing I would say is that just because the lake of fire is an eternal fire doesn't mean that people will be burning in it forever. The fact that the fire is "unquenchable" or "eternal" just means that God will leave that fire burning for all eternity as a warning of what happens to those who reject His love and grace. As John the Baptist said, "the chaff will be burned up in unquenchable fire."
- c. When Jesus says that those on his left will "go away to eternal punishment," in my mind, this does not mean continued punishings, but only means punishment that will have eternal consequences. Basil Atkinson, a professional philologist, writes:
 - 1. "When the adjective *aionios* meaning "everlasting" is used in Greek with nouns of *action*, it has reference to the *result* of that action, but not the process. Thus the phrase "everlasting punishment" is comparable to "everlasting redemption" and "everlasting salvation," both scriptural phrases . . . the lost will not be passing through a process of punishment forever but will be punished once and for all with eternal results." (Basil F. C.

Atkinson, Life and Immortality. An Examination of the Nature and Meaning of Life and Death as They Are Revealed in the Scriptures (Taunton, England, n. d.), p. 101.)

2. Atkinson's point is that eternal salvation doesn't mean we will be saved again and again – we are saved once but the effects last forever. Eternal redemption doesn't mean we will be redeemed again and again, but that the effects of redemption will last forever. In the same way eternal punishment or eternal judgment simply means the effects of that punishment and judgment will last for all eternity. There is no universal salvation in the end, this punishment will never be reversed, so its effects are eternal.
- d. C.S. Lewis writes: "But I notice that our Lord, while stressing the terror of hell with unsparing severity usually emphasizes the idea not of duration but of *finality*. Consignment to the destroying fire is usually treated as the end of the story—not as the beginning of a new story." (C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*. London and Glasgow: Collins, 1940, p114–115; emphasis in original)
- e. When Jesus says it's better to lose a limb than to be cast into hell where, "their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched," what does He mean? Let's look at the passage in Isaiah that He quotes which is a reference to final judgment. "All mankind will come and bow down before Me," says the Lord. "And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind." (Isaiah 66:23b-24)
1. This is not a picture of the righteous watching the lost being tormented but of their corpses being eaten up and burned up in their final judgment. This picture of the future must be after the lost have paid the just penalty for their sins and now only their bodies are left to be destroyed. We've already seen that the unquenchable fire keeps burning until it consumes, how about the worm? The effect of this worm is best interpreted by Isaiah himself since he spoke about the worm a few chapters before the one quoted above: "For the moth will eat them up like a garment; the worm will devour them like wool. But my righteousness will last forever, my salvation through all generations." (51:8) God makes a contrast between those who are devoured by the worm; and those who have accepted His righteousness which lasts forever.

2. While working on this manuscript someone brought to my attention the most recent rendering of Mark 9:48 by the 2011 New International Version: “Where the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched.” The idea of the worms is the same as that of the unquenchable fire – they will outlast that which they are consuming. The fact that today’s scholars have felt the need to change the language means that the above rendering is a more accurate rendering of the Greek than past English translations.
 3. So now we can see Jesus’ warning in a new light. Better to lose a hand, eye, or foot in this life than to be completely annihilated in the next. The worm will not die until you are eaten; the fire will be unquenchable until the tares are completely burned up. Both body and soul will be destroyed in hell.
- f. Perhaps the most difficult passages to counter in the ultimate annihilation view are the two in Revelation that speak of ongoing torment for the lost. One is specifically about Satan, the beast and the anti-Christ (Appendix Three) but the other one is a reference to all who took the mark of the beast. It says clearly: “And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name.” (Rev. 14:11)
1. How do we deal with this text? John Stott, a highly respected evangelical scholar questions whether the smoke of their torment rising forever and ever mandates that people are eternally in the fire. “The fire itself is termed ‘eternal’ and ‘unquenchable,’ but it would be very odd if what is thrown into it proves indestructible. Our expectation would be the opposite: it would be consumed forever, not tormented forever. Hence it is the smoke (evidence that the fire has done its work) which ‘rises forever and ever.’” (John Stott and David Edwards, “Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue (London, 1988) 316)
 2. “The smoke of their torment will rise forever” is a direct quote of prophetic literature (Isaiah 34:9-10) where God is punishing the land of Edom. Isaiah prophecies: “Her land will become blazing pitch! It will not be quenched night and day; its smoke will rise forever.” While the land of Edom was judged by God and that judgment was final, its smoke cannot be seen anymore in the Middle East. It is very important in interpreting a text to consider the genre the text is written in. In the prophetic genre hyperbole is often used to make a point. Is that what is happening here?
 3. Obadiah also prophecies about Edom (Esau): “the house of Esau will be stubble, and they (Israel) will set it on fire and consume it.

There will be no survivors from the house of Esau. The Lord has spoken.” (18) Edom, the house of Esau, was eventually annihilated although while they suffered it was continual (day and night); and the effects of that punishment (annihilation) are lasting forever and ever.

X. God’s Punishment for Rejecting Him

- a. According to Scripture there are two types of sin that we commit against God – those directly against Him, and those we commit against people. The way we sin directly against God is by rejecting the love, forgiveness, and eternal life He has offered us in Christ. John 16:9 says this is the sin the Holy Spirit will convict the world of: “concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me.”
- b. Those who reject God’s offer of reconciliation in Christ will be killed (destroyed, annihilated, consumed, perish) for their rejection of Him. Jesus says about the judgment: “But those enemies of mine who did not want Me to be king over them – bring them here and kill them in front of Me.” (Luke 19:27)
- c. Why will those who reject Christ be annihilated? Because they were created by God, and redeemed by Christ, not so they would continue to go their own way, but so they would begin to love Him back. If people choose not to, there is no purpose for their existence in the life to come. They made a choice and God won’t have them alive forever apart from Him.
- d. He wants everyone in His home as one of His sons or daughters, but when a person chooses to leave and go their own way, He honors their free will. He won’t force any one, but He does go after them by sending trials to get their attention, impressions of the Holy Spirit to convict them, angels who protect them, and Christians who witness to them. Yet if people persist in rejecting His love, He eventually withdraws. They break His heart because He loved them and died for them, but if that’s their final answer, He accepts it. His wrath will eventually come to everyone who rejects His love. The judgment for rejecting Him is that He will eventually annihilate that person and he/she will no longer exist.

