

Hello everyone,

Having held to this minority Christian view on the doctrine of hell for some time now, I find that it has taught me a lot about things that go far beyond final punishment. I also find that I am not alone in these things. Therefore, I have decided to write some of them down. This is the first installment in what we hope to be an ongoing series here at RethinkingHell. After all, there is always more to learn.

The point of this article is not so much to give further evidence for the evangelical conditionalist view as much as it is to share lessons that can benefit believers of whatever view on hell. It is, of course, inevitable that some examples and statements will promote the conditionalist view; that's just the nature of the beast. Nevertheless, as you shall see, these lessons are applicable to all kinds of spiritual matters, not just hell.

*It's easy to miss bad arguments when you agree with the person making them.*

This one is kind of broad, as there are all sorts of bad arguments a person can make (and you will see plenty of them the more you study this topic). But whatever kind of bad argument a person makes, you will find that they just don't sound that bad when they are made by someone trying to argue for your position.

Consider arguments of guilt by association, where a position is maligned not on its merits but because it is held by undesirable people or groups. I can't tell you how many times I have seen people pooh-pooh the conditionalist view because versions of it are held by Jehovah's Witnesses and some other unsavory groups. In terms of logical soundness, well, it has none.

*If there were any logical bearing on the validity of a belief just because of who holds it, we would have to reject the traditional view because Mormons and Muslims also believe in eternal torment.*

After all, there is no logical bearing on the validity of a belief just because of who holds it. If that were the case, I guess we would have to reject the traditional view because Mormons and Muslims also believe in eternal torment. And yet before becoming a conditionalist I found myself falling for this line of reasoning. I once heard a sermon against the view that is commonly held by Church of Christ (although not universally), that you cannot be saved if you are not baptized. The speaker called attention to the similarities between the (more radical branches of) Church of Christ and Mormon theology. He pointed out that both believe that the gospel and the true church were lost for over a millenium. They both believe that their founder claims to have discovered it anew in the 1800s, and that now they are the true church following the true gospel. And I was eating this up! "Yeah, obviously they are wrong about baptism," I thought to myself. "They are a cult like the Mormons!"

But looking back I realize that it was no different than how the arguments for conditionalism

are dismissed because of the Jehovah's Witnesses bogeyman. Indeed, there are plenty of reasons to reject the teachings of the more "conservative" Church of Christ groups,<sup>1</sup> but the fact that they happen to share some similarities with Mormons, similarities which were a bit overplayed to boot, doesn't mean that they are wrong on the separate issue of baptism. They are wrong about it, but the Mormon connection isn't why. Yet because I wasn't really used to being so unfairly lumped in with Jehovah's Witnesses, I just didn't bother to think, "Hey, this is not sound logic."

Any number of other bad arguments could apply here as well. Whenever someone points to a passage like Matthew 5:29-30, a passage which just mentions hell but doesn't tell us anything about its nature or duration, and claims that it proves annihilationism false because it says there is a hell, they are using circular reasoning. They are basically saying that hell means eternal torment, the Bible speaks of hell, and so therefore hell is a place of eternal torment. It's absurd. It's logically untenable. And yet people eat it up because it already agrees with what they believe, so they just don't think that critically about it. It's really easy to fall into this trap, so beware.

Details don't always matter, but sometimes they really matter. (And it's no different in scripture.)

I bet you were expecting just the cliché of "details matter." But sometimes in life they don't. Outside of discussions about hell, we see this all the time. If a digital scale is improperly set and someone purchasing ground beef at a grocery store only gets two pounds and 14 ounces when what they paid for was three pounds, no one would really care. (Unless it was a regular occurrence at that store, but that's another story.) But let's say that instead of ground beef we were dealing with someone buying gold. That two-ounce difference amounts to thousands of dollars!

