

An open letter to my traditionalist friends

Glenn Peoples

Dear friends

Not just friends, but brothers and sisters. Some of you might think that I am feigning my treatment of you as both friends and even family. I'm not sure how to persuade you that I'm genuine, but I am. I'm writing this open letter because I don't know you all personally (in fact I don't know any of you personally), and I also think other people might benefit from seeing what I have to say.

Who are you? In the long and protracted debate over the biblical teaching on judgement and final punishment, you've gained the label "traditionalists." You say that the Bible teaches that God will punish the lost with eternal torment. There's a range of different terms that many of you use, but that's a reasonable summary. Some of you use those terms, while others prefer what you take as less crude language like "eternal separation from God." But you believe that it will last forever, it will be a conscious experience, and it will be horrific. In particular, I write this for those of you who are apologists for this belief. The people I have in mind have contributed to a veritable torrent of books, articles, public talks and sermons on the subject, assuring the church and the public that the Bible teaches eternal torment.

I don't believe you're correct. I am persuaded that the Bible teaches annihilationism. You don't like that fact. Many of you are on record telling people that annihilationism is false and unbiblical, that it is clearly so, that it undermines the Gospel, that it misrepresents God, that it underestimates sin, that it is a concession to postmodernity and so on. Many of you swarm theological organisations, gatherings, websites and so on, reassuring your peers and your readers that you hold the solid, clearly biblical position, and that annihilationists quite clearly lack biblical support for their view, and many of you encourage theological organisations and colleges that would literally exclude me from working or even studying there because I am

persuaded as I am.

Other readers who perhaps do not wade into theological controversy and who might not be familiar with this issue will likely find this letter rather dreary and irrelevant. They can simply ignore it, I suppose. But I am writing to you. What's more, I have nothing personally to gain in writing this. Your colleges will continue to be unlikely to hire me because of my beliefs on this issue (and writing this will certainly not help this situation), and mainstream colleges will be uninterested in the fact that I have an interest in the subject at all. I will not increase my number of friends, but may potentially increase the number of people hostile to me. But I'm writing to you anyway.

As you know – and some of you express dismay over it – if this theological disagreement were a war, you would be losing. Christians are turning away from your point of view. In spite of the fact that you have spilled more ink than anyone else in this disagreement, evangelical Christians are, more and more, adopting different views on hell from yours. In particular, the doctrine of annihilationism now has more evangelical adherents than it has, I believe, ever had before. I'm writing this letter to tell you why I think this is happening.

Why do you need this commentary? It's because of this: I believe that you are partly responsible for this shift. Now ultimately I think the teaching of Scripture and a changing attitude to tradition is responsible for this shift, but you have certainly contributed. I suppose if you had simply remained silent, the change would be happening anyway, but you would be mistaken to think that you are stemming the tide. You're not. Please hear me out. I am going to say some things that you will not like. I am not setting out to offend you, but that may happen. Some Christian scholars do not react to criticism very well at all. When some of my criticisms of one of your author's arguments was published a few years ago, he accused me of making personal attacks on him. To this day I do not know what he was referring to. When I, a couple of days ago, told one of you that his book really didn't contain any new arguments for eternal torment that had not been addressed before, he told me, "I take exception" to being told this. I don't know how else I could have stated the facts. I don't think reactions

like this are appropriate. If you have chosen to enter an ongoing discussion and to criticise the beliefs of others, then you need to make yourself teachable, and you need to be willing to listen to the criticisms that other people present you with. Or at least, you need to not take personal umbrage when they do it.

I'm going to explain why your published arguments have not helped your case, in the sense that they have not caused a swing back to traditionalism – and why they are unlikely to do so in future. These are not pleasant things to be saying, but they are true. I am going to tell you that your endless stream of apologetics on behalf of your doctrine of eternal torment is very poorly argued, fallacious, tiresome, ineffective and even just lazy sometimes. That will appear very blunt. Those sound like insults to some people. But if they are true, then you are not helped by not being told these things. You need to hear them. There has to be a context in which you are willing to hear people tell you these things if they believe they're true.

There is a sense in which I am also expressing personal frustration with you. That's not necessarily an inappropriate thing to do. However, I will attempt to be truthful and clear without letting that frustration get in the way of the fact that I do regard you as, all things being considered, being on the same "team" as me. We have a lot more in common than not as fellow believers in Christ.

With these things said, let me get to what I take to be the facts.

Problem 1: Your interpretation of the relevant biblical texts is really bad

I understand that you do not like to be told this. Nobody who has expertise in theology would like it. I am not simply trying to make you feel insulted, but I realise that this might be the result for some people. I did try to think of other, perhaps nicer ways of saying it, but this is the truth and it's what I want you to realise. Your exegesis of the texts of Scripture that contribute to this debate is not simply a bit off or in need of minor

tweaking. It represents what is likely to be the worst exegesis you have ever engaged in or will ever engage in throughout your entire academic or pastoral career. In any other context you would immediately reject exegesis of this standard, and you would probably be incredulous that a critical reader of the Bible could ever engage in such pseudo-scholarship. I'm sorry to have to put it so bluntly but that is exactly what I want to tell you.

Please listen to this: I am not saying that you are not intelligent, or that in general you don't have the ability to engage in careful biblical interpretation. You are, and you do. But I would be patronising you if I said that the arguments that you have sought to use from Scripture against annihilationist arguments are in general fairly good, albeit mistaken. They're not. They are hasty, careless, they engage in special pleading, they make use of reasoning that people among your own number have called fallacious in other contexts, sometimes they appear to intentionally exclude important pieces of evidence from the very texts that they are supposed to be explaining, they make unwarranted leaps in logic, they gloss over important facts and they are overwhelmingly dismissive. In short, they strongly suggest that your position is not the product of careful exegesis, but the reverse is true: Your exegesis has been cobbled together simply to defend your position.

These are not mere rhetorical overstatements. These observations are easy to demonstrate. I am not going to reproduce every one of your arguments here, but I will offer an example of each of the kinds of unfortunate arguments that I allude to above.

1 Your exegesis is sometimes hasty and/or careless

Sometimes you appear to be in such a hurry, and to be so certain of what the text in front of you says, that you simply rush your exegesis, and when this is pointed out to you you are still as impatient as you were in the first place, so you do not even see what is being pointed out to you. You want the objection to just go away so your conclusion can be reached without annoying distractions.

For example, Robert Peterson argues that 2 Thessalonians 1:9 shows that annihilationism is false. This passage reads (in the New International Version): “They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of His power.” Peterson says: “[D]oes it make sense for the apostle to describe unbelievers’ extinction as their being “shut out from the presence of the Lord”? Does not their being shut out from his presence imply their existence?”¹ The words that are doing the work here are “shut out.” Peterson’s point is that the text doesn’t just say that people will be destroyed, it also says that they will be “shut out.” But you can’t be “shut out” unless you exist, can you? So the lost will continue to exist in hell, reasons Peterson.

This is shockingly careless. As many of you will know (and as any of you can find out by checking), the words “shut out” are not in most translations, because they do not answer to any combination of Greek terms in this verse. They literally aren’t there. Literally translated, this passage actually says that people “will be punished with everlasting destruction from the face of the Lord...” etc. There is no way to say that this text says that they will be destroyed and also “shut out,” as though the writer is indicating that they will continue to live on by adding the words “and shut out.” Paul simply didn’t add those words at all. A little more care and patience would have prevented this argument from ever arising.

