Dear Gerson,

Most of the teachers of my acquaintance for the past 40 years of my Christian studies were Acts 28 dispensationalists, who believed in annihilation for the unbeliever - i.e., destruction without a resurrection to follow. None of them believed in the orthodox view of eternal conscience torment in the flames of hell. It was such hellfire teaching that had helped drive me into atheism at the age of 18.

Annihilationists use the Great White Throne and Lake of Fire (Rev.20:10-15) as the basis of their view. I had heard about other groups in my earlier Christian years, who also rightly divide the word of truth. These are known as Universal Reconciliationists (UR for short). In recent years I have read some UR books. Although I found things that I could not agree with, the overall idea that God loses nothing makes sense to me. Also, I am able to understand certain scriptures without relying on interpretations that require "special pleading". One such is 1 Tim.4:10 where the annihilationist translates "a Living God, Who is Preserver of all men, especially of believers".

But are believers REALLY better preserved among men during this dispensation of grace than other men? I haven't observed it so. And although "preserve" and "heal" are aspects of salvation for faithful Israel, they don't belong in the current dispensation - where I believe 1 and 2 Timothy belong. Furthermore, none of the other uses of Soter/soteria in 1 Timothy has bodily preservation in its context - nor in the sister epistle 2 Timothy. I know that some consider "saved through childbearing" in 1 Tim.2:15 as a physical preservation. However, Paul in the same letter advised Timothy to take a little wine for his stomach's sake and his frequent illnesses (5:23). Why? Because the dispensation of Acts, which included miraculous healing and preservation, had come to a close. The best way to take "saved through childbearing" is the aspect of working out one's own salvation (Phi.2:12), which includes the labors of childbearing and childrearing for many.

My understanding is that the Church has a unique calling to service - and the Caller knows whom He has called and whom He has not (2 Tim.2:19). The unbeliever will be judged at the Great White Throne for his WORKS (with a different standard of works from ours - based on what they did when their conscience prompted them). Note that there is not a whisper of faith in that passage in Revelation. Those in the book of life will enter eternal life at that late stage of God's plan. Those not in the book will enter the destructive, purgative force of the Lake of Fire. After that experience they will eventually be resurrected at an appropriate time, humbled and submissive. It seems to take suffering to heal many of us rebels and teach us humility.

Annihilationist and UR both agree that "every knee shall bend" in submission to Christ - and willingly. But consider: if God has to destroy forever His unrepentant, rebellious enemies in order to achieve universal submission, doesn't that open God to the charge of using the fear of hellfire to gain the submission of certain others - eye-servants. But these servants would be insincere, and kindred to those after the Millennium who are so easily roused up again by Satan, who will be loosed for the "little season" (Rev.20:3). That seems to be a less than stellar victory of God over sin, if you ask me.

I don't know if any of this gets into the subject as you wanted. Please don't hesitate to disagree if you can't see it this way. After all, God will be the Judge of men, not us. The world keeps enticing us to be like them, so we should be judging acts and actions whether they are appropriate for **US**. How can we condemn the acts or persons of others, who haven't been enlightened by His Spirit? We might venture to criticize if we have the wisdom to see into another man's conscience, whether he is living in bad faith with himself. For the rest, I think the best we can do with those of the world is to remind them that God will judge certain deeds, and in their hearts most men know what these deeds are. Then we should try to shine as His lights by our own manner of life. Some Christians prefer to act as tyrants, judging others. Thus, they make God over as an image of themselves. They prefer to believe that some will be tortured in hell forever. This is the barbarism of Plato and Pharisee, but not the word of God. If "God is love", as God declared through John, how could such a thing be?

My thoughts,

Glen