With regard to the Bible, sometimes those who are looking at this issue miss important details. Sometimes it is because of sloppiness, sometimes a misunderstanding of what terms mean, sometimes due to translation. And translation issues come into play on several occasions in the hell debate. For example, consider Mark 9:43 (all emphases added):

"If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than, having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire" (NASB).

"If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out" (NIV).

To many there is no significant difference between the two, as an alarming number of scholars with PhDs don't seem to know what the word quench (and therefore unquenchable) means.<sup>2</sup> However, the difference between those two translations is actually quite significant.

To quench a fire means to actively put it out. Webster defines it as "put out; extinguish."<sup>34A</sup>

fire that is allowed to rage and burn everything up and go out on its own has not been quenched. If you let a fire burn out, like at a beach bonfire, it has not been quenched. But it certainly is not burning for eternity!

More importantly, **as mentioned before**, the Old Testament on numerous occasions points to fires that cannot be quenched (e.g., Jeremiah 17:27, Ezekiel 20:47). These fires do not burn for ever and ever; in fact, the fires spoken of have long since died out. They were not quenched because they could not be extinguished. They will rage and burn everything. No fire brigade can quench God's fire. A fire that is not quenched is absolutely not synonymous with a fire that never goes out. Granted, a fire that goes out would be also unquenchable, but an unquenchable fire does not necessarily (or even normally) mean a fire that never goes out.

With that in mind, you might see why the difference is so important. If you look at other translations (ESV, KJV, ASV, NRSV, YLT) they all mimic the NASB in regards to Mark 9:43. In Greek, the fire is "from 1 [alpha] (as a neg. prefix) and 4570 [sbestos];" and is defined as "unquenched, unquenchable."<sup>5</sup> Literally it is not quenched. If you look at those translations this verse doesn't tell you anything about whether hell is eternal torment or annihilation. But if you look at the dynamic equivalence translation of the NIV, where the translators attempt to convey the meaning and not just the words, suddenly this passage says that the fire never goes out. Presumably, given the context, it burns for ever and ever—according to the traditionalist translators. Thus they express it that way. Although in theory one could have a fire that burns forever without people being in it forever, it sure puts the annihilationist in an awkward position. Thus, Robert Yarbrough weighs in on this verse: "It requires a studied effort not to see eternal conscious punishment implied in the words 'where the fire never goes out'"<sup>6</sup>. Of course, had he been reading from any other, more literal translation, he wouldn't have been able to make this argument, an argument not based on the inspired text but what is essentially an interpretation of the inspired text. The Bible doesn't actually say the "fire that never goes out," but because people think that is what the Bible says (since they think a fire that is not quenched is a fire that never goes out), they argue as if it does.

Similarly, even when looking at other translations (or other verses that speak of the fires not being quenched), because people wrongly think that single word quench means simply to stop burning, every passage that speaks of the fires of hell not being quenched are seen as evidence for eternal torment, when they actually are at best (for the traditionalist doctrine) ambiguous.<sup>7</sup> All they say is that the fire will not be extinguished, not that it burns forever.<sup>8</sup>

**It's easy to see what you are looking for and miss what you are not.**

If you don't believe this statement, take this **awareness test**. Assuming the link is still up at the point in time you read this, you'll see what I mean.

The Bible is no different. When I first became a believer I assumed that eternal torment was true right off the bat because, well, that's what Christians believe, darn it! And so as I read the Bible and read about eternal and unquenchable fire and eternal punishment I saw eternal torment in it, clear as a bell. But I didn't notice that Jesus himself said that God

would destroy body and soul in hell, or that the soul, which I was always told was immortal, is liable to death (James 5:20). I didn't give a second thought to the fact that by reducing them to ashes God made Sodom and Gomorrah an example of the ungodly. I didn't notice that the wicked would be burnt up and would be ashes under our feet (Malachi 4:1-5). I definitely didn't catch that Revelation 14:11 was alluding to (almost quoting) Isaiah 34:9-10, or that Mark 9:48 was quoting Isaiah 66:24 about a bunch of corpses. To be fair to traditionalists who don't see the last few connections, since we aren't bombarded with the Old Testament from early childhood like the Jews of Jesus's day, how could one today be expected to notice that if they aren't looking for it? That's my point.

