

Would a Loving God Send People to Hell?

by Alex McFarland

"God is love, and the God I believe in would never send someone to hell!" The audience applauded enthusiastically as the TV talk-show host passionately stated her position about the afterlife. A panel of guests had been assembled to explain various views about death, heaven, hell and God's judgment. Of those authors and scholars, only one individual defended the biblical teaching about hell. And as the show progressed, both audience and interviewer seemed increasingly hostile to the lone evangelical panelist.

Surveys show that here in the West, belief in a literal hell is at an all-time low, and its most vocal opponents include some clergy. Scary, huh? Nevertheless, the Bible teaches that both heaven and hell are very real places and that each of us will eventually spend eternity in one of them. Most of what we know about hell, in fact, comes straight from Jesus' mouth:

"If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell" (Matt. 18:8-9).

"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life" (Matt. 25:46).

"Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned" (John 5:28-29).

To deny the reality of hell undermines the authority of Jesus. Such denial also debases humans. How? To deny that man has free will—and may use it—counters the Christian concept that we are "image bearers" (Gen. 1:26). We are not free to re-invent, revise or change biblical truths and Christian

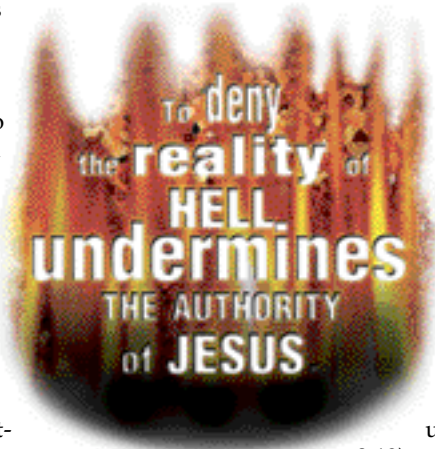
doctrines for mere accommodation. We must not evaluate truth based on what is popular, preferred or politically correct. Forget conventional wisdom. We must evaluate truth based on God's Word.

If we deny hell because we find the notion unbearable and undesirable, then why not drop any other part of Christianity that's unbearable or undesirable? The reality of hell is inextricably tied to the person and work of Christ. If there is no hell, then our understanding of who Jesus is and what He did must be thoroughly revised.

Some opponents of the biblical view may not be trying to throw out the doctrine of hell; they just have trouble seeing how such a place can exist if God is love. Here's the truth: God lovingly offers us forgiveness, but it must be accepted. It cannot be forced. Accepting the reality of hell doesn't make God vengeful or hateful. He is characterized by love and mercy, but also by justice and righteousness. The truth is that hell is necessary because God's holy, just nature demands that evil be punished. Similarly, Calvary was necessary because God's merciful nature demanded that salvation be offered.

Since we all fall short of God's standard (Rom. 3:23), we all deserve hell. It is completely fair that people go there. It's anyone's going to heaven that could appear unfair. No one is good enough. The opportunity to enter God's holy presence illustrates His mercy and grace. The Bible tells us that people loved darkness rather than light (John 3:19) and is clear that Jesus is the only way to get to heaven (John 14:6; Rom. 5:12-17). Those who fail to accept Christ's payment for their sins will go to hell. It's that simple. Heaven and hell are very real places. Which neighborhood we move into after leaving this mortal coil will depend on whether we chose to accept God's gift and follow Jesus.

The new president of Southern Evangelical Seminary and the Veritas Graduate School of Religion, author and speaker Alex McFarland will continue to serve as PLUGGED IN's teen apologetics expert.



the ask editor

My teenage daughter often gets invited by friends to see inappropriate movies. How can she turn down an invitation like that without alienating the group?

This can be a real challenge for Christian teenagers. They don't want to compromise, nor do they want to come across as holier-than-thou by passing judgment on the entertainment habits of less dis-

cerning, perhaps unsaved peers. Young people can create a win-win situation by shifting the focus from *entertainment* to *relationship*.

Your daughter should let her friends know that she really wants to spend time with them but isn't comfortable with that particular film. She shouldn't pressure them to come up

with an alternate plan but simply ask if they'll be going out for a bite to eat afterward. Have her suggest meeting up with them there. This way she won't compromise her principles or come off as self-righteous, and she'll send the message that the most important part of the evening isn't some movie; it's hanging out with people she enjoys.