

Hell – a guide for Christians

1. The Pope has been – it is said – falsely accused of denying the existence of hell. There is no point in addressing the question of what he did say. But Christians may benefit from some clarity about hell.
2. There are two rather different topics which in English (but not in many other languages) are confused under the common name of “hell”. These are the place of the dead (Sheol in Hebrew, Hades in Greek) and the place of punishment of the wicked (Gehenna often in the New Testament).
3. In the Apostles' creed we find the clause “he descended into hell” (Latin “descendit ad inferos” or went down to the people below). This is an unusual topic in Christian creeds, though the clause is echoed in the Athanasian creed. It is an instance of the meaning “place of the dead”. I suggest that the primary meaning is that Christ died utterly, completely, thoroughly, as all men do, and so was found where all dead men were found. This is an essential article of faith. The resurrection is from death, not from some near-death condition.
4. Hell in this sense is not a place of punishment. At times in the Old Testament it (Sheol) is a place as near nothing as possible; but as belief in the resurrection grew, it necessarily was a place which would include the just awaiting the resurrection to life, who were not being punished.
5. An extension of this clause is that Christ descended into hell to complete his saving work. There are ideas of his preaching to the dead (1 Peter 4.6), and of his bringing all the just of the Old Covenant with him in his resurrection (as in Orthodox iconography and the “Harrowing of Hell”).
6. We have inevitably had to bring the resurrection into consideration. As we find in the later books of the Old Testament, it seems to be introduced as a consequence of God's justice. Those who do not receive justice in this life (whether the persecuted good or the prospering wicked) will receive it later. This leads to the belief in two ultimate destinations. Paradise, heaven or the presence of God on the one hand; outer darkness, hell (Gehenna) or the company of the devil on the other.
7. Neither destination is a place. Neither is in time as we are. It is quite true therefore that no cosmonaut will see either in this life. We cannot know any physical details of what are not physical entities. So there is and can be no Church teaching of the temperature of hell (mainly cold in Dante, mainly fire in some other imaginings, both alternately in Milton). But equally there can be no details about heaven. Some might be tempted to conclude from this that hell does not exist, but if so neither does heaven. It would be wiser to avoid making empiricist demands about either.
8. What there can be, given the lack of physical details, is received imagery of both heaven and hell. Some of it is scriptural; most is of less authority. I do not mean by calling it imagery to say it is false; it is an attempt to convey truth in a case where more direct language is unavailable. Obviously a Christian is to give more respect to scriptural and to long-received imagery than to more marginal imaginings, especially if these are remote from the way of salvation.
9. A little linguistic clarity may also be useful. No Christian is asked to or should “believe in” hell in the sense that we believe in God (or even, in the original Greek of the “Nicene” creed, in the Church). We trust and rely on God to the utmost; that is what “believe in” means. We do not trust hell in the slightest; we merely have reason to think it exists. Similarly, of course, with the devil.
10. It might be suspected that heaven and hell are the identical factor (God's presence and love) experienced differently; that what is a delight to those who accept God's saving initiatives is inevitably a horror to those who reject them. There is no need to design separate torments. While this is speculation, I do not think it is harmful. IV Esdras 7.81-7 (a text little known until the nineteenth century) describes intermediate punishments (and similarly rewards) for the dead which are largely intellectual, though the ultimate punishments envisaged in that text include torments.
11. While the idea of two destinations suggests a symmetry between them, that is not the case. God “wishes all men to be saved”. The self-styled atheist Shelley was right enough: “It is a lie to say God damns”. Some people may achieve so thorough a rejection of God and all good that they put themselves outside his salvation. But that is not God's purpose.

