

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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TRUE SPIRITUALITY AND THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CHARACTER OF GOD

Public opinion polls are used repeatedly to determine how the majority of people respond to some particular issue. These polls do influence people, perhaps more so than we like to think. If the majority of people voice their opinion and this becomes the expected response, *most* people when asked will simply echo the majority position. In other words, what happens is that people cease to think on their own and simply defer to the opinion of the majority, regardless of how ill-informed and shortsighted those opinions might be. *The Shack*, as we noted last week, takes great pains to eliminate any notion of the judgement of God, especially when it comes to God's wrath against sin. Turns out the views of the author of *The Shack* are typical when it comes to today's Evangelicalism. In a very revealing story in the *Los Angeles Times*, we discover that for all practical purposes Evangelicals by the boat load have grown silent about the subject. Bill Faris believes in hell, that frightful nether world where the thermostat is always set on high, where sinners toil for eternity in unspeakable torment. But you'd never know it listening to him preach at his south Orange County evangelical church. He never mentions the topic; his flock shows little interest in it. "It isn't sexy enough anymore," said Faris, pastor of Crown Valley Vineyard Christian Fellowship. In churches across America, hell is being frozen out as clergy find themselves increasingly hesitant to sermonize on Christianity's outpost for lost souls. The violence and torture that Dante described in the "Inferno," and that Hieronymus Bosch illustrated on canvas centuries ago have become cultural fossils in most mainstream Christian denominations, a story line that no longer resonates with churchgoers. "There has been a shift in religion from focusing on what happens in the next life to asking, 'What is the quality of this life we're leading now?'" said Harvey Cox Jr., an eminent author, religious historian and professor at the Harvard Divinity School. "You can go to a whole lot of churches week after week, and you'd be startled even to hear a mention of hell." Hell's fall from fashion indicates how key portions of Christian theology have been influenced by a secular society that stresses individualism over authority and the human psyche over moral absolutes. The rise of psychology, the philosophy of existentialism and the consumer culture have all dumped buckets of water on hell. The tendency to downplay damnation has grown in recent years as nondenominational ministries, with their focus on everyday issues such as child-rearing and career success, have proliferated, and loyalty to churches has deteriorated. "It's just too negative," said Bruce Shelley, a senior professor of church history at the Denver Theological Seminary. "Churches are under enormous pressure to be consumer-oriented. Churches today feel the need to be appealing rather than demanding." A 1998 poll by Barna Research Group, a Ventura company that studies Christian trends nationwide, found that church-shopping has become a way of life: One in seven adults changes churches each year; one in six regularly rotates among congregations. That fickleness has helped give rise to "megachurches"-evangelical congregations of more than 2,000 people that mix Scripture with social and recreational programs in a casual atmosphere. Megachurches routinely pay for market research on what will draw people to their ministries and keep them coming back. "Once pop evangelism went into market analysis, hell was just dropped," said Martin Marty, professor emeritus of religion and culture at the University of Chicago Divinity School. Hell is far from dead. A May 2001 Gallup poll of adults nationwide found that 71% believe in hell. They just don't want to hear about it. Log onto www.pastors.com, the Web site run by Lake Forest's Saddleback Church, whose senior pastor, Rick Warren, says the Bible's teachings on hell guide his ministry. Scan the list of sermons for sale. There are sermons on abortion, addiction and

