

Hell

© Richard Bauckham
First published in *News Extra*

Early in 1996 a report by the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England was published. It was a book (called *The Mystery of Salvation*) on the Christian understanding of salvation. The coverage in the national press was largely confined to one paragraph within this book of over 200 pages: the paragraph about hell. Typical headlines in the press were: "The Church's empty hell" - "Church elders pour cold water on hellfire and damnation" - "We believe in Hell, says the Church (but without the flames)."

This was a surprise to the authors of the report, who had thought the paragraph about hell fairly uncontroversial. In any case it was a very small part of their report, which dealt at length with many other more topical issues, such as feminism and the church's attitude to non-Christian faiths, which they would not have been surprised to find proving controversial.

Much of the report is a sustained attempt to make the Christian understanding of salvation relevant and meaningful in the context of contemporary British life and society. The national media were not interested in this. For them, salvation means escaping hellfire when you die, and so the only point worth noticing in the report was the suggestion that the church was abandoning its traditional picture of fire and brimstone as the fate of the damned.

In fact the report wants hell to be taken seriously. But hell is nothing more than not attaining salvation. It cannot be understood as something positive in itself. It only makes sense as a negative: not being saved. Salvation is not avoiding hell; rather hell is missing out on salvation. So hell cannot be understood without a fully Christian and thoroughly positive understanding of salvation.

There are many Christian ways of describing salvation. One way the Doctrine Commission report adopts is: Salvation is experiencing the One who is the Source and Goal of all things as the Source and Goal of one's own being and living. Salvation means, in the last resort, finding one's fulfilment as a human being in God. Human beings are made to find fulfilment ultimately only in God. Salvation, both now and after death, is in knowing God.

If this is the destiny for which God has made us, hell cannot be a kind of parallel, alternative destiny. Hell is the result of refusing the one destiny for which we were made and the only way in which human life can find eternal fulfilment. It is a real and terrible possibility that human beings can refuse the destiny for which they were made. This belongs to the utter seriousness with which God takes the freedom he has given us.

We cannot say dogmatically whether in the end anyone will choose hell. But hell is an absolutely serious possibility of which people must be warned. No one should suppose that while refusing to know God now, they can always change their

mind later. As in all areas of life, our choices now may limit the choices we can make in the future.

The New Testament uses a variety of different pictures to describe hell: fire is one of them, destruction another, exclusion from the presence of God another. Burning in fire for eternity is the picture which got fixed in much traditional teaching about hell as though it were a literal description. The New Testament does not require us to think of hell in this way. Hell is not an eternal chamber of horrors across the way from heaven. Hell is the fate of those who reject God's love. God's love cannot compel them to find their fulfilment in God, but there is no other way they can find fulfilment. They exclude themselves from the Source of all being and life.