

HELLRAZED!

EDITED BY
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Can Faithful Christians Disagree on Hell?

By Jaime Clark-Soles

I didn't grow up in church (though I became a Baptist in college). I really came to the hell conversation in a serious way by helping people die well. I served in the Chaplain's department at Connecticut Hospice in Branford, CT, when I was a seminary student in the early 1990s. There I heard an extremely wide variety of ideas among Christians, whether the client, the family members, or staff members themselves, around death and the afterlife. I became curious about the source of the variety. As a Baptist who loves the Bible, I was interested in what the Bible had to say about it. My curiosity led me to earn a PhD in New Testament and write a book called *Death and the Afterlife in the New Testament* (2003). Since then my interest has remained strong and I continue to publish about it (see list at end of this chapter). For a concise (only nine pages), accessible overview of what I find the most important issues to address up front, I recommend my essay "The Afterlife: Considering Heaven and Hell."

I also regularly teach on "Evil, Suffering, Death, and the Afterlife." I address college students, seminary students, laypeople, and clergy across different denominations on a regular basis. My participation in the *Hellbound?* project has helped to organize and clarify my own thinking and writing on the subject and has shaped my teaching on the subject to these various audiences.

Just within the last two months, I've addressed various audiences on the following subjects: the atonement, dying well, and heaven and

hell. In each case, *Hellbound?* and the related website have been included as resources for the participants. Along with the bibliographic data, I provide this annotation for them:

Hellbound? Directed by Kevin Miller. Produced by David Rempel and Kevin Miller. <http://www.hellboundthemovie.com>. September 2012.

Hellbound? is not just timely and engaging—it's smart. Everyone who watches this movie will find someone they agree with and someone they disagree with. The movie will teach you things you didn't know, introduce you to people or ideas you may be unfamiliar with, and explain further things you may have some inkling about. Visually, intellectually, and emotionally provocative, sometimes even stunning, the movie keeps your attention to the very end. It's the kind of movie that you want to watch with other people and then go out afterwards to talk about. I highly recommend it. I regularly teach a course on "Evil, Suffering, Death and the Afterlife." This movie is required viewing—it does an excellent job of both explicating and summarizing key concepts and debates in Christianity over thousands of years. See the movie, and get conversations going around it—we need to give serious, sustained, reasoned, civil discussions around this important aspect of the Christian faith.

Here are some of the reasons I have found *Hellbound?* so useful and important over the years.

First, the language. When addressing heaven and hell in the Bible, one is dealing with evidence that spans thousands of years, comes from different cultures and locales, and appears in various ancient languages. There is no word in Hebrew or Greek for "hell." Rather, several different words are used that then get translated as hell (e.g., Sheol, Gehenna, Hades, and Tartarus). The KJV has far more mentions of "hell" than the NRSV. The movie helps people understand this and unpacks some of the language, such as Gehenna.

Second, definitions. What do different people mean by "hell" in the first place? Do they mean a place (physical, existential?) where

certain sinners go to be consciously, eternally tormented by Satan, demons, or the like? Do they mean a temporary holding tank that people can transfer from into heaven if certain conditions are met (something like purgatory)? What is the point of this place or state? When does one "go" there—at the point of one's individual death or at the general resurrection? And, depending on how one answers these questions, what does it imply about one's view of the character, nature, and essence of God, about God's relationship with us, and about our relationships with one another? What does it imply about Jesus's work in his life and on the cross?

Third, the Atonement. There is no question that the past decade has seen a renewed interest in the atonement, especially among, but not limited to, evangelicals and/or post-evangelicals as well as feminists and womanists. Before this resurgence, penal substitutionary atonement reigned supreme and alone; few Christians had any idea that Christianity has always housed a number of different, conflicting doctrines of the atonement. And those who knew it were not sharing the information very widely. This is no longer the case, thanks, in part, to the work of such scholars as Sharon Baker (now Sharon L. Putt), author of *Razing Hell*. Since one's view of the atonement affects one's view of heaven, hell, and the afterlife, this development is crucial (pardon the pun).

Fourth, God's ethical character. The question of the atonement—how we get reconciled to God (or not?) and who gets reconciled to God—raises questions about God's ethical and ontological character. If Scripture characterizes God as the one who always leaves the ninety-nine to go in search of the one, how does this cohere with a doctrine of fiery eternal torment? As one theologian puts it: "What is there in the act of dying that it should change the mind of God towards us?" (Percy Dearmer, 1929). If God is going to allow the eternal torment of sinners at the hands of sadistic demons, can God be considered ethical?

