

Heaven and Hell in Church History

Intro: The traditional view of judgment, eternal life, and eternal condemnation

“[Jesus] will come to judge the living and the dead. At his coming all people will rise again with their bodies and will give account for their own works. Those who have done good will go into eternal life, and those who have done evil will go into eternal fire.” –The Athanasian Creed, lines 40-43

Some things to know about Heaven and Hell in the Early Church

1. They believed everyone, Christian and non-Christian, would have to go through a judgment process.
2. They believed in eternal blessing for Christians.
3. They believed that everyone would be bodily resurrected.
4. There was debate on whether the “new heavens and new earth” would be a *renewed* heavens and earth or a *brand-spanking-new* heavens and earth.
5. There was the idea that there would be *two* resurrections separated by a millennium - one for the righteous and the other for the unrighteous. The early church was primarily premillennial.
6. They believed the experience of pain in hell is eternal (i.e. they explicitly denied annihilationism).

“The damned will burn forever in hell. Devouring flames will be their eternal portion. Their torments will never decrease or end. Their lamentations will be vain and entreaties ineffective. Their repentance comes too late. *They will have to believe in an eternal punishment, as they refused to believe in eternal life.*” –St. Cyprian (210-258)

“God has not made us as sheep or beasts of burden, a mere by-product, and that we should perish and be annihilated.” –Athenagoras (133-190)

“If anyone says or thinks that the punishment of demons and of wicked people is only temporary, and will one day have an end, and that a restoration will take place of demons and of wicked people, let him be anathema [damned].” –Synod of Constantinople, 543

There was one church leader, Origen, who believed in what is called “*apokatastasis*” which is the idea that, eventually, all lost people in hell (and even demons and the devil) will be redeemed. But this position was condemned in 400.

7. They believed there would be varying degrees of reward or punishment

“But the former [the saved] shall live truly and happily in eternal life, the latter [the lost] shall drag a miserable existence in eternal death without the power of dying; for both shall be without end. *But among the former there shall be degrees of happiness, one being more preeminently happy than another; and among the latter there shall be degrees of misery, one being more enduringly miserable than another.*” – St. Augustine (354-430)

Some things to know about Heaven and Hell in the Medieval Church

1. They, essentially, held the same views as the early church except they believed there would be only one resurrection instead of two – everyone would be raised at the same time. The medieval church was primarily amillennial.
2. There was a flourishing in the arts regarding the idea of the final judgment. This heavily influenced the average person’s understanding of the final judgment.

Michelangelo’s *The Last Judgment*



Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*

In Dante's *Inferno* he describes Hell as having 9 levels (circles)

1. Includes moral pagans and unbaptized Christians. It is limbo. It's not really Hell yet but people wander around in loneliness.
2. Lust – People are blown in a continual wind storm
3. Gluttony – People are freezing in a continual icy rain
4. Greed – People are forced to push big boulders around
5. Anger – People are engaged in an endless battle in a swamp
6. Heresy – People are burned forever in stone coffins
7. Violence – People are made to drown in a lake of boiling blood
8. Fraud – People are endlessly tortured by being beaten by demons
9. Treachery - Is a vast frozen lake where the devil resides with the worst sinners (like Judas).

Many of these levels are based on Dante's idea of "The Seven Deadly Sins": pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth

John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

At once as far as Angels ken he views
The dismal Situation waste and wilde,
A Dungeon horrible, on all sides round
As one great Furnace flam'd, yet from those flames
No light, but rather darkness visible
Serv'd onely to discover sights of woe,
Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace
And rest can never dwell, hope never comes
That comes to all; but torture without end
Still urges, and a fiery Deluge, fed
With ever-burning Sulphur unconsum'd:
Such place Eternal Justice had prepar'd
For those rebellious, here thir Prison ordain'd
In utter darkness, and thir portion set
As far remov'd from God and light of Heav'n
As from the Center thrice to th' utmost Pole.
O how unlike the place from whence they fell!
-Satan's First Impression of Hell, *Paradise Lost*

3. They promoted sacramental theology for salvation.

Some things to know about Heaven and Hell in the Reformation

1. They continue to affirm the things already affirmed in the medieval church. Notice the ideas of judgment, eternal blessedness, and eternal conscious torment for the wicked are held almost universally throughout church history.
2. They got rid of much of the art in the churches that they believed to be idolatrous.
3. Calvin stated that the pain of punishment of hell is literal, but that there doesn't have to literally be "fire" for the Bible to be true. Elsewhere, the Bible says there is "darkness," in hell. How can you have both darkness and fire (which produces light)? The torture of hell is literal though the imagery the Bible uses can be figurative.

"As by such details we should be enabled in some degree to conceive the lot of the wicked, so we ought especially to fix our thoughts upon this: how wretched it is to be cut off from all [loving] fellowship with God." –John Calvin

4. They reemphasized that your life and vocation in this life is important. This world is not just something you ignore and pass through to get to the next one.

There is really no difference between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, "spirituals" and "temporals," as they call them, except that of office and work. . . . A cobbler, a smith, a farmer, each has the work and office of his trade, and yet they are all alike consecrated priests and bishops, and everyone by means of his own work or office must benefit and serve every other, that in this way many kinds of work may be done for the bodily and spiritual welfare of the community, even as all the members of the body serve one another. –Martin Luther

In the light of this view of the matter a poor maid should have the joy in her heart of being able to say: Now I am cooking, making the bed, sweeping the house. Who has commanded me to do these things? My master and mistress have. What has given them authority over me? God has. Very well, then it must be true that I am serving not them alone but also God in heaven and that God must be pleased with my service. How could I not possibly be more blessed? Why, my service is equal to cooking for God in heaven! –Martin Luther

5. They got rid of the idea of purgatory.
6. The Reformers taught that your works evidenced whether you were really saved. But the actual justification was a gift from God by grace through faith alone.

Some things to know about Heaven and Hell in the Modern era

FDE Schliermacher (1768-1834) dismissed the idea of judgment and eternal condemnation in Hell.

In this era you got four false teachings:

Universalism – Everyone will be saved.

Pluralism – People can be saved by trusting a “god” they know, even if it’s not explicitly the Christian God. All (or most) spiritual paths lead to the same goal.

Annihilationism – The damned will eventually be taken out of existence.

Conditional Immortality – Christians are granted immortality but lost people are not (similar to annihilationism).

“Until the 19th century almost all Christian theologians taught the reality of eternal torment in hell...Eternal punishment was firmly asserted in official creeds and confessions of the churches. It must have seemed as indispensable a part of universal Christian belief as the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation. Since 1800 this situation has entirely changed, and no traditional Christian doctrine has been so widely abandoned as that of eternal punishment.” –Richard Bauckham