- e. Traditionalists wonder if this is a punishment the lost would even fear. Yet, in our land today the worst possible sentence someone can receive is the death sentence. The punishment is not the two minutes in the electric chair or the time it takes for the drug to do its work; it is the removal from society; never to breathe again or eat or hope or dream. People would rather have a life sentence in prison than to have their life ended in death. How much worse is eternal death? To be forever non-existent and serve only as an example of what happens to those who reject God? Daniel says that those who reject God will be held “in shame and everlasting contempt.” (Daniel 12:2)

XI. God’s Punishment for Sins against People

- a. Unfortunately people don’t sin in a vacuum. Their choices affect other people and they will be held accountable for them. Christ died in their place and took the punishment for their sins but since they chose to reject that payment, they must bear the consequences of their sins themselves. “And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened... The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.” (Rev. 20:12)
- b. As I studied all of the verses on hell I discovered that whenever Jesus talks about punishment or blows in hell it is in reference to sins against humanity. Sin against humanity is ultimately sin against the God (Psalm 51:4) who loved them and created them for Himself. God commanded His children to not judge, but rather leave judgment to Him, and He promised to repay every misdeed that was done against them. (Romans 12:19) The payment for sins against people is not annihilation, but conscious torment in hell.
- i. In Matthew 5:22 He references hatred in the heart, and calling someone a fool as reasons for being thrown into hell. “But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever shall say to his brother, ‘Raca’, shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever shall say, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the hell of fire.”

- ii. In Matthew 18:6-8 He warns us about sins against children and the judgment that will be on those who influenced them in the wrong way. “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes! And if your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the eternal fire.”
- iii. In Matthew 24:45-51 Jesus warns His ministers of the consequences of them using their God given position to use and abuse those in their care instead of giving them their “food at the proper time.” He says the master of that house will return “on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour which he does not know, and shall cut him in pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites.” (51) Luke’s account says it will be a place with the “unbelievers,” in other words, in the lake of fire, and there he will “be beaten with many blows.” (Luke 12:46-47)
- iv. In Matthew 25:41-45 Jesus references the sins against “the least of these My brothers” that brings the punishment of fire. What is troubling about these sins is that they are sins of neglect toward the naked, homeless, prisoners, and the hungry/thirsty. Who can measure the depth of these sins and know to what degree God is holding people responsible? “Then He will say to those on His left, ‘Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire that has been prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry...thirsty...a stranger...naked...sick...and in prison’...Then they themselves also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?’ Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’”
- v. In Luke 16:19-31 the rich man is in Hades because he neglected Lazarus who was a beggar at his gate. He had walked past him every day and somehow justified his abundance while Lazarus went hungry right at his doorstep. Abraham explains to him, “Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony.” (25) We are our brother’s keeper, so to the degree people have neglected the poor and

needy is the degree they are guilty before a holy God who has taken their suffering personally.

- vi. In Luke 10:25-37 a scribe tries to justify himself by asking: “Who is my neighbor?” He must have been hoping for a very narrow answer that included those he currently knew and loved. When Jesus told the story of a stranger being beaten and left on the side of the road with the Pharisee and the Sadducee walking past, I can only imagine the scribe cringing. After he tells of the Samaritan helping him by taking responsibility for his care, Jesus asks: “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The expert in the law replied, ‘The one who had mercy on him.’ Jesus told him, ‘Go and do likewise.’” (36-37) Is God holding people responsible for every stranger on the side of the road that they didn’t help? Frightening.
- vii. James tells us that sin is not only what we choose to do wrong, but also what we choose not to do that is right. “Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins.” (James 4:17) Whether people like it or not, God is holding them responsible for all of their sins against humanity and writing them down in His book. Every judgment, gossip, slander, criticism, lust, manipulation, bitterness, envy, and lie is written down as well as every good deed people didn’t do because they were afraid, tired, depressed, or just plain lazy. Excuses will mean nothing before the justice of a holy God.
- c. How long will people be punished in hell for their sins against humanity? It’s probably a formula based on how holy God is and what His perfect requirement was, and how sinful people were. We know that it will be way worse for those who had lots of light and the absolute worst for those who actually knew Christ before backsliding.

XII. Who Escapes Hell?

- a. “The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in His hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.” (John 3:35-36)
- b. God has made one way back to Himself and that is through Jesus’ sacrifice and resurrected life. Because of God’s holiness and man’s sinfulness there

could be no other way for people to become righteous in His sight. “He (Jesus) who knew no sin became sin in order that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.” (2Cor. 5:21)

- c. God’s love reaches to all human beings and His desire is for everyone to be saved yet He will honor the will of those who reject Him. Because of God’s perfect foreknowledge (God knows the future choices we will make), many today have concluded that God must have predestined (preplanned) for some people to go to hell. (Appendix Four) But God’s foreknowledge is not causative. God predestined, or preplanned, before He made people that Christ would die on a cross (Revelation 13:8) and that whoever believes in Him would be saved. (John 3:16) He also predestined that those who reject Him would be condemned but that is not His desire. Below are a few verses to assure you that God wants all people to be saved:
 - i. “This (prayer for all people) is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (1Timothy 2:3-4)
 - ii. “The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.” (2Peter 3:9)
 - iii. “For God has shut up all in disobedience that He might show mercy to all.” (Romans 11:32)
 - iv. “He (Jesus) Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.” (1John 2:2)

XIII. Final Things.

- a. In Revelation 21 and 22 we see the earth after the Great White Throne Judgment. Jesus is on the throne (21:5); the bride is dwelling in a city whose streets are made of gold and God Himself provides the light. Outside the city (this can only mean in the lake of fire) are “the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murders and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying.” (22:15) The lost, here, are still alive while the saints are enjoying the New Jerusalem, so some have felt this is proof of eternal torment. Is it?

