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“Debunking Religion: Heaven & Hell”

Luke 10:25-28

If you watch “Two and ½ Men”, you know the character played by Charlie Sheen (and loosely based on Sheen’s personality). Charlie prides himself on his bachelor/playboy lifestyle in Malibu and drives a Mercedes, a Ferrari and used to own a Jaguar. His lifestyle consists of living in a two-story beachfront home, drinking excessively, smoking cigars, constant womanizing, gambling, and usually wearing bowling shirts and shorts. Charlie sleeps in constantly, while money seems to “fall into his lap” as he lives a life of free-spirited debauchery.

When Charlie Sheen’s personal life tanked, his character was killed off in the show. The next season, however, it was reprised... this time by actress Kathy Bates. She came to visit as Charlie’s ghost, who, not surprisingly, had gone straight to hell. A salty, funny conversation then takes place: Bates must convince Charlie’s brother that she is really Sheen, so she explains she’s in the “old broad’s body” because Charlie’s in hell and that this turn of events is evidence of Charlie’s philandering, thus the “eternal damnation” of being in an older woman’s body – what an irony!

I laughed until tears ran down my cheeks. If hell was a real place, I can imagine the just reward and punishment some of my own acquaintances might have to endure. On a terrible day with time to sit around, I have to admit that it’s a guilty pleasure to begin imagining that...

As Progressive Christians, we would rather talk about what we don’t believe about heaven and hell.

- “Oh, that’s pretty dualistic and literal” some would say.
- “What kind of God throws her own creation into hell for exercising the free will given to humans by the same God?” another might ask.
- “Looking at emotional maturity scales, you have to admit that the idea of eternal punishment or eternal reward is pretty low level thinking.”

- “Heaven & Hell are a fear technique Christians use to so that they have a marketable product. Otherwise, no one would think going to church was really necessary.” I’ve actually heard preachers say that.
- And one of my favorite theologians, John Shelby Spong, once quipped that heaven would “have a lot of old people sitting around a nursing home playing shuffleboard for all eternity.”

Heaven-and-hell Christianity emerged as the primary lens in the dark middle ages but it is so engrained into our common culture in the West that it is difficult for us to know how to construct a Christian belief without it.

In fact (just for fun), I’ve asked of the choir to help me out with a song I learned in the girl scouts called “Oh You Can’t Get to Heaven”. By the way, I found the lyrics to the song *this week* on a *boyscout* website!

“Oh you can’t get to heaven... (repeat)
In a limousine... (repeat)
Oh you can’t get to heaven... (repeat)
In a limousine... oh you can’t get to heaven in a limousine,
The Lord ain’t got no gasoline.
Oh you can’t get to heaven (repeat)
In a limousine!

“Oh you can’t get to heaven... (repeat)
In dirty jeans... (repeat)
Oh you can’t get to heaven... (repeat)
In a dirty jeans... oh you can’t get to heaven in dirty jeans,
The Lord ain’t got no washing machine.
Oh you can’t get to heaven (repeat)
In dirty jeans!

“Oh you can’t get to heaven... (repeat)
On a pair of skis... (repeat)
Oh you can’t get to heaven... (repeat)
On a pair of skis... oh you can’t get to heaven on a pair of skis,
You’ll shuss right through St. Peter’s knees.
Oh you can’t get to heaven (repeat)
On a pair of skis!

“Oh you can’t get to heaven... (repeat)
On water skis... (repeat)
Oh you can’t get to heaven... (repeat)

*On water skis... oh you can't get to heaven on water skis,
'Cause the angels don't like your hairy knees.
Oh you can't get to heaven (repeat)
On water skis!*

Well, we could have fun with this heaven and hell thing all day long. There are, after all, some 30 verses to the song! But I want to suggest some reasons to reconsider and construct another theology of eternity that might spur your lunch conversation after church today. It is important for me to say that I don't know the answers to most of the questions in our "debunking" series – but I can offer some historical and theological context and some of the most contemporary scholarship about them.