That carelessness is the culprit here is only confirmed by the following. A few years ago I had a paper published which, among other things, pointed out the error in Peterson’s argument here. The words “and shut out” are not really part of this text, so it is not legitimate to build an argument for something Paul must have meant by appealing to those words. They’re not Paul’s words. Peterson’s reply only heightened the frustration. He starts out by quoting from several passages and then issuing a challenge:

They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction away *from the presence of the Lord* and from the glory of his might (ESV; italics supplied). [The margin

¹ “A Traditionalist Response to John Stott’s Arguments for Annihilationism,” *JETS* 37:4 (1994), 555.

gives as an alternative “destruction that comes from.”]

They will be punished with everlasting destruction and *shut out from the presence of the Lord* and from the majesty of his power (NIV; italics supplied).

These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, *away from the presence of the Lord* and from the glory of His power (NASB; italics supplied).

Did the translation committees of each of these versions of the Bible fail to see that the italicized words were not in the original Greek? Are all three translations therefore unreliable at this point?²

You will see immediately that in all the versions quoted, Peterson has italicised the wrong words. Yes, these translations all refer to the presence of the Lord, but that was never the issue. He has simply rushed in again without pausing to review the argument put to him. Only one of these translations included his crucial phrase, “and shut out,” which was the phrase that he originally stressed. He has mishandled the argument.

Peterson is not alone. I am only using this example so that I can actually put some flesh on the bones, as it were. My friends, how many of you do this sort of thing? Do you caution each other when you see one another doing it? Would you let a colleague get away with this if you saw them doing it? Would you say “wait a moment there brother, while I agree with your conclusion, that’s not quite what the verse says,” or “look, I think you’re correct overall, but that’s not the argument he’s using”? Patience is a great virtue, but it looks to me at times that those defending the traditionalist cause simply lack this virtue when making their case. They know what the conclusion ought to be, and they are in a great hurry to get there, so at times the relevant pieces of exegetical data just become details that must be rushed through.

2 Your exegesis sometimes engages in special pleading

I have already said (and will say more) about specific points of exegesis in other sections, so let me be brief here. Sometimes – especially at really crucial points in your argument for traditionalism or against

²“Fallacies in the Annihilationism Debate? A Response to Glenn Peoples,” *JETS*, 50:2 (2007), 353.

annihilationism – you engage in special pleading. This is where you appear to need a word or words, or a biblical motif, to work fundamentally differently from the way it normally works, in a context where your case needs it to work differently.

For example, annihilationists have pointed to verses like Matthew 10:28 where Jesus says that God will destroy the lost in Gehenna, “body and soul.” Many of you have asked us to believe that *apollumi* here does not carry the strong sense of killing or destruction, but rather “ruin” or “loss.” Perhaps you think that Jesus meant that God will *lose* a person’s body and soul in hell, but “ruin” is more likely what you have in mind. However, it is relevant to note that when the word is used as a verb form *everywhere else in the Synoptic Gospels* to describe the actions of one person or agent, it does mean kill or destroy in the strong sense that annihilationists see in Matt 10:28. For example, Herod wanted to actually kill the baby Jesus (Matthew 2:3), a demon tried to throw a boy into water or fire to kill him (Mark 9:22), the owner of a vineyard actually killed the workers in his vineyard (Mark 12:9) and so on. Every single instance where these factors are present (used as a verb, present in the Synoptics, used to describe the actions of one person or agent against another), the meaning is the same. To ask us to make one exception for the sake of your case against annihilationism then is rather obvious special pleading.

A similar thing occurs in the book of Revelation. When you are not thinking about how to defend your doctrine of hell and attack annihilationism, you recognise a range of things that are relevant here. For example, you recognise that when *death* is thrown into the lake of fire, it means that death will be no more. Of course the action isn’t literal, but that’s what this action signifies. You recognise that the “beast” referred to is not a literal creature, but rather a kingdom, a corporate entity, and that this image is drawn from the book of Daniel, where we also see the beast being destroyed as a symbol of worldly kingdoms being destroyed and God’s kingdom being established. But suddenly when it comes to defending the doctrine of the eternal torments of the damned in hell, the symbolic nature of much of the language in the book of Revelation disappears. Now all of a sudden, but only when defending your doctrine of hell, you interpret the lake of fire, apparently, as a literal

place where people burn (or else a symbol of something just like that, minus the burning, where people suffer in some other way). It stands out that for people who are not known for their bizarre literalism *in general* when it comes to the book of Revelation, you suddenly become literalists when the doctrine of hell is in question. Surely this too is special pleading. I grant that it is not as obvious a case as the previous one, but it is special pleading nonetheless, as it involves a sudden change of rules when it suits your position.

3 Your exegesis employs reasoning that evangelicals in your camp have called fallacious in other contexts

Many of you are well known scholars in your field. Your readers, whether they agree with you or not, realise this. With this fact comes a degree of responsibility. Sometimes when a scholar in your position says something like “this word group has a range of meanings in Greek...” your readers will grant what you say because they lack knowledge of Greek, and also because they share your conclusions already. I know full well how reassuring it can be to hear an expert in a subject who knows much more than I do reassuring me with technical facts that the position I hold really is the right one. But in a context like this, you’ve got to be pretty ruthless with yourself. As Peter Parker’s uncle told him in the movie *Spiderman*, with great power comes great responsibility. People are listening to you, and they’re going to believe you. You ought not let yourself get away with persuading people with techniques that you wouldn’t let one of your students get away with in another subject area.

But some of you do precisely this.

Rob Bowman recently reminded me of his 2007 book in which he says he refuted the biblical case for annihilationism. One of the arguments he believes he has refuted is the argument from the language of destruction. Annihilationists have pointed out how emphatically the New Testament – and Jesus in particular –

uses the language of destruction to refer to the fate of the lost. Matthew 10:28 is a good example (as already mentioned), where Christ warns of God's ability to "destroy the body and soul in gehenna."

Bowman responds to this objection by stating, quite correctly, "Several New Testament passages using a form of *apollymi* do so in reference to ruin, waste, loss, or perishing." He lists the examples he has in mind thus:

- Wineskins can be "ruined" (Matt. 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37).
- A sheep (Luke 15:2, 4; cf. Ps. 119:176), a coin (Luke 15:8-9), and even a son (Luke 15:24, 32) can be "lost."
- Israel can be described as "lost" sheep (Matt. 10:6; 15:24).
- A person can either "lose" his soul, or he can find or keep his soul (Matt. 10:39; 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24-25; 17:33; John 12:25).
- A reward can be "lost" (Matt. 10:42; Mark 9:41).
- Food can "perish" (John 6:27).
- Perfume can be "wasted" (Matt. 26:8; Mark 14:4).
- A flower's beauty can be "lost" (James 1:11 NET).
- Gold pieces can "perish" in fire (1 Pet. 1:7)
- Luxuries can be "lost" (Rev. 18:14).