- b. During this time, the lost are still experiencing the severity of God's justice in the lake of fire where they are dying, perishing, being consumed, and being destroyed. No one knows how long this will take but only that Jesus will continue to rule until the full penalty is paid. After death itself has been destroyed, He will turn His throne back over to the Father who gave it to Him, and then God will be all in all.
- c. The farthest reaching Scripture in the New Testament describes this time: "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming, then comes the end, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death...When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all." (1Corinthians 15:22-26; 28) When all beings Jesus sends to the lake of fire are completely abolished in the second death, God will be "all in all" because everyone that rejected Him will have been annihilated.

XIV. **Does it Matter?**

- a. "Why? What's the upside of sharing this?" was the question a sincere man from our congregation asked. He was sure that my position was wrong, but his question implied that even if I was right, why does it matter? I received a similar response months earlier when I told our elders I wanted to do a Sunday night on hell and share my position. "Why? Everything is going in the right direction. Why would you introduce something controversial?"
- b. I have thought long and hard about that question because of my love for unity in the church and my experience of how quickly we can be divided. If my position is wrong, then obviously there is only a down side because I'm teaching something about God and us that isn't true. But if it's right (and I believe it is), it does make a significant difference to both the Christian and the unbelieving. Here are a few of the ramifications:

Ramification One

First, it brings the character of Christ and the authority of the Word of God together. While working on this book I received an email from a young pastor I had no previous relationship with. He explained to me that he felt he could no longer believe in the authority of the New Testament and wanted to talk with me about his doubts. A few days later he sat across from me in my office over a cup of coffee.

It turned out that at the center of his doubts was the doctrine of conscious eternal torment. He loved God, believed in the sinfulness of mankind and our need for grace, but felt the New Testament couldn't be true because conscious eternal torment was so contrary to the character of the God he believed in. To believe in the New Testament's absolute authority would be to betray his heart and mind which both told him this doctrine wasn't right.

I appreciated his conviction that you can't change the New Testament to make it say what you want it to say. All through church history some have wanted to defend the character of God at the expense of the Word of God by teaching universalism. Origen was among the first and Rob Bell among the most recent. In my opinion, these people have chosen to believe what they want to be true and then found Scriptures to prove their opinion.

In Rob Bell's words: "At the center of the Christian tradition since the first church have been a number who insist that history is not tragic, hell is not forever, and love, in the end, wins and all will be reconciled to God...Some stories are better than others. Telling a story in which billions of people spend forever somewhere in the universe trapped in a black hole of endless torment and misery with no way out isn't a very good story...In contrast, everybody enjoying God's good world together with no disgrace or shame, justice being served, and all the wrongs being made right is a better story." (Love Wins; 110-111)

I agree with Mr. Bell about which story sounds better but we don't have the authority to change the story so we like it better. We must be driven by what the Scripture says and not by what we'd like it to say or we may end up deceived as Paul warns. "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires." (2Timothy 4:3)

In an effort to preserve the authority of the New Testament, Augustine condemned Origen's teaching in the Second Council of Constantinople which I've outlined in a previous chapter. But when this young pastor came to me I didn't refer him to Origen or Augustine but only to the New Testament. He refused to twist meaning to make it say what he wanted to be true but he was willing to reexamine what it actually said about hell before throwing away its authority.

After going home and studying for himself the full topic including the Scriptures I'd given him, he felt he could again embrace the New Testament in light of the Scriptural support for ultimate annihilation. He came to understand that the Word of God doesn't contradict the character of God but only affirms both the love and justice He does everything with.

Ramification Two

A second ramification would be that Christians would have less stress on them. I was so struck by Francis Chan's story of himself in a coffee shop while writing his book, "Erasing Hell," which was a defense of eternal conscious torment. Chan was looking around the coffee shop contemplating the fact that most of these poor people were going to spend an eternity under

God's wrath in conscious torment. How could he justify having a cup of coffee and working on a book? If he really believed what he was writing, wouldn't he be doing something to help them escape this horrible end?

Really? Is this what the gospel is supposed to produce in us? Are we carrying good news that God, in His great love, is offering eternal life to even hardened sinners, or are we carrying the bad news that unless poor sinners accept Christ they will be eternally tormented in hell?

I think we've made too much of man. Jesus warned, "What will it profit a man to gain the whole world but forfeit his soul." (Mark 8:36) I don't think man has value apart from the value God places on him. We don't possess the inherent value of being eternal beings, so without responding to God we eventually forfeit our souls.

William Temple, former Archbishop of Canterbury writes: "Our dignity is that we are children of God, capable of communion with God, the object of the love of God – displayed to us on the cross – and destined for eternal fellowship with God. Our true value is not what we are worth in ourselves, but what we are worth to God, and that worth is bestowed upon us by the utterly gratuitous love of God." (Devotional Classics, 226)

The gospel is about an amazing God of infinite worth offering finite beings who have sinned against Him the chance at eternal life with Him. As Paul writes to Timothy, the grace of God now "has been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." (2Timothy 1:10) The gospel offers immortality; without it we're mere mortals.

We should have compassion on sinners because they're broken and need Christ. But I dislike the motivation that pictures poor sinners who will be eternally tormented if we don't warn them to repent. Please understand that I love Francis Chan and believe he has a great heart, but I don't think God wants Christians to live under the pressure he described in the coffee shop.

Ramification Three

The third ramification is that it makes hell more believable to the unbeliever. Jesus warned about the reality of Hades, hell, and final judgment much more than He talked about heaven. Our accountability before God is real - a loving God really will send people to hell for their sins. There is a heaven to gain and a hell to shun. The severity of God's judgment really will include conscious torment – darkness, fire, weeping, and the gnashing of teeth - until full justice is accomplished.

The problem is that our warnings often fall on deaf ears because the traditional belief of eternal conscious torment is so contradictory to what unbelievers have heard about who Jesus is that they easily assign it to the category of myth.

Some feel that my position won't motivate people enough to be saved since they get to be annihilated instead of continually tormented. I feel this position makes hell much more real because it is consistent with both God's love and His justice.