ambition. Laughter, leadership and love. War, work and worry. More than 350 topics in all. Nothing on hell. Even among some “born-again” churches, hell is a rare topic of conversation. Born-again Christians believe in hell, but they also believe that their decision to embrace Christ has earned them a one-way ticket in the other direction. “When you have a group of people who are born again, you’re not going to hell,” said Bob Anderson, 51, a lawyer who attends an evangelical church in Fullerton. “So why talk about it?” Traditional denominations also have pushed hell to the margins. The Presbyterian Church (USA)’s first catechism, drawn up a few years ago by a committee, mentions hell only once. George Hunsinger, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary and the catechism’s principal author, would have liked the document to address hell more directly and “talk about divine judgment in a responsible way.” But the committee rejected the idea without much debate. “It’s a failure of nerve by churches that are not wanting to take on a non-popular stance,” Hunsinger said. Where once hell was viewed as a literal, geographic location, it is more often seen now as a state of the soul. In 1999, Pope John Paul II made headlines by saying that hell should be seen not as a fiery underworld but as “the state of those who freely and definitively separate themselves from God, the source of all life and joy.” As much as that seemed like a departure from church beliefs, the pope’s words weren’t all that new. The Roman Catholic Church in the 1960’s moved away from the view of hell as a gothic torture chamber as part of the Second Vatican Council’s modernization of church teachings. New Catechism? Softens Language? Individual priests kept hell’s fires burning for years, aided by a Catholic catechism of beliefs published in 1891 whose tone one priest calls “positively medieval.” A new catechism, published in 1994, uses gentler language and emphasizes that hell’s chief punishment is the separation from God. “When you take [hell] away as a threat, everything changes,” said the University of Chicago’s Marty. “Who goes to confession anymore? Time was, a [Catholic] church had 16 booths and people snaked around the block. Today, a church might have one left.” One measure of hell’s continued decline can be found in the changed attitude of the Rev. Billy Graham, who came to prominence in the 1940s as a fire-and-brimstone Gospel preacher. His depiction of hell was unequivocal, an unpleasant address for unrepentant sinners. Even Graham has reconsidered hell-not whether it exists, but what it is.” The history of hell is long and complex, a product of evolving religious thought that has shaped-and been shaped-by-literature, art and popular culture. Hell’s roots are tangled up in the Hades of Greek mythology and the ancient Hebrew concept of Sheol-locales where the dead, both good and bad, resided. Hell became more hellish when the early Christians infused it with a serious fear factor. Jesus is quoted in the Bible describing hell as the “outer darkness” consumed by an “everlasting fire.” The book of Revelation warned that sinners would be “thrown into the lake of fire.” Matthew’s Gospel offered a soundtrack: the “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” During the Middle Ages and through the Renaissance, a lurid image of hell was firmly cemented in people’s minds. Dante wrote that within the seventh circle of hell runs “the river of blood, within which boiling is/Whoe’er by violence doth injure others.” Bosch depicted naked souls being devoured by a birdlike creature, pierced by spears and tormented by half-human demons. For churches, the fear of hell became a colorful-and effective-tool to teach the consequences of a sinful life devoid of God. In the centuries to come, scientific discoveries and the European Enlightenment would crack hell’s veneer, undercutting all things supernatural and questioning whether a merciful God would be so cruel. Amid this rethinking, more palatable theories of hell have developed: Souls not ticketed for heaven simply cease to be. Hell is a temporary state before heaven. Everyone goes to heaven. As a young preacher, Benitez warned nonbelievers that they would burn in Satan’s liar. He later dropped the tactic. “Can we accept a gift at gunpoint? This is total nonsense and madness.” Perhaps more than any other pastor, the Rev. Robert H. Schuller is credited with inspiring the movement to supplant hell with feel-good messages. The “Hour of Power” televangelist is founder of the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, a forerunner of the thousands of nondenominational congregations that have popped up in recent decades to serve believers uncomfortable with the formality of old-line faiths. Schuller is another believer in the concept of hell as an eternal separation from God. Yet he stopped preaching on the subject 40 years ago, moving on to a theology that stressed individual success in such books as “If It’s Going to Be, It’s Up to Me!” “I don’t ever want people to become Christian to escape hell,” Schuller said. His take: Why threaten people with God’s stick when dangling a carrot is enough to close the deal? By contrast, Ray Comfort embraces the stick-and isn’t afraid to use it. A Protestant preacher from Bellflower and the author and publisher of dozens of religious books, Comfort is fast becoming a rarity: a pastor who unabashedly delivers an unpopular message. Hell is real, Comfort believes. Break even one of the Ten Commandments, do not seek God’s mercy, and you will go there. And it will be as bad as advertised in the New Testament. Churches that abandon their role as moral compasses by