A judicious interpretation of biblical passages that speak of hell using forms of *apollumi* must consider the range of meanings that the word has while allowing context to be the dominant factor in deciding what nuance applies in those passages.³

Boa's point is simple: Sure, the biblical passages that annihilationists use do speak about people being destroyed, but that same Greek word has a range of meaning, as illustrated in other passages, and those meanings are not "destroyed" in the strong sense that annihilationists imply.

Christopher Morgan makes the same argument. Speaking of these same Greek terms, Morgan says:

In the New Testament, these terms were used to refer to such ideas as a 'lost' coin and son (Luke 15), a 'ruined' wineskin (Matt. 9:17), the son of 'perdition' (John 17:12), lost money (Acts 8:20), judgment (2 Pet 2:3), attempted murder (20:16), and lost hairs (Luke 21:18). None of these suggest annihilation.⁴

³Kenneth Boa and Robert Bowman, *Sense and Nonsense about Heaven and Hell* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

⁴Christopher Morgan, *Jonathan Edwards on Heaven and Hell* (Fearn: Mentor, 2004), 131.

Some of this is puzzling. The “attempted murder” example lacks the name of a book, giving “20:16” as the reference, but it appears that Luke 20:16 was intended, which does use the word *apollumi*. But here the word refers to a man killing his employees, which fits perfectly with the annihilationist understanding. This may show that Morgan has a strained understanding of what annihilationists themselves actually believe (I have heard it said that any sort of existence, even as a pile of ashes, would be a problem for the annihilationist view, which is palpable nonsense). But the shape of Morgan’s argument is that it is illegitimate to think that texts that speak of God destroying the lost favour annihilationism, since the words related to destruction are used in a range of other contexts where “none of [those cases] suggest annihilation.”

One more example. The same argument was made by Don Carson. “The *apoleia* word-group,” he said, “has a range of meanings, depending on the context.” yes sometimes it refers to straight forward destruction as the annihilationists contend, it need not always have this meaning in some contexts. Carson demonstrates this with examples: The “lost” son and lost coin of Luke 15, the “ruined” wineskins of Matthew 9:17 and similar examples. None of these things is simply “destroyed,” so we might legitimately read the *apoleia* terms as referring to ruin or loss, and not complete destruction.⁵ The argument is the same as that of Bowman.

However, Carson also – when not writing on the subject of hell – warned people about what he calls an *Exegetical Fallacy*. The fallacy involves the “unwarranted adoption of an expanded semantic field.” This fallacy “lies in the assumption that the meaning of a word in a specific context is much broader than the context itself allows and may bring with it the word’s entire semantic range. This step is sometimes called illegitimate totality transfer.”⁶

The point is this: It is never legitimate to deny that a word means destroy in the strong sense in one case because we know that the word actually has a range of different meanings across a range of different contexts

⁵Don Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), 522.

⁶Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 62.

as Carson and Bowman note that it does. That the word *apollumi* has a range of meanings has never come into dispute. Edward Fudge, who Carson and Bowman are both familiar with, freely admitted this. But the fact that a word has a range of meaning, as Carson pointed out in the above book, does not give us licence to select from the whole gamut of possible meanings. Our task in any given instance is not to ask what a word is *capable* of meaning, but rather what that word is likely to mean in any given context. Both Carson and Bowman know this – I have no doubt of this – and yet they are both arguing against an annihilationist interpretation on the grounds that there's a range of meanings that exist for *apollumi*. This is simply not legitimate.

As both authors do admit, context is supposed to be the determining factor in which emphasis a word has on any given instance. Take Matthew 10:28, which uses a verb form of *apollumi* to warn of God's ability to destroy body and soul in Gehenna. It is contextually relevant to note, as I did earlier, that every time this word is used in the Synoptic Gospels as a verb describing the actions of one person against another it carries the very meaning that annihilationists draw from Matthew 10:28.

Similarly in Carson's work he has just referred to 2 Peter 3:7 – “But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgement and destruction of the ungodly.” If context, rather than simply the full range of meaning, is to guide us when interpreting “destruction,” then he must surely realise that in this very same context – the previous verse in fact – Peter has already used the same word once: “the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished.” If context is to be determinative, then surely the same base word meaning “perished” in the very strong sense of killing people off completely only one verse earlier should inform how we interpret Peter then immediately re-using that word to describe the fate of the lost.

So there's the third issue with your exegesis. The problem isn't that you don't know the rules or that you don't

look into the Greek terms. Many of you do. The problem is that, *knowing your own rules* and knowing the Greek, you do things in defence of your own point of view that you realise are wrong when they are done in defence of other points of views. Your lay audience is likely to be unfamiliar with the Greek terms and unfamiliar with the existence of these fallacies. They will not see what you're doing. But many of your readers – especially those who you are seeking to criticise – see it. We see some of you willing to use techniques that you must surely realise are problematic. If you do not realise it, you certainly should, based on what you have said elsewhere.

My traditionalist friends, this tactic hurts you. Among those who already share your point of view, perhaps some of them will notice, while many will not. Those who notice will be bothered, hopefully. But certainly none of these people will be more endeared to your work because of it. They will either already hold your view and they won't notice, or they will already hold your view and they will be troubled by the way you defend it. However, among those of us who do not share your point of view, we see it and we are led to believe that this is an area where principles are taking a back seat. We're not happy because of this.

We're not rejoicing at the way some of you are weakening your case, because it's not just a matter of being right. It's a matter of being absolutely willing to follow the rules even when they hurt your case. We're not pleased, we're disappointed. This shouldn't be happening. This leads us to despair that exegetical arguments with you are really worthwhile at all, since the principles of exegetical reasoning seem to matter to you less than we'd like them to. The tail is wagging the dog. But that aside, this is another feature of your exegesis that leads us to reject your biblical case for your view and against ours.

4 Your exegesis sometimes appears to intentionally exclude important evidence from the very texts it is meant to be explaining.

We understand that there are some texts that become “favourites” when looking at what the Bible says about

specific issues. That's normal. Some texts do speak more clearly about some issues than others. One of the favourites among those who think the Bible clearly teaches eternal torment, and clearly teaches against annihilationism, is Isaiah 66:24b. This part-verse reads: "... for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh."

Many of you regard this text as especially important because Jesus is recorded as quoting this verse in Mark 9:48 when referring to the fate of the lost. A number of you claim that this passage in Isaiah teaches the doctrine of eternal torment of people who are consciously enduring the anguish of hell.

Not long ago on the *Stand to Reason* radio show Christopher Morgan spoke with host Greg Koukl. One of Morgan's comments was that Isaiah 66:24 "talks about where the worm doesn't die and the fire is not quenched and the permanence of the suffering of the wicked." The first thing to say is that this third element is simply incorrect. Yes Isaiah speaks about the worm and the fire as Morgan correctly observes, but it says nothing in addition to this about suffering.

But in addition to adding in claims that the text never makes, there's a deeper problem with Morgan's exegesis, and he is certainly not alone. Many of you have done this, whether you are quoting from Isaiah 66 or from Mark 9, which quotes Isaiah 66 verbatim. The problem is that many of you have snipped out the last few words of Isaiah 66:24 and quoted them all by themselves, when in fact the whole verse, if it had been quoted, would have painted a different picture. The entire verse reads:

"And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh."

