

10 Things This Huffington Post Writer Got Wrong About Hell

It's easy to mud-sling on the Internet. It's even easier when the topic is something as controversial as hell.

So as I pen this article, my hope is that my words would not seem frivolous. I have no desire to attract attention. Rather, I believe that when untruths are promoted publicly, they must be dealt with publicly—with tact proportionate to the immense weight of the topic.

On June 13, author Jon M. Sweeney, penned an article for the Huffington Post called “What About Hell? Fiction and Fact.” Sweeney, whose bio describes him as an evangelical-turned-Episcopalian-turned-Catholic who practices Judaism (I'm not sure exactly how that works, but I digress), lists five myths about hell and five little-known facts.

While I disagree with most of what Mr. Sweeney wrote, he has a good point: A lot of the PR on hell has been man-made, and few of us have directly studied Scripture on this crucial topic.

The problem is that Sweeney indirectly condemns Christians for letting tradition and culture warp their view of the Bible, but he does not trust what the Bible says plainly and injects his own opinions. You must use an even-handed standard; if you are going to separate cultural myth from biblical fact, then allow the biblical texts to stand alone. If you are going to base your opinion off of your own intuitions about God's nature, then it shouldn't matter whether or not Christians have betrayed Scripture on the topic.

Like Sweeney, I too believe that a lot of what both Christians and non-Christians assume about hell comes from the world and

not from the Bible. Thus, I challenge all my readers to both tear down the straw-man hells *and* see the truth of Scripture that lies uncorrupted beneath it all.

By my count, Sweeney got 3½ of his points right. Clearly that's not a precise figure. But all 10 need to be addressed. Let's go through his piece and see how it lines up with what God has long ago revealed about Himself.

Claim #1: The Bible is Unclear on Hell

The Bible is crystal clear on the subject of hell. (It isn't. The Bible is vague at best.)

This is a little broad of a statement, so it's hard to give any kind of blanket response. But notice that Sweeney doesn't specify *how* the Bible is vague on the topic; he simply claims that it's vague in general.

Certainly there are things we don't know about hell—precisely how hot the fire is, whether it's pitch black or not, so forth—but those are secondary issues at best. Sweeney is burying the lead: The Bible is *explicit* about who goes to hell, how long it lasts, and that it's a terrible place.

If you had no prior exposure to the Bible, and you read these verses in context, would you be uncertain of what is being communicated?

- “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Daniel 12:2, ESV).
- “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28).
- “But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says,

‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire” (Matthew 5:22).

- “And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:12-15).
- “And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Heb. 4:13).
- “Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).
- “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it” (James 2:10).
- “But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt. 5:28).
- “Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him” (1 John 3:15).
- “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).
- “Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the

day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town" (Matt. 10:15).

I do not know how Sweeney defines "clarity," but even a brief survey of Scripture reveals that all sinners are going to stand before God, and that he is going to punish the guilty. And that's a sobering thought for anyone.

Claim #2: Jesus didn't teach a real Hell.

Jesus said that hell is real. (He didn't, but he spoke several times about Gehenna, a violent, sad place just outside Jerusalem where child sacrifice once took place.)

The "Gehenna-was-a-flaming-garbage-dump-outside-Jerusalem" argument is nothing new. However, there may actually be no evidence; the best guess is that it was derived from a Jewish commentary on Psalm 27 dating to the 1200s A.D. What is known, however, is that Jesus's use of "Gehenna" mirrored Old Testament prophets who had already used "Gehenna" (or, more accurately, the Valley of Hinnom) to describe the ultimate destination of the wicked *hundreds of years prior to Jesus*.

Jesus *does* use the word "Gehenna" to describe hell. But to be clear, he also uses the word "Hades," which is universally understood to refer to the realm of punishment for the dead.

In Matt. 9:47 (the verse is paralleled in the other Gospels), Jesus says, "And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell." The word here is indeed "Gehenna," but notice that it's being contrasted with *the kingdom of God*. If Jesus was talking about a place for outcasts near Jerusalem, he'd probably contrast it with Jerusalem. But instead, he contrasts it with God's eternal kingdom.

Saying "Jesus never talked about hell, just this place called

Gehenna” is a bit like historians 2,000 years from now combing through ancient Christian blog posts that complain about “Hollywood filth” and concluding, “See? The ancient 21st-century Christians never talked about the movie industry, just this town called Hollywood.”

My life would be a lot easier if Jesus never talked about hell. I could probably dismiss the doctrine and not worry so much about my unsaved friends and family. But the “Gehenna” argument is not a way out.

Claim #3: Hell doesn't have nine descending circles, as Dante (“Hell's true architect”) wrote.

Hell has nine descending circles. (That's all Dante, hell's true architect.)

