Theological Thought

Topic: The theological consequences of abandoning the idea of hell and eternal punishment

Overview

Conditional Immortalists, Annihilationists and Universalists all hold to a particular view of hell and eternal punishment – there is no such thing! They abandon the idea in favour of their theological positions.

Are there theological consequences for such a rash action? Do their arguments have creditability?

This seminar considers their positions and presents eight theological consequences that occur if hell and eternal punishment are abandoned.

Ultimately it we will find that the idea of hell and eternal punishment must be theologically supported, therefore rejecting Conditional Immortalism, Annihilationism, and Universalism.
Introduction

Hell and eternal punishment are devastating concepts, to many, unthinkable and even too devastating to begin to contemplate. It is no surprise that many commentators have suggested theories describing the fate humans experience after death. Many have found ways to abandon the very idea of hell and eternal punishment in favour of less theologically founded positions.

Let’s consider the theological consequences of abandoning hell and eternal punishment by on the one hand considering theories such as Conditional Immortalism and Annihilationism and on the other hand considering the idea of Universalism, which reject the traditional view of Hell.

It is worth noting initially that both hell and eternal punishment are concepts that are used interchangeable. The concepts are derived from many New Testament references, which teach that there is such a place where the condemned go after earthly death. It is a place where punishment for sin is experienced. However, as Leon Morris recognizes, what hell and eternal punishment looks like and where this place is located cannot be detailed.1

Exercise

Brainstorm some of the reasons why someone may suggest an abandonment of the idea of hell and eternal punishment?

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Conditionalism

The *Conditional Immortalist* and the *Annihilationist* are frequently grouped together. They hold the view that humankind is potentially immortal, but if the individual is not in Christ then they simply cease to exist upon death. There is no hell or eternal punishment for the rejecter. The person is merely wiped from memory.

There is a slight difference between each position.

**Conditional Immortality**

Proponents for Conditional Immortality do not believe that humankind was born immortal, but rather that immortality is a gift from God to those who believe in Christ.²

**Annihilationism**

Proponents for Annihilationism, believe that all are created immortal, but it is those who then refuse to repent and believe in Christ that will be deprived of their immortality.³

While these views recognize the existence of a biblical heaven, they challenge the theological justification of hell, because non-believers simply lose all consciousness or existence. There is no room for the doctrine of hell and eternal punishment.

Because these views both arrive at the same result, we’ll address them together as *Conditionalists*. Both theories can be broken down into four main arguments.

**4 Main Arguments**

1. ‘Immortality’ is equated to a heavenly eternal life. Those who are condemned are wiped from existence leaving only those who are redeemed in Christ to live immortal lives. To support their view that there is no immortality in hell, Conditionalists appeal to Bible texts such as 2 Timothy 1:10 to

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S. McKnight, ‘Eternal Consequences or Eternal Consciousness?’ in W.V. Crockett & J.G. Sigountos (eds.) *Through No Fault of Their Own – The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard.* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 149.
describe eternal life (immortality) as the only ongoing consciousness after death.

‘…our Saviour Jesus Christ, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel’ (2 Tim 1:10)

➢ Merit? Issue?

If 2 Timothy 1:10 could be treated in isolation then it may be possible to remove the distinction between immortality and eternal life, but to do so, would bring the passage into opposition with other passages such as Matthew 25:46 that speaks of the co-existence of eternal life and punishment. Nowhere in scripture is there a defining point that clearly speaks of eternal life and immortality being the same thing.

It is suggested that tradition and philosophy has influenced the interpretation of hell in scripture. This may be because tradition over time has spoken more forcefully than scripture or because a false assumption that humankind is created immortal has been established and so proponents of hell have then been led by blind faith rather than Biblical exegesis.

Harmon points out that although Scripture is the final court of appeal, we should not simply disregard theologians of the past twenty centuries who have held the traditional view. We would need to have strong grounds on which to make the change and so the burden of proof should fall on those wishing to make the change.

Consequently, by removing hell by redefining ‘immortality’ we have to reevaluate our theological structure, which would influence our understanding of other doctrines.

2. For the Conditionalist the whole concept of eternal hell appears to contradict the loving and just nature of God. How could God allow sinners to suffer eternally and still be a ‘loving’ God? Conditionalists will argue for fair justice and punishment, instead of eternal punishment for crimes committed in just 70 or so years of life.

