

What to say about hell: A symposium

by [Paul J. Griffiths](#)

This article appears in the [June 3, 2008](#) issue.

Hell is talked about cautiously, if at all, in mainline churches. Yet the notion of a divinely ordained place of punishment for the wicked after death is deeply embedded in the Christian imagination. How should we think and talk about hell? Why don't we talk about it? We asked eight theologians to comment.

The doctrine of universal salvation, often simply taken for granted, is being defended afresh on biblical as well as philosophical grounds. This very defense is a testament to the importance of taking hell seriously, and shows a clear recognition that universal salvation cannot be casually assumed as a matter of course for anyone who respects the authority of scripture and the tradition of the church. At the same time, the doctrine of conditional immortality, as an alternative to the traditional doctrine of hell, has gained a number of defenders, particularly on biblical grounds.

It is noteworthy that much of this debate is occurring in the more evangelical and conservative segments of the church, segments noted for taking a high view of the authority of scripture. All of this is very much as it should be for it is simply impossible to take seriously orthodox Christian doctrine and not have a lively, indeed passionate, interest in the issues of heaven and hell. While there may have been periods in which Christians were preoccupied with the afterlife to the neglect of this life, our age is not one of them. We have been shamed by Freud, Marx and Feuerbach into thinking that concern with the afterlife is a childish fantasy that is not worthy of the attention of mature, responsible persons. And in buying into this shame, we have trivialized both the gospel and our own lives.

What is ultimately at stake is the extraordinarily dramatic choice of whether we shall embrace the love, joy and peace that abides forever in the Trinity and is offered to us, or whether, against all reason, we shall reject it in favor of the illusory appeal of sin. One of the things that makes the doctrine of hell incredible to many people, and is at the heart of current defenses of universalism, is the perception that the choice

of hell is simply inconceivable. Following the Platonic notion that the choice of evil is simply a misguided choice of good, all prodigals must eventually have their illusions shattered by the stench of the pigpen and return to the Father.

By contrast, the doctrine of hell aligns with Kierkegaard's insistence that it is possible for a person to be decisively shaped by the choice of evil—though whether such a being is still a person in the strict sense may be debatable. We are truly persons only when we relate properly to the trinitarian God and other persons who submit to his love.

How to teach and preach hell is a difficult question. When I am asked this, I usually refer people to C. S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, which does a masterful job of depicting with remarkable psychological realism the sort of choices that constitute the choice of hell. Ghosts from hell take a bus ride to heaven, but it is not heaven to them because of the current state of their character. The astonishing thing is that most of the ghosts prefer to return to hell rather than embrace the joy offered in heaven.

—*Jerry Walls, who teaches at Asbury Theological Seminary*

Hell is a nonnegotiable item of Christian vocabulary. It has scriptural roots, it is there in the earliest creeds, and it has been a staple of Christian preaching and art since almost the beginning. To speak of hell is to speak primary Christian language: the language of confession, of prayer and of hymnody, a language in which fear, hope, sin and grace are inchoately intertwined.

To abandon this sort of talk, as some Christians recommend and some attempt, is a strange and sad form of self-hatred, like that of those who mutilate themselves in an attempt to see what it would be like to live without arms or legs. The stumps can still be wiggled; there'll be those phantom pains where the lost limbs once were; but once the knife has cut deep enough the body will no longer do what it once could and what the lure of health draws it to. Just so, the fabric of Christian thought without hell is rent, damaged, no longer the seamless white garment with which we Christians have been uncomprehendingly gifted.

It's worth noting that although the Christian tradition has been rich in philosophical and theological speculative specifications of what such talk means, and still richer in poetical elaborations of its connotations, it's been chaste in formulating doctrine about hell. The Catholic Church, for example, in whose passionate embrace I delight,

has very little developed hell-doctrine, teaching almost nothing *de fide* about who is in hell, whether anyone is, what it's like to be there and so on. This is a good thing: no developed eschatology's details are such as to command the assent of any Christian. We have, then, the unavoidability of hell-talk, together with the speculations and imaginations it prompts. But about the topic itself we know almost nothing.

