

Conditional Immortality—An Acceptable View?

What does Conditional Immortality affirm and deny?

As a doctrinal position, *conditional immortality* explicitly affirms that immortality is a gift from God given only to the saved (1 Tim 6:16; Rom 2:7; 2 Tim 1:10; 1 Cor 15:54). Immortality means living forever (literally, *deathlessness*).

It also implicitly rejects *universal immortality*, the view that all people are or will be immortal. Since this is a tenet of both *eternal torment* and *universal salvation*, conditionalism necessarily denies those two positions.¹

Conditionalism is described in terms of “eternal life” for the saved, and “eternal punishment” for the unsaved (Matt 25:46). Punishment here consists of an “eternal judgment” of death instead of life, requiring an “eternal destruction” of “body and soul” (Heb 6:2; 2 Thess 1:9 cf. Matt 10:28).

This aspect of conditionalism can be called *annihilation*. Whereas the concept of death speaks of a forfeit of life—without specifying whether this will be temporary or permanent—annihilation speaks of a death that is permanent. Since God is the source of life (Acts 17:25; Heb 1:3; Rev 2:7 cf. Gen 3:22), this may be understood in terms of a consequence of eternal separation or severance from God.

Proponents of conditionalism are therefore able to affirm any Christian statement of faith to include the language of eternal separation, and/or expressly biblical terms such as “eternal punishment.” However, conditionalists are unable to affirm statements which include everlasting torment, or everlasting consciousness for the unsaved.

Does Conditional Immortality reject a core doctrine of Christian faith?

Neither conditionalism nor annihilationism were rejected by any early church councils or creeds. These also did not affirm universal immortality, either in the form of eternal torment or of universal salvation (a version of which was [arguably rejected](#) at the time of the Second Council of Constantinople in 553 AD).

¹ Conditionalism therefore also rejects universal salvation’s stipulation of a universally-met condition for immortality.

However, eternal torment and the immortal soul became official dogma of the Roman Catholic church. If one is Catholic, then conditionalism may be considered a rejection of the church's teaching.

In the Protestant tradition, the Catholic dogma "that the soul is immortal" was most famously rejected by Martin Luther,² and later by William Tyndale, both of whom were following in the footsteps of John Wycliffe in this regard. Protestants are not typically bound to any teaching that the soul is by nature immortal, and thereby will eternally exist.³ Strictly speaking, it is only the eternal existence of souls here that conditionalism must deny, since if God created a soul with an immortal constitution, it does not follow that God will never destroy that soul.

As for the question of whether eternal torment must be affirmed within Protestantism, this varies according to context, and is often tied to a particular statement of faith (which do vary in this regard, as noted above). The general trend is toward statements with language deliberately selected to be inclusive of conditionalism and all forms of eternal torment.

The additional question of whether belief in eternal torment is absolutely essential to Christian faith, goes beyond denominational context. It would be relatively rare to find any formal church statement explicitly equating disbelief in eternal torment with disbelief in Jesus Christ. Despite this, it is less rare to find individuals who are willing to take that position.

A final question arises as to whether any core doctrine of the Christian faith is challenged by some logical implication of conditionalism. The common charge in this connection is that if Jesus Christ underwent the penalty that is due to sinners (under a penal substitutionary atonement model), then annihilationism entails that his divine and human natures were separated.⁴ But this is based on a mistaken assumption that conditionalism stipulates annihilation or everlasting destruction as the punishment for sin, instead of simply death (Rom 6:23). Death is the wages of sin universally, so that this still applies at the time of the final judgment, just as it did when Jesus forfeited or "laid down" his life (John 10:17, 18). The difference between the two is not that the wages or punishment is changed, in which case an exact substitutionary atonement would not be supported. Rather, in the context of final punishment a judgment is being given that is eternally binding (Heb 6:2). This means that the wages of sin will be applied to individuals irrevocably. While it is true that annihilation ends up describing their eternal punishment, annihilation is not the judicial standard used.

² Martin Luther, "Assertio omnium Articulorum m. Lutheri per Bullam Leonis X. novissimam Damnatorum," article 27, 131-32. Note: For Luther, the rejection of the soul's innate immortality did not lead ultimately to rejecting eternal torment.

³ A notable exception would be a situation requiring full adherence to the Westminster Confession, which speaks of mankind being created "with reasonable and immortal souls."

⁴ For a more thorough response to this charge see Chris Date, "Cross Purposes: Atonement, Death and the Fate of the Wicked," available in [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#).

Is Conditional Immortality an acceptable view outside Roman Catholicism?

Yes, broadly and formally speaking. The Eastern Orthodox church has no official view. The Church of England does have a formal position: Conditional Immortality.⁵

In terms of the global evangelical movement, conditionalism is compatible with the statement of faith of the [World Evangelical Alliance](#), and other regional statements such as that of the [Evangelical Alliance](#), the largest and oldest evangelical body in the UK, which also takes the [explicit position](#): “The interpretation of hell in terms of conditional immortality is a significant minority evangelical view. Furthermore, we believe that the traditionalist-conditionalist debate on hell should be regarded as a secondary rather than a primary issue for evangelical theology.”⁶

A principal leader of the movement, John Stott, embraced conditionalism. Another principal voice in the movement, J.I. Packer, stated that conditionalists are “honored fellow-evangelicals,” and that “it would be wrong for differences of opinion on this matter to lead to breaches of fellowship.”⁷

Among the many celebrated proponents of evangelical conditionalism are Basil Atkinson, Richard Bauckham, E. Earle Ellis, Roger Forster, R.T. France, Michael Green, Harold Guillebaud, P.E. Hughes, David Instone-Brewer, Dale Moody, I. Howard Marshall, John Stackhouse Jr., John Stott, Richard Swinburne, Anthony Thistleton, Terrance Tiessen, Stephen Travis, John Wenham and Nigel Wright.

⁵ The Doctrine Commission of the Church of England, “The Mystery of Salvation” (London: Church House Publishing 1995).

⁶ Evangelical Alliance Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals, “The Nature of Hell” (London: Paternoster Publishing 2005), see pp130-5.

⁷ J. I. Packer, “Evangelical Annihilationism in Review,” *Reformation & Revival* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 37-51.