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He may even derive a certain perverse satisfaction in existing in continual defiance, or in the vain hope of heaven's ultimate defeat—

... him to unthrone we then
May hope, when everlasting Fate shall yield
To fickle Chance, and Chaos judge the strife.⁴⁸

But let us say that the sinner is willing to be annihilated. Even this entails difficulty for the annihilationist. For that would imply that there must still be a chink in his armour which still lets in some light for him to agree with his Maker that annihilation is in his best interest, or God must have succeeded in making him so. In either case, annihilation would be unjust. But if it is the latter, the question arises: If God succeeded in making him willing to be annihilated, why didn't God make him willing to be saved? Universalism would have been the preferred option.

III. SOVEREIGN GRACE

I grant that the annihilationist's picture of the future world is the neater one, swept clean of all the unsightly, filthy spots. But the cleaning process is carried out at the expense of changing the ground rules of creation. God will certainly be sovereign, but what sterile sovereignty! On the other hand, the world in which there is a hell is admittedly messy. But then what is ultimately revealed is the triumph of another kind of sovereignty: the sovereignty of grace.

Hell is man's creation, yet in a more ultimate sense it is with God's permission and by his grace. The damned—or those who damned themselves—are able to exercise their puny wills against God only because he maintains them in freedom by grace. It is in this sense that Donald Bloesch describes hell as 'the last refuge for the sinner'.⁴⁹ It is also in this light that we can now understand why the ancient theologians consider the contemplation of hell as serving to promote the blessedness of the saints in heaven. (There is no evidence to suggest that such a thought is the product of a perverse mind or a vindictive will.) For one cannot think of hell without thinking of the all-encompassing grace of God.

Dr Simon Chan teaches Theology at Trinity Theological College, Singapore. [p. 33](#)

The Logic of Hell: A Brief Rejoinder

John Start

I have a warm personal regard for my younger friend and brother, Simon Chan. I am thankful for his Christian integrity and his commitment to Christian scholarship, and I have

⁴⁸ Ibid., Bk. II, 11. 231–3.

⁴⁹ *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, II (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), 227.

read his essay with care and respect. I am also grateful to the Editor of ERT for giving me the opportunity to make a brief rejoinder.

(1) I welcome the public discussion of this solemn even ‘agonising’ (as Dr Chan rightly calls it) issue. It is a mark of evangelical maturity if we are able to debate with one another on the mutually agreed basis of Scripture, without misrepresenting, vilifying or disenfranchising one another. In Dr Chan’s article I think his paragraph on ‘understanding metaphor’ may offer the most fruitful way forward in our continuing interevangelical dialogue.

(2) I fully agree with Dr Chan that all of us come to Scripture with our own presuppositions. A totally open, objective and presuppositionless approach is impossible. But if he wonders whether it has occurred to me that I may be psychologically conditioned, I wonder whether it has occurred to him that he may be *philosophically* conditioned! He seems to me to make assumptions about ‘freedom’ and its ‘logic’ whose biblical basis still needs to be verified.

(3) I hope that nobody will jump to conclusions about my own position after reading Dr Chan’s article, without also reading what I wrote in 1988 on pages 312–320 of *Essentials* (Hodder, UK) or *Evangelical Essentials* (IVP, USA). I have been disappointed by brothers who have spread rumours about me, or given credence to them, without first taking the trouble to check the facts (as Dr Chan has). That is not the way to promote genuine evangelical dialogue.

(4) I am sorry that in his essay Dr Chart characterizes the concept of ultimate annihilation as an *alternative* to ‘the theory of eternal punishment or the doctrine of hell’. For this is not the case. Speaking for myself, I believe in hell and in eternal punishment ([Mt. 25:46](#)). The debate [p. 34](#) concerns not the eternity but the nature of this punishment, whether the wicked will endure conscious torment for ever or be destroyed/ annihilated for ever. I find it confusing that Dr Chan writes in his Introduction of *three* theories about the future of the impenitent. It would surely be more accurate, and more conducive to mutual respect, to say that there are *two*. On the one hand there is the eternal salvation of all (universalism) and on the other the eternal damnation of the impenitent (in the form either of torment or of annihilation).

