

Many Churches Consider Hell Too Hot a Topic

Harsh concept often gets soft-pedaled

*By Mike Anton and William Lobdell
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Bill Faris believer in hell, that frightful nether world where the thermostat is always set on high, where sinners toil for eternity in unspeakable torment.

But you've never know it listening to him preach at his south Orange County, Calif., evangelical church. He never mentions the topic; his clock shows little interests in it.

"It isn't sexy enough anymore," says Faris, pastor of Crown Valley Vineyard Christian Fellowship.

In churches across America, hell is being frozen out as clergy find themselves increasingly hesitant to sermonize on Christianity's outpost for lost souls.

The violence and torture that Dante described in the "Inferno" and that Hieronymus Bosch illustrated on canvas five centuries ago have become cultural fossils in most mainstream Christian denominations, a storyline that no longer resonates with churchgoers.

"There has been a shift in religion from focusing on what happens in the next life to asking, 'What is the quality of this life we're

leading now?'" said Harvey Cox Jr., an eminent author, religious historian and professor at Harvard Divinity School. "You can go to a whole lot of churches week after week and you'd be startled even to hear a mention of hell."

Hell's fall from fashion indicated how key portions of Christian theology have been influenced by a secular society that stresses individualism over authority and the human psyche over moral absolutes. The rise of psychology, the philosophy of existentialism and the consumer culture have all dumped buckets of water on hell.

The tendency to downplay damnation has grown in recent years as nondenominational ministries, with their focus on everyday issues such as childrearing and career success, have proliferated and loyalty to churches has deteriorated.

"It's just too negative," said Bruce Shelley, a senior professional of church history as the Denver Theological Seminary. "Churches are under enormous pressure to be consumer-orientated. Churches today feel the

need to be appealing rather than demanding."

No room for hell

A 1998 poll by Barna Research Group, a Ventura Calif., company that studies Christian trends nationwide, found that church-shipping has become a way of life: One in seven adults changes churches each year; one in six regularly rotates among congregations.

That fickleness has helped give rise to "megachurches"—evangelical congregations of more than 2,000 people that mix Scripture with social recreational programs in a casual atmosphere.

Megachurches routinely pay for market research on what will draw people to their ministries and keep them coming back.

"Once pop evangelism went into the market analysis, hell was just dropped," said Martin Marty, professor emeritus of religion and culture at the University of Chicago Divinity School.

Hell is far from dead. A May 2001 Gallup Poll of adults nationwide found that 71 percent believe in hell.

They just don't want to hear about it.

Even among some "born-again" churches, hell is a rare topic of conversation. Born-again Christians believe in hell, but they also believe that their decision to embrace Christ has earned them a one-way ticket in the other direction.

"When you have a group of people who are born again, you're not going to hell," said Bob Anderson, 51, a lawyer who attends an evangelical church in Fullerton Calif. "So why talk about it."

Traditional denominations have also pushed hell to the margins. The Presbyterian Church (USA)'s first catechism, drawn up a few years ago by a committee, mentions hell only once.

George Hunsinger, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary and the catechism's principal author, would have liked the document to address hell more directly and "talk about divine judgment in a responsible way." But the committee rejected the idea without much debate.

"It's a failure of nerve by churches that are not wanting to take on a nonpopular stance," Hunsinger said.

Kinder, gentler hell

Where once hell was viewed as a literal geographic location, it is now more often seen as a state of the soul.

In 1999, Pope John Paul II made headlines by saying that hell should be seen not as a fiery underworld but as "the state of those freely and definitively separate themselves from God, the source of all life and joy."

As much as that seemed like a departure from church teachings, the pope's words weren't all that new. In the 1960's, as part of the Second Vatican Council's modernization of church teachings, the Roman Catholic Church moved away from the view of hell as a gothic torture chamber.

Individual priests kept hell's fires burning for years, aided by a Catholic catechism of beliefs published in 1891 whose tone one priest calls "positively medieval." A new catechism, published in 1994, uses gentler language and emphasizes that hell's chief punishment is the separation from God.

"When you take (hell) away as a threat, everything changes," said the University of Chicago's Marty. "Who goes to confession anymore? Time was, a (Catholic) church had 16 booths and the people snaked around the block. Today, a church might have one left."

The History of hell is long and complex, a product of evolving religious thought that has shaped—and been shaped by—literature, art and popular culture.

Hell's roots are tangled up in the Hades of Greek mythology and the ancient Hebrew concept of Sheol—locales where the dead, both good and bad, resided.

Hell became more hellish when early Christians infused it with a serious fear factor. Jesus is quoted in the Bible describing hell as the "outer darkness" consumed by an "everlasting fire." The Book of Revelation warned that sinners would be "thrown into the lake of fire." Matthew's Gospel offered a soundtrack: the "weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Dante wrote within the seventh circle of hell runs "the river of blood, within which boiling is/Who'er by violence doth injure others."