

Hell Hath No Fury?

By Randall F. Matheny

"Hell Hath No Fury" (US News & World Report, January, 2000, pp. 45-50.), identified several modern rebirths of revisionist thinking regarding the nature of "hell." A Vatican audience was instructed that "rather than a place, hell indicates the state of those who freely and definitively separate themselves from God." Referring to a "US News" poll, the report states, "that more Americans believe in hell today than did in the 1950s or even 10 years ago. But like the Pope, most now think of hell as "an anguished state of existence" rather than a real place." According to a professor from Eden Theological Seminary, St. Louis, a literal hell is "a part of an understanding of the cosmos that just doesn't exist anymore." The 1960's are pinpointed as the decade during which teaching about an eternal hell "all but disappeared from the religious mainstream" and that "theological discourse on the subject at the nation's divinity schools almost evaporated. And while polls showed that the majority of Americans professed to believe in hell's existence, almost no one thought he would go there." Some "conservative theologians" suggest that hell is not eternal torment, but rather annihilation, or the cessation of existence. Finally, a professor at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati, suggests that the main concern regarding hell is, "retribution in this life . . . in the harmful ways we treat each other."

The Bible speaks of hell in the type of language that it uses to speak of heaven: as eternal (Mat. 25:41, 46), and as a prepared place of consciousness (Mat. 13:49-51; Jn. 14:1-4). Consequently, if hell is to be understood simply as a state of being rather than a place, then so must heaven, but those who wish to relegate hell to pure symbolism are hesitant to do so with heaven. The Bible uses symbolic language to describe both heaven and hell, but it is not because hell itself is symbolic. Temporal beings have no experience that can help them comprehend the blissful splendor of heaven, nor the horrendous terror of the place prepared for the Devil and his angels, so symbolic language is used to portray heaven as a place that is beyond the ability of the human mind to comprehend in terms of splendor and glory, likewise, hell is portrayed as a place that is beyond the ability of the same mind to comprehend in terms of hostility and torment for the lost soul. In other words, heaven will be better than the human mind can possibly imagine, and hell will be exceedingly worse. The removal of the biblical doctrine of hell from modern theology has also removed the basis for contrasting ultimate good with ultimate evil and sin becomes more difficult to define. If hell only exists in this life and there is no ultimate accountability for personal behavior, then there is no credible restraint against evil, period. The desire to wish hell out of existence is foolish from all angles. If we do not choose heaven, and view it as a place worthy of all effort to get there, then the only alternative place is hell, where anyone can go without even trying (Mat. 7:13-14).

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