

A Defense of Conditional Immortalism

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Conditional immortalism is the view that human beings are not naturally immortal but are only granted immortality (eternal life) by God as part of our salvation. In other words, immortality is conditional upon divine grace. Thus, those who are saved in Christ live forever with him, while those who are damned suffer in hell for some finite period and are eventually annihilated.

Conditional immortalism should not be confused with other versions of *annihilationism* which say that the damned are immediately destroyed upon death and do not suffer in hell. And conditional immortalism contrasts with the traditional view (since Augustine) that the damned suffer eternal conscious torment.

Six Arguments for Conditional Immortalism

1. The language of destruction --- Numerous biblical passages refer to the wicked and the damned being destroyed or perishing (Ps. 37:38; Ps. 68:2; Ps. 145:20, etc.). But if the damned live forever, then they are never destroyed. Also, the biblical imagery of fire (Isa. 34:10-11; Ezek. 20:47-48; Amos 5:6, Mt. 3:12, Mt. 13:49-50, Rev. 20, etc.) suggests obliteration of the wicked, since fire consumes what it burns.

2. The opposing concepts of damnation and eternal life --- In Scripture the eternal life promised to Christians is opposed to the damnation of the wicked. But if the damned live eternally in hell, then their fate also is eternal life. After all, they never die. Theirs is a painful eternal life, but it is still eternal life. The conditional immortalist view makes much better sense of the biblical contrast between damnation and eternal life.

3. Reconciliation of all things to God --- The Bible says that God will reconcile all things to himself (Col. 1:20). If the damned live forever in hell, then they are not reconciled to God.

4. Matthew 10:28 --- In this passage Jesus says that God can “destroy both body and soul in hell.” This suggests that hell is indeed a place where souls are destroyed.

5. The “Second Death” --- Conditional immortalism makes the best sense of the concept of the “second death” referred to in Rev. 20:14-15 and Rev. 21:8. If the damned soul lives forever in hell, then there is no second death, thus contradicting Scripture.

6. The argument from justice --- If all of the damned suffer in hell eternally, then this constitutes an infinite penalty for finite sins, which is profoundly unjust. Some traditionalists insist that sins against an infinite and holy God require a temporally infinite penalty. But this is a *non-sequitur*. It does not follow from the fact that God is infinite and morally perfect that punishment of those who sin against him must be infinite in duration.

So where did the doctrine of eternal conscious torment come from, if not Scripture? It appears that the culprit is the Platonic concept of natural immortality. Socrates and Plato affirmed the notion that the human soul is naturally immortal. This idea found its way into Christian theology in the late second century and later through Augustine. It should be noted that while Augustine had most things right, he was not infallible. He read the platonic doctrine of the soul's indestructibility into Scripture, and the church followed his cue.

Replies to Counter-arguments

1. Matthew 25:46 --- In this passage Jesus says the wicked “will go away to eternal punishment” which suggests eternal conscious torment.

Reply: The word translated here as “eternal” is *aionias*, which literally means “of the ages” (cf. Rom. 16:25). However, even if *aionias* is taken to imply an everlasting state, conditional immortalism is not contradicted in this verse. Those who go to hell are eventually annihilated and they remain destroyed *forever*. This is a perfectly natural understanding of “eternal punishment” in this verse.

2. Revelation 20:10 --- As commonly translated, this passage declares that the devil, the beast, and false prophet “will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (NIV).

Reply: These are special cases and should not be taken to represent the fate of all of the damned, particularly human beings. More importantly, the phrase often translated “forever and ever,” again involving *aionias*, is better translated “for ages upon ages,” as it is in some Bible translations. This signifies a much longer torment but hardly that which is everlasting.

For an extensive discussion and defense of conditional immortalism, see Edward Fudge’s classic work *The Fire that Consumes*. [http://www.amazon.com/Fire-That-Consumes-Historical-Punishment/dp/0595143423/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1249361834&sr=1-1.] And for an informative scholarly dialogue between proponents of the traditional and conditional immortalist views, see *Two Views of Hell*, co-authored by Edward Fudge and Robert Peterson [http://www.amazon.com/Two-Views-Hell-Biblical-Theological/dp/0830822550/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1249361957&sr=1-1] Here is an interview with Fudge about his view: <http://planetpreterist.com/news-5568.html>. Lastly, the eminent evangelical biblical scholar John Stott defends conditional immortalism view in his *Evangelical Essentials* http://www.amazon.com/Evangelical-Essentials-Liberal-Dialogue/dp/0830812857/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1249365236&sr=1-1