

Scripture, Tradition, Purgatory, Heaven, and Hell

So, I ran across this article on the moral argument for Hell. The problem today is that people are wont to say one of:

- there is no Hell
- no human will go to Hell
- because there is a Hell where God would send people, God does not exist

The article claimed "Doing a limited Google Search of the Internet I wasn't able to readily discover a succinct, yet comprehensive, treatment of this subject. Therefore, I think one is called for here." It then went on and on building a whole case for Hell and whatnot out of Scripture. It had some fine points I wrinkled my nose at, but wasn't terribly bad until it cited the author's exchange on the Internet with someone which initiated the whole article:

Some person: "Did Jesus descend into hell to watch as people were being tormented with fire and brimstone, yes or no?"

Author: "No he didn't. Could you PLEASE cite the BIBLICAL reference for "Jesus descending into hell"

[emphasis, the author of the article]

Later in the article itself, the author said, "the idea of Purgatory was an invention of the Roman Catholic Church. It is a completely unBiblical concept and actually an anti-Biblical concept since it teaches that sinners go there to be purged of unrepented sins, when in fact, no-one but Jesus pays for sins"

This is where I stopped reading, because it was clear the author, despite a PhD, has not done his homework.

I want to cover four things:

- Tradition
- purgatory
- Jesus' descent into Hell
- what Hell is

It won't take long.

TRADITION

There is no Christian denomination that practices Scripture Alone. None. If a churchy person says to you, "Scripture alone is the sole source of truth," run away. Sola Scriptura is the doctrine that states that the Christian (Protestant) Scriptures are the ultimate authority in matters of doctrine and practice. To this I make five points:

- The Scriptures do not claim that the Scriptures are the ultimate authority in matters of doctrine (or practice).
- Different Christian denominations have different lists of which books are a part of the Scriptures.
- No two denominations that claim Sola Scriptura have the same set of doctrines.
- There is no Christian denomination that does not have a governing body that interprets the Scriptures to derive instruction on matters of doctrine and practice.
- The Scriptures were completed after the Christian church was established and written by the church, not the other way 'round.

In other words, it is the Scriptures as interpreted by the doctrinal authority of the church that acts as the authority in matters of doctrine and practice for a given congregation.

And how does the governing authority of the local church interpret Scripture? Through the lens of its theological tradition. Sola Scriptura is one such tradition, originating with Martin Luther. Some point to 2 Timothy 3:15: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof ..." as Scriptural evidence for Sola Scriptura, but of course, it isn't. The text does not say "Only Scripture ...,"

it says “All Scripture ...” – in any language you choose to translate it.

In any case, the only supreme authority in matters of doctrine and practice is God Himself. Scripture and the Church are merely messengers.

So Scripture is authoritative only when interpreted under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit teaches through – you guessed it – the Church. Scripture is a tool to add in understanding the Will of God and for communicating it. It is not the end-all, be-all singular source of Truth.

Here’s the kicker: when a local church says, “Sola Scriptura!” it implies the corollary “There is no interpretive authority of Scripture!” Scripture, in that case, is useless for teaching, for reproof, etc., etc. You can’t expound on Scripture while under the restraint of Sola Scriptura. The only way in which you can use Scripture to back doctrine and practice is to acknowledge that Scripture must be interpreted through a sacred Tradition that is endowed by God with equal authority to Scripture. Only then can Scripture even hope to be profitable for anything. A church that denies that can make up whatever it wants, even teaching heresy through mis-interpretation of Scripture.

PURGATORY

Purgatory is a doctrine taught mainly through Tradition. We’ve established why Tradition is as relevant as Scripture, but there are Scriptural references to Purgatory. The most obvious are in books that Protestants reject (e.g., 2 Maccabees), but here’s a reference from one every denomination I’ve ever encountered includes in its canon:

1 Corinthians 3:15 “If any man’s work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as through fire.”

We Catholics call that passing as through fire “Purgatory.”

So when the author of the article I read says Purgatory is an invention of the Roman Church and isn't Biblical, he's not got a bean to stand on. In fact he owes us beans, because he is also wrong about what the Church actually teaches. He says the Catholic Church teaches that “sinners go there to be purged of unrepented sins.” That is not true. Sinners pass through Purgatory to be cleansed from sins of which they are repentant but have not received formal absolution. There is also a concept of temporal punishment due to sins already forgiven that must be paid. Punishment is a bad word to use, by the way, in my mind for all this. Yes, it is a punishment, but it isn't like a spanking, it's a purification – a means of purging the effect of sin from the soul, so to speak. It's never pleasant. No one wants to do penance. But punishment hasn't got exactly the right connotation.

