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Why I Believe in a Purgative Hell

First, a couple of disclaimers: What I am talking about in this article is my personal belief, not the doctrine of my denomination, GCI. Or, to put it another way, for those who are also part of GCI: if you don't like what I say in this article, write me about it, don't pester Mike Feazell about it. Secondly, please be clear that I am not talking about the doctrine of purgatory. That is something else all together.

What I am talking about is the belief, held by some of the Church Fathers (such as Gregory of Nyssa) that hell is purgative, not punitive. What does that mean? It means that the Father allows the existence of hell in order to purge us of - not punish us for - the sin of disbelief. After all, didn't Jesus pay for all sin - including the sin of disbelief - already? Why would we need to be punished for a sin that is already forgiven in Jesus? A purgative view of hell says that since all are reconciled in Jesus anyone in hell can leave at anytime they want to - right now, or a million years from now. No one is locked in hell forever by the Father.

In the Bible, Jesus makes it clear that all humanity is adopted in him as children of the Father (Rom. 5:18, Col. 1:20, Eph. 2:15.) Jesus also makes it clear that if we do not believe this truth about ourselves then we will suffer great pain and anguish, and that if we keep on not believing this truth about ourselves then we will keep on suffering this anguish - possibly forever (Matt. 13:50, Rev. 14:10-11.)

But there is something even more important that Jesus makes clear to us: his Father is our Father. God the Father is our Daddy, who loves us. He is not a judge who yearns to punish us for criminal behavior. He is a loving Papa whose whole plan, purpose, and reason for relating to us is to draw us home to himself where we belong.

If my purpose in disciplining my kids is to purge them of their wrong beliefs and help them come home to me then how is that purpose served by imposing an eternal sentence of torture or death on them? It isn't. I allow consequences and punishments in their lives that are purgative, not punitive, so that they will change.

As soon as my kids learn their lesson, they are free to stop experiencing purgative discipline and begin enjoying life. Since I don't believe that I am a better, more loving Father than my Daddy in heaven, I believe that the consequences he allows in our lives (e.g. hell) are designed to purge us of wrong belief, not to punish us forever for our failures. I believe that anyone in hell can believe in the truth of who they are in Jesus and leave hell at any time.

As far as I know, GCI doesn't take a specific position on the exact nature of hell. However, GCI's statement on Judgment does say, "God disciplines those he loves so that they will return to him and live . . ." That sounds like a kind of judgment that leaves me room to never give up hope for others.

~ Jonathan Stepp