Or perhaps we do, even though doctrine about it is rightly undeveloped. One thing I'm sure I know is what hell is like. And I'm sure that you know it too, and that only a half-willed blindness can make you think otherwise. It's this matter—hell's foreshadowings in this life, its agonizingly dusty taste on the tongue, its melody-destroying disharmonies trailing off into endless silence—to which I'd like to see preachers and teachers pay more attention. Hell, formally speaking, is that despairing condition in which separation from God seems to be final and unending; in it, there is no faith, no hope, no love—only the agony of abandonment, the edgeless desert of dissimilitude to which you know you do not belong but from which you can see no exit other than the attempt at self-destruction.

This you know, and have known since birth. It is the condition of the child separated from the mother and not finding her, and the despair of that hell is real to the child even if it occurs in the warmth of a loving home and does not last long—so much the more if it occurs at the hands of torturers and killers. It is the choking dry-as-death hopelessness of the adult whose idols have failed and who can, whether for now or for ever, see nothing beyond them. It is, in short, the condition natural to humans in this fallen world, a world so broken by sin that the most natural response to it is despair.

It doesn't do to skip lightly over this truth, the truth of hell's obviousness and closeness. If we, as Christians, do that, the gospel of grace is emptied and turned into a lie whose comfort is nugatory, like that of an empty chocolate Easter egg. We have something more important to say than that, but we can say it only if we both recall and talk about the reality of hell.

—Paul Griffiths, who recently joined the faculty of Duke Divinity School

Gehenna, the term often translated as hell in the New Testament, refers to the valley of Hinnom (Ge-Hinnom) southeast of the city of Jerusalem. It was the site for the cult of Moloch, an idol represented by a bull, into whose fiery arms little children

were thrown to be offered as sacrifice. According to rabbinic tradition, the pagan priests would sound cymbals and beat drums to buffer the screams of the burning children from their mothers and fathers. After Josiah's reformation the cultic place was destroyed, and it became a landfill for disposal of the waste of the city and for the carcasses of animals and executed criminals. Fire was set to burn the waste. The imagery of hell as a lake of fire is associated with the forgotten cries of the innocent and the burning waste of the city. More vividly than the idea of Hades or Sheol, used to describe the underworld where the souls of the dead dwell, Gehenna evokes images of hell of consummate literary quality as in Dante's description of the place in which all hope must be abandoned. Hell is no waiting room.

From the place that it was, hell became a trope to describe a condition of utter despondency where hope is no longer a companion. Condemnation to hell is comparable to an exile from where the departed has no longer the resort to return, has not even recollection of what was home. Even better said is the poignant description of those who descend to Sheol in the book of Job: "their places know them no more" (7:10). That one's place is the subject of knowledge reveals hell as radical forgetfulness even of that which is most familiar, a place of no return, of no re-collection. But this forgetfulness is not the obliteration of memory; instead, memory is frozen, and the deeds of the past are hardened and have no future. All that has gone before are items no longer collectible. From a place of condemnation it becomes a place of closure from where there is neither retrieval nor redressing.

Yet, in a paradoxical way, for the Christian there is a hope against all hope. As it is confessed in the Apostles' Creed: God in Christ descended into hell. That nothing is out of God's reach, even the depths of hell, is what affords hope, the promise of life. All hope has indeed been abandoned. But this hope that defies all hope becomes the gateway to heaven. However, this can be known only if one has been there, in hell, to meet the Christ and hear the promise, the one made to the thief dying by Jesus' side in the horror of Golgotha: "Today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). The promise is elicited by a simple petition: "Remember me." This remembrance unlocked the ultimate gates of the domain of evil and included that criminal in the last petition of the Lord's Prayer: "Deliver us from evil"—the daring, prayerful supplication that evil, the devil and hell be no more.