Additionally Conditionalists will suggest that Christ’s atoning death was a once off event, which took the punishment for all sin, and so the concept of eternal

\(^{4}\) A.F. Johnson, 261.
\(^{5}\) T. Gray, 16.
\(^{6}\) R.A.Peterson, 177.
punishment would appear to be inappropriate. 7 Christ did not suffer endless pain so why should a sinner suffer endless torment? 8

➢ Merit? Issue?

These points are forceful making a strong case for the removal of hell from theological thought. However, the consequences are also forceful for two reasons. Initially, they diminish the seriousness of sin. 9 The Bible states that the gravity of sin is so great that Jesus had to die in order to reconcile sinners to God. 10 It is in this act that the surpassing love of God and his unceasing call for justice is demonstrated.

This argument also diminishes the importance of Christ’s death on the cross. Jesus came to rescue sinners from the prospect of eternal punishment. 11 To reject him is a grave sin, and it could be argued, one that deserves eternal punishment.

3. God’s victory over humankind is seen more obviously when the wicked cease to exist. Conditionalists see the problem of sin corrected at the point that immortality is conferred (or not, as the case may be). Rebels are wiped out ensuring there is no risk that creation will be spoilt again. 12 If hell existed Conditionalists would question how God could be seen to be sovereign while sin restricted his creation.

➢ Merit? Issue?

The theological consequence of removing hell in this way means that an easy way out is created. What is there to fear in death? A person either goes to eternal life or is wiped from existence. There is no account for sin or ongoing consequences for non-believers.

Conditionalists fail to see that hell in an indirect way glorifies God, because it highlights the justice of God and the fact that all creation is subject to his rule. Hell and eternal punishment means that all people in heaven and earth will be under the Lordship of Christ. 13

Furthermore, God is not bound or restricted by sin. 14 In fact, God’s sovereignty is highlighted by the fact that he is Lord over sin. Hell can exist because it demonstrates God’s way of judging sin.

7 T. Gray, 16.
9 T. Gray, 16.
10 Rom 3:21-26
11 In 17:2-4.
12 S. Chan, ‘The Logic of Hell: A Response to Annihilationism’ in ERT (Sept 1993), 26
13 T. Gray, 17.
14 S. Chan, 27.
4. Conditionalist theories answer the question of how God can be omnipresent and omnipotent but still allow the existence of sin and evil. With the elimination of hell God can create a world where people could be free agents and evil could still be present. Upon death, the evil is removed with the extinction of the person and God continues to rule over all.\textsuperscript{15} If there is no hell then there is no reason for God to dwell there.

- Merit? Issue?

There is a fundamental flaw with this argument because the removal of hell means that human freedom is also removed. Humankind is created as free agents and God has given us free choice in how we respond to him. Conditionalism brings into question the integrity of the relationship between God and man because it effectively removes the choice. No longer is there any option for humankind because there is only one continuing path after death.

\section*{Universalism}

At the other end of the spectrum is the theory of \textit{Universalism}.

- What is \textit{Universalism}?

Universalism suggests that in the fullness of time all people would be released from the penalties of sin and restored to God.\textsuperscript{16} As all are ultimately saved, the traditional understanding of hell is removed.

This is a popular position because it brings a positive result – it’s not hard to favour a favorable outcome especially when the alternative is hell and eternal punishment. Furthermore, proponents support their theory using several Biblical references that are hard to refute.

- How could you use the Bible to argue for \textit{Universalism}?

This theory has three main arguments.

1. Universalists want to establish that \textbf{God desires the salvation of all.} Passages such as 1 Timothy 4:10, 2 Peter 3:9 and 1 Timothy 2:3-4 support this claim: \textsuperscript{17}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{15} S. Chan, 26.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} R.A. Peterson, 152.
\end{itemize}
‘This is right and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.’ (1 Timothy 2:3-4)

Reading these passages in isolation makes it possible to easily develop a Universalist theology leaving out hell. But this would not recognize the context of 1 Timothy and 2 Peter that teaches that it is God’s will that the gospel reaches all people as opposed to saying that all people will chose to respond to God’s will and be saved.

There are two different considerations; 1 Timothy 2:3-4 speaks of the will of God, what he would most desire for his creation. Whether people are actually saved is a separate issue. Universalists would use these verses to say that as the sovereign God, his ‘will’ would always be carried out.

But what about humankind’s freewill? Can humans receive the warnings of hell and eternal punishment and turn to God? The Apostle Paul does and makes his choice explicit in 1 Timothy 1:15-16.

