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Hell in the Classroom

Martha Moore-Keish, *Columbia Theological Seminary*

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“So, if anyone tells you to go to hell,” I say to my students, “you can say, ‘that’s fine—because Jesus has already been there, so I won’t be alone.’”

When I started teaching theology at Columbia Seminary nearly twenty years ago, nobody told me that I needed to talk about hell. And for many years I barely mentioned it. In my own formation, from Sunday school through doctoral studies, the threat of hell had been either a quaint theological fragment of an earlier era, or a harmful piece of proclamation from Other Christians. It was not a pressing concern of the contemporary theologians I engaged, and it was not even a major topic for classical theologians like John Calvin. Like James Cone, I was more concerned about living conditions that might be called “hell on earth” than about any future state of punishment.

The one place I did address hell was in connection with Jesus’ “descent into hell” (as affirmed in the Apostles’ Creed). Students wondered what in the world this might mean. It regularly prompted discussions between students who were familiar with this line and those whose churches had deleted it. “Do you ‘descend into hell?’” I began to ask my classes early on when we came to the topic. Students tended to have strong opinions.

Ruminations on the presence or absence of hell in the creed led me to discover startling good news in this affirmation, in two ways:

- To say that the human Jesus of Nazareth experienced not only physical death, but the fullness of spiritual alienation from God—and to affirm that this same human is also one with God—is to affirm that God in Jesus somehow enters the depth of human suffering. There is nothing in human experience, not even hell, that is bereft of the presence of God. It's Romans 8:38-39 all over again.
- The descent into hell is not the final word. As the ancient image of the "harrowing of hell" and the common Orthodox anastasis icon portrays it, Jesus descends into hell and then draws up those who are dead into new life. Those in Hades are now joined with Christ in resurrection.

I would not have reached this recognition of the good news of Jesus' descent into hell without following the questions of students.

But for many years, this is all I said about hell in Theology 1 and 2. That changed recently, as students began to ask new questions.

A couple of years ago, toward the end of the second semester of theology, my co-teacher Tim Hartman and I were talking about Christian faith in a world of religious diversity, and several students were troubled. "We have been taught our whole lives that if you do not accept Jesus Christ and confess him as savior, you are going to hell," they noted. "Why have we not talked about hell all year?" Tim and I paused. When our classroom had been majority white, I had avoided this topic because I did not think it was important—and no one had questioned that choice. Now that our classroom includes a majority of students from communities that have been minoritized because of race or sexuality (or both), the question resounds differently. We decided to make a change.

This year, we added some readings about hell in connection with our discussion of salvation. Engaging this conversation directly enabled students to interrogate what they meant by this term, and how it was related to the gospel. Is "salvation" solely an individual matter, as popular visions of hell seem to suggest? Or is it communal, concerned for the well-being of all people and the whole world? Are heaven and hell actual locations, and if so, what does that mean? What does "hell" suggest about the relation of bodies and souls—are we talking about "souls" going somewhere after death? Focusing on hell also enabled us to wrestle afresh with Calvin's doctrine of double predestination, in which eternal damnation is not the main point, but is a logical consequence of God's eternal decree. Not many people (including me) wanted to defend Calvin on this point, but how does hell acknowledge the reality of God's righteousness, and the significance of human responsibility? And finally, how has teaching about hell functioned in our churches, particularly in ways that harm people who do not conform to social norms?

When we followed our students' questions and made room for conversation about hell, it defused the concerns about its absence. Hell, actually became a fruitful part of a larger whole.

So, here's the takeaway: Following the surprising questions of students, even into hell, led to my own deeper discovery of the good news of a topic that I had previously avoided. How might

attention to other student questions similarly open new vistas of discovery in the theology classroom?

<https://wabash.center/2023/04/hell-in-the-classroom/>