

Eternity

by Richard Foster
Founder & Chair of RENOVARE

The following article is reprinted by permission from the *Renovaré* publication *Perspective*.

Jesus – the compassionate Jesus, the forgiving and accepting Jesus – never flinches when it comes to the subject of eternity.

Time and eternity. That is the theme we have been working on. Remember the touchstone concept from Dallas Willard: **“We are unceasing spiritual beings with an eternal destiny in God’s great universe.”** In the last *Perspective* we thought together about time. So, now on to eternity. And specifically to that aspect of eternity dubbed “hell.”

Hell – an uncomfortable notion, to be sure. I don’t mind telling you that I am the most uneasy about this aspect of our theme. I wish I could avoid discussing it altogether. I’m eager to get on to the subject of heaven. But if we are to take the biblical revelation seriously we *must* wrestle with the subject of hell. My discomfort (yours too, perhaps) is simply beside the point.

Universalism’s Fatal Flaw

As I was starting to work on this subject a publisher sent me the galleys for a new book on Universalism, the notion that every person will eventually be saved. Now, Universalism is growing in popularity today, for it fits neatly into the modern non-judgmental live-and-let-live mood of our culture. And it has been a minor (very minor) current in Christian history. So I thought I’d see how persuasive the arguments might be in this new attempt to dust off an old heresy. How utterly disappointing! The same tired arguments and the same weak sentimentality about God’s mercy winning out over God’s justice. It reminded me of the prophetic comment of William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, just before his death in 1912 that he saw coming to the Church “forgiveness without repentance, sal-

vation without regeneration...a heaven without a hell.”

In setting forth their case Universalists inevitably make the person and teaching of Jesus the center of their appeal. Jesus’ love and grace and compassion, and his assurance to us of God’s unconditional love and grace-filled acceptance. All true realities, to be sure. But, and here is the fatal flaw in all Universalist teaching, this Jesus to whom they appeal so ardently is the very one who teaches more emphatically about hell than anyone else in the entire Bible. This is a reality we simply cannot get around. Jesus – the compassionate Jesus, the forgiving and accepting Jesus – never flinches when it comes to the subject of eternity.

Jesus’ Authoritative Witness

Throughout his preaching Jesus holds forth two – and only two – possibilities for human existence: everlasting happiness in the presence of God or everlasting torment in the absence of God. In the judgment of the nations recorded in Matthew where we hear those famous lines, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me,” we also read that the Son of Man welcomes the righteous into “the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” and says to the wicked “you that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” And Jesus’ final summation to this story: “And these (the wicked) will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matt. 25:31-46). Now, we can legitimately argue about whether the “eternal fire” is literal or metaphorical, but we cannot argue over whether or not Jesus is intending to teach us that there are two final possibilities for human existence. He did not leave that matter open for debate.

This fact is reinforced in the Gospel of John which, although it actually says very little about hell, does record Jesus’ words, “the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come

(continued on page 2)

out — those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation” (John 5:28-29).

We simply cannot sneak around the fact that Jesus teaches that there are two outcomes to human destiny: “the resurrection of life...the resurrection of condemnation.”

Jesus’ word about the reality of hell is unambiguous. In the story about the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man, after death, is described as “In Hades, where he was being tormented” and later in the story this place is described as “this place of torment.” I’m sorry, I wish I could make the story sound better. Or have a happier ending. You remember, I’m sure, how the rich man pleads with Father Abraham to “have mercy on me” and is told that this is not now possible and that “between you and us a great chasm has been fixed” (Luke 16:19-31).

Equally unambiguous is Jesus’ word that not all will enter the Kingdom life which, of course, includes heaven as its natural outcome. When a fearful disciple asks the Master, “Lord, will only a few be saved?” Jesus replies, “Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able” (Luke 13:23-24, see also Matt. 7:13-14). As if this exchange were not enough, Jesus next adds, “go away from me, all you evildoers!” There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out” (Luke 13: 27-28).

I could go on, but perhaps these sample passages make sufficiently clear Jesus’ teaching on the matter. The epistles only reinforce Jesus’ outlook. Paul says that those who “do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus...will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 Thess. 1:8-9). And John’s Apocalypse simply seconds and thirds the teaching: “the devil...was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever,” and then adds, “as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death” (Rev. 20:10, 21:8).

