

*We affectionately dedicate this book to our students, at  
California Baptist University and Covenant Theological Seminary,  
respectively, who have helped us grapple with issues  
concerning heaven and hell.*

*CHRISTOPHER W. MORGAN AND ROBERT A. PETERSON*

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Chapter 1

MODERN THEOLOGY:  
THE DISAPPEARANCE  
of HELL

*R. Albert Mohler Jr.*



At some point in the nineteen-sixties, Hell disappeared. No one could say for certain when this happened. First it was there, then it wasn't. Different people became aware of the disappearance of Hell at different times. Some realized that they had been living for years as though Hell did not exist, without having consciously registered its disappearance. Others realized that they had been behaving, out of habit, as though Hell were still there, though in fact they had ceased to believe in its existence long ago. . . . On the whole, the disappearance of Hell was a great relief, though it brought new problems.

David Lodge, *Souls and Bodies*<sup>1</sup>

A fixture of Christian theology for over sixteen centuries, hell went away in a hurry. The abandonment of the traditional doctrine of hell came swiftly, with centuries of Christian conviction quickly swept away in a rush of modern thought and doctrinal transformation. Historian Martin Marty reduced the situation down to this: "Hell disappeared. No one noticed."<sup>2</sup>

The traditional doctrine of hell now bears the mark of *odium theologium*—a doctrine retained only by the most stalwart defenders of conservative theology, Catholic and Protestant. Its defenders are seemingly few. The doctrine is routinely dismissed as an embarrassing artifact from an ancient age—a reminder of Christianity's rejected worldview.

The sudden disappearance of hell amounts to a theological mystery of sorts. How did a doctrine so centrally enshrined in the system of theology suffer such a wholesale abandonment? What can explain this radical reordering of Christian theology?

The answer to this mystery reveals much about the fate of Christianity in the modern world and warns of greater theological compromises on the horizon, for, as the church has continually been reminded, no doctrine stands alone. Each doctrine is embedded in a system of theological conviction and expression. Take out the doctrine of hell, and the entire shape of Christian theology is inevitably altered.

### **Background: Hell in Christian History**

The traditional doctrine of hell was developed in the earliest centuries of Christian history. Based in the New Testament texts concerning hell, judgment, and the afterlife, the earliest Christian preachers and theologians understood hell

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<sup>1</sup>David Lodge, *Souls and Bodies* (London: Penguin, 1980), 113.

<sup>2</sup>Martin E. Marty, "Hell Disappeared. No One Noticed. A Civic Argument," *HTR* 78 (1985): 381–98.

to be the just judgment of God on sinners without faith in Christ. Hell was understood to be spatial and eternal, characterized by the most awful biblical metaphors of fire and torment.

Following the example of Jesus, the early Christian evangelists and preachers called sinners to faith in Christ and warned of the sure reality of hell and the eternal punishment of the impenitent. Thomas Oden summarizes the patristic consensus on hell as this:

Hell is the eternal bringing to nothing of corruption and ungodliness. Hell expresses the intent of a holy God to destroy sin completely and forever. Hell says not merely a temporal no but an eternal no to sin. The rejection of evil by the holy God is like a fire that burns on, a worm that dies not.<sup>3</sup>

As Oden notes, the terms “eternal fire” and “eternal punishment” are very common. These terms “have withstood numerous attempts at generous reinterpretation, but they remain obstinately in the received text.”<sup>4</sup> A central example is Augustine, who encouraged his readers to take the biblical metaphors quite literally. Beyond this, Augustine was stalwart in his refutation of those who taught that the punishments of hell were not truly eternal:

Moreover, is it not folly to assume that eternal punishment signifies a fire lasting a long time, while believing that eternal life is without end? For Christ, in the very same passage, included both punishment and life in one and the same sentence when he said, “So those people will go into eternal punishment, while the righteous will go into eternal life.” [Matt. 25:46] If both are “eternal,” it follows necessarily that either both are to be taken as long-lasting but finite, or both as endless and perpetual.<sup>5</sup>

