

THE FINAL JUDGMENT

Summary

Fundamental Truth 15 of the Assemblies of God Statement of Fundamental Truths, “The Final Judgment,” makes four claims regarding God’s final decision on evil. First, there will be a final judgment of God. Second, the dead will be resurrected and judged according to their works and whether their name is in the Book of Life. Third, the guilty will share in the punishment of the devil and his angels, the Beast, and the False Prophet. Finally, this punishment will be everlasting. This paper will offer guidance on dealing with some of the more difficult questions regarding the doctrine of hell and clarify why the Assemblies of God does not affirm universalism/ultimate reconciliation or annihilationism/conditionalism. This document contains guidelines for ministers on how to teach about God’s judgment.

Preliminary Concerns

The Problem of Hell

Some have called the doctrine of hell the most disturbing doctrine in Christian theology. The traditional interpretation of hell emphasizes God’s final judgment as an eternal punishment imposed by God (Matthew 25:41; Mark 9:46–48; 2 Thessalonians 1:6–9; Jude 7; Revelation 14:11; 20:10–15). Since much of the imagery surrounding this punishment involves fire, a debate among traditionalists has been whether to interpret the fire as symbolic or literal. Scholars sometimes call this traditional view of hell “Eternal Conscious Torment” or ECT.

For much of church history, both the traditional understanding of hell as a place of eternal torment imposed by God and the biblical character of God have been in tension. Old Testament writers described God throughout the Old Testament as a “compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness”¹ (Exodus 34:6; see also Nehemiah 9:17; Psalms 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). The New Testament states that “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son” (John 3:16) because God “does not want anyone to be destroyed”² (2 Peter 3:9, NLT). Finally, “God is love” (1 John 4:8). How do we reconcile eternal torment coming from an eternally loving God? If it is hard to reconcile the existence of suffering with the character of God, how much more of a challenge is the existence of hell?

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At the same time, the Old Testament writers record God's commitment to justice. "All his acts are just and true" (Daniel 4:37, NLT). The Psalms and the Prophets repeatedly affirm that God is just (Psalms 11:7; 33:5; 50:6; 89:14; 101:1; 140:12; Isaiah 5:16; 30:18; Jeremiah 9:24; Ezekiel 34:16; Amos 5:24; Malachi 2:17). The Bible promises that Jesus will judge the world with justice (Acts 17:31; Hebrews 1:8; Revelation 19:11). How do we reconcile eternal punishment as a just punishment for sin, no matter how severe, when all sin is temporal? Where is justice in a punishment that is only punitive and not redemptive? How can an eternal place of torment be the decision of a just God?

Accepting the idea that the punishment of God is everlasting leads to other questions, including the fate of the unevangelized. Can people receive the salvation offered in Christ apart from hearing the message of the gospel? If not, should they be judged as if they had rejected the message they did not receive? Again, does this fit with the character of a just and loving God?

Alternative Views to Eternal Punishment

Considering this tension between the nature of hell and the character of a loving and just God, other options are possible in place of the traditional or ECT view. One of the best-known alternative views is the belief that eventually everyone will be saved. This view has been ascribed to the early Christian teacher Origen and is also associated with the Early Church bishop Gregory of Nyssa.

The early universalist argument was not that the wicked would be saved immediately after death or that the wicked could be saved apart from Christ. No one argued for the "all roads lead to heaven" approach of modern-day pluralism. Rather, they believed in the existence of hell as a place of temporary punishment. Here, the wicked could be purified and eventually repent of their sins and be reconciled to God. In this view, sometimes referred to as universal or ultimate restoration/reconciliation, hell functions as a place of redemption.

Christian defenders of universalism or universal reconciliation support their views with biblical passages describing the character of God or the scope of salvation rather than passages on the judgment of the wicked. From those passages, proponents reason their way to universalism by arguing that a loving and just God could never punish eternally. Verses that say otherwise are reinterpreted so that "eternal" means "of a coming age" rather than "everlasting." Other passages offered in support of universal reconciliation describe the scope of God's work in Jesus as reconciler or Lord to include "all" people or things, or "every" knee and tongue (Romans 5:18; 1 Corinthians 15:22; Philippians 2:11; Colossians 1:20; 1 Timothy 4:10). These passages are interpreted to mean a universal reconciliation with God for all of creation, in the end.