—Vitor Westhelle, who teaches at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Hell is an integral part of the Good News. If there wasn't something to be saved from, why would we need a Savior? One is saved not only for something good, but also from something bad. Slaves are saved from captivity for liberty. The ill are saved from sickness and death for health and life. Even politicians promise to save us from present difficulties for a better society.

It would be unhealthy nostalgia for someone saved to obsess about the past; one should focus on growing stronger in renewed liberty and health. However, that new life fittingly includes gratitude proportionate to former misery and present joy, which requires consciousness of both.

Hell's gospel character is especially revealed in Christ's descent into hell: after Christ died, his human soul (united to the Word) descended to the souls of the holy men and women who had died before him. As originally professed, *hell* could refer to any abode of the dead that was not heaven. Since our relation to God in this life determines our fate after death, those who had died loving God prior to Christ's opening of heaven were not in the same condition as those who had not. Thus *hell* in the original profession is plural. It implies Christ's "preaching" to the dead in their different "prisons": the announcement of freedom to the holy souls and of the truth about God to those who had rejected him. That original plurality suggests why major controversy about the doctrine erupted only in the 16th century, when noncreedal uses of *hell* were increasingly understood in the singular and to refer only to eternal punishment, as in modern English.

Christ's descent shows how hell is integral to the Good News, because it encapsulates the message of salvation: in virtue of Christ's death on the cross, we may be saved from eternal separation from God and for eternal communion with him. But there are these two, communion and separation, and which will be our ultimate fate depends on our separation from God or communion with him in this life. We may sometimes oscillate between the two as we sin grievously or repent sincerely. Yet Christ's descent reveals the great hope we have in him: that is, similarly to the holy souls who awaited him then, if by his grace we now persevere in believing in him, keeping his commandments and desiring his return, we shall likewise someday see him coming to bring us into his heavenly glory!

Thus Christ's descent reminds us that God truly became man and died a human death, his body going to the tomb and his soul going to the realm of death. It reminds us how he is our Savior, what he saves us from and what he saves us for.

Children can easily learn these truths from the vibrant traditional Christian artwork of Christ's descent, while the rest of us can also deepen our appreciation for our moral freedom and the friendship to which Christ invites us.

—Alyssa Pitstick, who teaches at Hope College

Do you believe in hell?" Believe it or not, I am sometimes still asked that question. My first temptation is to be flip, answering in corollary profane fashion to what someone answered when asked, "Do you believe in infant baptism?"—he answered, "Believe in it! Hell, I've seen it!" So I am tempted to say, "Do I believe in hell? Hell, I've seen it!" I've seen hell in our world of incessant warfare and killing, in the death of innocent children, in the fire and ice of alienation across generations and in marital breakups, and when seeking souls testify to their experience of the silence or absence of God. Are my questioners satisfied with such a true answer?

My second response is not flip, but it reflects suspicion. Why, given the range of creeds and confessions to which I willingly and consistently subscribe and which I confess, would this one ever be selected as a test of orthodoxy? Longshoreman and philosopher Eric Hoffer nailed this point in *The True Believer*: "Strict orthodoxy is as much the result of mutual suspicion as of ardent faith." Is ardent faith, as in "faith in Christ and God's love," the motivator of such a question or is the inquiry spurred by an interest in nailing the person questioned or nailing down the borders of the faithful community?

That aside, I do believe that questions about the status of hell in Christian belief can be in place. Some years ago I gave a lecture titled "Hell Disappeared, No One Noticed: A Civic Argument." Historian Arthur Mann and I long ago threatened to write about the disappearance of hell in the piety of most modern Catholicism (and Protestantism?) as a subtle but epochal event.

The question of hell relates to themes of divine judgment, "the wrath of God," the calling to account and the like. Loading up those themes with this glamorous, colorful, mythosymbolic, ever-changing (also within the canonical scriptures) envisioning, so subject to caricature and so useful for terrifying children, does not advance belief in the God revealed as a God of love. Does it advance morality? I prefer the piety of the St. Bernard tradition. In a vision an angel announces that she is going to torch the pleasures of heaven and quench the fires of hell, so people will start loving God for God's own sake.