ignoring or sugarcoating the Bible's warning will become irrelevant, Comfort said. "God will remove his spirit, his power from them, and they'll become just like social clubs," Comfort said. "What we've done is make things comfortable for people with padded pews and air-conditioning and a promise that we won't say anything that will offend you." The 52-year-old New Zealand transplant crisscrosses the country to preach at churches that still embrace his tough-love approach to Scripture. Until recently, Comfort reached out to the lost-mostly young urbanites-from atop a plastic storage crate in Santa Monica every Friday night. He was twice beaten up for his efforts. "I'm like a police officer who's going into a group of criminals," he said one recent day before stepping on the crate before a crowd of heckling students at Cal State Long Beach. "I know I won't be Mr. Popular."¹ Given the wide-spread popularity of *The Shack*, it comes as no surprise to discover that Ray Comfort and *The Way of The Master* approach to evangelism is considered *persona non grata* in the majority of professing Evangelical Churches. This is simply another indication that Evangelicals have fallen prey to what public opinion polls say. Cultural critic Neil Postman observes, "We can see this process of responsibility-shift even more clearly in the case of the statistically based ratings of television shows. The definition of a "good" television show has become purely and simply a matter of its having high ratings. A "bad" show has low ratings. The responsibility of a television writer, therefore, begins and ends with his or her ability to create a show that many millions of viewers will watch. The writer, in a word, is entirely responsible to the audience. There is no need for the writer to consult tradition, aesthetic standards, thematic plausibility, refinements of taste, or even plain comprehensibility. The iron rule of public opinion is all that matters. Television executives are fond of claiming that their medium is the most democratic institution in America: a plebiscite is held every week to determine which programs will survive. This claim is given added weight by a second claim: creative artists have never been indifferent to the preference and opinions of their audiences. Writers, for example, write for people, for their approbation and understanding. But writers also write for themselves and because they have something they want to say, not always because readers have something they want to hear. By giving constant deference to public preferences, polling changes the motivation of writers; their entire effort is to increase "the numbers." Popular literature now depends more than ever on the wishes of the audience, not the creativity of the artist."² There is an obvious application of Paul's remarks in our text as one recent commentator points out, "But there is also the fact that those who condone and applaud the vicious actions of others are actually making a deliberate contribution to the setting up of public opinion favourable to vice, and so to the corruption of an indefinite number of other people. The full extent of the rejection of God becomes evident in such an attitude. His judgment is known, yet people are encouraged to pursue evil anyway. Those who encourage others to pursue evil commit a greater evil in that they foment the spread of evil and are complicit in the destruction of others. The hatred of God is so entrenched that people are willing to risk future judgment in order to carry out their evil desires. Once again the text hints that the fundamental sin that informs all others is a refusal to delight in or submit to God's lordship. God's wrath is rightly inflicted on those who not only practice evil but find their greatest delight in it."³ God is our judge. Ps. 119:137 declares: "Righteous art thou, O Lord, and upright are thy judgments." The character of God is what makes all His judgments right. God is what He is, so He is what He should be. The great Puritan preacher William Ames once commented, "Although vain men feign to themselves many notions of righteousness, yet there is not true and real righteousness besides that revealed in God's Word."⁴ If you have seen the movie *The Unforgiven* there is a line by Clint Eastwood that captures the man thought of in our text. In response to a remark that the man they had killed had it coming (he deserved what he got), Eastwood said, "We all got it coming." It is because we do not realize the infinitely evil nature of all sin that we have a difficult time accepting at face value the teaching of Scripture on the wrath and judgment of a Holy God. The imprecatory Psalms (like 69, 129, and especially 109) have long been considered (even by some Christians) one of the moral difficulties of the Bible. But long ago Jonathan Edwards rightly said, "We cannot think that those imprecations we find in the Psalms and Prophets, were out of their own hearts; for cursing is spoken of as a very dreadful sin in the Old Testament; and David, whom we hear oftener than any other praying for vengeance on his enemies, by the history of his terrible imprecations that we find in all the Old Testament, are in the New spoken of as prophetic, even those in the 109th Psalm; as in Acts 1:20 . . . They wish them ill, not as personal, but as public enemies to the church of God."⁵ As we come to the close of the first chapter of Romans, the Apostle Paul saw no need to vindicate the reputation of God from the charge that He is not acting properly in His judgments. He is just in all that He does. God's righteousness is evident in three particular ways.