Ramification Four

A final ramification is that from man's perspective the human experiment becomes a great success instead of a tragedy. Jesus said, "Small is the gate and narrow is the way to life and few are those who find it." (Matthew 7:13)

What if a few is three out of ten? How could seven out of ten human beings living in continual torment for all eternity with no hope of redemption be seen as anything less than a tragedy from man's perspective? Obviously, God owes us nothing, and has every right to do things however He wants, but was this really His plan?

Or was His plan to give eternal life to those who believe and a just punishment to those who reject Him which would eventually lead to them perishing. At the end He would have the "few" who chose Him through the temptations and difficulties of this life as beloved children who would love Him and rule with Him for all eternity, while those who rejected Him would simply die.

This would be a great story, but is it true? After examining all the Scriptures I believe it is. You'll have to decide for yourself.

XV. Conclusion

- a. If you aren't yet a Christian: I hope this talk has stirred your heart to consider both the kindness and severity of God. Because of God's holy character no one can be saved by their own goodness or works. The gospel can be summed up in one verse: "The wages of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 6:23) If you and I get what we deserve for our sins we will die, both the first and second deaths. But God, in His great love for us, has purchased (by His own blood) a costly gift for us called eternal life. This gift includes the forgiveness of our sins, a place in heaven, and a love relationship with Him that will go on for all eternity. Because it's already paid for, salvation only has to be received as a gift, in prayer by faith. If you can honestly pray the prayer below, I urge you to pray it and then tell someone what you have done. (Romans 10:9-10) *Every head bowed.
- b. If you are already a Christian: I hope you this talk has stirred you to think about what the Scriptures teach concerning the important issues of Hades, hell, and the final judgment. Even if your view is unchanged, my prayer is that what you believe is now based even more on the Scriptures themselves instead of on what you have heard others teach. Finally, I urge you not to divide from other Christians because they differ with you about the nature of hell. For five centuries the church grew and prospered without having any definitive statement on the nature of hell

because their focus was on the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I believe that is where our emphasis should be today as well. To review:

1. Christians are in full agreement that Scripture is the final authority in all matters of faith.
2. Most Christians are in full agreement that God will send people who reject Him to hell and that there will be no reversal of this final judgment.
3. Christians differ in their opinion as to the nature of hell:
 - a. Some believe it is a place of conscious eternal torment.
 - b. Others believe it is a place of punishment followed by annihilation.
 - c. Others don't have an opinion and prefer to simply trust God, however it is.

Appendix One

Agreeing to Disagree

We are often tested by the Lord by being in fellowship with people that don't agree with us on every point. Christians share essential truths with each other but must grant liberty on secondary issues or we unnecessarily divide from our brothers and sisters in Christ and cause damage to the body of Christ. Below is a devotional I wrote a few months ago called: Knowing in Part.

"Now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known." 1Corinthians 13:12b

I've seen a great evil in the body of Christ that has plagued the church through out the ages. Those who know in part often presume they know fully and so divide themselves from other Christians who don't see things exactly their way.

Jesus prayed in John 17:17 that we would be sanctified (set apart) by the truth and then defined truth for us: "Your word is truth." The word of God was given to set us apart from the corrupt value system, perspective, and ungodliness of this present age so that we would reflect God and His ways in the darkness of this world.

Christians have taken the word that was given to separate or divide us from the world's system, and instead used it to divide the body of Christ. In the very chapter that Jesus prays we would be sanctified, He also prays that the Father would make us one. The result of this oneness, He said, would be that the world would believe in Jesus.

Instead of accepting each other, the body of Christ is often found rejecting each other on things that aren't essential to the gospel. Pride makes us "strain at gnats and swallow camels." (Matt. 23:24) There are essential truths that unite us and divide us from the world and these need to be embraced with a passion we are willing to die for: the authority of Scripture; Jesus is the Son of God and Savior of the world; the gospel calls all people to repent and put their trust in Christ for salvation; Christians are called to love God and love people; everyone will stand before the judgment seat of Christ and go irreversibly to heaven or hell. Even these clear truths in the word of God are only known in part, yet Christians through all the ages have established these as essentials that define one as a Christian.

Matters like communion, baptism, how the second coming will unfold, how predestination is defined, spiritual gifts, the age of the earth, etc. are all examples of issues that sincere believers disagree as to how the Bible should be interpreted. You probably have an opinion on every one of these topics and you more than likely think you're right. (If you didn't it wouldn't be your opinion) Yet, we need to hold these opinions with humility or our attitude can end up bringing division to the church instead of the unity that Jesus prayed for.

Appendix Two

The Rich Man and Lazarus

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’

But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’ He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father’s house for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’

Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’

‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’

He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’” (Luke 16:19-31)

Should this be interpreted as a parable or as an actual event? I don’t know that it matters if we’re only looking for information about Hades where this dialogue is described as happening. Even if it’s a parable, the place Jesus is describing is a real place Jews were familiar with but only someone with the authority of Jesus could speak definitively about. Before we look at Hades, though, let’s look at the point of Jesus’ teaching.

The audience He is addressing is the Pharisees who in verse 16 are described as being those who “loved money.” Jesus is warning these leaders that riches are not necessarily a sign of God’s blessing and that they would be responsible one day before God concerning their attitudes toward the poor. Lazarus, translated, “God help me,” is seen as the one who looked to God even when man did nothing for him.

Jesus is warning the Pharisees and all those who are rich, are to start obeying the law of Moses and believing the words of the prophets now, before it’s too late. He even gives the principle that

people who don't believe what God has already given to them will end up rejecting an even greater revelation – someone rising from the dead.

Jesus describes these events as happening in Hades which is our only first hand look in the Bible of what this place is like. We learn a number of things about Hades from this story:

1. People are alive there apart from their earthly bodies yet still have speech, feelings, and experience pains.
2. The fire of Hades does not consume but does torment. Peter says God holds “the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment.” (2Peter 2:9)
3. Although these souls do not have their earthly bodies they are recognizable to one another and still appear to have some sort of a body that can experience pain or at least phantom pains.
4. Before Christ's resurrection when He opened Hades and “led captives” in His ascension, the wicked and the righteous could view each other but not pass through to the other's side.

