

What Did the Early Christians Believe About Hell?

The Earliest Teaching

As we seek to understand what the Bible teaches about Hell, it may be helpful to understand what the earliest believers believed and taught. The teachings of the early believers have been preserved for us in the writings of the earliest church leaders (known as the Early Church Fathers). While their writings are not canonical (they are not on par with the words of the Bible), they do help us to see what those closest to the apostles first understood as Biblical Truth.

As we assemble the teachings of these first church leaders, several patterns emerge related to the nature of Hell. The Early Church Fathers, with very few exceptions, agree with the teaching of the Bible in the way they describe Hell:

1. Hell is a place of judgment for those who have rejected God and denied Jesus as their Savior
2. Hell is a place of separation from God
3. Hell is a place of torment in which the rebellious are in anguish and pain
4. Hell is a place where the rebellious are tormented forever and are CONSCIOUS of this torment for all eternity (In fact, the eternal duration of their torment is often compared to the eternal duration of the reward of the saved)

At the same time, the earliest Church Fathers are ambiguous on those areas where the Bible is ALSO ambiguous.

1. The exact nature of the torment of the rebellious is unknown
2. The manner in which the rebellious are kept alive in spite of 'deathly' anguish is also un-described

The Early Church Fathers simply reflected the clearest teachings of the Bible related to the nature of Hell. They believed that Hell was a place of eternal conscious torment, reflecting the clearest teaching of the scriptures (more on that [HERE](#)).

What They Wrote

From the earliest days of Christianity, the first believers wrote about the nature of Hell. Here is a very brief assessment of their understanding related to the final resting place of the damned:

From "The Epistle of Barnabas" (70-130AD)

The author of the Epistle of Barnabas is unknown, but many consider him to simply be who he said he was, Barnabas, the associate of Paul who is mentioned in the Book of Acts. The letter was written to new converts to Christianity:

The way of darkness is crooked, and it is full of cursing. It is the way of eternal death with punishment. ("Epistle of Barnabas")

From Ignatius of Antioch (110AD)

Ignatius was a student of the Apostle John, and succeeded the Apostle Peter as the Bishop of Antioch. He wrote a number of important letters to believers in churches in the area:

Corrupters of families will not inherit the kingdom of God. And if they who do these things according to the flesh suffer death. how much more if a man corrupt by evil reaching the faith of God. for the sake of which Jesus Christ was crucified? A man become so foul will depart into unquenchable fire: and so will anyone who listens to him. (Letter to the Ephesians 16:1-2)

From Clement of Rome (150AD)

Clement was Bishop of Rome from 88 to 98AD, and his teaching reflects the early traditions of the Church. "Second Clement" reportedly a recorded sermon, and Clement discusses the nature of Hell:

If we do the will of Christ, we shall obtain rest; but if not, if we neglect his commandments, nothing will rescue us from eternal punishment.

But when they see how those who have sinned and who have denied Jesus by their words or by their deeds are punished with terrible torture in unquenchable fire, the righteous, who have done good, and who have endured tortures and have hated the luxuries of life, will give glory to their God saying, 'There shall be hope for him that has served God with all his heart!'

From "The Martyrdom of Polycarp" (155AD)

This work was written by an Early Church Father (unknown author) and is dated very early in the history of Christianity. It describes the death of Polycarp, a disciple of the Apostle John, and also describes early teachings of the church:

Fixing their minds on the grace of Christ, [the martyrs] despised worldly tortures and purchased eternal life with but a single hour. To them, the fire of their cruel torturers was cold. They kept before their eyes their escape from the eternal and unquenchable fire ("Martyrdom of Polycarp" 2:3)

From Tatian (160AD)

Tatian was an early Assyrian believer who moved to Rome as a pagan and eventually became a Christian. Interestingly, he read the Jewish Scriptures and from these became convinced that other pagan ideas about the world were simply false. He was a student of Justin Martyr and wrote about the unreasonableness of paganism and the truth of Christianity:

We who are now easily susceptible to death, will afterwards receive immortality with either enjoyment or with pain.

