



Heaven or Hell?

While driving across South Dakota last summer my wife and I were greeted somewhere mid-state with a full-sized billboard proclaiming in huge letters: “Heaven or Hell?” There were appropriate eye-catching colors and Bible verses—though, traveling at 75 mph, we passed too quickly to determine what they were.

Nevertheless, the point was clear and hardly new. There have always been advocates of a good old “scare-the-hell-out-of-’em” Christianity. Does it work? Why not? Rewards and punishments are pretty much what make the world go around, and they seem to be the basis of our capitalist system, so why not sell God or heaven in the same way?

The problem, though, as we learn at several places in this issue, is that our view of heaven (and hell) mirrors our view of God. And then things get complex. One can, in fact, find Bible verses to support the “If you died tonight, where would you spend eternity?” approach to evangelism (though, then the “good news” definition of evangelism seems to take a hit).

At the same time, however, others will be quite willing to match your “Are you saved?” Bible verses with at least an equal number that speak of transformation now, of God’s care for all people, and of eternity entering the present. Take your pick. Indeed, your view of heaven and hell mirrors your view of God.

And how time changes things—even these things. Somewhere back in the Vietnam days, students literally walked out of chapel at Augustana College in Sioux Falls when the campus pastor had the temerity to ask them to sing “Jerusalem, my happy home”—no “pie in the sky” for them! Yet, within less than five years, when I was a candidate for that same campus pastor position, students on the call committee wondered whether I would sponsor “full gospel” missions on campus to proclaim salvation to the lost. The social gospel was out, and ’70s-style neo-Pentecostalism was in.

Maybe we are always in danger of answering yesterday’s questions. Those of us who, like me, grew up in more conservative traditions that stressed more-or-less literal interpretations of a heaven and hell that marked the fate of individuals were surprised and excited to find biblical theologies that were more communal and more concerned with this world. Several authors in this issue share that perspective. But did we stop talking about heaven too quickly? Pam Fickenscher was surprised to learn that members of her suburban congregation knew next to nothing about Christian eschatology, Sonja Hagander tells us how interested her young

students are in the afterlife, and Gracia Grindal (re)introduces us to hymns that portray heaven in poetic images that do both things at once: describe the deep hopes and longings of the human heart and also work to transform our visions of the present. Maybe we need heaven after all.

Still, I don't want to give in to the in-your-face billboards or the other peddlers of fear that seem never to wane in their zeal. What is it, I wondered, that motivates the guy at the recent local street festival in our area who found the need to lambaste the crowd with "Christian" clichés? Or what is "evangelical" about wearing signs and passing out "Homosexuality is Sin!" leaflets at a gay rally (another recent event in this area)? Neither the billboards nor the zealots had any intention or any hope of true engagement with others, which seems to be essential for actual proclamation of the gospel, so what are these things about? Trouble is, I fear, those messages, too, mirror their bearers' view of God, and the result is hardly pretty.

Nevertheless, I remain convinced (because, I suppose, of *my* view of God) that some notion of heaven is essential to biblical faith. The thing is, it is not only humans that long for something better—whether African American slaves in their spirituals or others now suffering in poverty or physical pain—so does God. According to the Bible, God, too, is disappointed over how things turned out on earth. And God promises more—a "more" that includes both the transformation of what is and the hope for what will be. Christian faith, to be sure, insists that we need not wait to meet God "out there" in a safe never-never land; God enters this world—not because this is as good as it gets, but precisely because it is not. The hope for more remains an essential element of our proclamation, a vision we need always to hold up for people to enliven their imaginations now—and it becomes more than a vision as we hear about a resurrection from the dead in time as we know it.

And hell? I haven't made an argument for that here, so what does that say about my view of God? We all know hell in this world, certainly, and biblical faith needs some notion of divine judgment, because God is finally not a relativist about the difference between good and evil. Divine justice *is* a respecter of persons, though, because God—as the demonic Screwtape notes in *Screwtape Letters*—"really loves the human vermin."^{*} That is God's final secret; and that is why at least some common understandings of hell have to be left behind. What does it mean for hell when God takes the judgment of the sinner upon God's own son, upon God's own self? Will it be sufficient, in the end, for the unrepentant sinner—even, say, the terrorist or the mass murderer—to have to look Truth in the face? Will the terrible, blinding glow of grace serve the purposes of the fires of hell? I will leave the matter of God's judgment up to God, while I rejoice in (and proclaim) the promises of heaven—and, better yet, Easter.

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^{*}In Letter XIX of C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters* (1942; New York: Macmillan, 1959) 96.