What a different scene from the one typically painted by traditionalists when they quote only 24b. When we step back just a little to see the whole verse, we realise that contrary to what Morgan (like many of you) says,

there is no reference to people consciously suffering. These are dead bodies. And when we step back one more level and read the paragraphs that come immediately before this, any excuse that you might have had for misunderstanding this evaporates:

For behold, the Lord will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire.

For by fire will the Lord enter into judgement, and by his sword, with all flesh; and those slain by the Lord shall be many.

Those who sanctify and purify themselves to go into the gardens, following one in the midst, eating pig's flesh and the abomination and mice, shall come to an end together, declares the Lord.

For I know their works and their thoughts, and the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come and shall see my glory, and I will set a sign among them. And from them I will send survivors to the nations, to Tarshish, Pul, and Lud, who draw the bow, to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands far away, that have not heard my fame or seen my glory. And they shall declare my glory among the nations. And they shall bring all your brothers from all the nations as an offering to the Lord, on horses and in chariots and in litters and on mules and on dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the Lord, just as the Israelites bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the Lord. And some of them also I will take for priests and for Levites, says the Lord.

For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the Lord, so shall your offspring and your name remain.

From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the Lord.

And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.

Any hope that you might have had of saying that perhaps the last line was ambiguous is gone. When you quote verse 24b, why do you not tell your audience about 24a, which tells us that the verse speaks of dead bodies? Why do you not tell your readers that the whole passage depicts a great onslaught of God directed at his enemies, when he comes and slays them with the sword, leaving them lying dead on the ground for all to see? Why do you leave out such important information? Why do you instead tell people that this is about the sufferings of the damned in the flames of hell?

What's interesting is that biblical scholars who write commentaries on these texts and who are not attempting

to score a theological point in their favour do not miss out these facts. Douglas Hare is a normal example:

It is clear in the Isaiah passage that the apostates whose worm and fire are unending are “dead bodies.” There is no suggestion that these evil persons will suffer eternally; their carcasses will remain indefinitely as a reminder of their rebellion against God.⁷

The fact that you find details like this irrelevant troubles me, and I cannot be the only one. When we see you making theological claims like yours on the basis of texts where it's quite clear that you're ignoring materially important information, we get turned off discussion with you. That's perhaps unfortunate. Maybe some good would be gained if we were ore willing to keep talking to you about your arguments and your endless flow of books. But I think many people, seeing examples like this, will readily appreciate why we are increasingly starting to think that there's little point. That sounds pretty depressing I know. We're family and we should talk about our issues. But this sort of thing just makes you look one-eyed, filtering out any facts that stand in your way. It seriously undermines your claim that you represent the biblical perspective on this issue.

5 Your exegesis sometimes makes unwarranted leaps in logic

There's an obvious difference between identifying a biblical passage that you believe supports your point of view on the one hand, and seriously investing the time to *show* that it supports your point of view and how it does so on the other. You realise this of course. We all do. But many of you speak and write as though you didn't realise this. Sometimes people who think that they're giving a biblical argument for the traditional doctrine of eternal torment are really just leaping from text to conclusion with nothing in between. No explanation, no argument, just a great big leap.

Inside your head there may be all sorts of justifications for the leap. At very least, I hope there are some. But

⁷Douglas R. A. Hare, *Mark*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 117-118.

you do have to share those justifications, otherwise the tremendous confidence that you have in the argument you believe you've just made looks quite unjustified to the rest of us.

Here are a couple of examples. I won't need to name names here, because these arguments are so common that I hope you'll realise that you've seen these arguments used many times without me having to name authors.

Matthew 25 says that some people will get eternal life, but other people will get eternal punishment. Therefore if you believe that some people will get eternal life because of this passage, you should also believe that some people will get eternal conscious misery/torment/suffering/something else.

I have seen this argument more times than I care to recall. "Life and punishment are set in parallel. They are both eternal." Fine. That has never been an issue. *That* fact is not in dispute. What is in dispute is what the punishment actually consists of. So many of you are so quick to make this leap: The punishment is eternal, so the punishment is conscious suffering. But this *is* a leap. It's definitely not true as a matter of definition, and you can hardly claim that Matthew 25 actually states this. You might think that being destroyed isn't really a punishment. That's your position and you are welcome to argue for it. But you can't get all the way over to that claim just by noting that the punishment is eternal. If destruction really is a punishment, then of course annihilationism presents eternal punishment as well. Don't expect us to leap with you. We're still standing here waiting for you to give an explanation of *why* you maintain that destruction isn't a punishment. You certainly won't find that in Matthew 25.

This leads some of you to 2 Thessalonians 1:9, a verse that I've already mentioned. This verse speaks about the future return of Christ, and it states that some people will be "punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord." Annihilationists have identified this text as one of the many that speaks of the destruction of the lost, because it explicitly refers to their destruction. However, some of you have cited this text as one that counts *against* annihilationism. Robert Peterson gives what seems to me to be the standard

version of this claim (I do call it claim rather than an argument, for reasons that I hope will soon be clear): “Paul says of the disobedient, ‘They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of His power.’ Annihilationism is an unlikely meaning for the words ‘everlasting destruction’.”⁸

That’s the end of the argument. Peterson then moves onto another argument related to this text (the one I addressed at the outset of the section on poor exegesis). But where’s the argument? Annihilationism is an unlikely meaning? Why? What are the reasons? How do we get to that conclusion? What’s the thought process? It’s no more than a leap. Somehow Peterson has moved rapidly from the phrase “everlasting destruction” to the conclusion that annihilationism is unlikely, but how is this move made? We just aren’t told. It’s clear enough that if annihilationism is true, then the fate of the lost will indeed be destruction, and it will certainly be everlasting, so somewhere in Peterson’s argument he has made a major leap in logic that he has not explained.

Other traditionalists only seem to make this worse when they try to strengthen this argument. Douglas Moo, for example, agrees that even if the “destruction” was taken in this verse in the strong sense that annihilationists take it, “one must still ask how a destruction whose consequences last forever can be squared with annihilationism. For eternal consequences appear to demand an eternal existence in some form.”⁹ What? Wait, we really need to see the reasoning there. It seems clear to most people, I would think, that if the act of destruction kills a person and literally annihilates them, then in order for the consequence to be eternal, they would have to *not* exist forever. How on earth does Moo get from “the consequences of their annihilation last forever” to “they must exist forever”? We are treated with stony silence. Literally no explanation is offered for this seemingly bizarre leap. And yet it is this leap that carries the weight of Moo’s argument against the annihilationist use of the verse! Can you really blame us for finding this kind of logical leap frustrating?

⁸“A Traditionalist Response to John Stott,” 555.

⁹Douglas Moo, “Paul on Hell” in Christopher Morgan and Robert Peterson (eds), *Hell Under Fire* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 106

When you do this kind of thing, my friends, we're not always sure what to make of it. Are you assuming that we wouldn't understand the logic if you explained it to us? Is this just a symptom of a poorly thought out argument? Is it a case of automatic association, where the verse on the pages, since it mentions punishment, is immediately connected to the doctrine in your mind that you already hold, which involves eternal torment? We can't tell. That's the problem with leaps like this. We just don't know how you got there. It's frustrating to see arguments like this repeated time and time again, along with the apparent belief that we're not addressing your case. What case? What is there to these arguments? How are they supposed to work? Throw us a bone! The overall impact that examples like this have is that they make us think, "You know, these traditionalists don't even need an argument to reach their conclusion. Just mention punishment, and boom, they're already there. Are they even thinking about how they get there?" It just ends up looking like you're not really arguing for your position, but you're preaching to the converted, to people who already share your view. They don't need an argument because they're already there, so you don't have to give them one.