12. It is not the belief of the Church that some are “predestined to damnation”. This is a speculation associated with Calvin. Heaven is exactly what God intends for us and it exists for that reason. Hell is not what God wants for anybody, but some, it seems, impose it on themselves. C. S. Lewis speculated that hell was a merciful creation of God because it set a limit to the misery some would otherwise impose on themselves. If God values freedom, he cannot overrule the choice of evil.
13. Nor is it the belief of the Church that many or most are damned. This again is a Calvinist idea. When the Lord was asked whether there would be only a few saved, he did not answer. He only gave practical teaching. It is better to heed a warning than to attempt to derive facts from it.
14. It is ordinary Christian teaching and can be shown to have been so from the beginning that there is a hell and that some may go there. Even those few who speculated that there might be a way of repentance from hell assumed this. (That speculation was clearly rejected by the Church.)
15. This teaching did not begin with Jesus. It has become apparent as various Jewish writings of the period commonly called “intertestamental” have been recovered that resurrection, judgement, heaven and hell were increasingly discussed – and were naturally discussed together. For example, there is a Targum (an Aramaic rendering of the Pentateuch) in which the words of Balaam's ass are expanded in order to reinforce the teaching on this complex of subjects. This is also true of the patterns of teaching preserved in rabbinic Judaism. True, the occasional speculation of deliverance from hell is found, but not as early as the time of Jesus' earthly ministry. Jesus was not giving new teaching in this area; there were already some who “took full account of the resurrection”.
16. I do not see how methodologically we can safely reject some of Jesus' teaching and still claim to be Christian. Scholars have indeed attempted to find criteria for which of his sayings are more likely to be genuine. Their methodology is often odd; to be genuine a saying must disagree both with contemporary Judaism and with the early church, for example. (We do not know either of them as exactly as would be needed to make this work!) I do not see how sayings about resurrection, judgement, heaven and hell must be less likely to be genuine than others; this tends to be a prejudice that Jesus must have been only a mild ethical teacher and must have had a fastidiousness about the arguments he used for that purpose unexampled for centuries before or after him.
17. This fastidiousness is that it is wrong to use fear of punishment as a motivation. Or even, that it is wrong to use rewards as a motivation. Neither the Old Testament nor the New thinks this. Certainly, there are better motives than the fear of hell; but the preacher must take men as he finds them.
18. I doubt we could keep resurrection and heaven while abandoning judgement and hell. Some people dislike the idea of punishment; but if so we have abandoned judgement. Granted that the Jewish concept of justice and judgement had much to do with the vindication of the innocent rather than our idea of an impartial process, still that vindication requires that the guilty are shown up for what they are. Which is itself a punishment even if nothing further is inflicted on them.
19. That the wicked are simply annihilated rather than punished is a speculation without any basis in Scripture, or in Jewish and Christian teaching. It does not deliver justice either against them or for the innocent.
20. That the vast majority (particularly in a country where false teaching is prevalent) are unfit for heaven is true. As they are now, they could not cope with it. We simply have not been told what God does about them. We may have the hint in his purpose that all be saved, but that is all.
21. Not that we are fit for heaven either; it is God's generosity not man's entitlement.
22. As some are too lazy to check what is to be found in the New Testament, here is a summary.
23. The broad way leading to destruction is contrasted with the narrow way leading to life (Mt.7.13-4). The two ways stand and fall together. This is often the case, as we shall see.
24. There are several warnings of “hell fire” in Matthew (literally “Gehenna of fire”) as punishment. For instance 5.22, which has to be an extreme threat because of the climax. Similarly in Mark.

25. In the sheep and goats, (Matthew 25.31-46) the threat is of “everlasting punishment” which is the same as “the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels”. This is obviously hell, and is contrasted with “eternal life”.
26. In the parable of Lazarus (Luke 16.19-31) the rich man is in torments and separated from paradise by a gulf which cannot be crossed. This would seem a clear instance of punishment in hell, though the word is Hades and the point of the parable is not to describe heaven and hell but to give the warning that the mere fact of resurrection does not guarantee conversion. Luke is however capable of threatening “fear him who after he has killed has power to cast into hell (Gehenna)”. This is clearly in the context a fate worse than death.
27. Hell is also clearly taught in Paul (2 Thessalonians 1.9 punishment glossed as “eternal destruction from the face of the Lord”), James and the Apocalypse.
28. In summary, no major part of the New Testament writings except perhaps John avoids the mention of hell. This is a significant exception, but even so Judas is described as the “son of perdition” (John 17.12) which probably indicates that hell is his destination. Still, hell is not of much importance to John, either in Gospel or Epistles. I think this is because John's focus is on who Jesus is rather than on literal recall of what he taught. And the antithesis to heaven in John is “the world” (with which the devil is sometimes conjoined). This is a present threat and alternative. Consequently hell is not relevant to his purpose. John is of course an important exception; his positive teaching must be received. But we are not committed to his silences, not least because he may have been taking the normal teaching, such as we find in the other three Gospels, for granted.
29. In the nineteenth century there was much anxiety not about punishment as such but about *everlasting* punishment. A first comment is that there does not seem to have been much anxiety about everlasting salvation! If our choices will in the end and after whatever intermediate processes simplify to either a loving acceptance or a bitter rejection of God, it is not clear why one should be temporary in effect and not the other.
30. I do not know how we should understand eternity – if indeed we can do so at all. It is not just infinitely prolonged time. We can see the injustice in an infinite sentence for finite sins; indeed this would be true of earthly crimes, which however grave are still finite. But hell is not punishment for individual wicked acts, rather it is the working out of a formed determination against God and man. It is not in time. Being in hell is eternal because the determination is eternal, not because God imposes an unfair sentence of infinite punishment for finite sins. Being in heaven is similarly eternal and for the same reasons. It is not an infinite reward for finite merits – and not least because we are all “unprofitable servants”. That too would be unjust. Neither heaven nor hell is correctly understood as our experience of time prolonged without limit.
31. Both Gehenna and everlasting fire are images. It is not inherently implied that God will carry out tortures for the sake of an abstract justice, or uses devils (a rather more marginal topic even than hell, incidentally) to do the dirty work. It is possible to think that the torture of hell is a self-torture which is to have fixed oneself in rejection of what one yet knows to be good.
32. Much more can be found in Pusey “What is of faith as to everlasting punishment?” which is downloadable from the internet. That work also proves at length that the early church continued to teach the New Testament doctrine.
33. No Christian will benefit from studying hell and how to avoid it, or even from worrying about it as it might affect others. It has been thought that the fear of hell has brought some, even many, souls to heaven. If so, it has been a useful first step. It is no more than that. The prudent Christian preacher might have a duty to preach a “hell-fire sermon” faced with a complacency verging on apostasy. But he might never need to do so.
34. The point of the Christian life was adequately expressed in the simple hymn “Fit us for heaven, to live with thee there”.