I have a test, when pressed. Take the presser to dinner, see to it that a candle is lit, and ask the guest to put his or her finger in the tiny flame for ten seconds. “Are you crazy?” No, just testing. Now picture your whole body in it for ten seconds and then forever. If you still want to press me, I’ll say: “If you believe that torment will happen to unreached Hindus and your friendly neighborhood unbeliever or lapsed Catholic, why are you so inhumane, so selfish, that you are spending an extra hour beyond necessity to eat or chat? Get out of here. Pass out tracts, Board planes to reach the heathen. Don’t tell me you have dealt with the physical pain of that hell and can keep your sanity.”

Hellfire and brimstone preachers can’t digest their own message. Those who really want to save souls or spread divine love—even those who use belief in hell as the orthodoxy test—are the ones who teach us to love God for God’s own sake.

—*Martin E. Marty, who recently wrote The Mystery of the Child*

From the gospel we have heard the absolute word of hope. We have heard that Christ conquered death and despoiled hell. We have seen the icons of Christ crushing hell’s jaws; we have heard him call out to Adam, “Sleeper awake, I did not create you to be a prisoner of hell!” Why, then, a student once asked me, do Christians continue to believe in hell? Shouldn’t hell be downgraded from a hurricane to a tropical storm, from Gehenna to Sheol?

My first instinct was to agree. Child of my age, I find hell baffling and repugnant. I’m against capital punishment, against corporal discipline. Every motherly instinct tells me that children should be reared by hugs, not threats. If I held God to the same standard, I’d be a universalist or an annihilationist. Nonetheless, I had to tell my student that far from being abolished by the gospel, hell—eternal hell, with the undying worm and unquenchable fire—is a Christian distinctive.

A look at the world’s religions suggests, moreover, that it’s a distinctive that makes a difference. Though few religious traditions have devised more nightmarish hells than Buddhism, Buddhist hells are as temporary as Buddhist heavens; one relapses from them into other births, until at last the stain of individuality dissolves. Nor are Buddhist hells like Christian purgatory; for the holy souls in purgatory are already sealed for heaven, experiencing, through their pains, a blessedness from which they cannot fall away.

Hence the Christian distinctive: individuality is for keeps. If there is a blessedness from which one cannot fall away, there is also a cursedness from which the truly depraved, who say no to blessedness with all their being, cannot be forced to depart. Christ has robbed death of its sting and deprived the devil of many a tasty meal, but hell persists, we are told, because freedom of the will requires it and justice demands it. It wasn't just "abandon hope" that Dante saw inscribed over the entrance of hell, but "justice moved my maker on high; divine power made me, wisdom supreme, and primal love."

There's no subject on which I'm more skeptical of my own—and our common—opinion. Of course we'd prefer to think that divine mercy will empty hell and set free every human captive, if not every last demon or imp. Of course we think ourselves well rid of the carking, soul-destroying guilt and judgmentalism that hell once evoked. But are we really serious? Abolish hell, and see how salvation dims down. Strike the "Inferno" from the *Divine Comedy*, and see how a blandness overtakes even "Purgatory" and "Paradise," turning the cosmic drama of sin and salvation into a spiritualist soap opera of inevitable progress. Abolish hell, and a host of smaller obsessions will fill the gap. For our fears we will always have with us, whether of hell or of comparative trifles. Keep hell in view, and the trifles will fade as the promise of salvation burns bright.

—*Carol Zaleski, who teaches at Smith College*

I have a vivid memory of an evangelistic event I attended as an undergraduate. The slick multimedia presentation of the gospel focused extensively on the torments of hell. At the conclusion, we were urged to trust in Jesus in order to escape this fiery fate. I was appalled. It was emotionally manipulative and designed to scare people into faith. The gospel was presented as little more than an escape from future agonies. From this perspective, it is hardly surprising that hell has fallen out of favor with many Christians.

