



STATEMENT DH-198

EFFECTIVE EVANGELISM

What about Hell?

by Douglas Groothuis

Is the doctrine of hell a hindrance or a help in witnessing? Many evangelicals are ashamed of this biblical doctrine, viewing it as a blemish to be covered up by the cosmetic of divine love. But this dishonors God's Word. Jesus warned His hearers of the eternal punishment awaiting those who reject Him (Matt. 13:40-42; 25:46). If we clearly and compassionately expound the truth about hell, we may be surprised to find people responding to it in faith.

The doctrine of hell does not stand alone as a kind of ancient Christian horror story. Rather, hell is inseparable from three other interrelated biblical truths: human sin, God's holiness, and the cross of Christ.

In a relativistic culture, the very concept of sin must be elucidated and defended vigorously. If morality is relative to each person, then there is no higher moral standard one can meet or break. But as C. S. Lewis argued in *Mere Christianity* and *The Abolition of Man*, the idea of an objective moral law is inescapable. When we are snubbed or exploited, we call out for justice. When we encounter people of grit and grace, we praise them as moral examples. Our conscience is more than mere instinct or social conditioning. Yet because there is often a great gap between our ideals and actions, we suffer guilt and regret. Despite our denials and excuses, our consciences dog us throughout our days.

Christianity explains the global stain of human guilt by placing it in a theological framework that both sharpens its sting and makes relief possible. Sin is a moral condition that offends the holy God and removes us from His approval.

While much modern psychology assures us that guilt can be gutted through humanistic methods, the Gospel faces the problem head-on. Guilt is real because we have violated the standards of goodness. Left to ourselves, we can do nothing to undo our wrongs. Forgiving ourselves is never sufficient because we are in no position to exonerate the guilty party — anymore than a murderer can grant himself or herself a stay of execution.

Lawbreakers deserve punishment. But is hell too extreme? The great American theologian Jonathan Edwards took this question up in his essay, "The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners." Edwards argued that because God is "a Being of infinite greatness, majesty, and glory," He is therefore "infinitely honorable" and worthy of absolute obedience. "Sin against God, being a violation of infinite obligations, must be a crime infinitely heinous, and deserving of infinite punishment."

Edwards's much maligned but solidly biblical sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," presses home the point that without Christ we have no grounds for confidence and every reason to fear hell. God, who is angry with sin, could justifiably send the unrepentant sinner to hell at any moment. Jesus Himself warned, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28).

To fathom the horror of sin and the holiness of God we must kneel before the cross of Christ. While the Scriptures command us to be like Christ, this is never presented as the basis of our salvation. Christ's sinless perfection is

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impossible for us to attain, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). Because Jesus flawlessly obeyed God's moral law in our place, He is uniquely qualified to be our Savior. On the cross, Christ offered Himself to the Father as a spotless sacrifice for our sin.

Sin against God is so severe that only the death of the sinless Son of God could atone for it. We see the reality of hell when the crucified Christ calls out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). Paul explained, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21).

In the cross of Christ the sinfulness of sin, the holiness of God, and the reality of hell are all writ large with the blood of the Lamb. Only through Christ taking on our hell through His death could sinners be reconciled to a holy God. Once this is understood, hell takes on a clarity not otherwise perceived. Apart from the cross, there is no hope for forgiveness or reconciliation. Hell is the only alternative.

Only by understanding hell can we grasp the immensity of God's love. God's love took His Son to the hell of the cross for our sake. This is a costly love, a bloody love, that has no parallel in any of the world's religions. Although other religions (particularly Islam) threaten hell, none offer the sure deliverance from it that Christianity offers through the sacrificial love of God Himself.

In this rich theological context, we can courageously incorporate the doctrine of hell at the heart of our evangelistic enterprise. Jesus asked what a person's life would be worth if he or she were to gain the whole world but forfeit his or her very soul (Matt. 16:26). Hell is the loss of the soul, a reality so terrible that Scripture uses a variety of ways to describe it. The graphic reports of hell in Scripture — such as the abyss (Rev. 9:1-11), the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14), the blackest darkness (Jude 13), the weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 25:30) — disclose the stark reality of eternal separation from God.

We can apply these truths in several ways. First, we should encourage biblical preaching and teaching on hell set in its proper theological setting and presented with prayer and compassion. As Francis Schaeffer said, the doctrine of hell must be taught "with tears." When I gave a campus lecture on the New Age view of Christ, I emphasized that the biblical Christ came to save people from hell. This did not repulse people, even though it was a secular campus. Students pondered what was said and many stayed to ask questions after the lecture.

Second, our everyday witness must involve a warning as well as a welcome. We welcome people to find eternal life in Christ, but we must also warn them of the eternal death awaiting those who reject the Gospel. Pascal said, "Between heaven and hell is only this life, which is the most fragile thing in the world." Given the biblical warnings about hell, the unbelievers end up betting their eternity that Christianity is a lie. We should challenge people to investigate intently the claims of Christianity, considering all there is to gain and all there is to lose.

Third, we must beseech God to alert both our non-Christian friends and the church at large to the reality of hell. Without this doctrine firmly in place, Christians will lose their evangelistic edge. And without a proper fear of God's holiness, no one should be expected to come to Christ for His gift of forgiveness and eternal life.