(5) One evangelical scholar has referred to me as ‘that erstwhile evangelical’. But no, the hallmark of authentic evangelicalism is not that we repeat traditional beliefs, however ancient, but rather that we are always willing to re-examine them, and to subject them to fresh biblical scrutiny. This is not adjusting to liberalism, but being open to Scripture. And it *can* be argued that the *natural* interpretation both of the language of ‘destruction’ (e.g. [Mt. 10:28](#)) and of the imagery of fire (which ‘consumes’, e.g. [Mal. 4:1](#); [Mt. 3:12](#)) suggest annihilation rather than torment.

(6) Belief in the ultimate annihilation of the unsaved does not cut the nerve of missionary commitment, as some claim. As far as I know, my hesitant acceptance of it has not affected my own zeal for evangelism. The greatest incentive to world evangelization is concern for the glory of Christ.

(7) Dr Chan describes me as an ‘advocate’ of annihilation. But I am not pleading a cause, which is what advocates do. I wrote in *Essentials*: ‘I do not dogmatize about the position to which I have come. I hold it tentatively’. My belief is that there is no ‘knockdown’ biblical argument on either side which effectively settles this issue. Both sides are faced with difficult texts. I am disturbed by the excessive dogmatism of those who claim that only one view is biblical, and that those who are not committed to it forfeit the designation ‘evangelical’. If I am an advocate at all, I am pleading for greater humility of judgment. We evangelical believers need to give one another liberty wherever Scripture is not absolutely plain. We already do in other areas of eschatology (rapture,

tribulation, millenium etc.); why not in this area too? The late Professor F. F. Bruce wrote to me in 1989 that ‘annihilation is certainly an acceptable interpretation of the relevant New Testament passages’. He added: ‘For myself I remain agnostic’. My position is similar.

6 September 1993 p. 35

Confessing the One Faith: An Evangelical Response by W.E.F. Theological Task Force on Ecumenical Issues

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The Confessing the One Faith document by the Commission of Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches is an explication of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed. Churches are being asked whether they can recognize in it the faith of the apostles and on that basis can recognize one another as churches of Jesus Christ. The earlier study document by Faith and Order, ‘Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry’ (1982), had a similar goal of manifesting the unity of the churches. In this evaluation and response the Theological Commission seeks to test this document against the normative testimony of the Apostolic writings—the Scriptures. The response was sent to the Faith and Order Commission for consideration at their international meeting in August 1993. It is also addressed to the W.E.F. Constituency for their responses. The Task Force will welcome responses from the readers of E.R.T. Write to The Convenor, Dr. Paul G. Shrotenboer, 1677 Gentian Dr. S.E., Grand Rapids, MI 49508, USA.

Editor

INTRODUCTION

In a world in which the central affirmations of the Christian faith are being assailed from all sides—even its core and foundation, namely, Christ Jesus as the truth—we welcome the attempt at clarifying key aspects of the Christian faith in the document *Confessing the One Faith*, (Faith and Order Paper No. 153, World Council of Churches).

Observing the World Council of Churches (WCC), Evangelicals have had concerns: that the quest for visible unity would be pursued at the expense of truth; that the scandal of disunity would propel ecumenists towards a lowest-common denominator p. 36 approach to Christian doctrine; that the urgency of the sociopolitical ills of our time would lead to impatience with truth, captured in the adage, ‘Doctrine divides, service unites’; and finally, that certain approaches to dialogue with people of other living faiths would lead to relativism and syncretism.

In that climate, we welcome the study project on the Apostolic Faith and specifically this explication of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, commonly known as the Nicene Creed (hereafter NC). It evidences a seriousness and insight concerning the core of the Christian faith. In the following response we will outline our positive appreciation, as well as areas of concern.