‘Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners…for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life.’ (1 Tim 1:15-16)

If the concept of hell was abandoned, then the theological significance of free will would also be abandoned. All people whether they wanted it or not would be saved.

2. Related to the first point is that the Universalists’ suggestion that the New Testament teaches final restoration for all people. Here we are talking about the actual end point after death. 1 Corinthians 15:22, 28 is the most explicit. 18

‘for all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.’ (1 Cor 15:22)

‘When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who puts all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all’ (1 Cor 15:28)

It is hard to argue against Universalists using these passages. But the passages cannot be used in isolation. 19 What is Paul’s use of the word ‘all’? If

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18 Other passages include Acts 3:21; Rom 8:19-23; Eph 1:10; Phil 3:9-11.
19 R.A. Peterson, 155.
he means ‘all people’ then we have a Universalist theology, but 15:23 narrows the definition by explaining that ‘all’ are those who belong to Christ.’ Peterson points out that there are other texts that “speak of unbelievers ‘perishing (1:18), being judged by God (5:13), not inheriting ‘the kingdom of God’ (6:9-10), and being ‘condemned’ (11:32).”

It appears that Universalists are using their agenda to influence their reading of the biblical texts. They have removed the concept of hell and therefore softened the message of judgment. Worse, by using 1 Corinthians 15:22 to say that all people are saved; they have removed the importance of humankind responding to Jesus.

3. Universalists want to suggest that the work of Christ is unlimited. Again this is a biblically sound concept, but not if at the expense of hell and eternal punishment. Roman 5:18 is most frequently quoted.

‘Just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all’ (Rom 5:18)

We would want to uphold that the death and resurrection of Jesus is the one act of righteousness that saves. But we cannot, in the light of other scripture support the claim that all people would be saved regardless of their response.

This view hides the seriousness of hell in the work of Christ and ultimately presents a false hope. When there is no risk of hell because Jesus has saved all, then there is no reason to change anything about life, nor is there any reason for repentance. We could ask the same question that Paul did in Romans 2:4b: ‘Do you not realize that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?’

Broadly, Universalism undermines faith in Christ as the only way to God. Specifically by removing hell it removes the need of a response to Christ, the response that scripture says is necessary.

➢ Question? Comment?

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20 R.A. Peterson, 155.
21 R.A. Peterson, 154 – other common Universalist passages include Jn 10:16; 12:32; Rom 11:32; Col 1:20 and 1 Jn 2:2.
22 R.A. Peterson, 155 – he cites other passages that speak against all people being saved (Rom 1:18-20, 32; 2:1-5, 8-9, 12, 27; 3:5-8).
23 R.A. Peterson, 156.
Eternal Punishment

What does hell and eternal punishment offer? What value is there in holding to the traditional view?

The traditional view of hell and eternal punishment presents reasons for not abandoning hell that Conditionalism and Universalism may not address.

1. **What is the meaning of ‘eternal’?** Matthew 25:46 is hard to ignore when we consider the concept.

   ‘And these (the unjust) will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’
   (Matt 25:46)

Scott McKnight convincingly suggests that ‘eternal’ (αἰώνιον) refers to the ‘final eternal age’, one that continues in death as it does in life.\(^25\) If we use ‘eternal’ to describe the ongoing experience of the righteous, then we would have to consider the same intent for when it was used with eternal punishment – that is that punishment is the ongoing experience of the unjust.

Conditionalists and Universalists accept one and not the other. John Stott in stating his case for Annihilationism suggests that the passage does not define the nature of life or death, but rather is describing two destinies. His argument is semantic.\(^26\) What is his understanding of eternal punishment? For Stott it is complete destruction.

There are three problems with the way that Stott has removed hell from the discussion of eternal punishment. First it rejects biblical texts that speak of the ongoing nature and destiny of ‘eternal’. When Matthew uses the word ‘eternal’ (αἰώνιον) he is indicating endlessness. In Matthew 19:29 Jesus explains that those who follow him receive eternal life implying ongoing and endless blessing.\(^27\)

There is nothing to suggest that ‘eternal’ is temporal and so when it is used in regard to hell and punishment; there is no reason to think that it has an end.

Next, if Stott uses this passage to speak of destinies then it raises the question of whether we can think of eternal life as an ongoing destiny. Stott uses ‘eternal’ to speak of the temporal destiny of eternal punishment. Why does he not consider eternal life temporal as well? We can apply the same principle to his understanding of eternal life but nowhere in the Bible would we find eternal life to be temporal?