I'll admit that I don't know a single Christian who thinks hell has nine descending circles or who takes Dante's *Inferno* as gospel truth. So I'll agree with Sweeney—I'm willing to bet hell doesn't have nine descending circles!

But to call Dante “hell's true architect” is ignoring the massive preponderance of biblical teaching on this serious topic. Sweeney also assumes that *Inferno* was written in a vacuum. Dante didn't invent “hell” for his book; he was exploring a topic (granted, in unbiblical ways) that was already a well-understood teaching of God's Word.

Claim #4: The degree of sin in this life equals the degree of punishment in the next life.

The worse your sins in life, the worse your punishments for eternity. (Again, that's Dante, this time inspired by Aristotle and Cicero.)

Christians always seem a bit confused about whether there are levels of punishment in hell. The bottom line is that *all people are equally sinful, but not all sins appear to be equal*.

The mistake we humans make, since we judge by subjective human standards (ourselves), is in thinking that some sins are excusable while others are not. *No sin is excusable before a holy God*. And to make this point clear, the Bible reminds us often that God's standard lumps every human being into the same category as sinners.

Scripture is universally clear that we are all equally sinful in terms of where we deserve to spend our eternity. At the same time, there are levels of punishment:

For those who are sinners by nature, which we all are by default, God's judgment is on the basis of how *bad* you did (not *if* you did bad; in other words, the assumption is that you did bad). All are sinners and all deserve to be judged in hell because of it. If, however, your nature has been fundamentally set right before God, justified by Christ's death and resurrection to take away your punishment and regenerate you, his judgment of you is on the basis of how *good* you did (a judgment of rewards).

"Works" only matter within the context of your relationship with God; if your relation to God as judge is one of a criminal (i.e. a sinner), he'll punish you based on your sin. If your relation to God is one of forgiveness and adoption through Christ's perfect sacrifice, he'll reward you based on your good deeds. But it's only Christ who can change your nature, not the works.

Bottom line: levels of punishment or not, there are still no good seats in hell.

Claim #5: Satan doesn't rule over hell, and in the Bible

“Satan” is a force, not a person.

Satan reigns in Hell, with pitchfork and tail. (In the Bible, Satan is mostly an impersonal force.)

Sweeney is half right. Satan does *not* rule in hell, pitchfork in hand. His fate is to suffer in God’s eternal punishment along with the rest of the demons and anyone else who has rejected Christ (see Revelation 20). Of course, he is not ignorant of his fate, so rather than waste the last several thousand years trying to beg forgiveness from God, he’s instead been trying to take as many humans with him as he can.

Satan is *not*, however, an “impersonal force.” In Job 1, he directly speaks and interacts with God in the throne room of Heaven. In Luke 4, he has a conversation with Jesus (do impersonal forces have conversations?). In Luke 10, Jesus said he saw Satan’s fall from Heaven. In Revelation 12 and 20, we also learn that Satan was the snake in the Garden of Eden, and that he’s going to wage war on God at the end of human history.

In *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis wisely observed, “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors, and hail a materialist or magician with the same delight.”

It’s one thing to claim Satan is an impersonal force. But you can’t use the Bible for that argument.

Claim #6: Islam is clearer on hell than Christianity.

Of all the world’s scriptures, the Quran teaches most consistently the concept of a violent afterlife for unrepentant sinners.

Islamic teaching is definitely more gruesome than the Bible on the exact nature of hell, Sweeney's right about that. Interestingly, a popular belief among Muslims is that Muhammad's uncle, Abu Talib, while not a Muslim himself, was rewarded with the best place in hell for assisting his nephew during his life. His fate? Shallow fire that only goes up to his feet, making his brain boil (Sahih Bukhari, Volume 5, Book 58, Number 224).

But as far as the Quran itself is concerned, are its descriptions of hell graphic but consistent? No. Numerous verses teach that hell is eternal, but Surah 6:128 and Surah 11:106-108 both imply that hell can be temporary if Allah wills.

But setting all this aside, even if the Quran did talk more about hell than the Bible... so?

Claim #7: Hell is "more real" in the *Aeneid* than in the New Testament.

Hell is far more real in Virgil's Aeneid than in the New Testament.

I confess that I'm not up on the *Aeneid*. So, like the last fact, I'll just say—so?

If you're looking for a concept of hell as a cartoonish underworld where dead souls are sent for all eternity, then I would indeed assume you'd be more likely to find it in Roman literature than in the Bible. But the Bible does not describe hell in such terms. Let it speak for itself, Mr. Sweeney.

