

Has Hell Frozen Over?

Modern theologians have challenged the existence of hell. Clergymen no longer preach on it. Graphic illustrations on the wrath of God were banished. They were considered medieval. Modern people had outgrown such ideas. Sermons began to stress self-improvement. Love and mercy began to override God's holy justice. It seemed as if hell had frozen over.

But hell has not gone away. Just when it appears that hell has vanished from public thought, it is making a comeback. Time magazine had hell as its cover story in 1993. In 1994 the Ottawa Citizen featured an article entitled "The Many Faces of Hell." A recent report from the Church of England declares that although traditional images of hell as eternal torment are wrong, everyone will still face a day of judgment. Bishop John Taylor, one of the report's authors, said, "You can't be frightened into belief and you can't be frightened into heaven. There are two possibilities and we wanted to affirm that and to say final judgment is a reality." The report says "no one can be installed into heaven by compulsion. The possibility remains for each human being of a final rejection of God." Recently CBC had a phone-in-show, in reaction to the Church's report on hell, asking listeners what they thought about the subject. The responses ranged from full acceptance of the Biblical teachings to denial and even ridicule. The majority of the callers seemed to have an optimistic view of the nature of man and imagined God as an all-forgiving, kindly, heavenly Being, unwilling to punish anyone. Yet historian Alan Bernstein says that hell ranks as one of history's most influential concepts. He writes: "It's one of the most powerful symbols in our collective psyches. Everyone knows what hell is, even if they don't believe in it."

The growing interest in the topic accounts for such titles as: the "History of Hell" by Alice Turner, longtime fiction editor for Playboy; "Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment" by Robert A. Peterson, an American professor of theology. "Whatever Happened to Hell?" by John Blanchard, British evangelist and Bible teacher.

Why should anyone, who has no interest in actively pleasing God or in enjoying God, want to go to heaven, where the worship, the service and enjoyment of God are the principal activities?

Controversy about the existence and the nature of hell is nothing new. And very little can be said about the subject that has not been said before. That becomes clear when we examine the thorough defense of eternal punishment by the New England pastor and theologian Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758). He is probably best known for his sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." This sermon contains a vivid portrayal of the unconverted sinner as a spider held precariously over the flames of hell. As a result, Edwards is thought of as a crude fanatic trying to scare his poor parishioner with lurid images of eternal fire. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. His sermons and theological works are

masterpieces of logical reasoning and careful thought. Edwards was America's greatest early theologian and is considered one of the greatest philosophical minds the English speaking world has ever produced. His work is still the subject of serious academic study. When he was asked why he was a "scare" preacher, Edwards explained that he didn't believe that he could frighten anyone into heaven but by God's grace he could be used of God to show the unconverted their plight before God. He said: "Some talk of it as an unreasonable thing to fright persons to heaven, but I think it is a reasonable thing to endeavor to fright persons away from hell. They stand upon its brink, and are just ready to fall into it, and are senseless of their danger. It is not a unreasonable thing to fright a person out of a house on fire."

Why did Edwards believe in such a popular doctrine? He subscribed to it because he had submitted his thoughts and feelings to the Bible. It is impossible to think that anyone wants to go to hell - and difficult to think of anyone who believes he is in danger of doing so. Edwards observed: "Almost every natural man that hears of hell, flatters himself that he shall escape it; he depends upon himself for his own security, he flatters himself in what he has done, in what he is now doing, or what he intends to do."

And in our century people are not any different. British soldiers in World War I used to sing:

O death, where is thy sting-aling-a-ling,
O grave thy victory?
The bells of hell go ting-a-ling-aling
For you but not for me.

Why eternal punishment? Because God is holy and just. Edwards understood the nature of God's holiness. He was overwhelmed by the majesty and splendor of God. He knew that the ungodly have much to fear from such a God. He argued that the existence of hell is consistent with God's mercy and justice. It is an expression of God's awesome character. Edwards argued that by obligating God not to punish according to His holiness and justice, people show contempt for God. They will not allow God the right to freely dispose of what He owns: His own mercy. Edwards also pointed out that a host of Biblical passages becomes nonsensical if there is no eternal hell. Although Edwards cringed at the horrors of hell he was constrained to tell sinners the truth that "the bodies of wicked men as well as their souls will be punished forever."

Edwards realized the dreadful nature of sin. By nature we are enemies of God (Romans 5:10). We have a tendency to flee from His presence. Most of us can imagine the extreme punishment of hell reserved for Stalin, Hitler and Pol Pot as their crimes are so horrible that they defy imagination. But we are not as keen when it comes to perceiving the ugliness of our own sin. Edwards traces our unwillingness to accept the existence of hell to the lack of understanding of how

evil sin is and what it deserves. There is no such thing as a small offense. Romans 3:9 declares: There is no one righteous, not even one." People do not become sinners when they sin; they sin because they are sinners. King David was very specific when he confessed: "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me (Psalm 51:5). And Romans 6:23 says, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life."

How can one escape eternal punishment? In his sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," Edwards warned his hearers of the folly of trying to save themselves:

"You cannot save yourselves... all your righteousness would have no more influence to uphold you and keep you out of hell than a spider's web would have to stop a fallen rock."

God in His love and mercy did something to rescue us from our sinful condition and to bring about our salvation. He sent His Son to become the Saviour of the world. The amazing truth is: "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Sinners are called to "turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus," (Acts 20:21). Repentance involves a confession of sin and sorrow for sin, the recognition that all sin is loathsome in God's sight. A Philippian jailer asked the imprisoned Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied; "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved - you and your household" (Acts 16:30f).