

COMMUNITY CHURCH OF THE MIDLANDS

Unapologetically Christian, Unapologetically Progressive

Pastor's Paragraphs

“GO TO HELL!”

Yep. “Go to hell!” That’s what the fundamentalist radio preacher to whom I was listening said God would tell us to do if we didn’t believe several statements he had just made.

Whew! I don’t know how many people that minister *frightened* into a deeper spiritual pilgrimage (probably none), but it may be that some of his listeners had difficulty reconciling, on the one hand, God’s consigning people to suffer and burn forever with, on the other hand, the *love* of God to which he had referred briefly a few moments earlier. How can those two possibilities fit together? Wouldn’t one of them cancel out the other?

Interestingly enough when I was a professor, my more thoughtful students used to ask me questions about hell more than almost any other subject. And for good reason: They simply couldn’t reconcile God’s endlessly torturing anyone with what they had been taught about a God whose love, as the biblical Paul described it, “never ends.” Some of you, no doubt, have wondered about that, as well. If so, this article is for you!

Whether we find hell a palatable subject or not, it is an important issue, because Jesus himself talked about hellfire, a fiery furnace, and unquenchable fire more frequently than anyone else in the New Testament! So, we need to take the subject seriously. Most major denominational churches now “deal” with the issue by simply avoiding it. But, to me, that is an extremely inadequate (if not dishonest) approach that leaves the questions of too many people unaddressed and, worse, refuses to take seriously an obvious theme in Jesus’s teaching.

The important issue here is this: *What might Jesus have had in mind* when he talked—actually warned—about hellfire?

I believe that the radio preacher to whom I referred earlier missed *completely* what Jesus intended us to understand about the words ‘hell’ and ‘fire’. Why? Because he was giving a strictly *literal* interpretation to Jesus’s words!

The fact is that Jesus was a master in his ability creatively to use metaphors, imagery, parables, and symbolic language to communicate an important truth; moreover, he *never* expected his hearers to take his symbolic language *literally*. If they did, his teaching would have made no sense at all. Let’s look at some examples.

When Jesus said “I am the *vine*,” did he mean that he was a plant? No. That would be a literal understanding that he did not intend.

When Jesus said “I am the *door*,” did he mean that he was a piece of wood with a door knob in his navel? Of course not. A literal interpretation of that statement would make no sense.

When Jesus said, “I am the *way*,” did he mean that he was an avenue, road or street? You get the point. He was using colorful metaphorical language. A *literal* interpretation would not only *distort* Jesus’s meaning, it actually would shield it from people’s awareness!

In a previous sermon, I gave an example from the New Testament about a man named Nicodemus who *did* take Jesus’s metaphorical language literally. In response to the man’s question, Jesus said, “You have to be *born again*.” The man couldn’t believe his ears and probably thought Jesus had a loose screw. “How in the world, Jesus,” he asked, “can an adult person like me climb *back* into his mother’s womb and be born *again*?” You see, Nicodemus, as is the case with far too many people today, was a *literalist*! Jesus was using imagery, symbolic language, to refer to a *new quality of life*; but the man’s insistent *literalism* caused him to *miss* Jesus’s meaning *altogether*!

So, given Jesus’s tendency consistently to use symbolic language, it seems to me that some of us, including the radio preacher, could easily miss Jesus’s intention if we take *literally* his references to a hell of fire. We need to take seriously the genius of Jesus—his matchless ability to use metaphors to get across an important truth, *then* ask ourselves, “Is it possible that Jesus was utilizing his incredible gift for imagery to represent a truth *other* than a strictly *literal* interpretation of hell?”

There are numbers of Jesus’s dedicated followers who have asked the aforementioned question brilliantly. One of the earliest Christian biblical scholars, Origin (185 C.E. to 250 C.E.), claimed that divine punishment must be curative, *healing* in nature, not purposely punitive. And Martin Luther believed that the pain of a person in hell was a form of *inner* torment. Moreover, John Calvin, in his *Psychopannychia of the Soul* (1534), understood hell not as a *place*, but as a *condition*, a state of being. So, throughout Christian history, dedicated followers of Jesus have taken seriously the superlative ability of Jesus to use non-literal imagery to point to a very literal truth; and they have tried to discern his *intention* in different instances, *including* his use of the words ‘hell’ and ‘fire.’ So, instead of our being a 21st century version of the sadly literalistic Nicodemus, the insight of those early biblical interpreters might offer a helpful option for each of *us*.