Another alternative view to ECT, also tracing back to the Early Church, is annihilationism (aka conditional immortality or conditionalism). This view teaches that temporal punishment of the wicked will result in their utter destruction: they cease to exist. Some argue that the nonexistence of the wicked is the extent of their punishment.

Many are attracted to annihilationism because they find it easier to reconcile an eternally loving God with hell if the torment for temporal sins is timed so that only nonexistence is eternal. Nonexistence could also be understood as the preference of the wicked who refuse to recognize God as God. If there can be no eternity outside an eternal God, then rejecting God is rejecting eternity. Therefore, annihilation would be the natural outcome of what the wicked desire.

Among evangelicals, annihilationism earns more support than universalism. Proponents emphasize passages that describe God's judgment in terms of destruction rather than eternity (e.g., Matthew 7:13; 10:28; Romans 6:23; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Hebrews 10:39; 2 Peter 3:7). Imagery that speaks to torment, including fire, can also refer to destruction. The fire rages. The fire burns and utterly destroys.

The Assemblies of God holds to a traditional view of hell as eternal torment, though it does not require a particular belief on the nature of that torment. In light of Fundamental Truth 15, the Assemblies of God rejects both universalism and annihilationism. This article will explain this rejection and offer ways to answer some difficult questions concerning the doctrine of hell.

Unpacking Fundamental Truth 15

In Fundamental Truth 15, four claims are made regarding the final judgment:

1. God's judgment of the guilty is final.

The final judgment of God represents the finality of God's judgment. There is no hope offered for the future salvation of those cast into the lake of fire in Matthew 25:46; Mark 9:43–48; Jude 7; Revelation 19:20; 20:10–15; 21:8. Hebrews 9:27 says that “people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment” without any hint of another chance. Those hearing the message about Christ in their lifetime do not have to go to hell. Now is the day of salvation (2 Corinthians 6:2)!

One concern regarding the Christian doctrine of hell is that God seems vindictive. The overarching view of the doctrine of hell should be in terms of justice and salvation rather than retribution and punishment. For God to restore creation to its intended good state requires the removal of evil. If God does not permanently separate the wicked from His good creation, then God would be condemning creation to an ongoing threat from evil. God's permanent final judgment of evil is part of His salvation of creation. Rather than hell being punitive, God's judgment of the wicked allows for the complete restoration of creation as a realm without sin or death.

God created humanity with free will. The first humans chose to reject God's good plan. They hid from God and chose His “absence” (not that anyone can escape God! Psalm 139:8). Hell is the completion of that absence. Revelation 21 and 22 add nuance to the fate of those who have rejected God. Revelation 21:8 affirms the fiery lake/second death of Revelation 20:10–15. Revelation 21:27 says, “Nothing evil will be allowed to enter [the city], nor anyone who practices shameful idolatry and dishonesty—but only those whose

names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life." Those who are purified and whose name is written in the Lamb's Book of Life may enter the city freely (Revelation 21:27; 22:14). The impure (also listed in Revelation 21:8) are outside the city and cannot enter (Revelation 22:15). C. S. Lewis suggested that "the doors of hell are locked on the *inside*. . . . They enjoy forever the horrible freedom they have demanded, and are therefore self-enslaved."³

Yes, hell is a place of torment whose inhabitants experience the absence of good. But good is not absent because God does not love everyone. Good is absent because those inhabitants have rejected God and have willingly chosen His absence. They prefer the presence of evil over the presence of good. That choice now becomes final and eternal. This segregation enables salvation to be complete. A restored earth where God himself dwells with humanity is the eternal reality of those who have not rejected God (Revelation 21:3).

2. The guilty are judged by their works in the absence of redemption.

A major concern in the Christian doctrine of hell is the fate of the unreached. If someone can only be saved by the work of Jesus, and they can only respond to Jesus by hearing the gospel (Romans 10:14), that does not mean those who have never heard the gospel are damned through no fault of their own. The Assemblies of God does not believe that someone will go to hell because they were born in the wrong country or the wrong century.

According to Revelation 20:12–15, the dead are judged not only by the absence of their names in the "Book of Life" (representing their "roster" among the redeemed) but by the works they have done. Those acts define the wicked who have no place in God's new creation, including the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, murderers, sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, idolaters, and all liars (Revelation 21:8). (See also Matthew 8:12; 13:41–42; 22:13; 23:15; 25:30, 33; Luke 13:27; Galatians 5:19–21; Revelation 21:27; 22:15.)