6 Your exegesis sometimes glosses over important facts

Some of the other worries that I have expressed over your exegesis overlap with this one. When you seem to exclude certain parts of the passage you're using (as in Isaiah 66) or when you're hasty and you don't take the time to check the correct wording of the verses you're using (as in 2 Thessalonians 1:9), you're glossing over important facts. But there are other times when you're not doing either of these two things, but you're still glossing over important facts in other ways.

For example, a large number of you repeat the phrase "eternal fire" as it appears in Matthew 25. You tell readers that this demonstrates that the doctrine of eternal torment is true. There is a sense in which there is a logical leap here, since a fire that lasts forever (assuming this is what you think we have in this instance) does not in itself imply eternal torment, but let's set that aside. It's true, Matthew 25 does refer to the "everlasting fire,

prepared for the devil and his angels.” Robert Peterson once commented on this verse:

Included in Jesus' teaching concerning the sheep and the goats are his terrible words to the wicked, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt 25:41). Traditionalists since Augustine have interpreted Scripture by Scripture and gone to Rev 20:10 for help in understanding this “eternal fire prepared for the devil.”¹⁰

The suggestion here is that if we want to understand what “eternal fire” is, we should go to the book of Revelation – as though all parties are already agreed that Revelation 20 offers a description of the eternal fire. Yet this same article passes over in total silence the fact that the phrase “eternal fire” *itself* appears elsewhere in the New Testament, not in the book of Revelation but in Jude 7. If we are going to arrive at an understanding of this phrase by “interpreting Scripture by Scripture,” surely we should look to see how Scripture itself uses that phrase elsewhere. When we turn to Jude 7 we realise how significant this omission truly is. There were read: “Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.” An example is something we can all see, and sure enough the account is right there in Genesis. It is no secret what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah. They were completely destroyed with fire – we could even say that they were annihilated. Why was this not mentioned? Why was the only other biblical usage of the phrase “eternal fire” not even brought up. Peterson is not alone, I’ve seen many of you do this. You tell your reader or your audience that the phrase “eternal fire” confirms the doctrine of eternal torment, yet you do not tell them how this phrase is used elsewhere. Do you not think that this is materially relevant? Yes, I am aware that some of you do *mention* Jude 7. I think your exegesis in those cases is poor. Robert Bowman for examples claims:

Jude 7 does not exactly say that Sodom was destroyed by “eternal fire.” What it says is that Sodom and the other wicked cities around them serve as an example in undergoing the punishment of eternal fire. The point Jude is making is that the fire that fell on those cities typifies the punishment that will come on the false teachers who are trying to mislead Jude’s readers. He calls the fire that fell on those cities “eternal fire” because it foreshadows a future “fire” that really

¹⁰Peterson, “The Hermeneutics of Annihilationism: The Theological Method of Edward Fudge,” in Michael Bauman and David Hall, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: Selected Essays from the 1994 Evangelical Theological Society Convention* (Camp Hill: Christian Publications, 1995), 198.

will be eternal.¹¹

This is awkward to say the very least. First, even though the text directly states that Sodom did actually serve as an example by undergoing the punishment of eternal fire, Bowman inexplicably says that Jude does not “actually” say this. But if this is not how one actually says it, how on earth could one say it? Bowman then says that actually the fire that fell on those cities was eternal fire (apparently rejecting his earlier claim), but only because it typifies a future fire that “really will be” eternal – apparently unlike the fire in Sodom. So was the fire eternal or not? Jude says yes, Bowman says no, then yes, then no! As arguments go, this is far less than cogent. I do not think this has any plausibility at all, but he at least makes an attempt at dealing with the very difficult problem his position is faced with. But many of you do not. You mention eternal fire in Matthew 25 but you do not tell people that the phrase is used elsewhere too, in a way that does not suit your theological position. Is it because doing so would result in this kind of text wrangling? Is it because you’re not aware that the phrase is used elsewhere? Whatever your reasons, it looks very bad when you simply ignore it. It looks as though you’re excluding important pieces of evidence. You’re avoiding difficult arguments against your position, but what do you think will happen if your readers discover them?

7 Your exegetical rebuttals are sometimes much too dismissive

I understand that you have confidence in your position. I certainly do not think the biblical evidence warrants your confidence, but I understand that you have it. Confidence can get you into trouble. It can mean that you reject arguments for other peoples’ beliefs much more quickly than you ought to.

Every theological stance that is grounded in exegesis of biblical passages is going to have some passages that present more complex issues and require more explanation than others. Of all people, you should know this. This is all the more likely going to be true when – quite apart from the doctrinal issue in discussion – the texts in question are ones that are notorious for being difficult to understand and fraught with controversy as to

¹¹Bowman, *Sense and Nonsense*.

their meaning.

In particular I have in mind two passages in the book of Revelation, chapters 14 and chapter 20. Anyone who assumes that their position on the meaning of such texts is the only and obvious possible position for any reasonable interpreter to take is simply out of touch with reality, as I hope you will appreciate. Unfortunately however, some of you leap onto passages that are full of what is clearly vivid imagery with a secondary meaning, and you claim them as obvious proof of your position without appearing to even try to honestly grapple with the interpretative difficulties related to those passages.

I know as well as many of you do that well-known scholars have written on your behalf in regard to these passages. Greg Beale, for example, has defended the claim that these passages teach eternal torment and that they are incompatible with annihilationism.¹² I think his exegesis is seriously flawed, but I acknowledge that he at least sees the need to engage those passages carefully and to *argue* that they teach his view. I don't think he adequately allows the Old Testament imagery to speak, I think he treats the passages as a literal depiction of hell when they were never intended that way, I think he emphasises the wrong aspects of the literature in front of him (he lays great stress on interpreting an angel's proclamation of what is about to happen in Revelation 14:9-11 which uses language of torment, but gives very little emphasis to the actual depiction of those events unfolding in Revelation 14:14-20 which uses the language of slaughter – in fact he ignores the latter altogether), I think he fumbles the implications of the corporate nature of the imagery involved (in particular the corporate nature of the beasts and the implications that this has for their fate) and I think he engages in a rather obvious informal logical fallacy when writing about the "beast" (technically known as the fallacy of division).

While I think Beale's case is weak, I do acknowledge that he at least treats these passages as complex and as though they are in need of careful interpretation. Beale does this, but many of you do not. Many of you present

¹²“The Revelation on Hell” in Morgan and Peterson (eds), *Hell Under Fire*, 111-134

these texts, note that they mention fire, judgement and suffering, and immediately leap to the conclusion that they must teach your familiar doctrine of the eternal torment of the damned in the flames of hell. When we try to point out to you the difficulty of interpreting apocalyptic imagery, when we have said that the things in these visions actually represent other things and shouldn't be read at face value, some of you have scoffed at us "not taking God's word seriously," and as trying to get off the hook by saying that it's "all symbolic." We admit that these texts are complex – not just for us, but for anybody. You appear to dismiss this fact and write off what we say as mere rationalisation. This is disheartening. You need to understand that we can't interact with that. That's a kind of arrogance that is unteachable, and it suggests that you're not willing to consider complex issues of biblical interpretation if they get in the way of doctrinal positions to which you have become attached.

