

## Does the Bible Teach Annihilationism?

Robert A. Peterson \*

In recent years a number of leading evangelicals have stated in writing that they believe in annihilationism-the view that ultimately the resurrected wicked will be obliterated and no longer exist. Michael Green, for example, wrote, "But it [Scripture] does not teach the conscious unending torment of those who are eternally separated from God."<sup>1</sup>

In 1989 Philip Edgcumbe Hughes said, "The conception of the endlessness of the suffering of torment and of the endurance of 'living' death in hell stands in contradiction to this [biblical] teaching."<sup>2</sup>

John Stott affirmed, "I also believe that the ultimate annihilation of the wicked should at least be accepted as a legitimate, biblically founded alternative to their eternal conscious torment."<sup>3</sup> And according to John Wenham, "I believe that endless torment is a hideous and unscriptural doctrine which has been a terrible burden on the mind of the church for many centuries and a terrible blot on her presentation of the gospel. I should indeed be happy if, before I die, I could help in sweeping it away."<sup>4</sup>

Michael Green, Philip Hughes, John Stott, and John Wenham are four stalwarts of evangelical Christianity (in its Anglican expression), and four proponents of annihilationism (though with varying degrees of conviction, as the quotations suggest).

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What arguments do these respected evangelical thinkers adduce in support of this view? Are there good answers to these arguments? And what difference does it make whether Christians believe in annihilationism or eternal conscious punishment? This article seeks to address these questions, examining both biblical and theological arguments that are given in support of a view traditionally considered false.

### Biblical Arguments

For more than fifty years John Wenham privately believed in annihilationism but hesitated to state it in print. In 1992, however, he was no longer hesitant when he penned "The Case for Conditional Immortality." Conditional immortality, or "conditionalism," for short, is the view that human beings are not innately immortal, but are only potentially so. God gives the gifts of eternal life and immortality to believers, and the unsaved, not having received immortality, ultimately go out of existence. Today the term "conditio...

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