In this article, I am avoiding technical, esoteric terminology as well as Hebrew and Greek words to assist us in our attempt to understand the meaning of terms such as *sheol*, *hades*, and *gehenna* (all can be translated by the word ‘hell’). Instead, I want now to focus directly on what *Jesus* may have had in mind when he spoke about an “unquenchable fire” and his other references to hell.

Understandably, Jesus was steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures, which we usually refer to as the Old Testament. In those books, there is something important that we need to know. Fire often represented *the presence of God*. Remember Moses’s experience of the burning

bush? We're told that the bush was *afame*, but the fire did not consume or *destroy* the bush. Moses discerned that he was "on holy ground" because the fire represented the presence of God. And when the people of God were wandering in the wilderness, we're told, with vivid imagery, that they were led by a "pillar of fire" by night—symbolic of the *presence* of God with them in the darkness. That imagery, I'm sure, was not lost on Jesus. It may well be that the 'fire' of hell is a way of saying that, whatever else hell may involve, God has not *abandoned* us! Jesus's use of a word for fire could indeed represent the *continuous presence* of God with us throughout the process. The fire could be described as "unquenchable," unable to be put out, because God is the *eternal* One, the One who has never stopped and never will stop being with us. In other words, as unquenchable fire keeps on keeping on, God's presence with us *also* keeps on keeping on, no matter *where* we are.

But as *Jesus* used the term, what is hell supposed to *accomplish*? What is hell designed to *do*? For Jesus, I don't think that hell was punitive, that it was suffering for the sake merely of inflicting pain—although *psychic* pain could indeed be involved. Based upon Jesus's own scriptures, I believe that the purpose of the imagery of fire was to provide a process, not of torture, but of *cleansing and refining*. Let me tell you why.

There are two passages in our Old Testament that surely must have had a profound effect on Jesus. The book of Malachi refers to the Lord's coming as a *refiner's* fire—to refine, to purify, as metal, oil, sugar, and other substances can be refined to make them better. And, significantly, in Numbers 31:22-23, Israel was told: "Gold, silver, bronze, iron, tin, lead, and anything else that can withstand fire must be put *through* the fire, then it will be clean, refined, purified."

So, the biblical teachings on which Jesus "cut his teeth" referred to fire as the presence of God making things better, cleansing, purifying, making improvement possible. And that, of course, as my students were well aware, would be consistent with Jesus's picture of a God who is love—infinately, unendingly *loving*!

We cannot know with absolute certainty what Jesus had in mind; but, during *his* lifetime, the trash dump just outside the city of Jerusalem had fires that were kept burning continuously. That place was called *gehenna*, usually translated by our English word hell. And the *purpose* of the fire was not viciously to *destroy*; it was to cleanse and purify whatever could hurt or contaminate human beings.

So, far from our being totally cut off from God, as some of us may have been taught, it could well be that we have a God who *never* deserts us—not here, and not hereafter. And the God who sent Jesus to help us to experience more *abundant* life, life in *all* its fullness, continues to help us to move more *fully* into that reality—again, not just *here*, but *also*, hereafter. If so, Paul was right: "*Nothing* can separate us from the love of God...." Nothing! Not death, not even hell itself!

As you read these words, I send you my constantly abiding love, joined with the hope that this interpretation of what, for many, is a difficult teaching in scripture, will be helpful.

With deepest affection,

Your pastor and friend,
John

IT'S HAPPENING AT CCM

September, 2017

Please Note: Our fellowship will gather for worship and spiritual growth on the second and fourth Sunday in September.

Sunday, September 10 (2nd Sunday of the Month)

10:00 a.m. WORSHIP

Since our fellowship gathers *only* twice a month, we try to respond with radical seriousness to the importance of taking advantage of those two very special opportunities. Every gathering is planned to contribute to our welfare and enrichment, and this month is no exception!

