

# Conditional Immortality—An Acceptable View?

## What does Conditional Immortality affirm and deny?

*Conditional immortality* explicitly rejects *universal immortality*, affirming instead that immortality is a gift 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*).

Since universal immortality is a tenet of both *eternal torment* and *universal salvation*, conditionalism necessarily denies these two views.

Conditionalism is rendered in terms of “eternal life” for the saved, and “eternal punishment” for the unsaved (Matt 25:46), the punishment consisting of “eternal destruction” of both “body and soul” (2 Thess 1:9 cf. Matt 10:28). This aspect of conditionalism can be called *annihilation*, understood as the permanent forfeit of life itself. This may further be understood to result from an eternal separation or severance from God as the source of life (Acts 17:25; Heb 1:3; Rev 2:7 cf. Gen 3:22).

Proponents of conditionalism are therefore able to affirm statements of faith that include the language of eternal separation, and/or expressly biblical terms such as “eternal punishment.” However, conditionalists cannot affirm statements of everlasting consciousness or everlasting torment for the unsaved.

## Does Conditional Immortality reject a core doctrine of Christian faith?

Neither annihilationism nor conditionalism were rejected by any early church councils or creeds.

Similarly, universal immortality is not affirmed by any early church councils or creeds, either in the form of eternal torment or of universal salvation (a version of which was [arguably rejected](#) by the Second Council of Constantinople in 553 AD).

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

In the Protestant tradition, however, the Catholic dogma “that the soul is immortal” was first rejected by Martin Luther,<sup>1</sup> and later by William Tyndale and John Wycliffe. Protestants are not typically bound to any teaching that the soul is by nature immortal, and thereby will eternally exist.<sup>2</sup>

As for the question of whether eternal torment must be affirmed within Protestantism, this varies according to context (as already noted regarding different statements of faith). The additional question of whether belief in eternal torment is considered absolutely essential to Christian faith (i.e. regardless of context), likewise varies with context. It would be relatively rare to find any formal church statement explicitly equating disbelief in eternal torment with disbelief in Jesus Christ. In fact, the general trend is toward statements of faith having language inclusive of both conditionalism and of eternal torment in its various forms.

## Is Conditional Immortality an acceptable view outside Catholicism?

Yes, broadly speaking. The Eastern Orthodox church has no official view. The Church of England does have a formal position: Conditional Immortality.<sup>3</sup>

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.”<sup>4</sup>

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.”<sup>5</sup>

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, John Stott, Richard Swinburne, Anthony Thistleton, Stephen Travis, John Wenham and Nigel Wright.

---

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.”

<sup>3</sup> The Doctrine Commission of the Church of England, “The Mystery of Salvation” (London: Church House Publishing 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Evangelical Alliance Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals, “The Nature of Hell” (London: Paternoster Publishing 2005), see pp130–5.

<sup>5</sup> J. I. Packer, “Evangelical Annihilationism in Review,” *Reformation & Revival* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 37-51.