

Should believers fear Hell

There's a reason why a book about the afterlife has created such a stir. *Love Wins* is making Christians re-examine what Jesus' words of teaching really meant.

By Oliver Thomas

What happens when you die? People have been wrestling with the question for as long as we've been people. And though Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and others have tried to eliminate some of the mystery from what lies ahead, the truth is we're all speculating. Not even the pope or Billy Graham has been given an advance tour of the other side.

The Egyptians, Greeks, Romans all had elaborate beliefs about the afterlife. We're no different. Right now, a book is burning through America's churches that has put the issue back front and center for many. The book — *Love Wins* — by Rob Bell challenges the traditional Christian belief in a place of eternal punishment. Damnation.

Hell? Yes.

Most Americans still believe in hell. A 2009 poll by The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life put the number at 59%. A 2005 Fox News poll put it at 74%!

Ask these folks why they cling to such a decidedly medieval notion, and they will tell you: *Because the Bible teaches it!* And if we're talking about the King James Bible, they are right — at least on the surface. But dig into the languages in which the Bible was actually written — Greek and Hebrew — and things get murky.

Nowhere in the Hebrew Bible (Christian Old Testament) is the abode of the dead described as a place of eternal punishment.

Rather, "Sheol" as it is sometimes called, appears as a shadowy, dream-like place where all people — good and evil — are destined.

One Old Testament writer has this to say: "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might for there is no activity or planning or wisdom in Sheol where you are going." Not my idea of a

Shangri-La, but certainly better than everlasting fire.

Even Jesus gets misquoted here. Clearly, Jesus taught that there would be a day of reckoning. In the 25th chapter of Matthew's Gospel, he paints a disturbing picture of it. "I was hungry and you didn't feed me. Naked and you didn't clothe me."

But the Greek word that is often translated "eternal" (aionos) — whether it is used to describe punishment or life — is better understood as a word of quality, not quantity. Punishment is only "eternal" (in the way that Americans understand that word) in the sense that it could be final.

Not what Jesus meant

Nearly every reference to "hell" that comes from the lips of Jesus is a mistranslation.

The word translated as hell by the King James Bible is the word "Gehenna," literally "the valley of the sons of Hinnom." This notorious valley on the south side of Jerusalem was once the site of pagan sacrifices, including child sacrifice, and had been cursed by the prophets of Israel. By Jesus' day, it served as the garbage dump. It was a

foul, noxious place where dogs roamed and fires burned. Jesus seized upon this vivid imagery in his sermons. He urged people to repent (literally "change your mind"), lest they end up in Gehenna (i.e. the garbage dump).

He could just as easily have told them to repent or they would wind up throwing away their lives.

Rob Bell makes the case that turning Jesus into a purveyor of hell-fire and brimstone religion stands his gospel on its head. After all, Jesus taught that God was loving and merciful — more loving and merciful, he insisted, than a human parent.

Equally fundamental to Christian, Jewish and Muslim beliefs about God is that God is a God of justice. A bedrock

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— and God?



By Alejandro Gonzalez, USA TODAY

principal of justice is that the punishment must fit the crime. We don't impose the death penalty for speeding tickets.

Reality check

Now, I'm a pretty decent parent, and I'm married to an even better one. I can guarantee that if one of our daughters turned out to be a murderer, neither of us would respond by setting fire to her. We wouldn't torture her for a second, much less a trillion years. (Reality check: A trillion years is a mere droplet in the ocean of eternity.)

Yet millions of Americans are laboring under the heavy psychological burden that if they don't believe the right things about God — or “accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior” as Evangelicals like to put it — they will burn in hell forever.

Several questions cry out for a response. Why would we worship a God like that? And, perhaps more important, what kind of people — and, consequently, a nation — does that make us?

Fearing God

The answer to the first question is simple: fear. Fear is a horrible motivator for human behavior. It can cause us to do all sorts of wild things. If we really believe that unorthodox beliefs will lead people to everlasting torment, you begin to understand things such as the Crusades, inquisitions, witch hunts and, yes, jihad. Muslims, too, believe in a place of everlasting torment. Forgive me if it sounds circular, but irrational fears are scary.

The second answer is less apparent though no less disturbing. I suspect that a deep-seated fear of God lies behind

much of the neurosis — if not actual psychosis — that we see in the world today. No person is as sick as a person who is sick on bad religion.

So the hornet's nest Bell kicked over with his little book is one that affects us all. Because the kind of God Americans worship affects the kind of people we are. If that God is unjust when doling out punishment, it's likely we will be the same. If folks don't measure up to our standard, then, off with their heads.

Though we may speak of such a God as loving — and as his devotees think of ourselves in a similar fashion — deep down, we know it's a sham.

Oliver Thomas is a member of USA TODAY's Board of Contributors and author of 10 Things Your Minister Wants to Tell You (But Can't Because He Needs the Job).