From Athenagoras of Athens (175AD)

Athenagoras was a philosopher and citizen of Athens who became a Christian (possibly from Platonism) and wrote two important apologetic works; "Apology" or "Embassy for the Christians", and a "Treatise on the Resurrection":

We are persuaded that when we are removed from the present life we will live another life, better than the present one...or, if they fall with the rest, they will endure a worse life, one in fire. For God has not made us as sheep or beasts of burden, who are mere by-products. For animals perish and are annihilated. On these grounds, it is not likely that we would wish to do evil. ("Apology")

From Theophilus of Antioch (181AD)

Theophilus was the Patriarch of Antioch from 169 to 183AD. He was born a pagan and converted to Christianity after reading the scriptures. He was very zealous about protecting the orthodoxy of the earliest believers and he wrote a defense of the faith to a man named Autolycus:

Give studious attention to the prophetic writings [the Bible] and they will lead you on a clearer path to escape the eternal punishments and to obtain the eternal good things of God. . . . [God] will examine everything and will judge justly, granting recompense to each according to merit. To those who seek immortality by the patient exercise of good works, he will give everlasting life, joy, peace, rest, and all good things. . . . For the unbelievers and for the contemptuous, and for those who do not submit to the truth but assent to iniquity, when they have been involved in adulteries, and fornications, and homosexualities, and avarice, and in lawless idolatries, there will be wrath and indignation, tribulation and anguish; and in the end, such men as these will be detained in everlasting fire ("To Autolycus" 1:14)

From Irenaeus (189AD)

Irenaeus was bishop of Lugdunum in Gaul (now Lyon, France) at the end of the second century. He was a disciple of Polycarp and a notable early apologist for the faith. He wrote several volumes defending the faith against Gnosticism and other early heresies of the Church, and he often compared eternal punishment to eternal reward, drawing the conclusion that one endured as long as the other:

...Christ Jesus, our Lord, and God, and Saviour, and King, according to the will of the invisible Father, 'every knee should bow, of things in heaven,, and things in earth, and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess' to Him, and that He should execute just judgment towards all; that He may send 'spiritual wickednesses,' and the angels who transgressed and became apostates, together with the ungodly, and unrighteous, and wicked, and profane among men, into everlasting fire; but may, in the exercise of His grace, confer immortality on the righteous, and holy, and those who have kept His commandments, and have persevered in His love, some from the beginning of their Christian course, and others from the date of their repentance, and may surround them with everlasting glory. ("Against Heresies" 1:10:10)

The penalty increases for those who do not believe the Word of God and despise his coming. . . . [I]t is not merely temporal, but eternal. To whomsoever the Lord shall say, 'Depart from me, accursed ones, into the everlasting fire,' they will be damned forever ("Against Heresies" 4:28:2)

From Clement of Alexandria (195AD)

Titus Flavius Clemens was the first significant and recorded Christian from the church of Alexandria, Egypt. His parents were Greek and he was raised with a solid, formal Greek education. While he had a tendency to blend Greek and Christian philosophies, his view on the issue of Hell was derived from the scriptures:

All souls are immortal, even those of the wicked. Yet, it would be better for them if they were not deathless. For they are punished with the endless vengeance of quenchless fire. Since they do not die, it is impossible for them to have an end put to their misery. (from a post-Nicene manuscript fragment)

From Tertullian (197AD)

Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus was a Romanized African citizen who was born in Carthage (now Tunisia). He became a Christian and was a powerful and influential apologist for the faith, writing prolifically in defense of the doctrines of orthodoxy:

