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How do you contemplate that Whac-a-Mole issue of hell?

Bill Tammeus | Sep. 18, 2013 A small c catholic

A Bible study group I help lead was in the ninth chapter of Mark recently when the Whac-A-Mole issue of hell popped up yet again.

There, Jesus is telling people to cut off their hand if it causes them to sin because "it's better for you to enter into life crippled than to go away with two hands into the fire of hell."

So after acknowledging the reality that as far as I know, there are no one-handed biblical literalists walking around because of this verse, I asked people what they believed about hell. Is it a physical place? How do you end up there? Things like that.

I was a bit surprised that three elderly women all expressed a belief in a literal, physical hell with, as one said, "fire and gnashing of teeth," though the eternal nature of that punishment was something she had trouble getting her head around given what she believes about a God of love.

In the end, everyone agreed that each of us has opinions, but nobody really knows from personal experience.

One of our members is Catholic, and she seemed both surprised and relieved when I told her that the late Pope John Paul II once said he believes [1] that hell is not a physical place but a state of being.

I told the group I thought the traditional images of hell as an eternal fire full of people who never burn up was a metaphorical way of describing what being outside of a relationship with God might feel like. But, I said, we have to take the idea of hell seriously because Jesus talked about it and because if humans have no possibility of choosing against God, they cannot be considered free and could not, therefore, love God fully.

"I am not a universalist," I told them, "though I'm perfectly willing to let God be one, and I hope God is one."

There are, of course, branches of Christianity that focus intently on hell as a way of scaring people into heaven. Well, I think that's why they do it. My own Presbyterian denomination, by contrast, tends to have a pretty low devilology, preferring to focus on God's love and promises of redemption.

And it won't surprise you to know that I think that's the right approach. Why? Because if we give the bulk of our attention to demons and evil, we will find that our theology becomes dangerously unbalanced. Instead, we need to pay attention to what Jesus paid attention to, which is love and mercy, compassion and justice, healing and the in-breaking of the reign of God.

Still, when Scripture talks about hell (or heaven), it's worth wrestling around with what that means because we'll also become theologically out of tune if we pay attention only to our own favorite parts of the Bible.

We need the challenges of such passages as Mark 9. For as my copy of the *Handbook for Today's Catholic* says, "Hell is a real possibility as a person's eternal destiny," basing that assertion on wording in 1033 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church [2] that describes hell as "definitive self-exclusion from communion with

God."

All of this, of course, is tied to the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, which is the Christian response and alternative to the old Greek idea of the immortal soul, an idea that Christianity does not teach, no matter what you sometimes hear at Christian funerals.

What people in my Bible study group have heard from me over and over is that when we die, we're obliterated, gone, kaput, doornail dead. Only God is immortal. What that means is this: An eternal life in God's company will happen only by the grace of God not because of our merit or our own immortality.

Which strikes me as a hell of a good way for God to operate.

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