In the Old Testament, we learn that the dead go down to *Sheol* ("the grave," the realm of the dead), a curse on humanity brought about by Adam's sin, where they await the *resurrection of all dead* at the end of the world (Daniel 12). The God-followers of history understood that God would deliver them

somehow, and that the “underworld” of Sheol wasn’t their final home (see Psalm 16:10). The Bible further draws out that in Sheol was an area of paradise for the righteous and an area of conscious torment for the wicked (see Luke 16). But when Christ died, paying for the sins of all God’s people past, present and future, the way back into God’s presence was opened up: The righteous who are dead can now reside *with* God in heaven (2 Cor. 5:8), while the dead are still confined to the punishment of Sheol, which today we also call *hell*. But all this is still temporary; we’re awaiting the resurrection, when God will give the righteous perfect bodies to live on a New Earth forever with him, and the wicked will be raised from the dead only to be thrown into the Lake of Fire—which is eternal (see John 5, Revelation 20).

That is a far more nuanced picture of hell than you see in any of the other world myths or religions. And there’s a key difference between the full biblical picture of hell and the cultural Christian caricature of the afterlife: In the Bible, God’s goal isn’t just to split up dead men’s souls into two groups, but to recreate Earth the way it was before sin entered the world and live freely with his redeemed people forever, reversing what Adam did in Eden, while those who rejected Christ are doomed to suffer God’s wrath forever.

Claim #8: The Old Testament doesn’t talk about hell.

The Old Testament speaks only of Sheol, not Hell, and Sheol is the dusty place in the earth where everybody goes after they die.

As previously noted, it’s true that the Old Testament talks about Sheol, but to use that as an argument against hell is unfair to the text of Scripture.

In Luke 16, we in essence learn that the punishment compartment of Sheol involves torture, shame, fire, heat and

pain—in other words, hell. The Old Testament also depicts “the grave” (Sheol, or the Pit) as a fate *earned* by the wicked (Psalm 55:23) while holding it in tension as the destiny of the righteous (see Psalm 16:10, 28:1, 30, 49:9). There is a clear Old Testament expectation that God had more in store for the righteous than Sheol: eventual resurrection and vindication. Thus, Christ’s resurrection—which enables us to be raised from the dead (see 1 Cor. 15)—is that long-awaited solution for God’s people through the ages.

Claim #9: Paul never discussed Hell.

St. Paul, who lived and wrote before the New Testament gospels were written, doesn’t seem to have thought much about hell at all.

The word “hell” doesn’t come up much in Paul’s vocabulary (not that it matters, since the New Testament contains more than just his writings), but eternal *wrath* and *judgment* are *everywhere* in Paul’s writings. Sweeney is outright deceiving readers at this point.

Consider how Paul treats the concept of divine judgment:

- “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil” (2 Cor. 5:10).
- “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (Rom. 1:18).
- “But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed” (Rom. 2:5).
- “But for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury” (Rom. 2:8).

- “Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God” (Rom. 5:9).
- “For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come” (1 Thess. 1:9-10).

Paul didn’t need to reinvent the wheel where the concept of God’s judgment in hell and at the resurrection was already understood. Instead, much of his writing focuses on explaining the nature and cause for God’s wrath—and his frightening point is that *no one is under God’s wrath who doesn’t deserve it*. That should cause us to take a serious look at the cross of Christ as the solution to our sin problem.

Claim #10: Hell depends on the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, which comes from Greek philosophy.

The idea of hell wouldn’t have been possible without the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, and that comes most from Socrates and Plato.

This again wrongly assumes that the Bible advocates a sterile, dualistic realm of the dead/realms of the undead doctrine of the afterlife. Pagan philosophers taught this (the “immortality of the soul”), but the Bible has more to say than that—yes, man’s soul is undying, but God’s goal in human history is *the literal, bodily resurrection of all the righteous and wicked!*

One need look no further than the book of Genesis to see that the Hebrews understood the dead to continue existing in a realm of their own (see Gen. 37:35). Even most skeptical, liberal critics of Scripture only ever push the composition of

the Pentateuch as far forward as the exilic period, a solid 500 years (give or take) before Socrates or Plato. The idea of death as the cessation of existence is nowhere to be found in the Old Testament.

To Sweeney, and anyone else reading, I would simply close with this: no true, loving, Bible-believing Christian would ever want to invent the idea of hell. The doctrine of hell is not one that we gleefully use to bash sinners, but one that we fearfully revere—because the overwhelming testimony of Scripture is that we Christians deserve hell too (1 Cor. 6:11)! It is only because we have been touched by God's Spirit that we can claim Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection as our own; we did nothing to deserve our own release. We continue to preach hell, because the Bible soundly testifies that it is a real place not because we want to.

Believe us: Our lives would be much more laid-back if we didn't think hell was real. Rather than arguing over the diagnosis, accept Christ's cure.

Alex Kocman is a recent media graduate with a background in biblical studies. A writer and editor for *Christian Life News* and *Charisma News*, he resides in Virginia with his wife. You can follow him on Twitter via @ajkocman.