These seven observations and the examples used are illustrative. I haven't tried to cover every flawed use of exegesis that you have made in your case for eternal torment. The reality is that yours is a position that has become tiresome to address, partly because of the fundamental flaws in the biblical arguments you have repeatedly tried to make, and also because we have seen these arguments many times before, which leads to the next reason that your position is not winning and will not win the battle on the issue of final punishment.

**Problem 2: You are often unresponsive to the fact that the arguments you are now using
– yet again – have already been addressed in the literature**

There are some arguments that are really tiresome, not simply because they're poor arguments, but because they keep reappearing again and again, no matter how many times they are soundly addressed. You may already be familiar with some of these arguments. I have lost count, for example, of the times that I have seen or heard a zealous atheist claim that the "first cause" argument for the existence of God is flawed, because if everything needs a cause then God too needs a cause. For the last time, that's not the first cause argument! I see similar things happen in regard to divine command ethics. That view of ethics has had very able exposition and the objections have been addressed numerous times, and yet each year there seem to be a fresh batch of

exactly the same objections recycled again, without any serious interaction with the literature where those objections have already been addressed. Many of you know what this is like, and you realise how frustrating this phenomenon can be. You may have said to yourselves, “What’s the point of interacting with people of they’re just going to wait for the dust to settle and then present the same arguments, unmodified, all over again in some sort of communist re-trial?”

Unfortunately the same thing keeps happening in the debate over annihilationism. You saw earlier how a number of you have responded to the annihilationist argument using the language of destruction. You’ve replied by pointing out that those terms in fact have a range of meaning, so you have the legitimate option of appealing to one of those meanings instead of the strong sense of destruction that the annihilationists suggest. Now, there was a flaw in the argument that you’ve used, but I’ve already covered that. What I want to point out now is that this rebuttal of yours has already been addressed numerous times in the literature, and yet you never seem to acknowledge or address this fact. I will assume that you agree with Don Carson in saying that the context should, ultimately, be the deciding factor in determining which nuance of meaning we should find in any given usage of a word like “destroy” (*apollumi*). But for many decades, annihilationist work has been in print carefully explaining that their case from the language of destruction has strength not just because of the presence of the word “destroy,” “perish” or “destruction.” They have been at pains to explain that language, *along with the context in which it appears*, plainly favours the idea of straight forward death and destruction rather than only ruin or loss (unless we mean loss of life itself). They simply have not presented the simplistic argument that you suggest.

Henry Constable explained this argument in his 1871 work, *The Nature and Duration of Future Punishment*. First he notes that of all the terms that can be used for “destroy,” “perish” or “destruction,” when considering the specific terms that the New Testament does use, no other terms would be more suitable to refer to “the utter loss of life” than these. He then notes that according to ordinary Greek lexicons (not theological ones, which he complains may be coloured by doctrinal bias), these terms do *primarily* refer to death

and destruction in the strong literal sense, whatever else they may signify – a point he illustrates from a range of instances in the New Testament. Referring to this strong sense of the words, he goes on to say that he will show that “it is *thus* used in Scripture.” That is, he does not merely intend to show that this group of words is used, but rather that it is “thus” used – used in the way that he has just explained. He uses examples where the context shows that the intended sense is not some lesser sense of these terms like “lose” or “ruin [but not destruction].” For example:

We would direct attention to the passage in 2 Pet. ii. 12, as affording indubitable proof that it is thus used in Scripture. Speaking of the ungodly, Peter says, ‘these, as *natural brute beasts made to be taken and destroyed, shall utterly perish in their own corruption*.’ Here the *same* Greek word is used of the end of beasts and of the end of the ungodly. We know what is the end of beasts taken and destroyed: even such Peter declares will be the end of the ungodly in the future life: *they shall perish there as beasts perish here.*¹³

You’ll notice here that Constable doesn’t merely stop at the observation that the language of destruction is *present*, as your response seems to suggest. Instead, he notes that it is present, that its most straightforward meaning is literal death and destruction, and, as you seem not to have noticed, that the context where this terminology is used itself very strongly favours this interpretation. Constable’s case does *not* depend on there being only one possible meaning for the Greek words for “destroy” or “destruction.” It would therefore be irrelevant to reply to him that way. In other words, Constable is already following your advice in regard to the language of destruction. What good could it possibly do, therefore, to reply to him by telling him that these terms have a range of meaning depending on context? He has already replied to this rejoinder, and yet many of you are content to simply repeat it without modification time and time again.

Edward White explained the same argument in his rather wordily titled work, *Life in Christ: A Study on the nature of Man, the Object of the Divine Incarnation, and the Conditions of Human Immortality*, published in 1878. Interestingly, one of the very first things that White did in his chapter on future punishment was to address the way that some people seek to crack open words into their fullest possible range of meanings,

¹³Constable, *The Nature and Duration of Future Punishment* (New Haven: Chas. C. Chatfield and Co., 1871), chapter 4 (electronic copy without page numbering)

literal, metaphorical, spiritual and anything else, and imagine that every time that word is used they are free to go fishing for all of these meanings.

<blockquote>Too much stress cannot be laid on the rule that since the Sacred Writings were for the most part the work of men who were commissioned by God in different ways to address the understanding of human beings, - the law shall be observed, in interpreting them, of adhering to the natural and proper meaning of the words which they usually employ. If we once abandon ourselves to the fancies of dreamers who see everything through an intellectual prism, for whom no word retains its natural signification, but every vocable is surrounded with an aureola or many-tinted halo of mysteries and 'inner senses,' we might as well abandon at the same time the hope of comprehending Christianity.¹⁴

When examining the terminology itself, White notes, correctly:

[I]n ninety-nine instances out of every hundred in which the issue of God's judgment is referred to, its effect is declared to be to bring the subjects of it to an end which is described as *death, destruction, perishing, utterly perishing, corruption*; and, negatively, as exclusion from *life, or life eternal*. Such phrases as *endless woe, endless misery*, are unknown to the Bible. The ordinary language of the pulpit on this subject is systematically unscriptural.¹⁵

To say that this has no significance is to stack the odds impossibly against annihilationism. This fact clearly does have significance in itself. More than this, however, White provides reasons for maintaining that rather than some secondary sense, the Gospel writers are best understood as having the primary sense of real death and destruction in mind. His argument occupies considerable space and I cannot reproduce it here – but being familiar with the literature you will surely have read it (right?). He trudges through the philosophical literature that permeated the Hellenistic world familiar to most of the first readers of the New Testament – specifically Plato – and shows with multiple examples that the very same terminology of destruction and death that Plato says will *not* befall the soul, the New Testament writers affirm *will* happen to the soul (and to the person in more general terms). Plato of course did believe in ongoing misery for people in the afterlife, but he denied the annihilationist thesis that anyone would ultimately be destroyed. How can you not find this significant at all?

