

Conditional Immortality—An Acceptable View?

What does Conditional Immortality affirm and deny?

As a Christian doctrinal position, *conditional immortality* affirms that immortality—living forever and never dying—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; John 6:50-51; John 11:25-26; Luke 20:36).

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

Conditional immortality, or conditionalism, is expressed in terms of a reward of “eternal life” for the saved, and an “eternal punishment” for the finally unsaved (Matt 25:46). The punishment is an “eternal judgment” of death instead of life, since the wages of sin is death (Heb 6:2; Rom 6:23). This requires an “eternal destruction” of “body and soul” (2 Thess 1:9 cf. Matt 10:28).

Although the biblical label for that event is “the second death,” it can also be called *annihilation* (conditionalism and annihilationism may be used interchangeably). Whereas the concept of death indicates the forfeit of life but doesn’t specify duration, annihilation speaks of a death that is a permanent loss of life, and destruction of the whole person. Since God is the source and sustainer of life (Acts 17:25; Heb 1:3; Rev 2:7 cf. Gen 3:22), this kind of demise may be considered a consequence of eternal separation or severance from God.

Proponents of conditionalism are therefore able to affirm any Christian statement of faith that includes the language of eternal separation, or expressly biblical terms such as “eternal punishment” and “eternal fire.” Examples of such statements are referenced below. However, conditionalists are unable to affirm statements which specify everlasting torment, or any kind of everlasting consciousness (immortality) for the unsaved.

Does Conditional Immortality reject a core doctrine of Christian faith?

Conditional Immortality does not reject any core doctrine of Christian faith, either directly or by implication. Conditionalism actually emphasizes some core doctrines, including bodily resurrection and the atoning death of Christ.

¹ Conditionalism therefore also rejects universalism’s affirmation of a universally-met condition for immortality.

Neither conditionalism nor annihilationism were rejected by any early church councils or creeds. It is occasionally alleged that conditionalists deny the Athanasian Creed, where it says “and those who have done evil will enter eternal fire.” But conditionalists affirm this without reservation, believing that God’s eternal fire is what destroys those cast into it. The early creeds 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).

However, eternal torment and the immortal soul became official dogma of the Roman Catholic church. If one is Catholic, then conditionalism might be considered a rejection of the church’s teaching. It also might not, in that some Catholic authors have recently argued for the legitimacy of conditionalism in their tradition.²

In the Protestant tradition, the papal dogma “that the soul is immortal” was most famously rejected by Martin Luther,³ 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 will thereby eternally exist. Strictly speaking, conditionalists need only deny that the soul will eternally exist, since even if God created a soul with an immortal constitution, God is still able to destroy it, and may do so.⁴

Conditionalism is sometimes charged with implying that the divine and human natures of Jesus Christ were separated⁵, if he underwent the penalty that we say is due to sinners (under a penal substitutionary atonement model). 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 always the wages of sin, and this applies at the final judgment, just as it did when Jesus forfeited or “laid down” his life (John 10:17, 18). Having died and atoned for sin, the sinless Christ rose from death, having victory over it. He had “abolished death and brought life and immortality to light” (2 Tim 1:10). The difference between the two occasions of the death penalty is not that the wages or punishment has changed, in which case an exact substitutionary atonement would not occur. Rather, in the context of final punishment a judgment of death is given that is *eternally binding* (Heb 6:2). Hence, the punishment for sin is then applied irrevocably. While it is true that annihilation or destruction ends up describing the event of eternal punishment, God still uses the judicial standard of *death*, the forfeit of life, rendered eternal.

² See Paul J. Griffiths’ “Decreation: The Last Things of All Creatures” (Baylor University Press, 2014) and Robert Wild’s “A Catholic Reading Guide to Conditional Immortality: The Third Alternative to Hell and Universalism” (Resource Publications, 2016).

³ Martin Luther, “Assertio omnium Articulorum m. Lutheri per Bullam Leonis X. novissimam Damnatorum,” article 27, 131–32. Note: For Luther, rejecting the soul’s innate immortality did not lead ultimately to rejecting eternal torment.

⁴ This nuance may allow full adherence to the Westminster Confession, which speaks of mankind being created “with reasonable and immortal souls,” if that is the view of the particular conditionalist. Otherwise, this confession is a notable exception, and cannot be affirmed.

⁵ For a more thorough response to this charge see the article by Chris Date, “Cross Purposes: Atonement, Death and the Fate of the Wicked,” available in [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#).

So conditionalism does not deny any core doctrine of the Christian faith. Despite that, there are various contexts in which it may or may not be “acceptable.”

In which contexts is Conditional Immortality an acceptable view?

As noted, within the Catholic tradition where eternal torment is most dominant, the fact that conditionalism isn't also acceptable is still not a settled matter. The Eastern Orthodox church has no official view (though it has a common view of hell), and is non-dogmatic in the area of eschatology.

In the Protestant world, conditionalism is broadly and generally permissible, if not outright affirmed (for instance, it is the official position of the Church of England⁶), although there are a variety of contexts which are the exception to this rule. These are usually tied to a statement of faith affirming eternal torment. While such statements exclude conditionalism from that particular context, they normally aren't intended to pronounce that it is unacceptable everywhere. The general trend is toward statements with language deliberately selected to be inclusive of conditionalism and all forms of eternal torment, such as the Protestant [Reforming Catholic Confession](#).

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 [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.”⁷

John Stott, a principal leader of the evangelical church, embraced conditionalism. Another principal leader, J.I. Packer, stated that conditionalists are “honored fellow-evangelicals,” and “it would be wrong for differences of opinion on this matter to lead to breaches of fellowship.”⁸ In conservative American circles, conditionalism is broadly permissible among laity wherever a statement of faith doesn't preclude membership. Meanwhile, various church pastors (including Baptists, for example) and tenured academics have publicly declared their commitment to conditionalism.

Evangelical Conditionalism is seen as a distinctly acceptable form of conditional immortality, and is championed by the organisation, [Rethinking Hell](#). Among the many celebrated proponents of evangelical conditionalism are Basil Atkinson, Richard Bauckham, E. Earle Ellis, Roger Forster, R.T. France, Michael Green, Harold Gullebaud, 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.

⁶ Doctrine Commission of the Church of England, “The Mystery of Salvation” (London: Church House Publishing 1995).

⁷ Evangelical Alliance Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals, “The Nature of Hell” (London: Paternoster Publishing 2005), see pp130-5.

⁸ J. I. Packer, “Evangelical Annihilationism in Review,” *Reformation & Revival* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 37-51.