

Introduction

“If you are worried that your loved ones will not serve God unless they are afraid of Him willfully torturing them forever, this is not the series for you.” (SCREEN)

- For the last 2000 years, Christianity has been one of two dominant religions in the world (Islam is the other).
- Throughout its history, it has undergone widespread growth globally.
 - It has also experienced several major movements and countless minor movements within the religion itself.
 - The late Phyllis Tickle wrote in her book, *Emergence Christianity*, about how “semi-Millennial tsunamis of change shape religion and culture.”

“Every five hundred years, give or take a decade or two, Western culture, along with those parts of the world that have been colonized or colonialized by it, goes through a time of enormous upheaval, a time in which essentially every part of it is reconfigured.” - Phyllis Tickle (SCREEN)

- Some of these movements have been positive, contributing to growth of the Christian movement and others have been negative, contributing to decline.
- From the perspective of history - our looking back - it is somewhat painless to see whether the impact of a change was overall positive or negative, but for those in those moments or seasons of change, it probably was not as clear, and certainly not as painless.
- For example, we tend to view the reformation, our previous 500-year-cycle of a watershed moment, as we are now so far removed from it, proudly (even arrogantly) as a major event in Christian history, a time when a new stream of Christianity was born, when old ways of doing God’s mission were revitalized, and when ordinary Christians were freed from man-made institutions and human mediation between God and the believer.
- It is **important** to know the tumultuous environment that change occurred in.

“We can see, from the latter years of the fourteenth century to the dramatic one of 1517 when Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses on the door in Wittenberg, the process of wrenching, deconstructing, liberating, anxiety-producing, world-rending change as it works its way, straight as the proverbial arrow, from one

regimen for ordering life to a new and unprecedented one.” Phyllis Tickle
(SCREEN)

- Although I don't have time to dive into how such change affects **not only religion** but the world around us, I'll simply say it is an error not to realize the change such times bring politically, socially, and economically.
- To put it simply, something in history that appears predominantly positive and relatively painless from today's perspective, **almost surely did not** seem that way to those who experienced it in real time.
 - They're were undoubtedly feelings of restlessness, revolt, deconstruction, fear of losing the normalcy of the past, anxiety about the future path once untethered from the accepted religious norms, discord, reactions, and to **grossly underestimate the result**, division.
 - It is clear now, that a time of reconstruction followed this in a way that affected every facet of Western culture.
 - But, what we must also wrestle with, was that **before reconstruction**, this 500-year-cycle of change erupted in a **time of deconstruction**.

Transition

- If Tickle is correct about the tsunamis of change every ~500 years, and I think it's clear she is, then we should consider that **we're in the midst** of such.
 - This is why we have heard the term “deconstruction” or “deconstructing of faith” so much in the last couple of years.
- So I realize this is a new year and we are looking into '26 with anticipation, but I feel it's critical to start with a **brief dive into church history** so that we can live in the present and prepare for the future with greater awareness of what is taking place around us in the **cycle** humanity has experienced before.
 - The goal is **not** to:
 - Ignore the change happening in our day.
 - Slaughter our faith in Christianity in the current deconstruction movement.
 - Ignore it and fight to the death to defend a position that we are ignorant about and blindly align with, even if we're wrong, because we refuse to do the work of **honest examination**.
 - The goal **is** to let deconstruction to do what is necessary while continuing to move **through** deconstruction into reconstruction of our faith.

- Please understand, that is true, but it is **not as easy as it sounds**.
 - It is not difficult to question doctrines we hold casually but the ones we hold dear and formative, the ones we have never questioned - or at least admitted that we have, are more difficult to evaluate.
- So the purpose of this series, which will set the overarching theme for the year, is the idea of **courageously** looking at some controversial doctrines that are or may have been long and widely held by many Christians, to consider if they are as clear as we've been told. **(Annual theme)**
- We'll start off with a ringer, the **doctrine of hell**.
 - But to be clear, our goal in leaning into the deconstruction process, is not to deconstruct from faith, it is to deconstruct to any beliefs or allegiances that need to be questioned or debunked, so that through it, we **draw even closer to Jesus** and live in the reality of the Kingdom of God.
- But this kind of **honest** reflection **requires room for questions**, even for expression of and wrestling with **doubt**.
 - If we refuse to allow the church to be a safe place for questions because we think it encourages doubt, we'll reap the **inverse** of our goal.