However, in wrestling with this question over the years, I have come to think that in spite of the distortions of hell in some traditions, eradicating references to hell is shortsighted and has troubling consequences for the shape of our witness to the gospel. To be sure, there is much about Christian teaching on hell that is subject to critical scrutiny. But in its most basic form, it serves as a warning concerning the judgment of God against evil, injustice and callousness in the face of human need and brokenness. It is a reminder of the righteousness and justice of a God who

stands over against the principalities and powers that are characterized by the oppression of others and indifference to their suffering. It bears witness to the hope that in due course God will put things right and evil will be justly condemned and vanquished.

The resources for recovering these aspects of Christian teaching on hell are close at hand, residing in the Gospels, which repeatedly portray Jesus speaking about judgment and hell. While the presence of these texts should work against the elimination of hell from the lexicon of Christian witness, the pressing question concerns the communication of this idea in the present cultural moment.

I suggest that we appropriate the idea of hell as a witness to the seriousness with which Jesus Christ enters into solidarity with those who are poor and disenfranchised. In the midst of the tournament of narratives that compete for allegiance in our society and in our souls, Jesus calls us to join him in his mission of proclaiming good news to the poor, setting the oppressed free and seeking those who are lost. We participate by providing food for the hungry, water for the thirsty, clothing for the naked, hospitality to the stranger, companionship to the imprisoned and comfort to the sick, and so enter into solidarity with Jesus himself.

Narratives that set themselves against the poor, the helpless, the oppressed and the marginalized are opposed to the mission of God in Jesus Christ. Christian teaching on hell reminds us that at the consummation of all things, when the will of God is done on earth as it is in heaven, these inhumane narratives will be consigned to the “eternal fire,” where they will be banished once and for all. What of those who have chosen to participate in them?

—John R. Franke, who teaches at Biblical Theological Seminary in Hatfield, Pennsylvania

Julian of Norwich scoffed at the devil. In her received *Revelations* she spoke of sin becoming naught. And she saw Christ’s profligate blood bleeding and blurring together the carefully separated strata of the 14th-century body politic—the blue-blooded English lords and ladies, who by custom received the Eucharist first, were swept up into the tide rushing from the flowing side of Christ. They become mixed, miscegenated, dare I say Irish or Negro. The Evil One, who carefully teaches us, *before it’s too late, to keep ‘em separated* (choose your generation’s lyrics on the matter), has been caught and shown for what he is. In Julian’s vision, the devil is a

fraud. Satan is caught hawking the pristine, pricey and paltry markers of *which* class and *which* race and *which* school.

I've taught Julian's *Revelations* for nearly a decade. Recently I asked students to read her alongside Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Scoff at the devil? Declare that sin is *naught*? By what possible angle can evil be viewed as vanquished? Morrison names the world as nothing less than hell. Her novel evokes seething anger at the kaleidoscope of slights, slashes and assaults suffered in Lorain, Ohio. As a colleague of mine puts it, in this novel the bluest of eyes, the whitest of pedigrees, the ideal of Dick and Jane and Mother and Father in the very pretty house grind their way down through the African-American characters to crush the body of the girl-child Pecola Breedlove. Pecola becomes for little girls seeking not to be rendered as *naught* that one child who ensures their beauty and safety. "All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her."

Jennifer Beste's writings on trauma have prompted me to ask a question that demands of Christian ethics a full stop at the matter of hell: What if one of God's own beloved may be so violated as to vitiate her own capacity to opt for God? What if the grinding prism of violence comes so to bear on a body as to render the mind incapable of receiving grace? I must ask another full-stop question: What if one's own legitimacy and beauty and promise have been won through the machinations of the malevolent one?

In her preface to *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison demands that the reader be not merely touched, but moved. This is my only hope: to be moved by God into that Christ-formed participation that risks such pain, such confession, such rage that it risks coming so close to the devil that laughter may be impossible. Teaching these two texts together, I find myself looking at hell and praying, lamenting, raging that God *must* hold Pecola, and all our daughters, in God's own pierced palm.

—Amy Laura Hall, who teaches at Duke University