Appendix Three

Early Church Fathers and Annihilationism

The history of Annihilationism goes back to Arnobius in the fourth century although it is very possible that Iraneus and Justin Martyr also embraced this ending for those who reject Christ. The reason why it's unclear what the earliest church fathers thought about it, is they didn't give much time to it. Professor of theology, Phil Cary, points this out in a response to a question about what the early Fathers thought about eventual annihilation:

"The early church did not often think very far beyond the day of final judgment. There certainly is a strong sense in the New Testament that divine condemnation in the final judgment is irrevocable. But whether this meant unending torment or ultimate destruction is not absolutely clear, which is why the "annihilationist" interpretation of hell, though a minority opinion in the tradition, has some real plausibility." (Email response from one of his students in 2010)

One of the earliest church Fathers, Ignatius (50-117 AD), the third bishop of Antioch is thought to have believed in annihilation because of what he wrote in some of his letters like this one to the Magnesians'.

"Let us not, therefore, be insensible to His kindness. For were He to reward us according to our works, we should cease to be." (AnteNicene Fathers, Vol. 1. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. ClevelandCoxe. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.)

A second early church Father, Justin Martyr (103-165), who was a Christian apologist and author, was also thought to believe in annihilation by some because of the analogy he drew between Stoic Philosophy and Christian theology.

"For while we say that all things have been produced and arranged into a world by God, we shall seem to utter the doctrine of Plato; and while we say that there will be a burning up of all, we shall seem to utter the doctrine of the Stoics; and while we affirm that the souls of the wicked, being endowed with sensation even after death, are punished, and that those of the good being delivered from punishment spend a blessed existence, we shall seem to say the same things as the poets and philosophers; and while we maintain that men ought not to worship the works of their hands, we say the very things which have been said by the comic poet Menander, and other similar writers, for they have declared that the workman is greater than the work." (From Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.)

However, the earliest Father that expressly, unquestionably, believed in eventual annihilation was Arnobius of Sicca (253-327), an early Christian apologist and rhetorician.

In 'Against The Heathen', Book II, Section 14, Arnobius writes:

"Do you dare to laugh at us when we speak of hell, and fires which cannot be quenched, into which we have learned that souls are cast by their foes and enemies? What, does not your Plato also, in the book which he wrote on the immortality of the soul, name the rivers Acheron, Styx, Cocytus, and Pyriphlegethon, and assert that in them souls are rolled along, engulfed, and burned up? But though a man of no little wisdom, and of accurate judgment and discernment, he essays a problem which cannot be solved; so that, while he says that the soul is immortal, everlasting, and without bodily substance, he yet says that they are punished, and makes them suffer pain. But what man does not see that that which is immortal, which is simple, cannot be subject to any pain; that that, on the contrary, cannot be immortal which does suffer pain? And yet his opinion is not very far from the truth. For although the gentle and kindly disposed man thought it inhuman cruelty to condemn souls to death, he yet not unreasonably supposed that they are cast into rivers blazing with masses of flame, and loathsome from their foul abysses. For they are cast in, and being annihilated, pass away vainly in everlasting destruction. (Arnobius. *Against the Heathen'*, Book II (New Advent; 17 January 2011))

In 'Against The Heathen', Book II, Section 36, Arnobius writes:

"But the gods are said to be immortal. Not by nature, then, but by the good-will and favour of God their Father. In the same way, then, in which the boon of immortality is God's gift to these who were assuredly produced, will He deign to confer eternal life upon souls also, although fell death seems able to cut them off and blot them out of existence in utter annihilation."

After Arnobius, another church Father, Athanasius (293-373), the Bishop of Alexandria, also believed in eventual annihilation.

"For God had made man thus (that is, as an embodied spirit), and had willed that he should remain in incorruption. But men, having turned from the contemplation of God to evil of their own devising, had come inevitably under the law of death. Instead of remaining in the state in which God had created them, they were in process of becoming corrupted entirely, and death had them completely under its dominion. For the transgression of the commandment was making them turn back again according to their nature; and as they had at the beginning come into being out of non-existence, so were they now on the way to returning, through corruption, to non-existence again. (Athanasius. *On the Incarnation of the Word* (Christian Classics Ethereal Library; 3 November 2011))

Yet it was Augustine in the fifth century that cemented the church's position on conscious eternal torment. From there Dante and Milton added artistic depictions of the eternal torments of hell and with the force of a few New Testament passages, the church has never turned back from this tradition. There have been many voices throughout history for annihilation and there are a growing

number in today's mainstream evangelical debate. I will close with quotes from William Temple (1881-1944), Archbishop of Canterbury.

"Are there not, however, many passages which speak of the endless torment of the lost? No; as far as my knowledge goes, there is none at all."

"After all, annihilation is an everlasting punishment though it is not unending torment."

"One thing we can say with confidence: everlasting torment is to be ruled out. If men had not imported the Greek and unbiblical notion of the natural indestruction of the individual soul, and then read the New Testament with that already in their minds, they would have drawn from it a belief, not in everlasting torment, but in annihilation. It is the fire that is called aeonian, not the life cast into it."

"How can there be the Paradise for any while there is Hell, conceived as unending torment, for some? Each supposedly damned soul was born into the world as a mother's child, and Paradise cannot be Paradise for her if her child is in such a Hell." (William Temple. *Christian Faith and Life* ([1931] 1954); p.81, 464, 472.)

Appendix Four

What about Revelation 20:10?

“And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.”
Revelation 20:10

Revelation 14:11 says the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever, but here John clearly states that these three beings will be tormented day and night for ever and ever. Vines defines “for ever and ever” as being from “age to age.” Is it possible that these torments will last for all time but when time has ceased to be, these three will be annihilated like all others in the lake of fire? Let’s consider this.

First, are angels immortal? No where in Scripture does it say that they have this property, although it does say they don’t reproduce themselves like people do so some have assumed immortality (Matthew 22:30). Scripture states that God alone has immortality (1Tim. 6:16) so I don’t think we should assume it unless He says so.