“Most Christians can deal with inevitable doubts as long as there is room for doubt. But when a system is enforced that leaves no room for doubt, benign uncertainties can mutate into faith-destroying monsters. When doubts are locked away in a closet of secrecy, they can grow into formidable ogres.” Brian Zahnd (SCREEN)

Text

John 8:31-32 ESV (SCREEN)

“**31** So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, **32** and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

- If God is the God of Truth, if Jesus is Truth, if the truth will set us free when we know it, **then blind allegiance isn't the goal**, deep trust through faith, study, and experience is.

- I firmly believe if we truly seek the Scriptures, using the best resources available to us, sincerely pray, evaluate tradition and counsel, and be willing to accept the mystery of God, I think we will always **fall into God**.

- **Holy Hell? (SCREEN)**

- Hell is the most **emotionally charged** teachings in Christian theology.
 - Most in this room would likely say the traditional view is what we call “Eternal Conscious Torment” (ECT) but that would only be true of some Christians, **not all by far**.
 - Depending on one’s tradition, and in what era one was in, the “traditional view” may not be ECT at all ... more on that later.
 - But for the Bible belt of our generations, ECT is the view most know.
- The truth is when we look back into church history, there are actually **three major streams** regarding hell that are present all the way back to the early church, and have support from different church fathers.
 - The point is that if we are honest about the doctrinal debate, we must be honest that there is **support for and opposition to all three** from the oldest Christian writings and authorities in church history.
 - We can’t just choose one and say this one is the oldest and most supported in church history because that is **highly debatable**.
- The three views are: ECT, Conditional Immortality / Annihilationism, and Remedial Universalism. (Perhaps 4 if you include the Abyss where Vecna dwells, a realm connected via a wormhole to the Upside Down, an inter-dimensional bridge acting as a conduit for monsters to enter our world.)
- **DISCLAIMER:** My goal is not to convince you to choose any of the three as opposed to your current beliefs, but to push back against the support for and opposition against all three, particularly ECT, and get you to **engage honestly about the doctrine of hell**.

- **Motif for Evaluation (SCREEN)**

- Before we dig too deeply into any doctrine of hell, how it will be evaluated, critiqued, supported or rejected, has to be established.
- To help make my point, it is often said the only thing we need to know about hell is **“what the Word says.”**
- This is of course referring to what we would call the **“text”** of the Bible.

- It sounds great, simple, and clear, but the reality is that **it is anything but** if we are honest enough to look at the **issues** that arise from “the text.”
- Although I’ll dive deeper regarding this in each view, just to illustrate, when an English translation of the Bible uses the word “hell,” that word is a translation of the Greek, specifically Koine Greek, that the NT was written in.
- Further, any references to the English OT is the translation from Greek, which was translated from Hebrew and some Aramaic.
 - This is the Septuagint and came from 3rd century Alexandria, Egypt.
 - Interestingly, the Septuagint was so popular, it is what most NT authors quoted from, not the original Hebrew text.
- So the “text” is critical, but I am suggesting, that in an **effort toward triangulation**, the text is **one of three** essential criteria that make up a motif for evaluating any doctrine of hell.
 - The three elements of this **motif** are: God’s Character, the Scope of Redemption, and the Text, I’ll try to qualify each.
- **God’s Character.**
 - The criteria emphasis here is that any doctrine regarded as Christian has to align with God’s Character and cannot be in opposition to God’s Character.
 - Further, this means if we behold God in Jesus Christ (**Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. - Jn 14:9**), then any doctrine that is in out of alignment with Jesus’ life and teaching is false.
- **The Scope of Redemption.**
 - The criteria emphasis here is that if Jesus’ atoning death and resurrection accomplished a cosmic redemption, then what is the scope of it?
 - How far does it reach? What and who are included? What is the limit? If there is a limit, such as free will, does that mean the limit is more powerful than God’s Act of redemption through Jesus? Is it some or all? Can it be a successful attempt if it falls short of redeeming all things?
 - I believe the Scriptures support a cosmic redemption, not a partial redemption consisting just of human beings.
 - I’ll go deeper on this next week with scriptures.
- **The Text.**