Now, if you are hoping for a kind of middle ground between Universalism and the traditional view of the eternity of hell, the best place to look is Hans Urs von Balthasar’s *Dare We Hope “That All Men Be Saved”*? Balthasar provides a sophisticated theological argument for hoping that God’s omnipotent love finds ways of, so to speak, outwitting human resistance. He does this without falling into the Universalist trap of asserting as a fact that everyone will be saved or that

hell will be emptied at the end of time. He takes Jesus’ statements on hell seriously but would hold that they are minatory rather than predictive.

The Population Of Hell

One of the very first questions that arises with any discussion of hell is, “Who will be there?” The answer is quite simple, “All those whom God, in his great wisdom, knows could not stand heaven.” Remember, the purifying fires of heaven will be far hotter than the fires of hell! Consider, my friend, what it would be like to live a single day without guile. How about an eternity without guile! Are you, am I, still interested in heaven?

Jesus, of course, is the way to heaven. He is the way precisely because, in turning toward him and accepting him as our life, he leads us into a “with-God” life in the kingdom of God. It is here under God’s loving rule that we learn to do the will of God and to “grow in grace” as Peter puts it (2 Pet. 3:18). As we grow in this with-God life we discover that heaven is simply a minor transition from this life to greater Life...for it is all life with-God.

Conversely, hell is “away-from-God” life. And there are some people for whom life away-from-God is the only life to which they are suited. This is why we can well say that people choose hell, for they choose to be the kind of people who would not be “at home” in heaven. Hell, you see, is the ultimate expression of God’s respect for his creature’s freedom to choose. Hell, in the final analysis, is God’s best arrangement for some people. It is giving to certain people what they ultimately desire.

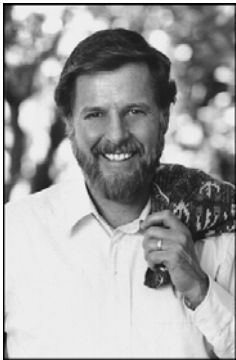
So we can be confident that God will take care of the population of hell. We can be sure that those who are in hell are suited for it in every way, just as those in heaven are suited for it. God will see to it.

Loving Community vs. Self-centered Isolation

This either “with-God” or “away-from-God” kind of life is, I think, a useful way of thinking about heaven and hell because it takes us outside of all of the debates about the furniture of hell (Is the “everlasting fire” literal or metaphorical? What is meant by “outer darkness,” or “gnawing worm,” or “tormenting thirst,” or “weeping and gnashing of teeth?”) and instead helps us to focus on an essential difference — perhaps *the* essential difference — between these two forms of existence: community or isolation. When we speak of heaven we are talking about the blessed community most fully expressed in the glorious familial fellowship of the Trinity — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And heaven is God’s ultimate way of saying, “Welcome to the family!” Conversely, hell is a way of talking about ever deeper isolation and ever greater self-centeredness.

Loving community or self-centered isolation—that is the choice given us by the reality of heaven and hell. Which will I choose? Which will you choose? And choose we must. There simply are no other options given us. For instance, it will come as a genuine shock to some people when they discover that they cannot cease to exist. That option is not open to us, for we are indeed “unceasing spiritual beings with an eternal destiny in God’s great universe.”

Reprinted with permission from Vol. 13, No. 3 of the *RENOVARE Perspective*, © 2003 RENOVARE, 8 Inverness Dr E, Ste 102, Englewood CO 80112-5609



Richard Foster

Richard J. Foster is the founder and chair of *Renovaré* and author of six books including *Celebration of Discipline*, *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home*, and *Streams of Living Water*, which effectively promote personal spiritual renewal. From his base in Denver, Colorado, where he and his wife Carolyn live, Richard travels throughout the world, speaking and teaching on the spiritual life.

© 2003 C.S. LEWIS INSTITUTE
8001 Braddock Road, Suite 300 • Springfield, VA 22151
703/914-5602
www.cslewisinstitute.org

C·S· LEWIS INSTITUTE
Discipleship of Heart and Mind



*In the legacy of C.S. Lewis,
the Institute endeavors to develop disciples who can
articulate, defend, and live faith in Christ
through personal and public life.*

