

THE NATURE OF HELL

By Denver Cheddie

Throughout the church age, historical Christianity has taught that heaven and hell are as much a reality as land, sea and space. The Bible, rightly divided certainly affirms the belief in a literal and eternal heaven and hell, Jesus Himself being most responsible for its teachings on hell. It is only in recent decades that this doctrine has come into question on a large scale by evangelicals and non-Christians.^[i]

Many today struggle to reconcile God's wrath and love, suggesting that the eternal suffering of the wicked is contradictory to the nature of a loving God. Others claim that the concepts of heaven and hell were just invented by the church to keep an ignorant society straight. The educated of today despise such techniques and discard the doctrine altogether. The heartbeat of New Age thought is that there is no such thing as sin and punishment. Instead people need to feel good about themselves, to which the concept of hell is a hindrance.

There are even those who resent the idea of a rapture and eternal home in heaven, referring to it as an escapist mentality. They feel that Christians add little to solving the problems of society by desiring to escape, and even label them as negative for insisting that the world's problems can only be solved when Jesus returns.

Alternatives to the Doctrine of Heaven & Hell

Reincarnation

A widely growing alternative to the traditional doctrine of heaven and hell is reincarnation. In 1982, over 50% of the world's population believed in some form of it, including 23% of western society and 17% of churchgoers.^[iii] The main idea in reincarnation is that the spirit leaves the body after death and inhabits another. Through several subsequent life times, it is hoped to reach a state of perfection or godhood referred to as Nirvana^[iii], the assumption being that one lifetime is not enough to attain perfection. A major shortcoming of this belief is the fact that humanity has not improved over the course of history, in fact, man has become worse^[iv]. This would not have happened had reincarnation been true.

Reincarnation has proven to be a convenient belief for a godless society especially among intellectuals – yet without valid scientific support. Although there have been many instances of people under “hypnotic regression” who are supposedly “recalling past life experiences”, psychologists believe that the mere presence of the hypnotist is enough to ‘lead’ the patients and to induce in them the required response^[v].

On the other hand, there are well-documented cases of people who have had “out of body” or “near death” experiences where the spirit temporarily leaves the body, especially during a coma or a state of unconsciousness. In one study of people who had such experiences, over 500 individuals independently and unanimously testified that they were ‘floating’ in ‘a

tunnel' progressing toward a 'light' with an appearance of a 'religious figure'^[vi]. Although such claims are always questionable, they do suggest the reality of a judgement throne rather than a second existence after death. At least they have some of the experts convinced^[vii].

Annihilation

A growing belief in Christian circles is that the fires of hell, similar to those of Greek mythology, utterly consume the wicked into a state of nonexistence. The common question is, "how could a loving God allow people to suffer eternally in hell?" But it has a scriptural answer. God is also just and holy and would by no means clear the guilty (Exodus 34:7). Besides, the way in which God manifested His love is clearly revealed in scripture, that is to save man from hell by giving His life as a ransom (John 3:16; 15:13). How could we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? (Hebrews 2:3)

Annihilationists appeal to many scriptures to justify their position.

1. 2 Thessalonians 2:8 – destruction: They claim that this word means *annihilation*. Greek scholars, however, point out that the Greek word *olethros*, translated destruction, refers to a *ruination* rather than an *annihilation*. A bulb, which falls to the ground, breaking into many pieces, is ruined but certainly not annihilated^[viii]. According to Revelation 19:20 the beast and the false prophet are cast in the lake of fire at the beginning of the millenium. After the 1000 years and Satan's little season, the devil is cast in hell where the beast and false prophet *still are* (Revelation 20:10). If they were not annihilated after 1000 years, when will they ever be?

2. Everlasting, eternal (Gr. *Aion*): Annihilationists say that this word refers to *an age*. Although that is correct, it could refer to either a temporary or an eternal time period, the context in which it is used determining the correct meaning. The same word is used to describe God's existence (Revelation 1:6; 4:9,10; 5:13; 11:15) and the reign of the righteous in heaven (Revelation 22:5). It is also used in the same sentence to describe future punishment and eternal life (Matthew 25:46). It is clear that in the contexts in which it occurs to describe hell, it refers to an age of ceaseless duration.
3. 2nd death: Annihilationists believe that the term *2nd death* refers to a cessation of existence. On the contrary, death, in scripture, is portrayed as a separation^[ix]. Spiritual death is a separation from God while still in existence (Ephesians 2:1; 1 Timothy 5:6), physical death is a separation of body and soul, and 2nd death is simply the eternal separation of the sinner from the glory of God's presence.

Universalism

Universalists believe that eventually everyone would be saved and end up in heaven. Hell may serve as a retributive form of punishment designed to lead sinners to a final act of repentance. Variations in the belief lead to the concept of purgatorial or redemptive fires in hell, while others see hell's fires as figurative or cleansing in nature. But the Bible makes it very clear exactly when the word *fire* is used in a figurative sense^[x]. When spoken of hell, however, it refers to a literal fire which is never quenched.

Heaven and Hell are Literal and Eternal

The Bible is very emphatic that there is an eternal and literal heaven and hell. God is eternal in nature and everything He does has eternal consequences. Heaven refers to His 'place of existence' therefore it must be as eternal as God Himself. Lucifer committed an eternal sin worthy of eternal punishment. Time was not even created until this world was made thus the concept of finite punishment simply does not exist as far as God is concerned. Hell was created for the devil and his angels, and not for man, but man has been given the choice of his eternal destiny during his temporary sojourn on earth.

^[ii] Jon E. Braun, *Whatever Happened to Hell?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1979): 158 quoted in Robert P. Lightner, *Handbook of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1993): 277,8.

^[iii] George Gallup Jr., *Adventures in Immortality* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1982): 192 quoted in Ajith Fernando, *Crucial Questions on Hell* (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications, 1993): 79.

^[iii] There are many varieties of the belief but in essence they are the same.

^[iv] Fernando, *Crucial Questions*, 85.

^[v] Ibid. 83.

^[vi] D. James Kennedy, *Evangelism Explosion* (Penang: Meko Offset Printing, 1983): 102,3. See also Rita Bennett, *To Heaven & Back* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), for other documented cases of "out of body experiences".

^[vii] Kennedy, *Evangelism Explosion*, 103.

^[viii] Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1997): 565,6.

^[ix] R. A. Torrey, *What the Bible Teaches* (New Kensington: Whitaker House, 1996): 306.

^[x] Finis Dake, *Dake's Annotated Reference Bible* (Lawrenceville: Dake Bible Sales, 1982): 621 (OT). 2 examples of figurative use are "fiery trials" (1 Peter 1:9) and "the tongue is a fire" (James 3: 5,6).

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