- The criteria emphasis here is that the text, Bible, Scriptures, has to be interpreted accurately to meet the claims of infallibility (trustworthy).
- If it is interpreted incorrectly, a false interpretation cannot carry the weight of infallibility because it is not truth.
- Correct interpretation is not a perfect exact science, if it was, **there would be no doctrinal disagreements** in Christianity and there would only be one group, tradition, denomination, etc.
- Acknowledging this doesn't make our commitment to the Bible weaker, it means we're **honest** about the reality of disagreements in interpretations.
- Additionally, we are all reading English **translations of ancient manuscripts** that were written thousands of years ago.
- Even more so, they were written in the context of and through the perspective of **cultures** that are, as it regards our limited understanding and lack of experience, even further away than the 2000 years of time.
- All of this means, the work of concluding what the intent of the original texts were then and are now is a **complicated task**.
- I'm not suggesting the bible is misleading or that it requires a PhD in Greek to understand, but I am saying it requires a few things to correctly interpret:
 - **Honesty** about our ignorance of ancient languages and cultures.
 - **Awareness** in utilizing tools and resources that are good but not perfect.
 - A deep commitment to the **pursuit** of truth, not the defense of a position when confronted with challenging info regarding the text.
 - **Humility**, admitting there are other people, who love Jesus and study, that come to different conclusions from us on certain subjects in the Bible, therefore respect in matters of disagreement are important.

Transition

- The reality is when the three main stream views of hell are overlaid the motif as presented, none easily answer **all three** of the criteria easily and fully.
- Sure, if you only consider things within your own narrow tradition's view, you may feel that is does, or find the tendency to ignore one of the three.
- This is one reason why the doctrine of hell is so difficult and why I'm presenting all three main stream views in this series.

- **Definitions:**

- I am offering definitions or descriptions of these three main stream views of the doctrine of hell, and I'll dive deeper into each one in the coming weeks.

“Eternal Conscious Torment is the belief that the wicked suffer unending physical and/or spiritual agony in hell after death, remaining conscious and aware of their punishment forever, as a just consequence for sin, rather than being destroyed or annihilated.” (SCREEN)

“Conditional Immortality / Annihilationism posits that immortality is a gift **only** for believers in Christ; the unsaved, being inherently mortal, face judgment in hell as a final, irreversible "second death," resulting in complete cessation of existence, not eternal conscious torment.” (SCREEN)

“Remedial Universalism, also called purgatorial universalism or universal restoration (apocatastasis), posits that hell is a temporary, corrective place of purification where unrepentant souls undergo intense but ultimately restorative suffering to purge their sins before eventually entering heaven.” (SCREEN)

Conclusion

- **The doctrine of hell is important but actually not necessary to love Jesus.**
- We do have the subject of hell in Scripture and so it is a very big deal.
 - But, if Jesus is who He says He is, then knowing His incarnation - birth, death, burial, resurrection, and reconciliation between us and the Father - is enough to truly and totally love Him in the way we were created to originally.
 - The truth is, no one is actually moved to love God through fear anyway.
 - I know some of you think you got saved because you were afraid of hell but that can't be true because fear can't move toward love.

1 John 4:18-19 ESV (SCREEN)

“18 There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. **19** We love because he first loved us.”

- Fear of hell may have made you willing to consider your mortality and eternity, but only God's light and love heals and saves.

Deconstruction → Reconstruction - 1
Holy Hell - 1

- Jesus' love is enough ... “Just Jesus”