

We Do Not Preach Hell; We Preach Jesus

One of the most common criticisms leveled against evangelical Christianity is that it places too much emphasis on hell. Yet historically, faithful gospel preaching has never centered on hell. It has centered on Jesus Christ.

The apostles did not travel throughout the Roman Empire proclaiming, "Hell is coming." They proclaimed, "Jesus is Lord." They preached His death, burial, resurrection, and exaltation. They called people to repent, believe, and receive forgiveness of sins through His name.¹

This does not mean they denied judgment. Far from it. Judgment was part of their message because judgment is part of Scripture. But judgment was never the centerpiece of the gospel. Christ was.

The gospel is good news because God has acted in Jesus Christ to save sinners. Through His death on the cross, Christ bore our sins. Through His resurrection, He conquered death. Through faith in Him, we receive forgiveness, reconciliation with God, adoption into God's family, and the promise of eternal life.²

In other words, we do not primarily preach what people are saved from. We preach the One who saves.

The Debate Over the Church Fathers

In recent years some Christians have appealed to the early Greek Church Fathers as evidence that eternal punishment was not a universal belief in the early church. There is some truth to this observation, but it is often overstated.

The Greek Fathers were not unanimous on the subject. Among several of the most influential Greek-speaking fathers, the views appear to have been mixed:

- Athanasius — Yes
- John Chrysostom — Yes
- Basil of Caesarea — Yes
- Gregory of Nazianzus — Unclear
- Gregory of Nyssa — Probably No
- Origen — No

This means that statements such as "the Greek Church Fathers did not believe in eternal punishment" are historically inaccurate. Some did. Some did not. Some were difficult to classify with certainty.

The reality is that the fathers themselves disagreed.

This should not surprise us. The Church Fathers were not apostles. They were not inspired authors of Scripture. They were theologians, pastors, bishops, and scholars attempting to understand and explain biblical truth.

They were often brilliant.

They were sometimes wrong.

And occasionally they were spectacularly wrong.

The Example of Origen

Perhaps no figure illustrates this better than Origen of Alexandria.

Origen was one of the most influential theologians in the history of the church. His biblical scholarship, theological reflection, and defense of Christianity shaped generations of Christian thinkers. Many later church fathers studied his work and benefited from it.

At the same time, Origen held several views that later Christians rejected.

Most notably for this discussion, Origen appears to have believed that divine punishment was ultimately corrective and restorative rather than eternal.³

Origen taught that God's judgments were real and severe. He did not deny punishment. However, he viewed divine fire primarily as a means of purification rather than endless retribution.

Yet Origen's life also serves as a reminder that even great theologians can make serious mistakes.

According to the church historian Eusebius, Origen interpreted Matthew 19:12 so literally in his youth that he castrated himself.⁴ While historians debate certain details of the account, the story has been repeated throughout church history as an example of misguided zeal.

The lesson is not that Origen had nothing to teach us.

The lesson is that Church Fathers are not infallible.

They are witnesses.

They are not the standard.

Well Known non Greek Church Fathers

Here are ten non-Greek but well-known Church Fathers and how they appear to have viewed eternal punishment:

- Augustine of Hippo — Yes
- Tertullian — Yes
- Jerome — Yes
- Cyprian — Yes
- Ambrose — Yes
- Hilary of Poitiers — Yes
- Leo the Great — Yes
- Irenaeus — Uncertain
- Clement of Alexandria — Uncertain / Probably No
- Arnobius — No (appears closer to annihilationism)

What's interesting is that once you move outside the handful of Greek fathers commonly cited in modern discussions, the overwhelming majority of the famous Latin fathers taught some form of eternal punishment.

What Matters Most Is What Jesus Taught

Ultimately, Christians are not called to follow Athanasius, Basil, Chrysostom, Gregory, or Origen.

We are called to follow Christ.

The central question is not:

"What did the Greek Fathers believe?"

The central question is:

"What did Jesus teach?"

When discussing eternal punishment, one of the most significant passages is Matthew 25:46:

"And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Those who believe in eternal punishment point out that the same word describing the duration of punishment also describes the duration of life.⁵

Others interpret the passage differently.

But regardless of where one lands in the debate, the authority for Christians is not the Church Fathers. The authority is Scripture.

The Fathers may help us understand the Bible, but they cannot replace it.

Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing

The danger in discussions about hell is that believers can become so focused on defending a position that they lose sight of the gospel itself.

The New Testament does not call us to make hell the center of our preaching.

Nor does it call us to make debates about the Church Fathers the center of our preaching.

It calls us to preach Christ.

Paul wrote: "For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified."⁶

The heart of Christianity is not a doctrine of punishment.

The heart of Christianity is a Person.

Jesus Christ.

We proclaim who He is.

We proclaim what He accomplished on the cross.

We proclaim that forgiveness is available through His blood.

We proclaim that eternal life is found in Him.

Judgment is real.

Hell is real.

But neither is the center of the gospel.

Jesus is. And good news is not merely that there is something to be saved from.

The good news is that there is Someone who saves, and we have privilege to be with him forever.

Footnotes

1. Acts 2:22–39; Acts 13:38–39; Romans 10:9–13.
2. Romans 5:1–11; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:13–22.
3. Origen, *On First Principles*, Book I and Book III.
4. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.8.
5. Matthew 25:46.
6. 1 Corinthians 2:2.