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ANNIHILATION ANNIHILATED?

By Barry Shucksmith

Writing in 1931, Ernest H. Jeffs stated ‘You will as soon find a grey badger in modern England as a black Calvinist . . . where now are the smoke and thunder of controversy which rolled around Election and Predestination, Eternal Punishment and Conditional Immortality, “the credibility of Genesis and the edibility of Jonah?”’¹

Sixty years later these words could not have been written. Conditional Immortality, or to give it a more popular name, Annihilationism, is suddenly back in fashion. Along with feminism, moralism, and biblicism the controversy gathers pace. We wonder whether any Evangelical doctrine will survive the onslaught on contemporary orthodoxy?

I begin with two quotations from Evangelical Reformed Confessions.

a. *The Westminster Catechism* ‘The unbelievers are cast into Hell, where they remain in torment and utter darkness, reserved to the Judgement of the Great Day. Besides these two places (Heaven and Hell) for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none’ (Chap. 32).

b. *The Second Helvetic Confession* ‘We believe that the unbelievers are cast headlong into Hell, from whence there is no return opened to the wicked by any offices of those who live.’ (Chap. 24).

There is hardly a tenet of these statements which is not either under attack or denied by the majority in Christendom. Alternatives proposed include Universalism – all will be saved and Probationism – all will be given a second chance after death. But it is with the more popular doctrine of Annihilationism that we are concerned, once the preserve of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, now the new toy of the Evangelicals.

In this limited article I raise a few questions which, for me, annihilated Annihilationism!

1. **The Bible not only gives no hint of any *cessation* of the punishment of the wicked but declares in the strongest terms its *endlessness*.**

It is said to be ‘eternal’ and ‘everlasting’. These words can be described as some of the strongest in the Greek language. They are used to express the eternity of God and to describe the duration of the blessed condition of the righteous in Heaven.

‘Now unto the King *eternal*, immortal, invisible, the only God.’

‘He that believeth hath *eternal life*.’

‘And these shall go away into *eternal* punishment; but the righteous into *eternal life*.’²

In this latter verse the same Greek word for eternal (*aionion*) is used in both clauses. The meaning must be the same in both cases.

Lorraine Boettner says the word *aionion* is used in the New Testament seventy two times and always it denotes indefinite, unbounded and eternal duration.

2. A second question to answer – is the teaching that the sufferings of the wicked have no end taught *unequivocally*?

Annihilationism declares that God's punishment of the unbelieving sinner is in his being snuffed out into a state of unconsciousness. But how does this square with the following?

The smoke of their torment goeth up for *ever* and *ever*: and they have no rest day and night.

The devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where are also the beast and the false prophet; and they shall be tormented *day and night for ever and ever*.

Who shall suffer punishment, even *eternal* destruction from the face of the Lord.

The fire is unquenchable . . . their worm *dieth not* and the fire is not quenched.³

It is worth noticing that in these verses it is not said that the *effects* of this punishment are everlasting, as would be the case if the wicked were annihilated but that the punishment itself – 'the fire', 'torment', 'worm', is everlasting. What would be the point of these being everlasting, for a God of purpose, if the sinner himself had ceased to exist?

3. Scripture teaches also that there shall be different degrees of suffering.

'whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgement and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of Hell fire'.

'It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of Judgement'.⁴

How can there be different degrees of suffering in Annihilation? If we are snuffed out we are unconscious to everything.

4. Yet another quotation needs answering by the proponents of Annihilationism.

Of Judas, Jesus said, 'It had been good for that man if he had not been born.'⁵

Being not born is a state of unconsciousness. But, according to the Lord Jesus Christ, Judas' state is worse than that!

5. My final question is in the use of the word *Gehenna* itself.⁶

There are twelve occurrences of the word. These verses speak of eyes, hands, feet, tongue. Long before Gehenna became the Jerusalem rubbish tip for burning waste it had a meaningful history. See Isaiah 30: 33; 2 Chron. 28: 3, 33: 6; Jeremiah 7: 31-4. It is clearly the biblical symbol of the everlasting abode of the finally impenitent and, with respect to the New Testament verses just cited, portrays a punishment which is sensitized in both body and soul. This is far from being blotted out.

In his sermon 'The future punishment of the wicked unavoidable and intolerable'⁷ Jonathan Edwards lists four reasons for the purpose of Hell's existence: (i) God must reckon with those who

despise His mercy as well as His wrath. (ii) He must vindicate the honour of His majesty. (iii) He has undertaken to subdue impenitent sinners. (iv) He has promised to rectify their judgements, that is to fulfil His word not theirs.

Even the philosopher John Baillie sees no problem for Hell's existence in his book *And the Life Everlasting*:

“The Universe is no less admirable and beautiful a place for having a chamber of horrors eternally present within it so long as each horror of pain perfectly matches and balances each horror of sin.”

St. Augustine resolved the problem by maintaining that ‘unpunished sin would be the greatest evil of all’. Annihilation would be no punishment at all if a person can indulge in a life of unrestrained sin only to be ‘put to sleep eternally’ in the end! What does this do either for the veracity of God’s Word or the justice of God’s character? Without the existence of Hell it is impossible to see how we can avoid annihilating God himself!

Jonathan Edwards knew Revival! So did Robert Murray McCheyne! Both preached Hell as a reality. In the latter case with overflowing love and tears.

In a decade of Evangelism, in a year of soaring crime figures, in a National Church of declining membership, morals and meaning, do we not need a new generation of preachers like Richard Baxter?

O Lord help me to preach as
though I ne'er should preach again.
And as a dying man
to dying men.

Barry Shucksmith (at time of writing) was Rector of Broughton, diocese of Lincoln.

References:

- 1) E. H. Jeffs, *Princes of the Modern Pulpit*, Low, 1931, p.70.
- 2) 1 Tim. 1:17, John 5:24, Matt. 25: 41, 46.
- 3) Rev. 14: 11, 20: 10; 2 Thess. 1: 9; Mark 9: 43, 48.
- 4) Matt. 5: 22; Matt. 10: 15.
- 5) Matt. 26: 24.
- 6) Matt. 5: 22, 29, 18: 9, 9: 27, 5: 30; Mark 9: 43; Matt. 10: 2, 23: 33; James 3: 6.
- 7) Preached in April 1741 on Ezekiel 22: 14.