

The Uncomfortable Reality of Hell

California pastor Francis Chan is one of my heroes, partly because he has given most of his book royalties—reportedly \$2 million—to charity. Another reason I admire him: He’s written a new book about hell at a time when many Christians are questioning the idea of eternal punishment. The guy has some *chutzpah*.

His new book *Erasing Hell* (David C. Cook) is a direct response to *Love Wins*, the controversial book by celebrity pastor Rob Bell of Michigan. While Bell’s book flirts with universalism and suggests that a loving God would never send anyone to hell, Chan’s message is blunt and biblical—yet without a hint of self-righteousness.

Erasing Hell is an answer to prayer and a prophetic response to the spineless gospel many Americans have embraced in recent years. Chan does not wave a “TURN OR BURN” sign, nor does he dangle his readers over hot coals. Yet he forthrightly states that people who reject the merciful gift of salvation through Christ will get what all of us deserve—terrifying separation from God that lasts forever.

Chan read Bell’s book carefully and was willing to ask whether hell was, in Chan’s words, a “primitive myth left over from conservative tradition.” After much prayer (he says we must “weep, pray and fast over this issue”) he became convinced that we cannot remove hell from our message. Chan makes four arguments that poke holes in Bell’s theology:

1. Hell is real. In *Love Wins*, Bell discounts the biblical view of hell as eternal punishment and suggests that it might be a metaphor for the horrors of life on earth—poverty, genocide and injustice, for example. But Chan goes back to the

words of Jesus, who spoke more about hell than anyone in the Bible, and clears up the confusion. He writes: "Hell is not considered to be the various 'hells on earth' that we face every day. It's a horrific place of judgment where God punishes people for their sins."

2. Hell is final. Universalists who blend Christianity with other religions teach that all sinners will get an extra chance to come clean with God after death. But Chan says that's not what the Bible teaches: "There's no single passage in the Bible that describes, hints at, hopes for, or suggests that someone who dies without following Jesus in this life will have an opportunity to do so after death," he writes.

3. Hell is fair. People who question the doctrine of hell often ask, "How can a loving God send anyone to perish in eternal fire?" Chan says that's a prideful, self-centered question. We can't define God, or His perfect love, from a merely human perspective. We are the clay, and He is the potter. We must humble ourselves and view life from the perspective of God's righteousness, justice and holiness. Chan also writes that the apostle Paul made reference to the fate of wicked people more times in his epistles than he mentioned God's forgiveness, mercy and heaven combined. If hell doesn't seem fair to us, we aren't seeing it from God's viewpoint.

4. Hell is escapable. Rob Bell's flawed premise is that God will end up saving everyone regardless of how they acted or what they believed. Chan argues that the gospel is not good news unless there is a hell that sinners can escape from. He writes: "While hell can be a paralyzing doctrine, it can also be an energizing one, for it magnifies the beauty of the cross."

Hell is not a popular doctrine. People don't shout, dance or wave handkerchiefs when we preach about it. They don't line up to come to conferences about it. Sermons about hell don't make people feel good. But every revivalist in church history has

kept the doctrine of hell at the core of his message, and we will see revival only if we reclaim it.

Charles Spurgeon advised aspiring ministers in the 1800s to constantly meditate on the sobering reality of hell in order to stay fervent in their faith. He wrote: "Meditate with deep solemnity upon the fate of the lost sinner, and, like Abraham, when you get up early to go to the place where you commune with God, cast an eye toward Sodom and see the smoke going up like the smoke of a furnace. Shun all views of future punishment that would make it appear less terrible."

Do you see the smoke of Sodom? Are you constantly aware that people around you are going to hell? Or have you bought into the trendy philosophies of backslidden preachers who question hell and have no power to free people from it? I'm grateful that Francis Chan had the grace—and the guts—to point us back to this biblical truth.

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