He created Lucifer and all the angels while possessing foreknowledge that a third of the angels would fall. He has used their fall to test mankind and to prepare us to be His sons and daughters. When this time is over and they come to judgment as human beings do, Scripture says those who have rebelled will be cast into the lake of fire that was prepared for their punishment. (Matthew 25:41) After their punishment, will they too be annihilated, or will they be tormented for all eternity? If they weren’t created immortal and are annihilated with us, how could “for ever and ever” be true?

In Hebrews 1:8 the term “for ever and ever” is used about the throne of Jesus: “But about the Son He says, ‘Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever.’” Yet 1Corinthians 15:24-28, the farthest reaching passage of the New Testament, says that in the very end Jesus will turn His throne over to the Father. “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.”

Is “the end”, the end of time? It seems clear in this passage that Jesus’ reign will only be until this time and then He will turn the entire kingdom over to the Father. After He has done this, verse 28 says, “then the Son Himself will be made subject to Him who put everything under Him, so that God may be all in all.”

If “for ever and ever” is only for the rest of time in the case of Jesus’ throne, than it seems probable that the “for ever and ever” in Revelation 20:10 covers this same period. Once Satan’s punishment is complete, death itself will be abolished, Jesus will turn over the kingdom, and God will be

all and in all that remain. We then leave time and go into eternity which is more than our minds can conceive.

Appendix Five

Considering Reformed Theology

When we think about who ends up in hell, we must address the theology of salvation. To do this properly I feel I must respond to the dominant theology of our day called, Reformed theology. I want to be clear that I have many dear friends who believe this way and we agree to disagree on how to interpret Scripture on this subject. In my opinion, Reformed theology casts a shadow on the character of God in the name of defending the authority of the Scripture. Because it gives a very definite answer to who goes to hell, and because so many Christians think this way, a full defense of God's character and a response to how they interpret Scripture is warranted.

What is Reformed theology? Martin Luther believed it, drawing mostly from Augustine, and then John Calvin systematically put these beliefs together to create a lens all of scripture can be seen through. Luther accepted contradictions about God without ever trying to reconcile them; Calvin solved them at length and made clear doctrines. Another name for Reformed theology today is Calvinism.

To understand the lens it might help to begin with Romans 8:29-30: "For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and those whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified." To Calvin the call of God is "effectual", which means that God only calls those whom He has predestined to save.

The most important passage this lens is built from is found in Romans 9:10-24 where Paul makes it clear that salvation depends entirely on God's choosing. He owes no one anything but hell, and in His mercy He has sovereignly chosen to save some. Others will suffer wrath because they weren't chosen for mercy, but they will only be getting the just penalty of their sin. It's not for us to like or not like, would be a Reformed theologian's argument, God is God and He transcends our understanding.

The basic tenants of Reformed theology can be given in the acronym, TULIP:

T stands for Total depravity - man is incapable of responding to God on his own. We are dead in trespasses and enemies of God apart from grace. General grace allows people to obey their consciences which is why depraved people can do good things. When God gives people over to themselves and withdraws general grace, depravity is seen for what it is.

U stands for Unconditional election. God has elected some based on nothing but His own choice and pleasure. No one has done any good work to be elected including believing in Jesus. Faith is a gift of grace and saving grace is not offered to everyone, but only to the elect.

L stands for Limited atonement. Jesus died for the elect and only for the elect.

I stands for Irresistible grace. Saving grace is irresistible meaning that if God has decided to save you there is nothing you can do to stop it because God's call is effectual.

P stands for Perseverance of the saints. If you are truly saved you could never fall away. You did nothing to get saved so how could you do anything to lose your salvation? All references to backsliding in Scripture are hypothetical because the elect will persevere.

Martin Luther in *The Bondage of the Will* defines God's sovereignty as His causing all things to be. We need to stop judging by human terms whether what He has decided is good or bad. God is transcendent and His ways are beyond finding out.

One of Luther's contemporaries named Erasmus question him on his beliefs about God's sovereignty.

Erasmus: Who will try and reform his life?

Luther: Nobody!

Erasmus: Who will believe that God loves him?

Luther: Nobody! Nobody can! But the elect shall believe it; and the rest shall perish without believing it, raging and blaspheming.

Erasmus: A flood-gate of iniquity is opened by our doctrines.

Luther: So be it.

R.C. Sproul, a highly respected Reformed theologian comments: "Luther insisted that, far from opening this floodgate, he was merely being faithful to the word of God. It is God who publishes these things, and he does so for the sake of His elect." (*Willing to Believe*, 94)

A friend of mine who is deeply reformed in his theology would debate me regularly on the topic. I remember an illustration that clearly pictured the differences between our thinking.

Two guys have fallen off of a ship and are drowning; they have actually passed out and are sure to perish unless someone intervenes. In his scenario the captain of the ship chooses to save one and does so by jumping in and pulling his passed out body onto the ship. The other drowns simply because he wasn't chosen.

In my scenario the captain calls out to both men that are drowning and wakes them up to the disastrous trouble they are in. He then throws them both a life preserver and orders them to grab a hold of it. One of them gratefully grabs a hold of the life preserver that has been provided and the captain pulls the rope until he is safely on the ship. The other man chooses to reject the life preserver because he insists that he doesn't need help. That man drowns.

We were both in agreement that the depravity of man is so great that no one can respond to God without God first reaching out to them. I don't believe man ever chooses Christ without God first waking them up by His call of grace. However, I do believe that the love of God will wake up everyone at some point in their life and give them a chance to grab a hold of the salvation He provided for us in Christ.

My friend felt the gospel I preached was too man centered. After my guy was woken up by the call, he was expected to do something – grab a hold of the life preserver. For my friend this made it a works gospel even though the only “work” I feel people need to do is to believe in Jesus.

But that’s just a story to help us define the issues. How do we respond Scripturally to Reformed theology? Before we even consider TULIP I think it is only fair to give a different interpretation to Romans 9:10-24 that gives a very different lens to see salvation through.