These have further set before us the proofs He has given of His majesty in judgments by floods and fires, the rules appointed by Him for securing His favor, as well as the retribution in store for the ignoring, forsaking and keeping them, as being about at the end of all to adjudge His worshippers to everlasting life, and the wicked to the doom of fire at once without ending and without break, raising up again all the dead from the beginning, reforming and renewing them with the object of awarding either recompense. ("Apology" 18:3)

Then will the entire race of men be restored to receive its just deserts according to what it has merited in this period of good and evil, and thereafter to have these paid out in an immeasurable and unending eternity. Then there will be neither death again nor resurrection again, but we shall be always the same as we are now, without changing. The worshipers of God shall always be with God, clothed in the proper substance of eternity. But the godless and those who have not turned wholly to God will be punished in fire equally unending, and they shall have from the very nature of this fire, divine as it were, a supply of incorruptibility ("Apology" 44:12-13)

Therefore after this there is neither death nor repeated resurrections, but we shall be the same that we are now, and still unchanged—the servants of God, ever with God, clothed upon with the proper substance of eternity; but the profane, and all who are not true worshippers of God, in like manner

shall be consigned to the punishment of everlasting fire—that fire which, from its very nature indeed, directly ministers to their incorruptibility. (“Apology” 48:12)

From Hippolytus of Rome (212AD)

Hippolytus was one of the most prolific writers of the early Church, and he was often at theological odds with the early Popes and church leaders of his time. He appears to have been a student of Irenaeus, and wrote MANY volumes of history, apologetics and Biblical teaching:

Standing before [Christ’s] judgment, all of them, men, angels, and demons, crying out in one voice, shall say: ‘Just is your judgment!’ And the righteousness of that cry will be apparent in the recompense made to each. To those who have done well, everlasting enjoyment shall be given; while to the lovers of evil shall be given eternal punishment. The unquenchable and unending fire awaits these latter, and a certain fiery worm which does not die and which does not waste the body but continually bursts forth from the body with unceasing pain. No sleep will give them rest; no night will soothe them; no death will deliver them from punishment; no appeal of interceding friends will profit them (“Against the Greeks 3”)

From Felix Minucius (226AD)

Felix Marcus Minucius is perhaps the earliest known Latin apologist for the Christian faith. He wrote “Octavius”, a dialogue on Christianity between a non-believer named Caecilius Natalis and a Christian named Octavius Januarius (who was a lawyer, friend and student of Minucius Felix:

I am not ignorant of the fact that many, in the consciousness of what they deserve, would rather hope than actually believe that there is nothing for them after death. They would prefer to be annihilated rather than be restored for punishment... Nor is there either measure nor end to these torments. That clever fire burns the limbs and restores them, wears them away and yet sustains them, just as fiery thunderbolts strike bodies but do not consume them (“Octavius” 34:12–5:3)

From Cyprian of Carthage (252 AD)

Thascius Caecilius Cyprianus was bishop at Carthage. He had an excellent Greek education and wrote several key letters and treatises in which he discussed doctrines of the Church:

An ever-burning Gehenna and the punishment of being devoured by living flames will consume the condemned; nor will there be any way in which the tormented can ever have respite or be at an end. Souls along with their bodies will be preserved for suffering in unlimited agonies. . . . The grief at punishment will then be without the fruit of repentance; weeping will be useless, and prayer ineffectual. Too late will they believe in eternal punishment, who would not believe in eternal life (“To Demetrian” 24)

Oh, what and how great will that day be at its coming, beloved brethren, when the Lord shall begin to count up His people, and to recognize the deservings of each one by the inspection of His divine knowledge, to send the guilty to Gehenna, and to set on fire our persecutors with the perpetual burning of a penal fire, but to pay to us the reward of our faith and devotion! (“To Thibaris” 55:10)

From Lactantius (307AD)

Lucius Caelius Firmianus Lactantius was a Latin speaking native of North Africa. He was an expert in rhetoric and he taught the subject in the city of Nicomedia at the request of Emperor Diocletian. He also wrote several apologetic and doctrinal works:

But, however, the sacred writings inform us in what manner the wicked are to undergo punishment. For because they have committed sins in their bodies, they will again be clothed with flesh, that they may make atonement in their bodies; and yet it will not be that flesh with which God clothed man, like this our earthly body, but indestructible, and abiding forever, that it may be able to hold out against tortures and everlasting fire...The same divine fire, therefore, with one and the same force and power,

will both burn the wicked and will form them again, and will replace as much as it shall consume of their bodies, and will supply itself with eternal nourishment ...Then they whose piety shall have been approved of will receive the reward of immortality; but they whose sins and crimes shall have been brought to light will not rise again, but will be hidden in the same darkness with the wicked, being destined to certain punishment. ("Divine Institutes" 7:21)

From Cyril of Jerusalem (350AD)

Cyril was a well respected theologian of the early Church and a bishop of the church at Jerusalem. He wrote twenty three teaching lectures on the doctrines of the Church and delivered these lectures while he was a presbyter in Jerusalem:

We shall be raised therefore, all with our bodies eternal, but not all with bodies alike: for if a man is righteous, he will receive a heavenly body, that he may be able worthily to hold converse with angels; but if a man is a sinner, he shall receive an eternal body, fitted to endure the penalties of sins, that he may burn eternally in fire, nor ever be consumed... ("Catechetical Lectures" 18:19)

The real and true life then is the Father, who through the Son in the Holy Spirit pours forth as from a fountain His heavenly gifts to all; and through His love to man, the blessings of the life eternal are promised without fail to us men also. We must not disbelieve the possibility of this, but having an eye not to our own weakness but to His power, we must believe; for with God all things are possible. And that this is possible, and that we may look for eternal life, Daniel declares, And of the many righteous shall they shine as the stars forever and ever. And Paul says, And so shall we be ever with the Lord: for the being forever with the lord implies the life eternal. But most plainly of all the Savior Himself says in the Gospel, And these shall go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into life eternal. ("Catechetical Lectures" 18:28)

A Horrible Truth Described By the Earliest of Believers

While this survey of early teachings on the nature of Hell may seem a bit long and laborious, it does help us to understand what the first believers learned and taught about the nature of the eternal conscious torment of those who reject Christ. Over and over again, we see that the Early Church Fathers believed that those who enter Hell are NOT annihilated or destroyed. In summary, these early believers understood the Scriptures to teach that:

Souls live on after the grave. Even those who are assigned to Hell are "immortal", "indestructible" and "abide forever" Those assigned to Hell will be "detained in everlasting fire" for a period of time that is as "equally perpetual and unending" as the eternal life of those who are in Heaven.

The rebellious will exist in Hell with an "eternal body, fitted to endure the penalties of sins". They will "burn eternally in fire" and they will never "be consumed" Those tormented in Hell will never "have respite" and their torment will never "be at an end". "Souls along with their bodies will be preserved for suffering in unlimited agonies"

Souls in Hell will NOT be allowed to die or cease to exist. "They would prefer to be annihilated rather than be restored for punishment", but this is simply not the case. The fire of Hell is "clever" and "burns the limbs and restores them, wears them away and yet sustains them, just as fiery thunderbolts strike bodies but do not consume them."

The torment suffered by those in Hell will be incredibly unbearable. It will feel as though "a certain fiery worm which does not die and which does not waste the body" will continually burst forth from the body "with unceasing pain".

This description of eternal conscious torment in Hell is certainly horrifying. It is hard to believe and even harder to accept. It is not something that we would wish on our worst enemy, and it is not something that we, as believers, can ignore. The Early Church Fathers affirm the Biblical truth related

to the orthodox doctrine of Hell. It is a place of eternal conscious torment and a place that should motivate us to reach others with the truth, even as it motivates us to live a life that is worthy of the God who created us. C. H. Spurgeon encouraged us to view Hell not only from the eyes of those who don't believe, but also from our own concerned and cautious position as believers: