

Chapter 1

I Believe in Hell

I believe in the existence of hell; however, I question what will happen in that terrible place.

I am not a heretic. I can tell you this confidently, because I believe in all of the fundamental beliefs of the Christian faith. These are called the “primary” Christian doctrines, which I need to distinguish from the “secondary” and “tertiary” doctrines.

By primary Christian doctrines, I am referring to the fundamentals of the faith, which—if we reject—we no longer will have Christianity. Among the primary doctrines we usually include the Christian beliefs in:

1. One true God, Creator of Heaven and Earth
2. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, true God and true Man
3. Jesus dying for our sins and then resurrecting from the dead
4. Salvation being given to us by grace when we put our faith in Jesus Christ
5. The reality of the Holy Spirit and His work convicting people of sin and sanctifying the believer
6. A future judgment of the wicked and the righteous
7. The Holy Bible as the inspired Word of God

I believe the primary doctrines—all of them. I am a Bible-believing Christian convinced of the reality of

Hell: God's Justice, God's Mercy

the Trinity and of the redemptive work which Jesus accomplished for us on the cross.

It is some of the secondary doctrines that I question.

Before I delve into that, let me distinguish the secondary doctrines from the tertiary ones. The third-level doctrines are those uniquely held by various Christian groups and denominations. Some of these include our understanding of:

1. The sacraments, such as Water Baptism and the Lord's Supper
2. The use of the gifts of the Holy Spirit today
3. Eschatology (one's understanding of end-time events)
4. The ethics of the use of alcohol and tobacco
5. Issues around divorce and remarriage
6. Methods and styles of worship

It is common for Christians to debate and disagree about these tertiary doctrines. It is acceptable and even expected in Christian circles.

The secondary doctrines are considered more "sacred ground" than the tertiary ones. These are the ones held by most of the historic Church but they are not as foundational as the primary ones. Some Christians would label me a heretic for even considering the possibility that the historic Church has been wrong on any of the related points. Yet that judgment would be erroneous, because I am a tenacious defender of all of the primary Christian doctrines.

There are many secondary doctrines about which I have thought seriously, but the one I challenge here is the traditional belief in hell. I believe hell exists, but I do not believe people will suffer there eternally. When I study the Bible, I come to the conclusion that the wicked people who will be thrown into that terrible place at some point will be annihilated, that is, they eventually will burn out of existence.

Of course, I am not the only one to consider this issue. The noted Bible scholar, John Stott, wrote in 1988, on page 320f, in his book *Essentials*, that “the ultimate annihilation of the wicked should at least be accepted as a legitimate, biblically founded alternative to their eternal conscious torment....” John W. Wenham in, *The Goodness of God*, published in 1974, and in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, published in 1993, states that he believes that annihilation of the wicked is a biblical doctrine. Early in his ministry, Isaac Watts, the famous hymn writer, believed in the eternal torment of the wicked, but later came to believe that the wicked would be annihilated. Similarly, the great thinker Charles Spurgeon first believed in eternal conscious torment of the wicked, but later came to accept annihilationism as a biblically acceptable view.

I am convinced that the wicked will not suffer forever and ever, but eventually God will end their torment by putting them out of existence. Please, allow me to show you why I have come to believe this.