I. UNIVERSALLY ACKNOWLEDGED

The heathen possess this knowledge. They are able to discern the fact that their evil deserves to be punished by God. They possess a moral consciousness. Furthermore, they realize that God's judgments are more than mere temporal discomforts. They deserve (are worthy of) *eternal* death. Note the Apostle's point. They know, but this knowledge does not change their conduct. "But knowledge does not liberate him from practicing sin. Knowledge alone does not save him; on the contrary, it renders him guilty, for his knowledge does not prevent him from practicing that which he condemns; furthermore he completes his resistance against the truth not only by not contracting those who practice evil, but by approving them."⁶

II. ITS INEVITABLE DEMONSTRATION

As certain as effect follows cause, so does punishment follow sin. There is no possible escape from condemnation for those who persist in pursuing unrighteousness (cf. Hebrews 2:3). To practice sin implies deliberation and habit. Note Paul's language here. The word translated *approve* in the NIV and *give approval* in the ESV (The King James Version has *have pleasure in*) is SUNEUDOKOUSIN. It does not describe simple passive assent or mere acquiescence, but active or hearty approval to act in a certain way (cf. Luke 11:48; Acts 8:1; 22:20; I Cor. 7:23, 13). The Apostle is speaking of those whose conduct involves a deliberate rejection of the light that God has given them. Furthermore, they actually conspire to spread their wickedness.

III. IT IS ESSENTIAL TO GOD'S CHARACTER

God is not free to act contrary to His nature. Justice *always* characterizes God (cf. II Thess. 1:6; Heb. 2:2; Jude 7). God hates sin because He is holy; it is His *nature* to hate sin. Since God hates sin, then He must by His own standard of righteousness punish sin. God's righteous judgment upon sin is *certain, inevitable, and universal*.

CONCLUSION: The author of *The Shack* does not like what the Bible has to say about the uncomfortable doctrine of God's wrath and judgment. It therefore comes as no surprise to discover that he likewise has no sympathy for the doctrine of Christ's penal substitutionary atonement. The noted 19th century Presbyterian theologian WGT Shedd, contended that the doctrines of God's wrath against sin and penal substitution were absolutely essential to Biblical Christianity. "We affirm therefore that the doctrine of Christ's atonement stands or falls with that of endless punishment. He who denies the latter must logically deny the former. He who subtracts anything from the demerit of man's sin, subtracts just so much from the merit of atoning blood. And what is true logically becomes true practically. Disbelievers in endless punishment are not believers in the atonement. Examine the mental history of one who lapses from an evangelical faith to infidelity, in any of its forms, and it will be found that the slide downward began first with doubts respecting man's responsibility for and the guilt of sin. But a second and equally strong proof that the doctrine of endless punishment is necessary in order to the integrity of the evangelical system, is found in the fact that there can be no evangelical piety without it. Evangelical piety, all will concede, is characterized by penitence. This differentiates it from the piety of sentimentalism, of rationalism, and of pantheism, for all these have their varieties of piety. He who is destitute of the publican's feeling when he cried, "God, be merciful to me a sinner," does not possess the piety of the gospel. He is impenitent. Now, we affirm that he who in his heart denies and rejects the doctrine of endless punishment, does not and cannot truly repent of sin."⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ "Hold the Fire and Brimstone," by Mike Anton and William Lobdell, *Los Angeles Times* June 19, 2002.

² Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (Vintage Books, 1992), p. 136.

³ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans: Baker Exegetical Commentary On the New Testament* (Baker, 1998), p. 100.

⁴ As cited in William S. Plumer, *Psalms: A Critical and Expository Commentary with Doctrinal and Practical Remarks* (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), p. 1079.

⁵ John Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards I* (Ligonier, 1991), p. 524.

⁶ Adolf Schlatter, *Romans: The Righteousness of God* (Hendrickson, 1995), p. 47.

⁷ WGT Shedd, *Theological Essays* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1977) p. 985.