

STATEMENT ON

Evangelical Conditionalism

Today there is a growing number of evangelical Christians who reject the majority doctrine of hell known as “eternal conscious torment” (ECT), as well as the more controversial minority position of universal reconciliation.

These Christians are embracing a third historical and biblical alternative known as conditional immortality (CI)—or simply “conditionalism”—which is also known as “annihilationism” in reference to God’s final judgment of the unsaved.

Conditionalism is the view that life or existence is the Creator’s provisional gift to all, which will ultimately either be *granted forever* on the basis of righteousness (by grace, through faith), or *revoked forever* on the basis of unrighteousness.

Evangelical conditionalists believe that the saved in Christ will receive glory, honor and immortality, being raised with an incorruptible body to *inherit eternal life* (Romans 2:7). The unsaved will be raised in shame and dishonor, to face God and receive the just condemnation for their sins. When the penalty is carried out, they will be permanently *excluded from eternal life* by means of a final death (loss of being; destruction of the whole person; Matthew 10:28).

As a group of evangelical conditionalists, we have collaborated on the following statement to articulate our shared beliefs and areas of theological diversity, in order to foster greater clarity as we engage in dialogue with fellow evangelicals.

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Statement prepared by *Rethinking Hell*, a non-profit organization promoting conditional immortality and respectful dialogue on the topic of Hell. For inquiries, please email media@rethinkinghell.com

1. We Affirm the Essentials of Evangelical Christianity

Evangelical conditionalists readily affirm statements of faith that are characteristically evangelical, such as that of the *World Evangelical Alliance*:

We believe in...

The Holy Scriptures as originally given by God, divinely inspired, infallible, entirely trustworthy; and the supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct...

One God, eternally existent in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit...

Our Lord Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, His virgin birth, His sinless human life, His divine miracles, His vicarious and atoning death, His bodily resurrection, His ascension, His mediatorial work, and His Personal return in power and glory...

The Salvation of lost and sinful man through the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ by faith apart from works, and regeneration by the Holy Spirit...

The Holy Spirit, by whose indwelling the believer is enabled to live a holy life, to witness and work for the Lord Jesus Christ...

The Unity of the Spirit of all true believers, the Church, the Body of Christ...

The Resurrection of both the saved and the lost; they that are saved unto the resurrection of life, they that are lost unto the resurrection of damnation.

Many prominent evangelical leaders have held to the view of conditionalism without compromising their core theological commitments, and groups such as the *Evangelical Alliance UK* explicitly include conditionalism as an acceptable view. We call for unity among evangelicals on the essentials we all affirm, and for charity where diversity is not any cause for division.

2. We Believe in Hell

Evangelical conditionalists take the biblical language describing hell and final punishment quite seriously. While many of us recognize that Scripture often uses highly symbolic imagery to describe final judgment, we also believe that we interpret the biblical language overall much more straightforwardly than those who hold to ECT: the analogy of weeds being completely burned up in fire; the comparison of the fate of the unsaved to those who perished in the flood and in Sodom and Gomorrah; the biblical emphasis on the final death and destruction of the unsaved; and more. We don't reject the existence of hell; we simply disagree concerning its nature and duration.

3. We Represent a Broad Range of Evangelical Backgrounds

Evangelical conditionalists are uniform in our belief that the unsaved will not live forever, and yet we are as theologically varied as evangelicals holding to the majority view of hell, concerning various in-house debates over the nonessentials of Christian doctrine.

We belong to many diverse denominations and faith communities: non-denominationalist, Baptist, Churches of Christ, Episcopalian/Anglican, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, and to many evangelical organizations. We are scholars and laypeople, pastors, teachers, overseers, missionaries and ministry workers.

4. Scripture, Not Emotion, Ultimately Determines Our Convictions

Evangelical conditionalists hold to a view of hell that results from a firm commitment to the truthfulness and perennial relevance of the Bible, and not from a desire to have its message be more palatable to our own culture. We are not seeking to construct a more tolerable version of hell, as though primarily motivated by an emotional aversion to the idea of eternal torment. Neither do we assume, however, that the correct view of Hell must be whichever is perceived to be the harshest and most intolerable.

However we might feel emotionally about any view of the fate of the unsaved, we do not subject Scripture to our emotions. We have been convinced primarily by direct statements of Scripture that the penalty God has outlined for those who reject his offer of life is clearly the eternal punishment of the “second death,” rather than endless torment.