The first major challenge to the traditional doctrine of hell came from Origen, whose doctrine of *apokatastasis* promised the total and ultimate restitution of all things and all persons.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Origen was the pioneer of a form of universalism. His logic was that God’s victory would only be complete when the last things are identical to the first things. That is, the consummation would involve the return of all things to union with the Creator. Nothing (and no one) could be left unredeemed. Beyond this, in *Against Celsus*, Origen responded to one of the church’s Greek critics by denying that hell would be punitive, at least in the end. Instead, hell would be purifying and thus temporal.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Thomas Oden, *Systematic Theology*; Vol. 3: *Life in the Spirit* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1992), 450.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>St. Augustine, *Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans*, tr. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 1972), 1001–2.

<sup>6</sup>For a review of patristic sources on hell and the reality of divine judgment, see David Powys, “Hell”: *A Hard Look at a Hard Question* (Paternoster Biblical and Theological Monographs; London: Paternoster, 1997), and Graham Keith, “Patristic Views on Hell—Part 1,” *EvQ* 71 (1999): 217–32.

<sup>7</sup>See Origen, *Contra Celsum*, tr. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1965).

Origen's teaching was a clear rejection of the patristic consensus, and the church responded in 553 at the fifth ecumenical council (Constantinople II) with a series of anathemas against Origen and his teaching. The ninth anathema set the refutation in undeniable clarity: "If anyone says or thinks that the punishment of demons and of impious men is only temporary, and will one day have an end, and that a restoration [*apokatastasis*] will take place of demons and of impious men, let him be anathema."<sup>8</sup>

This general consensus held well through the medieval and Reformation eras of the church. Rejections of the traditional doctrine were limited to peripheral sects and heretics, and hell was such a fixture of the medieval mind that most persons understood all of life in terms of their ultimate destination by God's judgment. Men and women longed for heaven and feared hell. Yet by the end of the twentieth century, inhabitants of those lands once counted as Christendom lived with virtually no fear of hell as a place of eternal punishment, and no fear of divine judgment.

The contrast between the modern dismissal of hell and the premodern fascination with hell is evident when today's preaching is compared with the graphic warnings offered by preachers of the past. In the medieval era, an Italian preacher warned his congregation of the real danger of a very real hell:

Fire, fire! That is the recompense for your perversity, you hardened sinners. Fire, fire, the fires of hell! Fire in your eyes, fire in your mouth, fire in your guts, fire in your throat, fire in your nostrils, fire inside and fire outside, fire beneath and fire above, fire in every part. Ah, miserable folk! You will be like rags burning in the middle of this fire.<sup>9</sup>

Jonathan Edwards, the great theologian-preacher of the colonial era in America, offered a similar warning:

Consider that if once you get into hell, you'll never get out. If you should unexpectedly one of these days drop in there; [there] would be no remedy. They that go there return no more. Consider how dreadful it will be to suffer such an extremity forever. It is dreadful beyond expression to suffer it half an hour. O the misery, the tribulation and anguish that is endured!<sup>10</sup>

Few congregations hear such warnings today. As a matter of fact, preachers who would dare to offer such graphic descriptions of hell and its terrors today would likely be considered eccentric, or worse. A major news magazine summarized hell's disappearance succinctly: "By most accounts, it has all but disappeared

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<sup>8</sup>"The Anathemas Against Origen," in *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church*, ed. Henry R. Percival (NPNF; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979 [1899]), 320.

<sup>9</sup>Quoted in Richard Marius, *Martin Luther: The Christian between God and Death* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999), 60.

<sup>10</sup>Jonathan Edwards, "The Torments of Hell Are Exceedingly Great," in *Sermons and Discourses, 1723–1729*, ed. Kenneth P. Minkema (The Works of Jonathan Edwards, vol. 14; New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1997), 326.