

Heresy?

This chapter is updated and edited from “God's Gift to Humanity” first published in 2018.

We have discussed the doctrines of total depravity, probation, infant salvation, and eternal conscious torment. These doctrines are interwoven in nearly every traditional congregation. We have also examined the theological principles of Calvinism and Arminianism as they relate to eternal conscious torment. Along the way, we have looked at dozens of Scriptures demonstrating God’s will to reconcile all—universal reconciliation, impartial grace. Even if you are not fully convinced, I pray you are at least given pause. If there is even a possibility that the traditional doctrine of eternal conscious torment is flawed, it should not be preached as truth.

Eternal conscious torment and universal reconciliation are theological doctrines that contradict one another. Both cannot be true. Yet good and sincere men and women believe wholeheartedly in God’s ultimate redemption of all, while other equally sincere believers are convinced of eternal punishment.

There should be no division between advocates of eternal conscious torment and advocates of universal reconciliation. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. We share the same Gospel. Sadly, the divide is wide. For many traditional scholars, universal reconciliation is considered heresy. How did we come to this? How is it that educated, honorable people seeking righteousness can arrive at such drastically different conclusions?

Heresy Defined

The writers at Got Questions offer a definition of heresy: “A basic definition of heresy, according to Merriam-Webster, is ‘adherence to a religious opinion contrary to church dogma.’ A second definition is ‘dissent or deviation from a dominant theory, opinion, or practice.’ ... With regards to religion, any belief or practice that goes against the official position of the church is considered heretical.”

They point out that the Catholic Church historically labeled anyone who disagreed with it as heretical—including the reformers. Ironically, many denominations that grew from the Reformation now call Catholic doctrines heretical. As they rightly note: “Any group or individual who differs from another group can technically be called heretical.”

The authors caution that disagreements alone do not qualify as heresy. Only when dissent becomes divisive or contradicts “clear biblical teaching” does it become heretical. But who decides what is “clear biblical teaching”? That question lies at the heart of our divisions.

Modern Accusations of Heresy

Tommy Clayton, writing for Grace To You, declares that eternal conscious torment is hell, and that hell is Scripturally irrefutable. He argues that those who believe God ultimately reconciles all people are clinging to “false hope.” He suggests that God’s redeeming work ends at death and that no redemption is possible afterward.

Advocates of universal reconciliation disagree entirely. No one is redeemed from a place that does not exist. Hell is the grave, the unseen realm, not a realm of never-ending torment. Universalists appeal to Scripture itself—Old and New Testament—to show that God’s redeeming work does not stop at death.

Ecclesiastes 12 reminds us: “the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.” If all spirits return to God, then His redeeming work does not end at death.

Mr. Clayton also quotes evangelist John Blanchard, who says that universal reconciliation “has not a shred of biblical evidence” and is a “fairy tale.” He then suggests universalists are deceived by Satan himself. Universalists, in turn, believe Scripture itself proves their position. Mr. Clayton is correct about one thing: Satan can deceive. But deception is not confined to one theological camp. Christ warned us: “You will be judged by the measure you judge others.”

The Weight of Tradition

Nearly every major denomination affirms eternal conscious torment. The SBC, NBC-USA, ELCA, UMC, Presbyterian bodies, Pentecostal bodies, and countless others teach endless punishment for the unrepentant. Some soften the language; others intensify it. The result is division—layers of division. Many disagreements arise from how Scripture is translated. Others arise from traditions accumulated over centuries. Even Bible translations differ based on theological bias. Publishers shape translations, and translators bring their assumptions to the text.

The purest early church was astonishingly simple: a community led by those who knew Christ. But very early, divisions arose—even within Jerusalem—between Jewish believers native to Israel and those from Greece. Over time, traditions multiplied, doctrines were developed, translations diverged, and biases became entrenched.

The Truth and the Traditions of Men

There is a Truth that shines through all traditions. That Truth is Christ. That Truth is Light. And that Light exposes the darkness created by human tradition. The Holy Spirit teaches all. Yet traditions often obscure His teaching. Paul warned Timothy of men who profited from the Word and misused it. But he also said: “All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable...”

The Spirit still teaches. But men distort. Eternal conscious torment is a tradition elevated to Scriptural status—a tradition nearly universally embraced in the Western church, yet frail when tested by the Light. Scholars debate endlessly. Pastors argue confidently. Translations differ significantly. Advocates of eternal conscious torment construct elaborate defenses. But if there is even a remote chance that ECT is false, it should not be preached as fact.

Literal translations—Young’s Literal, the Concordant Literal Version, the World English Bible—offer clarity. In particular, the Greek word “aion” does not mean “forever and ever.” It means an age, a finite period. Only God is eternal. Understanding this changed my view forever. It opened the Word to me.

Conclusion

As for me and my house, we will love the Lord. There is no force great enough to overturn the love of the Father or to drive away even one of His children. It is my prayer that all who read this chapter will pause, consider their theology with humility, and reject the doctrine of eternal conscious torment. And may the Lord place a hedge of protection around those who seek truth, shielding them from the sting of accusations and the weight of misplaced charges of heresy.