This Sunday, our pastor will be addressing a provocative but realistic concern that rarely, if ever, is even *mentioned*, much less dealt with in most churches. The title of his message is "WERE JESUS'S EXPECTATIONS OF US UNREALISTIC?" It's based on Jesus's words: "Be perfect, even as your father in heaven is perfect." Let's be realistic: Did he really believe we could be as perfect as *God* is perfect? In fact, would it be naïve to assume that is even possible? For thinking people who want to love God with both heart and mind, those questions deserve an honest answer; and since our pastor, fortunately, is not known for skirting difficult questions or *withholding* honest responses, the worship experience today should reward us with healing insight, spiritual growth, and a new depth of understanding.

As usual, discussion of the message will follow worship. (Out by about 12 noon)

Sunday, September 24 (4th Sunday of the Month)

10:00 a.m. ENLIGHTENMENT

The word “enlightenment” means to deepen insight and broaden perspective—an absolutely essential ingredient for someone who is *growing*. So, here at CCM, we try not to waste your time by repeatedly telling you only that which you already know. Here, we are about raising our collective consciousness, broadening our awareness.

So we are in the process of experiencing a fascinating series entitled SPIRITUAL VALUES APPLIED TO SECULAR ISSUES. In our last session, we talked about the relationship of spiritual values to MONEY. Our pastor began by exploding a common assumption held almost universally by church people and moved on to the exploration of relevant spiritual teachings about acquiring, spending, hoarding, misusing, and properly using money, seeing it as a gift for our wellbeing and that of others; and, as often happens, there were a few surprises along the way.

Today, we will attempt to apply spiritual truths to a huge issue that we and our entire nation are facing: HEALTH CARE! Most of what we hear day by day, unfortunately, is from a *partisan political* perspective. But since partisan politics *divides* and spiritual values, rightly understood, *unite*, we will be avoiding the former and emphasizing the latter. What can we learn? As we apply *spiritual* values to the complex issue of HEALTH CARE, this is our opportunity to envision new horizons—and, let us hope, much better outcomes. (Out between 11:30 a.m. and 12 noon, depending upon the extent of engaging discussion)

ANNOUNCEMENTS

CARING

We express our love and deep caring to Betty Sullivan and her family on the loss of Betty's brother-in-law. Betty was with her sister and other family members as together, they shared in the experience of loss.

KNOWN BIRTHDAYS

Please remember to wish a happy natal day to Bob Nolan (9/15); Harriet Hancock, who miraculously gets younger with each passing day (9/25); and Bill Austin who is still pretty young (9/27)! We share your joy upon this celebration of yet another memorable milestone in your life.

If we do not yet have the date of *your* birthday on file, please help us to update our records so we can celebrate with you when *your* special day rolls around!

CCM:

SIGNIFICANT SPIRITUAL AWAKENING FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

We can take you deeper on your journey than
most other local venues.

*WHEREVER YOU ARE, THE DIFFERENCE
IS WORTH ANY DISTANCE!*

Our Telephone:

Senior Pastor: (803) 331-9999. Our mobile cell phone is more reliable than our landline phone, because it is on 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. If no one answers, it usually means that our pastor is in a meeting, in a counseling session, doing regular spiritual mentoring, or is involved in some other form of ministry; but he will return your call as soon as possible, so please be sure to leave a message.

Our Websites:

CommunityChurchMidlands.com (Also .net, .info and .org)
or
CommunityChurchOfTheMidlands.com (Also .net, .info and .org)

Our Mailing Address: P.O. Box 6946, Columbia, S.C. 29260-6946

Our Location: CCM usually gathers on the 2nd and 4th Sunday of each month, and any changes will be noted in our monthly newsletter. Please join us at the gorgeous Seven Oaks Community Center in beautiful Seven Oaks Park, 200 Leisure Lane (between St. Andrews and Piney Grove roads, just off I-26 West). When you enter the spacious parking lot, you'll see the main entrance to our newly renovated building on your right. Once you are inside the Reception Area, our meeting locality is on your left. For updates on our programming, to verify meeting times, to learn about changes in scheduling, or for any pastoral need, please feel free to call 331-9999, night or day.

ALWAYS, WE'RE HERE FOR YOU!