¹⁴White, *Life in Christ*, 348.

¹⁵White, *Life in Christ*, 356.

On page 367, White explicitly grants your observation that the word *apollumi* does have a secondary sense of “lose” rather than destroy. But he invests considerable energy then establishing what our first expectation should be when that word is used, explaining why the mere existence of other shades of meaning should not be used to overthrow his argument. None of you seem to be aware of this, or to respond to it.

Edward Fudge explored this issue as well – as all of you must surely know, since you constantly name him as the architect of poor exegesis to bolster annihilationism. His comments on *apollumi* in the writing of Paul actually start out with the very same observations that you make: That this language is used of ruined wineskins or spoiled food in the Gospels. Obviously this sense is weaker than the strong sense of kill or destroy that the annihilationists urge, says Fudge, and so traditionalist writers point out this range of usage, with the consequence that “casual readers may assume that the word’s primary meaning must be very mild indeed.”¹⁶ His response is similar to White’s, wading through the many examples of this terminology in Paul’s writing and showing that in fact our primary expectation should be a meaning of literal death or destruction. He does not deny, of course, that you might be able to locate other examples where this is not the intended meaning, but you cannot deny that he makes an impressive case based on the way this language is *actually used*. While traditionalists are fond of making much of the parallel between “eternal life” and “eternal punishment,” which involves something of a logical leap, Fudge makes a powerful parallel of his own, showing that he is well aware of the need to interpret language in a way suggested by context. He comments on Matthew 10:28, where men can kill the body but God can destroy (*apollumi*) body and soul in hell: “In Matthew’s account Jesus uses ‘kill’ and ‘destroy’ in parallel fashion, apparently making them interchangeable.”¹⁷ So he certainly does make the effort to show that in context, kill or destroy is the likely meaning of terms such as *apollumi*. Your published responses seem not to be informed by this fact.

I won’t labour the point further. The fact is, a number of proponents of annihilationism have explained this

¹⁶Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes: The Biblical Case for Conditional Immortality* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994, 2nd ed.), 164

¹⁷Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes*, 108.

already. They are all well aware of the fact that the words referring to destruction admit a range of meaning in different contexts. This is not news to them, and it is no rebuttal to simply point this out. What they have argued is that straightforward death and destruction is the most natural sense of these terms, in the contexts where it clearly does refer to final punishment there is no reason to suppose that an alternative meaning was intended, and there are at times quite clear indications that the strong sense of “destroy” or “destruction” really is intended. You don’t address this reply. None of you do, as far as I have seen. All you do is re-present the same argument that these and other authors have quite handily dealt with.

Just like cases where people persistently (and poorly) critique the first cause argument or those who keep serving up the same old arguments against divine command ethics, the impression that this gives is not good. We do not know what your intentions are or what is going on in your mind, but it looks very bad. It *appears* that you are simply avoiding the argument altogether, and simply handing out the same lines once more in the apparent supposition that your words will not reach a critical or well informed audience. If someone has never read the literature then they might not realise that you aren’t advancing the discussion, but are merely repeating already debunked lines of argument. We hope that this is not what is happening, but if not this, then it is not clear what. As people who hold themselves out as competent to criticise the annihilationist stance, of course we assume that you are already familiar with the literature. The issue therefore cannot be that you just don’t realise that annihilationist writers have addressed the question of what words (which might have a range of meaning) mean in the specific contexts where final punishment is in view. But the fact that you say nothing about the way they address this argument is symptomatic of someone who doesn’t know how they respond to it. I do not know how to interpret these facts in a way that does not reflect very poorly indeed on the quality of your case. It looks to us as though you’re just not listening. I’m sorry, but that is the truth.

Problem 3: Some of you visibly mischaracterise the case against your position

If you've read the major works written in defence of annihilationism (such as that of Constable, White or Fudge), you will have seen that by far the majority of their case is made up of slow, meticulous, even *boring* exegesis of one passage of Scripture after another that speaks to the issue of final punishment. It's not riveting, but that's the nature of the task. Their central claim has been relatively straightforward: The Bible does not teach the doctrine of eternal torment, it teaches the doctrine of annihilationism instead.

For some reason however, a number of your writers have sought to persuade readers that this is not the central argument that these annihilationist writers use after all. Christopher Morgan, for example, asks his readers to believe that in the case of annihilationist arguments, "the annihilationists' misunderstandings of certain aspects of their doctrines of God and sin have shaped most of their arguments."¹⁸ Really? So even though Fudge's work mostly consists of chapters on the meaning and nature of *sheol* and *hades*, surveys of intertestamental literature, and most importantly, lengthy chapters on passages of New Testament exegesis, all the while "most of his arguments" are really founded on misunderstandings of the doctrines of God and sin? But how does an exegesis of, say Matthew 8:11 involve the doctrines of God and sin? When Fudge invests time discussing the Old Testament background of the imagery in the book of Revelation, how is he getting the doctrines of God and sin wrong? This characterisation is absurd. Morgan is just ignoring page after page, chapter after chapter of patient exegesis, and trying to sweep it all under the rug of a theological misunderstanding. In effect, it is *he* who is not doing exegesis, but rather making an appeal to systematic theology to short cut the argument. In the same book, unfortunately, Morgan effectively begs his readers to look the other way when annihilationists spend most of their time building an exegetical case, claiming instead that our real arguments are all about God's love, justice and victory (p. 140). It would certainly be convenient for traditionalists if this were actually true, but it is simply not the case.

At other times you have put claims into the mouths of annihilationists that they have simply never made in an attempt (so it appears to us) to make them look like they have a loose grip on the facts when this is simply not

¹⁸Morgan, *Jonathan Edwards on Heaven and Hell*, 139

true. For example, as Edward Fudge has pointed out, Jonathan Edwards, although he believed that annihilationism was false, did agree with us that the mere phrase “eternal punishment” does not rule out annihilationism. Those who are worried about the notion of “eternal punishment,” he explained, will get no relief by resorting to annihilationism, since this is properly eternal punishment of some sort. But when Fudge pointed this out, Robert Peterson replied by going to great pains to show that Edwards himself was not an annihilationist, concluding that “Plainly Edwards opposes annihilationism” as though this shows that Fudge was mistaken. But obviously it shows no such thing. What’s even worse is that in that same exchange Peterson then took Edwards’ concluding remarks about universalism and quoting them, mistakenly thinking that Edwards was talking about annihilationism, suggesting that it is he, rather than Fudge, who had a loose grip on the relevant facts (I discuss this in my blog post, “Jonathan Edwards Comes to the Aid of Annihilationism”).

In light of the dry, meticulous exegesis that has been carried out over the last couple of centuries on behalf of annihilationism, written from a plainly conservative evangelical perspective, it becomes simply incredible that Carson should include his volley against annihilationism in his work about how “Christianity confronts pluralism.” In a work devoted to the opposition of postmodernism, sentimentality, relativism and the push for inclusivism, the biblical case for annihilationism is dragged in as an example of precisely this. So when the conservative evangelical (some would probably go as far as to say “fundamentalist,” but I would not) Edward Fudge’s densely written exegesis was published as a lengthy Bible study, he was really just caving into the pressures of pluralism and postmodernity? What about White and Constable in the 19th century? Were they seduced by postmodern pressures too? What about the Church Father Arobius? Was he?

