

Do we still need hell? We're never beyond redemption: We're never beyond redemption

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A street preacher works a corner just blocks from the Christian Century office, loudly warning passersby of the wrath to come. It's always tempting to wonder, If that is the Good News, what's the bad news? Nevertheless, there is logic to this man's ministry. If he truly believes that most people are going to hell, then it makes sense for him to warn as many as possible.

A recent book by two Quaker ministers takes up the old issue of hell and who will go there. *If Grace Is True* (HarperSanFrancisco), by Philip Gulley and James Mulholland, is getting some attention, especially in evangelical circles. The authors make the case for the "universalist" position—that all will be saved—arguing that no one stands outside God's grace.

This is not a new stance in Christian thought. It's been a stream of Christian theology at least since Origen in the third century. "For the Almighty nothing is impossible, nor is anything beyond the reach of cure by its Maker," said Origen. And though half or more of the American people claim to believe in hell, most mainline Christians are implicitly if not explicitly universalists.

In addition to the argument for universal salvation based on the wideness of God's mercy, there is an argument on the basis of God's justice. Since no finite human can commit infinite sin, a sentence of infinite punishment just doesn't fit the crime.

Still, there's a problem in dispensing with hell entirely. If there is no hell—if God's grace is ultimately irresistible—then it would seem that humans lack true freedom. They can't decide against God. Further, the prospect of hell underscores the significance of our decisions and actions. Actions have consequences. As Flannery O'Connor put it, without hell humans would be like animals. "No hell, no dignity."

Since the Enlightenment, many Christians have been reluctant to say much about the "last things"—death, final judgment, heaven and hell—while other parts of the church talk about them with great specificity and assurance. Part of the challenge is that the biblical message on these topics is conveyed through figurative images that are ambiguous and sometimes contradictory. Therefore reverent agnosticism seems far preferable to the elaborate speculation found, for example, in the *Left Behind* series of novels.

Yet this much can be confessed: since God is the same yesterday, today and forever—as scripture attests of Jesus Christ—then God will be faithful in the future. That means that God will not force us to love him. It also means that God, like the father of the Prodigal Son, will never turn out the lights on us, will never assume that we are beyond redemption. That's a message worth taking to the streets.