It's no surprise that so many assume eternal torment in so many passages. The doctrine of hell is usually one of the fundamentals that we are taught before we get into the Bible. Here in the Christianized (though not very Christian) west, even non-Christians know that Christians believe in eternal torment. That doctrine is what we are all taught, and so that is what our minds will be predisposed to see. Things that seem so obvious to me now, like that some of our favorite evangelistic texts (John 3:16, Romans 6:23) compare eternal life not to eternal suffering, but to death and perishing, are easy to overlook. Why? Because I wasn't looking for references to annihilationism in the Bible. And I was even exposed to the idea of annihilationism before I even became a believer (though I didn't accept it until well after). How much more should we expect those who grew up in church, who since childhood believed in eternal torment, to see it in the Bible whenever hell comes up? How much more should we expect them to latch onto things that look a little bit like eternal torment and overlook things that look very much like annihilation, death, destruction?

That is why it is so important for us, as calmly and nicely as possible, as brothers, to say, "Ya know, have you ever noticed what this passage says? Think about that for a second." It's not natural to go against what you have always believed, and it's not natural to see what we aren't looking for. I mean, it is all the more important for us to have our eyes and ears open, so that things we would otherwise miss don't elude us forever.

## Conclusion

With those things in mind, stay tuned for the next installment of this series. After all, there is always more to learn.

## Part 2

### It Is Really Important to Understand the Opposing View



One thing that has been somewhat unusual about my conditionalist journey is that much more familiar with traditionalist literature on the topic of hell than I am with conditionalist literature. That is not to say I have not read anything by fellow conditionalists, but my exposure to a lot of this literature is relatively small

and relatively recent. One reason for that is simply that I didn't have to read that much to see that the position was biblical. In contrast, I have read and listened to no end of books and articles and sermons promoting the traditionalist view.

I think this me, and those like me, an edge. Why? Because we are well acquainted to many of the reasons why various traditionalists reject evangelical conditionalism. We know what doesn't work when it comes to promoting and defending conditionalism. We know that for many, the moment we mention God's love, many will tune us out. We know that it is unwise to deny that there is eternal punishment, since the Bible explicitly warns of "eternal punishment" in Matthew 25:46. We know that many think that "death" means conscious separation from God, so we know not to simply point to Romans 6:23 and leave it at that (although I do find it increasingly powerful to point to the death passages). We know that many believe that a sin against an infinite God warrants infinite punishment, so they are going to reject the argument that annihilationism is better because it annihilation is a finite punishment for finite sin. We know that some will point to the cross and say "Jesus wasn't annihilated" and so we know to have an answer to that objection.

You get the idea. In this and other matters, those who hold opposing views do so for a reason. They might not be good reasons, but they are reasons. Just giving your reasons may convince some more open-minded thinkers to consider a new view, but with something as contentious as the doctrine of final punishment, we really need to understand why traditionalists – of all stripes – hold to traditionalism. That way, we can show them that they don't have to hold onto it anymore (nor should they).

### Sometimes It's Just Not Worth Trying to Reason with Someone (At Least Not for the Time Being)

I'm sure we've all learned this lesson to some extent in life. We've all probably gotten into discussions about politics or religion, for example, so this shouldn't be an earth-shattering surprise. Some people are just incorrigible. Others just aren't willing to accept new ideas. Some are really beholden to what they were taught growing up. Others, for whatever reason, just cannot get their minds to follow clear and straightforward reasoning on a certain topic.

