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## Coming to Grips with **HELL**

“**H**ell disappeared. And no one noticed.”

With that terse observation American church historian Martin Marty summarized our attitude toward a vanishing doctrine that received careful attention in previous generations. If you are a churchgoer, ask yourself when you last heard an entire sermon or Sunday school lesson on the topic.

A recent *Newsweek* article says, “Today, hell is theology’s H-word, a subject too trite for serious scholarship.” Gordon Kaufman of Harvard Divinity School believes we have gone through a transformation of ideas, and he says, “I don’t think there can be any future for heaven and hell.”

Admittedly, hell is an unpleasant topic. Unbelievers disbelieve in it; most Christians ignore it. Even the

staunchly biblical diehards are often silent out of embarrassment. Hell, more than any doctrine of the Bible, seems to be out of step with our times.

### REASONS TO DISBELIEVE

There are, of course, reasons this doctrine suffers obvious neglect. At the top of the list is the difficulty of reconciling hell with the love of God. That millions of people will be in conscious torment forever is beyond the grasp of the human mind. Bishop Robinson, who gained notoriety with his liberal views in *Honest to God*, writes,

Christ . . . remains on the Cross as long as one sinner remains in hell. That is not speculation; it is a statement grounded in the very necessity of God's nature. In a universe of love there can be no heaven that tolerates a chamber of horrors; no hell for any which does not at the same time make it hell for God. He cannot endure that, for that would be a final mockery of his nature. And He will not.<sup>1</sup>

The doctrine of hell has driven many people away from Christianity. James Mill expressed what many have felt. "I will call no being good,

who is not what I mean by good when I use that word of my fellow creatures; and if there be a Being who can send me to hell for not so calling him, to hell I will go.”<sup>2</sup>

One man said that he would not want to be in heaven with a God who sends people to hell. His preference was to be in hell so that he could live in defiance of such a God. “If such a God exists,” he complained, “He is the devil.”

To put it simply, to us the punishment of hell does not fit the crime. Yes, all men do some evil and a few do great evils, but nothing that anyone has ever done can justify eternal torment. And to think that millions of good people will be in hell simply because they have not heard of Christ (as Christianity affirms) strains credulity. It’s like capital punishment for a traffic violation.

Second, serious thinking about hell all but disappeared because of the medieval distortions that have become associated with this place of torment. Dante in *The Inferno* describes his tour through hell with vivid images of demons who tear sinners apart with claws and grappling hooks if they can catch them before they sink beneath the boiling pitch. He depicted the judgment of God in exact symbolic retribution. If a person used music in this world in the

service of evil, demons will blow trumpets into his ears so that fire gushes out of his ears, eyes, and nostrils.

Such medieval authors took biblical teaching and combined it with pagan mythology resulting in caricatures that are still with us. We should note in passing that the Bible teaches that Satan and his demons will be the tormented, not the tormentors. The suffering of hell (to be discussed later) will be meted out by God, not inflicted by one sinful being onto another.

A third reason belief in hell has waned is because of the growing acceptance of reincarnation. Twenty-four percent of Americans now profess to believe that they will reappear in a different body. Shirley MacLaine says it is like show business. "You just keep going around until you get it right."

If liberalism allows us to believe in God without an afterlife, reincarnation enables us to believe in an afterlife without God. Thus millions of Westerners believe in some kind of afterlife, but it is one of bliss, not misery. Genuine fear of suffering in hell has vanished from the mainstream of Western thought. Few, if any, give prolonged thought to the prospect that some people will be in hell. Fewer yet believe they them-

selves will be among that unfortunate number.

### THE ECLIPSE OF HELL

For liberal Protestants, hell began to fade in the nineteenth century. The universalists believed God was too good to send anyone to hell, and the Unitarians concluded that man was too good to go there. United Church of Christ theologian Max Stackhouse said, "The prevailing opinion is that when you die you're dead but God still cares." Rabbi Terry Bard, director of pastoral services at Boston's Beth Israel hospital, sums up the view of many Jews: "Dead is dead," he says, "and what lives on are the children and the legacy of good works."

And what about evangelicals who believe in the complete trustworthiness of the Bible? University of Virginia sociologist James Hunter, who has written two books on contemporary evangelicalism, says, "Many evangelicals have a difficult time conceiving of people, especially virtuous nonbelievers, going to hell." He makes the point that according to evangelical theology, Ghandi should be in hell; but Hunter says that when evangelical students were asked about that, they became "extremely nervous." To say that good people