Fifth, our ethical character. Whenever I speak on hell and point out that the two major thinkers in the New Testament, John and Paul, have no language for hell, some people get very uncomfortable and express that their theology cannot work without hell. When I ask why, the response is: "If there's no hell, then why be moral?" This leads to two points of conversation. First, is it really the fear of hell that populates

heaven? Are mature Christians really motivated to follow God's will due to the threat of punishment, or are they motivated by more positive considerations related to making things on Earth as they are in heaven? Second, it is a logical fallacy to assume that because Paul and John don't envision a hell, they don't care about justice. They do. For instance, the author of John insists that judgment happens every day of our lives. When we go to bed at night and review the day, we are to ask: "Did I love today or not?" "Why or why not?" How might I stay the course tomorrow where it went well, redeem what went wrong, and love others as Christ has loved me (cf. John 13:34; 15:12; 1 John 4)? Paul clearly has a strong set of ethical standards that Christians are held accountable to and strive to attain. It's just that hell is unnecessary and, in fact, works against their view of God's sovereignty, will, and power.

Sixth, the nature of time. Must our infinite God do all of God's saving within the finite time of a human being's earthly sojourn? We are limited by time, but is God?

Seventh, most people I teach in an American context imagine God's justice, heaven, and hell to be a hyper-individualized affair (do we smoke, drink, or cuss too much?). But God's justice is communal and eschatological. How we treat each other matters to God. As I wrote in my essay,

Heaven and Hell are eschatological symbols. The metaphor of hell is not tied to little personal vendettas and heaven is not a cosmic spa retreat. The poetry of heaven and hell is much grander than that. It helps us to ask this difficult but essential question: "To what end judgment?" The Bible dreams big on this count: it imagines that you and I and our communities are actors in a drama that began long before we arrived and will persist long after no memory of us remains among the peoples. What we do now matters in an ultimate way" (Clark-Soles, "The Afterlife: Considering Heaven and Hell," p. 71).

Eighth, *Hellbound?* does a wonderful job of helping me help others think through the question of whether God's justice is retributive or restorative. If hell exists, is its purpose punitive or pedagogical?

Ninth, the wide spectrum. From universal salvation, to eternal tor-

ment, to purgatory, to annihilation—the Christian tradition has housed them all and continues to do so. *Hellbound?* gives compelling voice to this fact, literally. It presents not just a variety of theological positions but a variety of embodied voices. No one speaker gets to be the “authority” on the subject. On my best teaching days, I aim to invite my audience into a deep, important, holy conversation, not indoctrinate them. When various positions are voiced in my group, I show how each position ties into the varied conversation Christians have been having for two thousand years. No one is an “outsider” or a “heretic.” Rather, the point is to gather together and give the best of our minds and hearts to the nature of God in Christ and what the ramifications are for us as ethical communities of faith. No matter what a person’s position is, he or she will find himself or herself represented in the movie. To me as a teacher, that’s a boon and an asset. Furthermore, it concisely and engagingly presents the various views of hell in a visual chart that makes it easy for the audience to see the main points of each view and how the views compare with each other.

I want to note specifically how important it is to have my audiences exposed to Orthodox Christianity. I mostly teach Protestant Christians, who know little about non-Western Christianity. For many of them, Christianity is synonymous with Western Christianity. As theological children of the pessimistic Augustine and Luther, they are unaware of the more joyous, optimistic strains (to oversimplify the case) that inhere in Eastern Christianity.

Most of my audiences have also never experienced a view of universal salvation from a committed Christian Biblical perspective. They tend to associate views of universal salvation with “liberals” and associate liberals with “people who don’t take the Bible seriously” to arrive at the equation: “People who espouse universal salvation don’t take the Bible very seriously.” And, conversely, “People who take the Bible very seriously cannot espouse a view of universal salvation.” Further, people don’t know the difference between Unitarian universalists and Christians who espouse a view of universal salvation. *Hellbound?* helps enormously with getting all these issues on the table and helping people sort out the various threads.

Extremely intense emotions accompany this topic—far more than some other theological themes on which I teach. For my audiences,

hell language is often bound to shame ("I'm a wretch"; "I'm a worm, less than a human," Ps. 22:6); feelings of personal guilt ("All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"; "the wages of sin is death"); anxiety (someone may get something they don't deserve; there's a need to believe that my unjust enemy is going to "get theirs," if not now, then in eternity); guilt related to others ("I'm not doing enough to get people saved," meaning rescued from the fiery pits of hell and the torturous grip of violent demons). While some find it a core Christian doctrine and essential pillar of their faith, others find it incongruous with their understanding of God in Christ. Still others are sad or angry as they report that the doctrine has been used by a religious person or community in a way that has caused them or someone they love deep emotional, spiritual, and psychological pain.

The bottom line is this: faithful Christians disagree on hell. Some find new (new to them, at least) positions on hell and the atonement liberating. They are grateful to learn language and history that equips them to articulate what they've always "felt in their gut" when hearing penal substitutionary atonement served up. They are overjoyed to find that they are not alone in their rejection of that view and that they are not heretics. Others, however, find that after the conversation, they remain convinced that penal substitutionary atonement is the only road for them.

In sum, these are all matters about which *Hellbound?* has provoked me to consider for the first time or to refine my thinking. Indubitably, it has equipped me and my various audiences to have more productive conversations with Christians across the theological spectrum. I still believe that it can only help to have conversations across the board and grow in our understanding of the richness and variety represented by our Christian faith tradition and by one another.