And even though I have given serious thought to these topics, I have to say the disclaimer: "This is what I'm thinking today," because there are certainly theologies I have changed my mind about over time.

There are many ways to think about heaven. Consider the Garden of Eden as a metaphor. The garden is not a place of escape. It is not an unchanging paradise of eternal reward. It is a place where you nurture seeds of growth and explore what life means. The garden is a place of potential. *Progressivechristianity.org*

Ian Lawton points out, "evolutionary biology suggests that life is a never ending story. There are no absolute endings. All things continue in some form. A whale carcass at the ocean floor becomes home to all sorts of worms, clams and limpets, creating a new ecosystem that will live on for decades before splintering off into multiple other ecosystems. The human passes on DNA to offspring and the legacy lives on. Whether it's DNA or mindful actions and visions of a better world that outlast you or if it's your body that becomes fertilizer for future manifestations of life, there are many reasons to think of your life as carrying on indefinitely." *Progressivechristianity.org*

There is a wonderful Jewish story that describes heaven from the inside out. A rabbi had a dream that he went to heaven. When he arrived in heaven, he was excited. He was taken to a room where there was a series of long tables. At the tables were some sages, who had lamps, and their heads buried in books. The rabbi was deeply disappointed, and said, "how could this be heaven? It's just a bunch of old men studying." A voice answered him, saying, "The sages aren't in

heaven, heaven is in the sages.” The sages were doing what sages do. Their study had found deep fulfillment, and heaven had arrived inside of them.

Ian Lawton

“Heaven may not be some future promised land. It may be an experience in the here and now. You discover heaven by doing what you do, but doing it with mindfulness and loving intention.” As the Indian mystic Osho said, “Heaven and hell are not geographical. If you go in search of them you will never find them anywhere. They are within you, they are psychological.”

Jesus spent his ministry on earth describing over and over what the kingdom of heaven was like. He compared it to things of this earth: a pearl of great value, and a mustard seed. What if we take our yearning for a perfect world and use it to transform ourselves and the world around us? What if we all took notice of the signs of God around us and worked to become more and more aware of the Holy in another?

To be born again, I believe, is to be released from our selfishness, our ego, all the things that prevent our wholeness and then to live more God-centered than self-centered. We love freely; we have a passion for justice and peace; we develop compassion and gratitude as spiritual gifts. This is what it means to put away our old habits and be born anew.

Jesus told a parable about this as recorded in Luke 10: 25-28.

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “you have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

To have eternal life seems to be less about what happens to us when we die and more about how we live on this earth. The word translated as *salvation* in the Bible has an extraordinary meanings:

- Liberation from bondage
- Homecoming
- Life rather than death
- Sight to the blind

- Healing of wounds
- Freedom from fear

About a year ago, Rob Bell wrote a wonderful little book called “Love Wins”. In it, he breaks down all of the great theological arguments and the entire Biblical story to these two words – Love Wins. Imagine a world where love wins...

- Prisoners have more than one roll of toilet paper a week if they need it
- Families are not pulled apart by anger and hurt
- There are fewer arguments between spouses and no domestic violence
- The Hygiene Pantry would be overflowing with goods to give away – no strings attached

If that is true – that love wins – then we don’t need a hell. If the end of our story is that God’s love or our love wins, then we don’t have to worry about what happens to us after death. We don’t have to be afraid of, or be controlled by fear. Love trumps everything. Love wins.

Resources:

Astle, Cynthia. “The Progressive Christian; Faith and the Common Good” Feb. 13, 2011

Bell, Rob. “Love Wins”

Bennison, John. “Moving Heaven & Hell”

Epperly, Bruce. “Everlasting Life: A Progressive Perspective”

Lawton, Ian. “Heaven Within”

Meier, Rev. William F. “Heaven & Hell vs. Transformational Christianity”