Paul is making the point that God chooses, not man. He chose Jacob over Esau not because of works but because He preferred to. He chose to harden Pharaoh’s heart for His own purpose and He doesn’t answer to man about His choices. It doesn’t matter what humans think or will because they are the clay; not the Potter.

Paul then asks a question (My paraphrase): “What if God endured vessels of wrath who prepare themselves for destruction? And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for His glory? Can’t He do what He wants to do? Will you argue with Him?”

The answer is a clear, resounding, “no.” No one can argue with God. He has a Divine right to have mercy or withdraw mercy from whoever He wants to. But all this is a set up for where Paul is going. He is breaking down the Jewish defenses because it is going to be very hard for them to hear who God chooses to have mercy on.

“What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone, just as it is written, ‘Behold, I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, and he who believes in Him will not be disappointed.’ (Rom. 9:30-33)

God could randomly choose to have mercy on anyone, but He chose to do it another way and it doesn’t include keeping the law. God has chosen to have mercy on everyone who puts their trust in His Son, Jesus. To a Jewish mind that makes Jesus a stumbling stone because He just replaced the way a Jew thinks God should give mercy which is to those who are trying to keep the law.

Let’s look at TULIP. Martin Luther said he needed to be convinced by Scripture alone so I am not sparing the quoting of relevant Scriptures.

Total depravity

I believe man is depraved and unable to respond to God without God first coming to Him. The writer of Hebrews called this grace before salvation being “enlightened.” (Hebrews 6:4) John Wesley called it prevenient grace or the “grace that goes before.” John the Baptist called Jesus the “true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man.” (John 1:4)

The Bible teaches that man is actually not judged for their darkness (which they were born in), but for how they respond to the light. “This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil.” (John 3:19)

God calls to everyone, but only chooses those who put their trust in Jesus. He draws all people to Christ but only accepts those who don't reject His drawing. Jesus said, "Many are called, few are chosen." (Matthew 22:14) Bible scholar, David Pawson, comments on this Scripture in light of the Reformed debate:

"If 'chosen' here means 'elect, predestinated', then what does 'called' mean? Calvinists believe in 'effectual' calling, which always succeeds in bringing those called, in effect making the 'called' and the 'chosen' exactly the same number! But in the parable the king 'called' those who refused to come (and did he not choose the original guest list?) The called are clearly a larger number than the chosen; and the king is the subject of both verbs. Does God, then, call many but only choose some, thus teasing the human race? Such an arbitrary deity is an offensive image impossible to reconcile with the God who 'so loved the world' (John 3:16) and 'desires all men to be saved' (1Tim. 2:4)

"The many who were 'called' included both those who didn't come and those who did. Both decisions were the full and free responsibility of the invitees and not the predetermined decree of the king. Likewise, the failure to prepare properly was the full and free responsibility of the person concerned and not the predetermined decree of the king. However, this in no way reduces the sovereignty of the king. He had the first choice in how many guests there should be and who should be invited. When they refused, he chose their replacements. And he had the final choice to reject the one not properly attired and retain those who were." (The Road to Hell; David Pawson; pg 124-125)

Man doesn't choose God, nor can man presume that God will always be calling him. But when God does call he frees up our depraved nature enough so we can believe or reject His solution for our sin, Jesus.

Unconditional election

I believe election is conditional on us believing in Jesus Christ. He calls everyone but only chooses those who put their trust in Christ. The Pharisees asked Jesus how they could do the work of God and Jesus responded by telling them a human's part: "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent." (John 6:27)

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life." (John 3:16) God loves everyone but He will only save on the condition that people believe, trust, rely, and depend on His Son.

Limited atonement

"He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world." 1John 2:2

Irresistible grace

"Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18:14) "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." (James 4:6) The plain teaching of Scripture is that we can either humble ourselves when grace approaches and receive it, or we can exalt ourselves and resist it.

Perseverance of the saints

If there is one silver lining in Reformed theology it is the confidence one can have if they believe they are the elect. Jesus has provided a great salvation whereby He adopts us as His own children and removes the slavery to fear that comes when we seek to be saved by our performance. The good Shepherd gives us eternal life and a security that we will never perish and that no one can take us out of His hand. (John 10:28-29)

But can we leave if we don't want to be His child any more? I used to believe in "once saved, always saved" and one of the expressions I picked up from my mentors was: "my name's written in the book of life and there are no erasers in heaven!"

In one Bible study I used this phrase and the lady next to me exclaimed: "Yes, there are! Revelation 3:5 says that if we overcome, Jesus won't erase our name from the book of life."

I believe that we can backslide. I don't think it's easy because even if a Christian is disobedient or unbelieving they are still a son or daughter of God. God wants us secure and He disciplines us when we wander because He knows all of our weaknesses and struggles. But what if someone changes their mind about following Christ and no longer wants to be His? Is this possible? In the plain words of Scripture this is not only possible but warned against again and again. I will just list a few Scriptures now and encourage you to believe them, so that the fear of the Lord will keep you from ever turning your back on God.

"For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?" (Hebrews 10:26-29)

"Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off." (Romans 11:22)

"For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them." (2Peter 2:20-21)

"I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned." (John 15:5-6)

Appendix Six

Proof for the Unbeliever

“I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades.”
Revelation 1:18

How does Jesus alone have the keys of death and Hades? Why, in this study, is His voice authoritative? Why aren't we consulting other religions and other spiritual people about their thoughts on hell?

Jesus said one sign would establish His authority and Paul says it is the sign that God has provided for all mankind: the resurrection.

“What sign do you show us as your authority for doing these things?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’” (John 2:18-19)

“He (God) has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead?” Acts 17:31

Christianity is based on something that happened in the history of this planet. If the resurrection is true, then it is God's validation of the ministry and teaching of Jesus. If the resurrection is false, then Christianity is not true, according to Paul.

