Film traces Southern preacher's trip to hell and back

by Kay Campbell
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c. 2012 Religion News Service ATHENS, Ala. (RNS) Black and white. Heaven and hell. Right and wrong.

Blur or question those lines, and, well, all hell can break out.

At least it did for Edward Fudge in the early 1980s in in this small northern Alabama hamlet.

Fudge was a young preacher who also worked in his father's publishing company. When he began to teach a doctrine of hell that contradicted the traditional view of a place of eternal fiery torment for the damned, a quick succession of events cost him his job and his pulpit.

A new film, "Hell and Mr. Fudge," compresses the events of the years when Fudge, now a Houston-based lawyer and internationally known Bible teacher and author, began an intensive study of the Bible and the doctrine of hell. What he found made him question one of the bedrock doctrines of Christianity.

The feature movie, which was filmed in Athens last year by the nonprofit religious education organization LLT Productions, won a Platinum Award during its premiere at Worldfest, the Houston Film Festival. Producers are shopping the film to find national distribution.

Fudge's conclusion that hell is a place of destruction, not torture, got him fired from his pulpit. The fact that he asked a black preacher to pray at a revival didn't help.

"My life went in a direction I didn't anticipate -- or particularly want," Fudge said in an interview. "But at every step, God's been there to make happen what he wants to happen. I've just kind of been along for the ride."

To outsiders and even some Christians, the debate over the nature of hell may seem like splitting theological hairs. But for Christians who orient their lives around a literal understanding of biblical teaching, the belief in eternal hell is seen as an essential truth.

Hell can be the third rail of Christian teaching -- step on it and you're bound to get jolted. Last year, Michigan evangelical megachurch pastor Rob Bell found himself on the cover of Time magazine when his book, "Love Wins," questioned traditional notions of hell. Many conservative leaders swiftly denounced him.

Fudge's independence of mind and determination to dig deep into the Bible -- and then to stand for what he believes despite vehement opposition -- is what makes the film transcend narrow questions of theology, said Pat Arrabito, director of the Angwin, Calif.-based LLT Productions, which made the movie.

"Even though this is a specific story about a specific train of events, this has wide appeal," Arrabito said. "This is the story of someone who had to change their mind -- and it wasn't easy. And then he had to stand up for what he believes."

"Those kind of themes echo in a lot of hearts," Arrabito said.

Fudge never expected to change his mind on the topic of hell, he said. But then the renegade former Seventh-day Adventist minister Robert Brinsmead saw some of Fudge's articles and paid Fudge to research the topic of hell in the Bible and historic Christian writings.

For dramatic effect, the movie has Fudge's character (played by Mackenzie Astin) already agonizing over the doctrine after a young friend dies in an accident. In reality, Fudge said, he may have wondered about it, but he hadn't given it much study or much anguish.

An eternally burning hell for the "lost" was one of the accepted assumptions of everyone he knew. In his research, Fudge expected to merely assemble information that would verify what he had always taught and been taught on the topic.

"I thought I knew what was in the Bible," said Fudge, who already had a master's degree in biblical studies when he started his research.

But, he found out, he didn't know what was in the Bible, not when he took passages on the topic of the fate of the wicked at face value, in their own linguistic and historic contexts.

Fudge's research became the basis for his 500-page text on the topic, "The Fire that Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment," which was released in 1982 and is now in its third edition. In it, he argues that hell is a place of annihilation, not endless torment, while heaven is a place where God grants the gift of immortality for those who are saved.

The doctrine outlined in the book is now fairly widely accepted by leading evangelical preachers and Christian scholars. But historical ways of reading selected Bible texts to come to the conclusion of hell as a place of eternal torment also still flourish.

"I remember this (Fudge's heretical teachings) being talked about when I was in junior high and high school," said David Cox, who is pulpit preacher at Market Street Church of Christ in Athens, and who grew up the son of another preacher. "And I guarantee, if I got up Sunday and preached what Ed teaches, I would be asked to leave."

And for good reason, Cox said.

"Truth is not what people want it to be; it's what God says it is," Cox said. "God is not going to say, as he does in Matthew 25, that there is going to be everlasting punishment and there not be everlasting punishment."

And the most grave sin a Bible teacher can commit is teaching falsehoods or a way of applying the Bible that causes another person to miss salvation, he said.

Getting truth right according to the Bible is something Fudge agrees with, too, he said.

"When you say you're speaking for God, you had better be sure you're saying what God wants said," Fudge said. "To me, the traditional teaching of eternal torment is slander against God and against his character."