I knew this before. But I really came to understand this phenomenon when I started studying this topic. I think a number of factors are in play. One is simply the law of averages. There are a lot of traditionalists in the world. Traditionalism is, after all, held by the vast majority of all professing Christians. The more adherents there are, the more of all types of believers you will find. Another factor is that this is one of the first major doctrinal issues I really looked at in depth early on in my faith (the other being baptism). Some, who come to believe conditionalism later in life and studied many other controversial views before it, will probably be less surprised than I was. They, after all, would have already discovered this truth while studying those other controversial doctrines, and seen that some people just aren't ready to rethink things just yet.

What am I talking about when I say that sometimes people are not worth reasoning with at a

particular point in time? Well, within this field are two main camps. The first are those who are so emotionally tied to the doctrine of eternal torment being true that anyone who disagrees is anathema to them. These are the people who argue that annihilationism cheapens the gospel. They are the people who make outrageous claims about how, if the lost won't suffer forever, then Jesus didn't need to die. They say things that are as offensive and over the top as they are logically fallacious. If somebody passionately throws the gospel into this and says you are messing with it, nine times out of ten they just are not worth even discussing the issue with.<sup>1</sup> After all, for whatever warped reason, the very gospel is at stake in their eyes. Those who make something so clearly non-essential into an essential doctrine are, at best, going to question how devoted to God's truth you are, and at worst, question whether you are even a believer.

The second camp is made up of those who don't make it so personal. They are much more cordial and civil and brotherly. It is just that they cannot wrap their heads around anything other than what they already believe. They are not intellectually dishonest, but they are very intellectually inconsistent. They will say that their position is better because they can take a passage literally or at "face value" (for more on that, see [here](#)), but then fail to understand that by doing so, they reject literal/face value interpretations of many other passages. Or they argue that the Bible is for everyone and that the simple, uneducated apostles could have never meant anything as complex as you are saying (despite the apostles knowing the biblical languages as natives and being inspired by God). Then, however, after making such a big deal about simplicity, they then have to establish a more complex and biblically dubious line of reasoning to keep the interpretation of a single passage or even a single word (like "eternal") "simple." And when you point this out, they don't get it.

Of course, with either group things may improve with time. No one is saying that if someone is a jerk to you should avoid them forever. And those in the latter group, who don't quite seem to get it yet, are in an even better position since sometimes, it just takes a little time for things to click in people's minds. And part of grace is giving people the chance to improve themselves over time, which we would certainly all want to be given in situations where the roles were reversed. Just know that sometimes, you need to walk away for the time being.

### You Become A Real Stickler About Exegesis and Reasoning in General

Like most things on this list, this lesson isn't unique to conditionalism. Holding to any controversial view will require you to fine-tune your critical thinking skills. This is because any controversial view will be challenged. The more it is challenged, the more you will understand why you hold a view, and why others don't. And the more this happens, the more you will be exposed to bad arguments. This occurs in all theological debates. With something as controversial and widely panned as traditionalism, you will certainly come across all kinds of arguments against it. As you do, you will become a real stickler about exegesis and reasoning, seeing holes in opposing arguments that you would not have noticed before.

It is human nature to be more sensitive to bad arguments by those who disagree with you, but that said, you will likely encounter some on both sides. In some cases, you may even

encounter so many on your own side that you ultimately change your belief. Whatever the case, you will start noticing that a lot of people make bad arguments. They commit logical fallacies. They don't consider the logical implications of their arguments (as has been discussed here multiple times). This occurs in all theological debates.

As a conditionalist, I would say this is the norm in traditionalist defenses, which is to be expected if traditionalism is untrue. This was the inspiration for co-contributor Glenn People's "[Open Letter To My Traditionalist Friends](#)," about which he was interviewed back in [Episode 8](#). But even if traditionalism is right, it is still to be expected that even those who argue for a correct doctrine can do so poorly. After all, we have all read defenses of views we agree with that were guilty of poor reasoning and exegesis. Even conditionalists can do this. Even I can do this! If even people who are right can make bad arguments, how much more should we expect people who are wrong to do so?