The essence of sin is the rejection of God, His goodness, and His truth (Romans 1:25; cf. 1:18–23). The rejection of God and the resulting actions, not only failure to have heard the gospel, bring judgment. God has revealed His goodness by His works (Romans 1:18–23, 25) so that all may acknowledge Him as Creator (Acts 14:15–17). God saves all who repent of their sins and trust in Jesus.

Jesus has called the Church to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19) and to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). "There is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). God does not unfairly condemn the unevangelized because they have not heard the gospel. Rather, they are judged by their works against the light they have had available to them (Romans 2:11–16), with the result that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Now that Christ has been made known, our responsibility is to share the good news so that all can freely choose to receive the indwelling Holy Spirit and live in a right relationship with their Creator (Romans 10:14–15; 8:1–11).

³ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London/New York: Harper-Collins, 1996), 130.

3. The guilty share in the punishment of God's enemies.

The Bible makes it clear that the lake of fire was not created for people but for the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41). God's purpose and desire for humanity has always been good. God does not want "anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Nevertheless, God will not allow Satan to spoil the new heavens and new earth that are to come. God will cast him in the lake of fire. Those who follow Satan against God will share in that judgment (John 16:8, 11) because evil's removal is necessary from God's new creation for God's new creation to be wholly good.

The nature of our sin against God is like the nature of Satan's rebellion. Both are a rejection of God and His good plan. God provided a way for humanity's reconciliation. The price of that costly way was the death of the Son of God. Many have chosen to accept God's great gift and are no longer a part of that realm of evil. By contrast, there is no hint in Scripture that Satan desires reconciliation with God. His fate of eternal separation is just. Those who go into eternity still rejecting God rightly share that eternal separation (Hebrews 10:26–31).

Annihilationism insists that the eternal punishment of the damned will be nonexistence. Those found in Christ will live in God's eternity, while those who reject God's omission or commission will simply remain dead (or else be resurrected to face judgment, then face nonexistence).

The argument that the wicked share the same judgment as death and the grave or Hades (Revelation 20:14–15) and are therefore destroyed misses the point. Death and Hades are not beings or persons. They are temporary states of existence and someday eliminated when all their residents are gone (1 Corinthians 15:53–56; Revelation 21:4). Annihilationism errs in that it does not eliminate death but rather elevates it to a permanent state.

If Satan is to be tormented "day and night for ever and ever" (Revelation 20:10), that also defines the punishment of those who choose to follow Satan's example instead of receiving the grace of God. The nature of Sin (with a capital S) is such that it entails the rejection of God, leading to actions known as sins (lowercase s). Paul makes this distinction in Romans 6, where he wrote about dying to Sin (Romans 6:1–14) with the result of no longer needing to commit acts of sin (Romans 6:15–23).

4. The punishment of the guilty will be everlasting.

One of the key questions regarding interpreting these Scriptures is the nature of eternity. The Bible applies terminology for eternity to both salvation and judgment (Daniel 12:2; Matthew 18:8; 25:41, 46; Hebrews 6:2; Jude 7). What does *eternity* mean in these contexts?

One way of interpreting *eternity* is that it means "everlasting" or "unending." Another way some interpret *eternal* is "the age to come" (in contrast to this age, which will go away). For example, Matthew 25:46 uses the phrase "eternal [*aionion*] punishment." Some deny that this means *eternal* in the sense of absolutely unending. In the same verse, however,

Jesus uses the same word of “*eternal life*” (*aionion*) in a manner that is directly and exactly parallel. In other words, eternal punishment will be as everlasting as eternal life. This leaves no room for later restoration of the wicked.

Another New Testament passage refers to eternal punishment as “eternal judgment,” a judgment that is valid eternally (Hebrews 6:2). This “everlasting destruction” (or separation) is “from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 Thessalonians 1:9). In these passages the word *death* speaks of spiritual death or separation from God. Therefore, eternal judgment brings a final and eternal separation from God.