So Purgatory is a purification process. It's the passing through the gates – the gates opened by (and only by) Jesus. It's the putting on of the white robe, so to speak, before entering the court of Heaven.

JESUS' DESCENT INTO HELL

First, most of us know this doctrine from the Apostles' creed, which originated sometime probably before 400AD and is accepted by many (most) mainstream Christian denominations and probably many others that aren't so mainstream. It says: “He was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead.” The “dead” is understood to be the place where the dead awaited the opening of the gates of Heaven. In most cases it is considered to be a spiritual waiting room just outside the main rings of Hell. That's an oversimplification, but the point is that it is considered a part of Hell where souls of the righteous were waiting until Christ's work on the cross re-opened the gates of Heaven to mankind.

But even if the author's church poo-poo's the Apostles' Creed,

or like some Methodists leaves out the Hell line, then there are Scriptures that refer to Jesus' descent:

e.g., Ephesians 4:9, Acts 2:24, 1 Peter 3:19, Zechariah 9:11.

So, there are those BIBLICAL references the author wanted.

HELL

The author never actually got to what Hell is. This is the part I always find amusing about protestant know-it-all's: they poo-poo the Catholic Church and then go off to try to show what the Church has already worked out in great detail. They get really proud of themselves for coming up with something nice, tidy little demonstration of their point. But when you stand their magnum opus up against the Catholic teaching on exactly the same thing, the protestants really look frightfully immature. You just can't start a church and whip up some doctrine out of Scripture and expect to have a fully-fleshed, consistent, coherent theological system like the Catholics who have been working it out for 1,983 years.

So why is there a Hell and why does God send people there?

Let's trace this from Genesis:

– God drops Adam in Paradise so suited to him that he can live there naked. God gives him super intelligence and direct access to Heaven and then makes him a woman designed specifically for him with the same gifts of intelligence and access to Heaven as well as beauty and no clothes. God tells them to live there and be happy and to be fruitful and multiply (we know what that means!).

– God says all that is yours so long as you don't eat of that one tree in the middle of the Garden. Eat that, and you will die.

– Adam and Eve decide all they've been given isn't good enough, so they eat the fruit.

– God, who never backs out of a bargain, holds Adam and Eve to it. So now they have to die. To die, they must not be allowed to eat from the Tree of Life, so out they go, nor may they have access to Heaven, where there can be no death. I

could go on and on about the logical consequences of opening themselves up to death.

– God, who is ever merciful, uses their fallen state to initiate a plan to restore them to Grace without ever acting in contradiction to the Justice his initial bargain demands.

– Jesus' redemptive act (I won't go into the details about how I see the deep magic involved that makes it really, concretely work) re-opens the gates of Heaven and enables resurrection of the human body.

That last point is the key to understanding Hell. Without Jesus, the only place Adam and Eve could end up would be Hell. The breaking of the covenant in the Garden demanded it. They chose to go where God would not walk with them.

Hell is the place where Adam and Eve would go were it not for Jesus. Heaven is the place only open to those in a state of perfect Grace. All who have faith that Jesus is the the one and only hope for mankind's access to Heaven live their lives striving toward that faith. Those who do not believe that Jesus is the doorway to Heaven, or who do not believe that there is an afterlife (and thus have no need for Jesus) make the choice that Adam and Eve made in the Garden: they choose to accept the consequences of death.

So Hell is not a place that God **sends** people. Hell is a foregone destiny from which God **rescues** people. Heaven and Hell are not about God's **punishments**. They are about God's **mercy**.

The author of the article never really seemed to get that.

Heed Jesus' signals and you get to take the exit: to Heaven. Don't heed Jesus and you stay the Just highway of humankind: to Hell.

All of this hinges on individual faith: "believe and be saved" is a very theologically packed phrase – too packed, perhaps, which is why it sounds trite – but it is very precisely

accurate. And it really is that simple. People are always over complicating it.

ONE LAST THING

Oh, and by the way, the author quotes a lot of Catholics, both Church Fathers and recent orthodox Roman Catholics like G. K. Chesterton, so, well