

A Little Taste of Hell

As a pastor for over 35 years, I have struggled to come to terms with hell. During my early years in ministry, I didn't give it much thought and embraced the standard understanding that hell is a place where God sends evil people for all eternity, if, by the end of their lives, they don't repent of their sins and have correct belief. But the conundrum became: "What kind of God would send anyone to a place of torment for all eternity?" We might take delight at the thought of Hitler, Bin Laden, and others suffering for all eternity, but for what purpose other than to satisfy our desire for revenge? If there is no chance of rehabilitation, could it be that God too has a desire for revenge? But this notion is at odds with most holy writings found in the books of major religions throughout the world.

Most theologians in the Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopalian and other mainline denominations say that hell is not a physical place. They reason that if it is a physical place, who created it? In Genesis when God finished creating everything, he proclaimed that it was good. But hell is not good. It symbolizes the epitome of all that is evil. So, rather than a physical place, they suggest that hell is a "state of being apart from God" for all eternity. Hell, understood as a "state of being" opens the door to other possibilities that may shed some light on the conundrum of a loving God sending people to hell.

One could say that everyone who is alive is living in some kind of "state of being". Yet, their "state of being" is impossible to see, but it can be experienced. If you were to walk into a concert hall filled with people listening to beautiful music you would experience one "state of being". But, if you were to walk into a park filled with white supremacists carrying Nazi and confederate flags and shouting obscenities at Jews, Muslims and people of color you would experience a different "state of being".

Could this attraction to these "states of being" be operative in the afterlife as well? If heaven and hell are "states of being", perhaps those whose lives were orientated toward goodness, love and compassion will be drawn toward similar energy in heaven. And those whose "state of being" during their earthly lives was orientated toward anger, hate, racism and the like will be drawn toward similar energy in hell.

Some may object by saying this is "works righteous" where one is saved by their "good works". However, one's "state of being" is not a "work". It is the interior disposition from which works arise. With this understanding, God gets off the hook for sending people to hell. Rather, in eternity people will be drawn toward the same interior disposition or "state of being" they enjoyed during their earthly lives.

Sadly, during the last few years, a form of Christianity has arisen in America that has more in common with the “state of being” of hell than heaven. Ironically, this form of Christianity has hoisted upon America a little taste of hell with a sampling of its hatred, deception, immorality, racism and the like. This perversion of Christianity has confused faith with an ideology that is incompatible with the teachings of Jesus Christ.

When becoming a Christian, people accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Master and seek to follow in his footsteps. Yet, in the parable of the Final Judgement, Jesus said these haunting words to Christians who believed they were saved: “I never knew you. Away from me you evildoers”. They were surprised to find that the “state of being” they cultivated while on earth was incompatible with the energy of heaven. It appears that God knows the “state of being” from which our “works” arise. Jesus wasn’t sending them to hell, he was just proclaiming reality, which should cause all Christians to take pause.

The purpose of our houses of worship is to help people cultivate faith and an interior disposition or “state of being” that is compatible with what is found in heaven. We Christians get a glimpse of that energy in Galatians 5:22-23 where Paul lists the gifts of the Holy Spirit: “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” By definition these are “gifts” given to us by God, which indicates they are attributes of God as well.

Like insects attracted to a street light, in the afterlife, without physical bodies, souls will easily be swept into the current or “state of being” they found most comfortable during their earthly existence. We need to be honest with ourselves and what interior disposition or “state of being” we are cultivating. The future of our souls and society depends upon it.

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