\(^{25}\) S. McKnight, 154.
\(^{26}\) J. Stott, 317.
\(^{27}\) S. McKnight, 153.
We cannot remove hell by any definition because there is too much Biblical support to suggest that hell is real.

Lastly, the language used in the New Testament to speak of hell and eternal punishment may not be as specific as we are debating. Harmon points out that words such as privation, exclusion and banishment are words frequently used to refer to hell, but no one passage uses all three. Therefore to focus on one term, such as ‘destruction’ may mean that the full scope of the picture is not captured. Certainly, we must then avoid removing a whole concept of hell simply because a single term does not support the full picture of the traditional view of hell.

➢ Question? Comment?

2. We cannot remove hell without considering the nature of God’s judgment. 2 Thessalonians 1:9 emphasizes that those who do not know Christ will suffer eternal destruction, that is, they will be separated from the presence of the Lord.

‘These (those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus) will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might’ (2 Thess 1:9)

God’s judgment of those who reject the gospel is eternal in nature; it is eternal separation from their relationship with God. McKnight suggests that separation from God’s presence must be defined as non-fellowship. To say that judgment equals annihilation would be reading too far.

God’s judgment against unrepentant sinners leads to hell, the circumstance where God allows the unrepentant sinner to be given over to their own devices.

Here is the fundamental difference between Conditionalists and the traditional understanding of hell – Is eternal punishment, God’s act against those who are unrepentant or is it the consequence of non-belief?

Romans 2:6-8 makes it clear that eternal punishment is the consequence of unbelief:

‘For he (God) will repay according to each one’s deeds: to those who patiently doing good seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life; while for those who are self seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury.’ (Rom 2:6-8)

28 K. Harmon, 213.
29 S. McKnight, 155.
30 K Harmon, 221.
31 S. Chan, 29.
If there was no hell, then what would be the point of God’s judgment? The Bible’s teaching on hell is aligned with an appropriate response to the gospel. To respond to the Gospel means that eternal life is assured. To reject the gospel means that hell is the only option. Therefore the context of God’s wrath and judgment is shaped by the content of the gospel.\textsuperscript{32} Hell is best understood in the light of the cross.\textsuperscript{33}

Furthermore, eternal punishment is the only logical position to hold which does not take away humankind’s freedom to respond to Christ.\textsuperscript{34}

3. The most prolific user of the doctrine of Eternal punishment in the New Testament was Jesus himself. Of the twelve references that speak of ‘Gehenna’, the place of everlasting punishment for the wicked, eleven are the words of Jesus.\textsuperscript{35} Therefore to abandon the idea of hell would be to abandon the teaching of Jesus himself. Would there then be any reason to follow his teaching on any other matter? Removing hell undermines the authority of the Word of God.

➢ Question? Comment?

**No Hell – the Theological Consequences**

➢ To bring this together – what then are some theological consequences in abandoning the idea of hell and eternal punishment?

➢ What are some apologetic consequences in abandoning the idea of hell and eternal punishment?

**Eight Consequences**

1. We would be disregarding twenty centuries of theological thought and thus have to reevaluate our theological structures and our understanding of other key doctrines.

2. It would diminish the seriousness of sin by disregarding the consequences for rebellion, ultimately leading away from the glorification of God as the righteous judge.


\textsuperscript{33} K. Harmon, 224.

\textsuperscript{34} S. Chan, 21.

3. It diminishes the importance of Christ's death on the cross by disregarding Christ's mission to seek out and save the lost. With no hell there is no need for Christ to be Mediator of life and death for the world.

4. It rejects God’s sovereignty and creates an easy way out, as there is no account of sin, or any ongoing consequences for unbelievers. Humankind’s goal for life becomes materialistic as they become Lord of their own lives.

5. It removes the possibility of human free will and leaves only one path for humankind after death.

6. In the case of Universalism it suggests that Christ work saves all people and therefore hell is not a fear. This presents a false hope, allows complacency, and removes the need for repentance.

7. It rejects biblical texts that clearly teach of the existence of eternal punishment. It rejects the teachings of Jesus himself and in doing so removes the necessity to treat the Word of God with any confidence.

8. It removes the significance of God’s judgment and the need for humankind to respond to the gospel of Christ.

The idea of hell and eternal punishment must be theologically supported, rejecting Conditional Immortalism, Annihilationism, and Universalism.

- Spend some time praying
Bibliography:


