

Cheerful news about hell: God's love comes all the way down

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [June 3, 2008](#) issue

I can't remember the last time I read much about hell—the topic of a [symposium](#) in this issue—but those of us who recite the creed weekly do include “he descended into hell” as part of what we believe about Jesus Christ.

One of the problems with the topic has been the way it has been articulated. I remember the time my five-year-old daughter came home in tears, frightened because her playmate had explained that hell is a place deep in the earth, a place of terrible suffering and fiery punishment and a place where she and our whole family were headed. It took a lot of holding her on my lap and comforting her to get her through that experience, and for a long time she wanted nothing to do with digging in the dirt.

Paul Griffiths reminds preachers that hell is a very relevant matter. Hell, he proposes, is “that despairing condition in which separation from God seems final and unending; in it there is no faith, no hope, no love—only the agony of abandonment.” The preacher needs to remember that among the people in the pews on Sunday morning are those for whom “separation from God” is a description of reality.

Every time I say that part of the creed I think of William Stringfellow. He was a Harvard Law School graduate who moved to Harlem and wrote some important works of theology. When theologian Karl Barth visited the U.S. in the 1960s, he called Stringfellow “the conscientious and thoughtful New York attorney who caught my attention more than any other person.” Stringfellow's life ended much too soon. His books—*My People Is the Enemy*, *Free in Obedience* and *A Private and Public Faith*—are bracing and eloquent. Stringfellow wrote: “He descended into Hell. That is very cheerful news. . . . There is nothing that I have known this side of Hell that is unfamiliar to Him. There is nothing known to me which I am wont to call Hell which He has not already known. Nor is there anything beyond these realms which, even though unknown to me, He does not know.”

The crucifixion and death of Jesus is a sign not only of evil and human sinfulness, but also of God's love come all the way down to us, to live our life, to suffer, struggle, doubt and wonder, as we do, and to die our death. Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, in his book *Tokens of Trust*, echoes Stringfellow: "Jesus has plumbed the depths of human experience, including the terrible sense of abandonment by God that he endured on the cross. With his cry from the cross, 'Why has thou forsaken me?' he has traveled to the outermost limits of what our sin and untruthfulness produce—to the edges of hell." And, as the creed says, into hell. Cheerful news indeed.