That said, if so many believers from so many different denominations and traditionalists can all hold to a view and all be wrong about it, we would expect many different kinds of poor arguments to be made. And where there is so much bad reasoning and exegesis done by those who hold to a different view than you, you can imagine that you will become really acquainted with poor argumentation.

For me, being a conditionalist has made me much more aware of the successes and failures of other people's arguments, as well as my own. And this applies to issues far beyond those on this topic. After all, [the previously discussed non-sequitur fallacy](#) makes an argument just as false when applied to a particular political idea or doctrine regarding Israel, for example, as it is when it is used to argue for a particular view of hell. Similarly, I have become increasingly sensitive to people reading their assumptions into the Bible. Think of how Bible skeptics and theological liberals do this. They believe that the Bible teaches that slavery in all forms in all times is good, and so therefore every mention of slavery means slavery just like we had it in the US before the Civil War. They believe that the Bible treats women as inferior and as property, so any mention of rape means the Bible says rape is okay. They believe that the Bible is constantly wrong about things, so every time it could be wrong when taken at face value with no consideration of any other factors, it is wrong and that is that. You were no doubt aware of all these things before (and then some), but as an evangelical conditionalist, that awareness becomes acute. You realize that a lot of people in life simply are not very clear thinkers, and even those who are are still not perfect.

## Conclusion

In all of this, the one thing worth emphasizing these lessons are not all negative. Rather, whether learned through experience or by reading this blog, they can help us to better understand those who disagree with us, better react to the various situations that may arise in debates and discussions, and just overall improve the dialogue we have with others. That sounds pretty positive to me.

## Notes:

1. The theoretical 1/10 is the young person who doesn't know the Bible well, who is just

parroting his pastor, and who would immediately change his tune when he realizes for the first time that the Bible says that God will “destroy” the wicked in hell (a la Matthew 10:28).>

## Notes:

1. For those wondering, Edward Fudge is not part of the “conservative” movement within Church of Christ, and he is in fact quite vocal in his opposition to some of their more unsavory elements.>

2. This is not a reference to specific, linguistic arguments about the original language, as have come up in recent posts by [Dr. Glenn Peoples](#) and esteemed guest contributor, [Dr. Claude Mariottini](#). The argument that they successfully rebut is basically that the Hebrew in a similar verse, Isaiah 66:24, is mistranslated when it says “their fire is not quenched.” Rather than speaking of a fire that is not quenched, the Hebrew literally says that the fire does not extinguish itself, that it never goes out. Rather, virtually all traditionalists I have read, even those who know the biblical languages, simply see a fire not being quenched or being unquenchable, in English, and say, “See? It is not quenched. That means it burns for eternity!” It will soon become clear why the distinction matters.>

3. “Quench,” Merriam-Webster.com, Retrieved 1 May 2011. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/quench>>

4. Technically, the final possible definition, when used intransitively, is to “become calm,” which in theory could be consistent with the idea that a fire that dies out is quenched. That said, that is not the definition or even the primary definition. It would at most be a secondary, user-driven definition, based on the idea that something that becomes calm has been quenched by some unidentified force. And even then the traditionalist argument still falls apart. At best, for the traditionalist who argues from the language of fire not being quenched, the passages are ambiguous; “quench” could mean what they have to assume it means, but it could reasonably mean (and usually does mean) something else. You never want to have a position that only holds when you assume a secondary, less common meaning of a word in a context that doesn’t at all indicate such a thing.>

5. The Lockman Foundation. New American Standard Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible, ed. Robert L. Thomas (Holman Bible, 1981), 1636>

6. Robert Yarbrough, “Jesus on Hell,” in Hell under Fire. Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment (Zondervan, 2004), 74>

7. The fact that so many times unquenchable fires in judgment refer to devouring fires that leave nothing but ashes behind is really more of a help to the annihilationist doctrine than anything else.>

8. There are some reasonable arguments that even if the fire burns forever those in it do not. That however goes beyond the point of this discussion.>