“If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.” (1Corinthians 15:14-19)

Today's scholars, whether believing or unbelieving in the actual resurrection, have come to an agreement on one point: the disciples believed Jesus rose from the dead. Gary Habermas, a scholar who has debated the resurrection on many college campuses, states: “The substantially unanimous verdict of contemporary critical scholars is that Jesus' disciples at least believed that Jesus was alive, resurrected from the dead. Reginald Fuller refers to the disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection as ‘one of the indisputable facts of history.’ Upon what was their claim based? Fuller continues: ‘It is clear that the disciples had real experiences, characterized as appearances or visions of the risen Jesus. Whether these are explained naturally or supernaturally, this experience is a fact upon which both believer and unbeliever may agree.’” (Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (New York: Scribner's, 1965), 142.)

Why would unbelieving scholars make such an enormous concession? For a few reasons:

1. Christianity exists today with over a billion followers and its beginning is undisputed. The early church rose without the aid of authority or position; without any help from

the power centers of its day; and with very little organization in the midst of a hostile climate. The only thing it had was a shared belief in the resurrection. In 1Corinthians 15:3-6 Paul gives this earliest belief: "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, He appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of who are still living, though some have fallen asleep."

2. The appearances themselves would never lead one to believe in a bodily resurrection. Jews were familiar with apparitions of someone alive in another place, like in the case of Samuel appearing to the witch of Endor. They had to have seen an empty tomb combined with an apparition to conclude that there had been a resurrection.
3. It is simply too much to believe that the eleven disciples of Jesus, known as the most moral of men, moved the stone and removed the body while Roman soldiers were sleeping and then propagated a lie that Jesus rose from the dead. They would have gained nothing from this lie and, in fact, lost everything with ten of the eleven being martyred for their faith. The eleventh, John being condemned to Patmos because the effort to kill him failed.

Even unbelieving scholars agree that the disciples believed Jesus rose from the dead. But to remain unbelieving, what they are left to believe in place of the resurrection is some kind of hallucination theory – the disciples saw what they wanted to see and were very sincere even though what they experienced was a natural occurrence in their minds and not a supernatural event.

While this is certainly possible, there are some difficulties that make this position difficult to believe. First, you have to believe a whole bunch of people had hallucinations at the same time. One time there were eleven who saw it, and at another, there were five hundred, many who were still alive when Paul wrote and could tell the story.

But maybe even more problematic is you still have to have an empty tomb. You have to believe that someone else broke through the Roman guard, moved the two ton stone, broke the Roman seal (the penalty for this was to be crucified upside down), and hid the body somewhere else with no discernable motive. Something like this has to happen for the disciples to still find the empty tomb, have their apparitions, and believe in the resurrection without there needing to be a supernatural explanation. You almost have to want to not believe in the resurrection to embrace this scenario.

Unless of course you don't believe the New Testament accounts are credible history but only exaggerations from a later time by people who wanted to make it appear that Jesus had risen from the dead and fulfilled Old Testament prophecies. We know that people are capable of believing what they want to believe and also very capable of making up stories that end up being repeated. Is there proof of this in the resurrection accounts?

Former atheist, Antony Flew, wrote a book called: *There is a God*, in which he includes an appendix by scholar/historian, N.T. Wright, on the resurrection. Wright gives four reasons why it's difficult from a historian's point of view to believe that the gospel accounts were made up.

1. If you take the resurrection narratives in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in the original Greek and compare them side by side, they're quite different – even when they're telling the same bit of the story about the women going to the tomb and so on. They use different words again and again. So it looks as though they haven't simply copied it from each other.
2. There's an almost complete absence of echo and allusion to the Old Testament in the resurrection narratives. In the crucifixion narratives, it's clear that the story of Jesus' death has been told again and again by the early Christian community, and it's woven Psalm 22, Isaiah 53, Zechariah, and other Old Testament allusions into the crucifixion narrative, even in the burial narrative. But then you turn over the page to the resurrection narrative, and you don't find this in Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. It would have been very easy for Matthew, who loves telling us about fulfillment of scripture, to say, "This happened in order that the Scripture might be fulfilled that said..." But Matthew doesn't do that... These stories go back substantially to an early oral tradition that precedes the theological and exegetical reflection.
3. In the ancient world, Jewish and pagan, women were not credible witnesses in the law court. And already by the time Paul is quoting the public tradition about Jesus in 1 Corinthians 15, he is saying: 'Here's the story the way we told it. He was crucified for our sins, according to the scriptures, raised on the third day, according to the scriptures, and then he was seen by...' then he has a list of men – 'Cephas, by James, by the other early disciples, by five hundred at once, last of all by me.' We put up our hands and say, 'Excuse me, Paul, where are the women?' The answer is that, already in the early 50s, the public tradition has airbrushed the women out of the account, because the public tradition knew that they were going to be in trouble. We see the trouble they had when we read Celsus, who a century later pours scorn on the resurrection by saying, 'This faith is just based on the testimony of some hysterical women.' So it's fascinating that in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John we have Mary Magdalene, the other Marys, and the other women. And Mary Magdalene, of all people (we know she had a very checkered career in the past), is chosen as the prime witness: there she is in all four accounts. As historians we are obliged to comment that if these stories had been made up five years later, let alone thirty, forty, or fifty years later, they would never have had Mary Magdalene in this role. To put Mary there is, from the point of view of Christian apologists wanting to explain to a skeptical audience that Jesus really did rise from the dead, like shooting themselves in the foot. But to us historians this kind of thing is gold dust. *The early Christians would never, never have made this up.* The stories – of the women finding an empty tomb and then meeting the risen Jesus – must be regarded as solidly historical.
4. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John don't say, 'Jesus is raised, therefore we'll be raised one day.' These stories, as we find them in the Gospels, go back to a primitive way of telling the story that hasn't gotten around yet to saying, 'Christ is risen, therefore we will be raised,' as we find it solidly in Paul right through from the late 40s. So we have to conclude that these narratives go back way behind Paul to a time when we see the very, very early church reeling in shock from this totally unexpected event of the resurrection and figuring out what it means.

Wright then gives his conclusion: "In order to explain the rise of early Christianity, in order to explain the existence of those four resurrection accounts plus the bits and pieces in Acts and in Paul, we have to say that the very early church really did believe that Jesus had been bodily raised from the dead. We have no evidence of any very early Christians who believed anything else." (There is a God, Antony Flew, Appendix B pages 206-209)