Because the salvation of creation depends on God’s judgment of evil and the testimony of Scripture speaks to the finality of God’s judgment, the Assemblies of God considers any form of universalism to be an error.⁴ The rich man of Luke 16:19–31, already in torment, seeks easing of his pain and asks that a warning go to his brothers. He never asks for reconciliation with God. His rejection is ongoing. Near the end of John’s vision, the angel says, “Let the one who does wrong continue to do wrong; let the vile person continue to be vile; let the one who does right continue to do right; and let the holy person continue to be holy.” (Revelation 22:11).

The Bible offers no possibility of repentance after death nor a lessening of the torment of separation from God (Luke 16:23–26). Some call universalism “God’s favorite heresy” for its picture of none perishing. We understand God to be at work saving all who will be saved according to their will. The Assemblies of God teaches that humans retain the power to resist God’s grace regardless of His will.⁵ That “none perish” reflects the will of God, yet that does not translate into universal salvation because of human freedom. Universalism lacks scriptural support. This is why those who say all are saved according to God’s will alone must also argue that God chooses some for damnation because Scripture does not teach universal salvation.

Conclusion

The Assemblies of God rejects both the doctrines of ultimate reconciliation and annihilationism based on its understanding of Scripture, rooted in Revelation 20:10–15 but including other texts which describe the final judgment of God (Matthew 18:6–9; 25:31–46; Mark 9:42–48; 2 Thessalonians 1:8–9; Jude 7; Revelation 14:9–11; 21:8, 27; 22:11, 15). A doctrine of universalism harms both soteriology and eschatology, and thus causes more damage than a doctrine of annihilationism.

The Assemblies of God rejects both positions and holds that the best interpretation of Scripture is that hell is eternal separation from God and His goodness and is, therefore, an eternal punishment. The Bible’s teaching about this final judgment has a redemptive purpose and intends to draw people to salvation. The warnings are there so that none should perish and be condemned (John 3:16).

⁴ Universalism belongs to the category of “eschatological errors” the promotion of which can be a cause for ministerial discipline as stated in the Bylaws of the General Council of the Assemblies of God, Article IX. B, Section 3.

⁵ See the position papers on “Assurance of Salvation” and “A Response to Reformed Theology” at ag.org.

Guidelines for Teaching on God's Final Judgment

Ministers must take seriously the many biblical warnings about the coming judgment of God (Matthew 3:7; Luke 11:32; John 3:36; Acts 24:25; Romans 1:18; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Colossians 3:6; 1 Thessalonians 2:16; 1 Timothy 3:6; Hebrews 10:27; 2 Peter 3:7; Jude 6). We offer these few guidelines on how to teach about the judgment of God as ministers of the gospel:

1. We understand that the warning of God's judgment is a good thing. It tells us that God is faithful in judging evil and restoring good. God's judgment brings about justice and life for creation. In a world that cries for justice, God's nature guarantees that it will come. *Teach people that God's judgment is a message of hope.*
2. We see that we are all in danger before God's final judgment, apart from the message of the gospel. *Allow the doctrine of judgment to fill us with gratitude as those who have been saved, with humility as those who needed to be saved, and with love for others who also need to hear the message of the gospel as we did.*
3. We recognize that biblical warnings regarding judgment are given so that people might be spared God's judgment. Understanding that sinners will be judged is an opportunity to hear that we can be saved. *Use the message of judgment to proclaim the gospel.*
4. We must never teach the doctrine of hell with glee, as if we cannot wait for people to burn. At the same time, we cannot declare with certainty who will be in hell when we cannot judge the way God does. Rather, we should teach about hell with reverence and with grief. God is actively fighting to keep people from going to hell. In the same way, *by our love, our prayers, and our witness, we strive to see people rescued from hell and eternal separation from God.* Charles Spurgeon declared, "If sinners be damned, at least let them leap to hell over our dead bodies. And if they perish, let them perish with our arms wrapped about their knees, imploring them to stay . . . let not one go unwarned and unprayed for."⁶
5. We must remember that God's ways are not our ways. It is appropriate for people to ask questions because it is difficult to embrace a faith that they cannot question. At the same time, we must remember that we do not have God's insight to judge as perfectly as God. While God holds to justice (Genesis 18:25), He is not on the same level as creation. In Romans 11:33–34, Paul wrote, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! 'Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?' " We can only know what God has revealed. *We must remain faithful to what God has revealed, including the revelation of God's judgment.*

⁶ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, "The Wailing of Risca," *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 7 (London: Passmore and Alabaster), 11.