

Has Our Culture Extinguished the Reality of Hell?

Twelve dead. Fifty-eight injured. Countless people reeling from grief. The July 20 shooting in Aurora, Colo., has scarred the American psyche and generated debates on everything from gun control to the effects of movie violence to the reality of hell.

That's right. The **debate on hell** is back on the front burner.

When Jerry Newcombe, the host of *Truth that Transforms with Dr. D. James Kennedy*, suggested the tragedy in Colorado happened because America has lost its fear of hell, media reaction was swift and ugly.

The Huffington Post expressed disdain because Newcombe dared to turn the tragedy into an "opportunity for people to convert to Christianity and avoid the fate of hell."

Clay Farris Naff, a science writer and author, wrote on July 22 in *The Huffington Post*: "What I find utterly revolting and indecent is the rush by the Religious Right to exploit this tragedy to trash their enemies, judge the victims, and bully people into joining their religious and political movement."

And while Billy Graham Rapid Response Team chaplains—and other Christians—ministered the love and comfort of Jesus Christ within hours of the shooting, Newcombe's comments seemed to overshadow their ministry of genuine compassion.

Director and producer Kevin Miller, whose feature-length documentary *Hellbound* releases this fall, wrote: "What a surprise: An evangelical leader takes advantage of a tragic situation to utter foolish and insensitive remarks designed not to comfort the afflicted but rather to remind us why he and his people are right, and the rest of the world is wrong."

Dead wrong. 'On their way to hell if they disagree' [is] wrong."

Newcombe's actual comments? "If a Christian dies early, if a Christian dies young, it seems tragic, but really it is not tragic because they are going to a wonderful place. On the other hand, if a person doesn't know Jesus Christ, if they knowingly rejected Jesus Christ, then, basically, they are going to a terrible place."

He added, "Tens of millions of young people in this culture seem to have no fear of God. Where's the fear of God in our society? I don't think people would do those sorts of things if they truly understood the reality of hell."

Is Hell Even Real?

Only 59 percent of Americans believe in hell, compared with 74 percent who believe in heaven, according to surveys from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

Research from Barna Associates shows that only 32 percent of adults see hell as "an actual place of torment and suffering where people's souls go after death."

Timothy Keller, the founder and senior pastor of New York's Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, has said the concept of hell is one of the main objections contemporary secular people make to the Christian message.

Even among Christians, the concept of hell is being debated. Derek Flood, an author, theologian and artist, wrote in *The Huffington Post*, "Over the years I have been increasingly troubled by the **doctrine of hell**. As my love for God and my neighbor increased, the horror at the thought of many of those I loved suffering eternal punishment increased with it. I was shocked at how nonchalantly my fellow Christians accepted the idea that the majority of the world was going to hell."

Bell's Hell

If you think this debate has a familiar ring, you are right. It really gained momentum after the 2011 release of **Rob Bell's** book *Love Wins*, which questions the existence of hell and eternal damnation.

"Few events in recent memory have caused as much controversy and confusion among evangelicals as Bell's book," wrote Michael Faust, the associate editor of *Baptist Press*.

The New York Times reported: "A new book by one of the country's most influential evangelical pastors, challenging traditional Christian views of heaven, hell and eternal damnation, has created an uproar among evangelical leaders, with the most ancient of questions being argued in a biblical hailstorm of Twitter messages and blog posts."

Time magazine said that the "slim, lively book has ignited a new holy war in Christian circles and beyond."

While some of the heat has since died down since the original publication of *Love Wins*, the paperback version's recent release and a speaking tour by Bell are again fanning the flames.

Just before an engagement at The Viper Room in Hollywood, Bell was asked to weigh in on Jerry Newcombe's Aurora remarks. "Reactions like Newcombe's are just sad," Bell told *The Huffington Post*. "In a moment of horrific hell-on-earth suffering, to throw around grand judgments about people burning forever in hell is offensive. This is why a lot of people in our culture want nothing to do with the Christian faith and have no interest in church."

What Does the Bible Say?

Billy Graham has responded often to questions about hell in his "My Answer" column over the years. "Is hell just an idea someone dreamed up or is it real?" asked one reader. "The Bible's answer is clear," responded Mr. Graham: "Hell is real just as real as heaven."

“It might surprise you to learn that the person in the Bible who spoke the most about hell’s reality was Jesus,” said Mr. Graham. “He repeatedly warned us not to take it lightly: ‘Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell’ (Matt. 10:28, NIV).

“But Jesus didn’t talk about hell just to scare us,” Graham added. “He talked about it instead because He wanted us to know that God has provided a way of escape! Listen: God doesn’t want you to be separated from Him forever. He loves you, and He wants you to spend eternity with Him in heaven. Unlike hell, heaven is a place of joy and peace and freedom from all the fears and pains of this world. Who wouldn’t want to go there?”

Franklin Graham has also written about hell. “Some claim that evangelical Christians take pride in the fact that they are going to heaven, and those who believe differently are bound for hell,” Graham wrote in April 2011. “The redeemed of Christ have no claim apart from the Word of the Living God.”

Graham responded to the common question, Why would God’s Word put such an emphasis on hell? “Because God sent His only Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to die on the cross for the sins of mankind. Those who acknowledge and repent of their sin will receive forgiveness and eternal salvation and the hope of heaven forever.

“God does not want anyone to perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16), but He does not force His salvation on anyone,” said Graham. “He gives men and women the choice of accepting what He offers—His everlasting forgiveness and eternal love.”

This is why believers in the Lord Jesus Christ must preach the whole gospel, Graham added. “Christ did die for all, but not all will receive the grace and gift that He offers. I encourage all followers of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,

to remember what a seminary professor once said, 'Never preach about hell without tears in your eyes.'

In all of their messages about hell, both Billy Graham and Franklin Graham emphasize the key point: "We don't have to pay the penalty for our sins and face hell—and the reason is because Christ has already paid it for us. By His death on the cross, Jesus took the punishment you and I deserve. We deserve judgment and hell—but He suffered them for us. Now all we have to do is trust Him for our salvation. Why not give yourself to Him today?"

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