Published examples aside, I have lost count of the number of times I have heard traditionalists – in sermons, public talks and everyday conversation – informed people who should know better, repeatedly characterising annihilationists as people who get teary eyed at the thought of hell and who long to come up with a nicer, more loving portrait of God’s judgement. This is to say nothing of the ridiculous games of “guilt by association” that

some of you seem intent on playing. In Rob Bowman's book on heaven and hell, I lost count of the number of times when he refers to the annihilationist position and the first example he can think of when referring to those who hold this view is the Jehovah's witnesses. Who gives arguments for annihilationism? The Jehovah's Witnesses, that's who. Who believes in soul sleep? The Jehovah's Witnesses. Just imagine how contrived our arguments would look if we continually used the example of *Mormons* as people who believe in eternal torment! Guilt by association may at times be a guilty pleasure in order to arouse prejudice against us, but it is hardly a respectable technique.

When we see you misrepresent our emphasis, when we see you fundamentally misrepresent the straightforward claims we make about who said what, and when we see you employ the fallacious and unfortunate tactic of suggesting guilt by association, we find ourselves at a loss as to what to say next. You're either not listening, or something more sinister is afoot and you're intentionally trying to get people to not hear what we say, or you are poisoning the well by telling tall tales about our motives.

Problem 4: You have very badly underestimated the strength of the biblical case against your position, and are rather obviously relying on the belief that your position is the established and popular one

You've invested a lot of time now, in colleges that have statements of faith including the doctrine of eternal torment, teaching students who are there partly because they already believe those statements, that annihilationism is false. You will never advance your cause this way. It is akin to teaching Catholic students that Mary was a virgin her whole life. You will not find genuine, sustained opposition to your arguments in that context. It is my experience that some of you are actually a little shocked when you do come into contact with genuine, well informed and confident disagreement from evangelicals.

From behind the barricades, you have become convinced that the biblical case against your view is

insubstantial and can be blown down like a house of straw. I have met, either in person or online, countless people who initially told me that they had “looked at both sides of the issue,” by which they meant that they had read one or more of your works in which you – so they believed – laid out the merits of the biblical case for annihilationism and then destroyed it. When presented with just a few responses to these rebuttals as well as a few further considerations, it is as though their world has been turned upside down. They had *no idea* how compelling the arguments for annihilationism were, and as a result of our encounters many of them are now either undecided or they have embraced annihilationism. Of course, I have read your accounts of people being convinced the other way around too. For example, one of you wrote that his students in a conservative Presbyterian seminary – students who already embraced the Westminster confession of faith (which teaches eternal torment) – got angry at Edward Fudge after you explained why you think his arguments fail. But whipping up angst towards a person that students already disagree with is nothing compared to seeing a person’s shock when they realise that they have been lead to believe one thing when another is the case.

Evangelicals are finding this out. For years they have been reassured that the annihilationist position is one for those who don’t care for biblical authority, who doubt the seriousness of sin, who don’t have proper regard for God’s holiness, and who piece together a tenuous case based on the strained interpretation of a few texts of Scripture. Now, of course I haven’t presented in this letter the biblical case for annihilationism (I do make a modest attempt at doing this elsewhere). But Evangelicals are most certainly finding out that it is not what many of you have made it out to be, and as they have been finding out, many of them have been given the opportunity to think about the matter for themselves and they are changing their minds.

These reasons paint an overall picture of why we are so unimpressed with your arguments. They give a clue as to why the borders of your “territory” are shrinking rather than expanding. This is why your case isn’t working. You can call it something else like unwillingness to face the hard unpleasant truth, call it postmodern pressure, but these are the reasons.

You might be tempted to pick out one of the many concerns raised here (perhaps one of the cases where I think your exegesis has been very poor and argue that it doesn't justify the sort of reaction I have presented). OK, you might grant, maybe this appeal to Scripture is not perfect, but don't write off our approach because of that! That's a fair concern, but firstly, the exegesis I am concerned about is not just imperfect, it is really really bad. And secondly, my despair at your stance on this issue is grounded in a cumulative case. It's not just that *that* argument is bad. If that were the only concern, I wouldn't regard your endeavours this way. The problem is that there are so many and such fundamental flaws in your exegesis, your immunity from evidence, your unfairness and your overconfidence that even if one of the examples I have noted is not as bad as I think, this does almost nothing to improve things. You might be able to point to an example of a traditionalist writer who does address one of the arguments I say you ignore. That would surprise me, but OK. What about the rest of you? The phenomena that I have identified are endemic among you. They should be rare, but unfortunately they are normal.

So friends, what am I saying – that you should just give up and stop defending your position? In a sense I suppose I am, because I don't think you should approach Scripture the way you are, piecing together cases to defend your established position. But of course, I realise that over time you will settle on one view on the basis of what you think are good reasons, and you will henceforth defend that view. I do the same, naturally. At the very least I am saying that if you keep doing what you are doing, these are some of the reasons why you will continue to be unsuccessful. You might ask "So how can we be more successful?" I don't know. I don't want you to succeed, for obvious reasons, but I don't know how you could make your case more persuasive or successful. Removing the problematic arguments altogether would, in my view, reduce your repertoire of arguments dramatically, and correcting them would, in my view, result in the defence of a different position on final punishment.

I am also saying, and here we get into the less pleasant stuff again, that you need to clean your act up. There

are two sides to this. The first duty is more of a moral duty than the other. You really ought to be more careful. Don't misrepresent people's claims. Don't misrepresent their arguments. Don't impute motives to people who have never expressed those motives. Don't tell us where they are "really" coming from. They are quite capable of telling us these things. The second duty, and this may well offend you more than the first, is a scholarly and intellectual one. You've seriously got to think harder about some of these arguments. I can picture the outrage some of you might feel on reading a comment like that. I'm sorry on one hand, but not sorry on the other. Let me deliberately overstate it this way: I don't care what your theology is, if I were your teacher and you handed in an essay where you treated the word *apollumi* like Carson and Bowman did, you'd lose marks for it. That is appalling exegesis. If you just stated claims, one after the other, involving a clear logical leap from one to the other, I would write on it with a red pen: "you need to unpack this please." If you just stated that a verse is incompatible with someone's view without further comment, I would write "why?" And if you engaged in only half of what I have described in this letter, you would fail – as you should. It must be hard to appreciate the negative light in which the above tactics cast your work, but honestly, your arguments are to annihilationism what Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* is to Christianity. Among Christians it is virtually a laughing stock – as I assume you know. And that is how annihilationists regard your arguments. I am sure you will find that no less gracious than you find the fact that I (and perhaps you) think Dawkins' book is nonsense.

I'll draw the letter to a close. If nothing else, I've given you a window on how annihilationists see what you have done. I have tried to be honest, which carries with it certain risks. I couldn't tell you these things without running those risks, so I won't apologise any more than I already have. This, my friends, is why we are not impressed, why we don't seem to be reacting with any urgency to rectify our views, why the church is not moving in your direction, and why I do not think the case for annihilationism has anything to worry about.

Yours

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Glenn Peoples', with a stylized, cursive script.

Glenn Peoples