We believe that the punishment of annihilation as the permanent loss of life is a terrible fate, analogous to the most extreme form of human justice: capital punishment. The conditionalist view does not allow a Christian to escape from emotional anguish at the fate of the unsaved. Imagining a person under judgement coming to the realization that they are bereft of hope, devoid of the gift of eternal life, and facing the end of their existence should produce a profound sadness at the present plight of the lost. It should kindle in us a deep desire to share the gospel of God’s forgiveness and the offer of eternal life, found only through Christ’s work on our behalf.

5. We Believe the Unsaved Will Be Raised from the Dead for Final Judgment

Evangelical conditionalists affirm the future, bodily resurrection of both the saved and the unsaved: those who are saved, to the resurrection of eternal life with God; those who are unsaved, to face final punishment, consisting ultimately in the destruction of body and soul, a permanent end to life and conscious existence.

6. We Believe Eternal Life Is Found Only In Christ

Evangelical conditionalists reject the unbiblical notion that all human beings are naturally immortal (which many holding the mainstream view accept), and affirm that it is only through receiving the benefits of Christ's victory over death that any person can be made alive forever, which Scripture only describes as being given to those who are saved. Therefore, since immortality will not be granted to unsaved human beings, we see no way for them to have ongoing life or conscious existence. Though they will be raised from the dead to face judgment, their rejection of God's free gift of eternal life in Christ will mean that they will have to face death a second time, from which there can be no return to life.

7. We Believe Final Death is the Just Penalty for The Unsaved

Evangelical conditionalists do not elevate the love and mercy of God above his holiness and justice. In principle, we do not conceive of the final destruction of the lost as an act of mercy, or form of "divine euthanasia." The lost are not rescued from the serious implications of a "cosmic death penalty," which is truly deserved as an expression of God's perfect justice. God has shown mercy to the unsaved throughout their lives, but final punishment requires that with their very lives they must pay the price of rejecting God's forgiveness and grace. (Note: the question of how death is experienced is addressed in 8.2.)

8. We Accept Diversity on Particular Details

8.1. We differ on whether final punishment is finite in duration

Conditionalists sometimes put forward the idea that the biblical word translated "eternal" means "age-lasting" rather than "everlasting" when describing final punishment, or that it refers to punishment *in* or *of* the everlasting age to come. However, many of us wholeheartedly affirm that "eternal punishment" is an apt phrase to refer to the fate of the unsaved. In these terms, the punishment of death involves an everlasting deprivation of life. We can therefore agree with proponents of ECT that the punishment is eternal in scope, even though we disagree about its nature.

8.2. We differ on the timing, nature, degrees and relative duration of suffering

All conditionalists agree that there will at least be mental anguish experienced by the unsaved, in terms of abject shame, dread, anger and bitter regret.

Those who describe final punishment as basically finite in duration do so by locating punishment in the experience of conscious suffering (whether mental or physical), which culminates in death. Since suffering is seen as the thing which exhausts God's punishment, those who hold to this view tend to see this as relatively protracted, and varying by degrees among individuals. As a further difference, some might see here a more passive death, as God ceases to sustain life.

Those who instead locate final punishment primarily in death's significance as the means of exclusion from eternal life, tend to emphasize that any suffering is part of the process of a person being destroyed. If they do hold to suffering (whether mental or physical) in addition to the generally accepted anguish prior to punishment, as many do, they tend to see it as relatively brief in duration, comparable to the experience of Christ on the cross. This may include varying degrees, with the caveat that these exhaust an aspect of God's justice, while preserving death as the ultimate, universal penalty.

8.3. We differ on whether Satan and demons will be destroyed

Evangelical conditionalists, though uniform in their shared belief that unsaved human beings will not live forever, do not all agree when it comes to the eternal fate of the devil and demons. According to many conditionalists, these beings will be destroyed forever, sharing the fate of unsaved human beings. Others disagree, believing that demonic beings will be tormented for eternity. While this is an interesting question, it has no impact on our central concern about human beings.

8.4. We differ on anthropology and the intermediate state

Evangelical conditionalists also differ in terms of what we believe the Bible says about the constitution of human beings, and also about whether people are conscious in the intermediate state between death and resurrection. Some are anthropological physicalists or materialists who believe human beings are physical creatures, the functioning of whose minds is dependent upon their living bodies. Others are substance dualists who believe human beings have immaterial souls, but that they lack consciousness between death and resurrection. Still others embrace a traditional body/soul dualism and contend that the immaterial souls of human beings live on consciously after death (although not immortal in any sense), until a resurrection of the body. The same diversity of perspectives exists within evangelicalism more broadly, and therefore is not a logical requirement or consequence of CI.