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Remodeling Hell — Americans Redefine the Doctrine

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Is belief in hell disappearing? “Absolutely,” says Barnard College professor Alan Segal, author of *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion*. Segal’s remark is found within a news story released by Religion News Service. In “[Belief in Hell Dips, But Some Say They’ve Already Been There](#),” Charles Honey traces the transformation of hell in contemporary America.

The catalyst for Honey’s article was the “[U.S. Religious Landscape Survey](#)” released this summer by the [Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life](#). The data does indicate a shift in beliefs concerning hell. In the Pew study, just 59 percent of those surveyed indicated belief in a concept of hell “where people who have led bad lives, and die without being sorry, are eternally punished.”

That figure, Honey reports, is down from 71 percent “who said they believed in hell” as recently as a 2001 Gallup poll.

A closer look at those figures raises significant questions about the usefulness of the data. In the first place, the definition of hell as “where people who have led bad lives, and die without being sorry, are eternally punished” is a problem in itself. Evangelical Christians — presumably among those most likely to believe in hell — believe that hell is indeed where unrepentant humans will go, but that does not mean that the issue is having led a “bad” life. Evangelicals have historically believed that those in heaven are themselves no more worthy than those in hell. The crucial issue is faith in Christ, and thus the formulation used in the Pew study would confuse many evangelicals.

Nevertheless, no informed observer will doubt the central argument of Honey’s report. Americans *are* redefining the doctrine of hell before our eyes. Honey provides a helpful survey of various beliefs concerning hell, but the most interesting part of his article concerns evangelicals.

He writes:

Skepticism about hell is growing even in evangelical churches and seminaries, says one theologian here, a bastion of conservative evangelicalism.

“In a pluralistic, post-modern world, students are having a more difficult time with (the idea of) people going to hell forever because they didn’t believe the right thing,” says Mike Wittmer, professor of systematic theology at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary.

“That’s the biggest question out there right now: ‘Would God send someone to hell if they were someone as good as me, but didn’t believe what I believe?’”

It was easier to believe in hell 20 years ago when missionaries tried to convert people in far-flung places, Wittmer says. In today’s global village, many live next to good, non-Christian neighbors and wonder why an all-powerful, loving God wouldn’t eventually empty out hell, Wittmer says.



“I’ve noticed in the last five years how that view is making inroads even in conservative churches, whereas five years ago it wasn’t even uttered or discussed,” he adds.

Wittmer’s observation holds true for anyone familiar with the accommodationist tendency within modern evangelicalism. The key insight within Wittmer’s comments, however, is the way he lays out the populist transformation of the doctrine. Reasoning from their own experience and emotions, rather than from the Bible, many who call themselves evangelicals are just deciding that a “good” God would not send persons to hell — at least not anyone they know.

Undoubtedly, much of this can be traced to currents in the larger culture, where non-judgmentalism, a therapeutic view of life, and a thoroughly modern view of fairness lead many to reject hell as a place of everlasting torment and punishment for those who never come to faith in Christ.

As Professor Segal observed, “They believe everyone has an equal chance, at this life and the next.” Thus, “hell is disappearing, absolutely.”

That this is true within the culture at large is not surprising. But when those who claim identity as evangelical Christians begin to modify the doctrine, this should set off alarms.

No doctrine stands alone. There is no way to modify belief in hell without modifying the Gospel itself, for hell is an essential part of the framework of the Gospel and of the preaching of Jesus. Hell cannot be remodeled without reconstructing the Gospel message.

Here is a sobering thought: Hell may disappear from the modern mind, but it will not disappear in reality. God is not impressed by our surveys.

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