

Dear members and friends of St. John,

It's becoming increasingly popular in liberal American churches to **deny the existence of hell**. Some churches acknowledge hell's existence, but state that hell is "empty." Take, for instance, the presiding bishop over the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA), Elizabeth Eaton. She was recently asked if she believes in hell.

Eaton: "There may be, but I think it is empty."

Interviewer: "Really?" Eaton: "Yes."

Interviewer: "Why is that?"

Eaton: "Well, Jesus was clear in John chapter 3 that when He is raised up he will draw all people to himself. And if we take a look at salvation history, ever since we got booted out of the garden, it has been God's relentless pursuit to bring His people to God. Now, people wonder "can you say no?" I imagine you can say "no" to God. I don't think God is going to give up on us." (1)

If you carry this assumption forward, you will have to conclude that **sin doesn't matter one-little-bit to God**. And if sin doesn't matter, naturally the need for repentance, allowing God to work contrition in us (being sorry for our transgressions), and helping us to confess our sin and seek His help to turn from it, goes away. **Why** be concerned about our bad behavior, if God either (1) condones it, or (2) "turns a blind eye" to it?

The problem with all of this, of course, is the truth recorded in Holy Scriptures. Bishop Eaton has discarded the Bible's teachings on sin, repentance, and hell, for the more crowd-pleasing position that allows people to continue in their sinful lifestyles. **What does the Bible say? Plenty.**

First, Jesus doesn't condone sin, nor does He "turn a blind eye" to it. In John chapter 8, church leaders bring a woman caught in adultery to Jesus, so that He might pass judgment on her, condemning her to death. Jesus responds, "*Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.*" (v. 7). In other words, **everyone is a sinner**. The people put down their stones and simply walk away. Liberal theologians love this text! What they forget is the last part. Jesus says: "*Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?*" She said, '*No one, Lord.*' And Jesus said, '*Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.*'" (vv. 10-11). Jesus, looking into the woman's heart, saw a **repentant (or penitent) heart**. Being sorry for her sin, and desiring to turn from it, Jesus forgives her. With a penitent heart, this woman's sins are forgiven. This penitent heart comes as a product of faith in Christ. She calls Him "Lord." Jesus final instruction to her is important: "*from now on, sin no more.*" Jesus is talking about the **willful public sin of adultery**. If it persists, it will destroy faith. Sin is dangerous, for without faith, hell is our destination after we die.

That leads us to the second point: Jesus declares that hell is real. From Matthew chapter 25, we read Jesus' words:

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you

who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world...⁴¹ Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels' (vv. 31-34, 41).

This text reminds us that faith in Jesus leads us to obedience. Obedience means that we desire to keep God's Law, to please Him! The devil (Satan) and his fallen angels are working to destroy our faith in Jesus Christ. When Jesus returns to this earth in glory, **He will judge the living and dead**. Those who died with faith (or who on that day have faith in Him) are the "sheep," His faithful. They will inherit this new heaven on earth. Those who have rejected Jesus (the "goats") will be cast into the "fiery lake," or hell (see Revelation 21:8).

This is only a small portion of the words that God gives us on the place that is referred to as hell (for more, see Isaiah 66:24, Matthew 10:28, Luke 16:19-31, Romans 8:1). While hell is a very real place, God did **not** create it because He wanted some of His creation to burn in hell for eternity. This leads to the next point.

The third point: Jesus desires that ALL men, women, and children be saved, and spend eternity in heaven with Him. From 1 Timothy chapter 2: God *"desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all"*(vv. 4-5). Jesus did paid the ransom price necessary to release us from our debt of sin. Why hasn't Jesus returned again in glory, to create a new earth, and new heavens? The message of His Law and His life saving work needs to go out to the far reaches of the earth. God wants ALL people to have the chance to hear His word, repent, turn to Him for forgiveness and life, and to live forever.

The final point: God condemns all people who have rejected His only Son, the Messiah (we know Him as Jesus Christ). Yes, God is the God of perfect love, for He loves all people completely, but He's also the God of justice. God's Law was given to man for his good. God demands that it be kept perfectly. Because of God's great mercy, Jesus' atoning work on the cross was given as payment for all of those times that we refused to obey Him. Jesus Himself says, *"whoever believes in him [Jesus] should not perish [in hell] but have eternal life [in heaven]"*(John 3:16 – bracketed words by Pastor Travis).

How can the presiding bishop of the ELCA claim that "there may be [a hell], but I think it is empty"? By denying that the unrepentant, those who willingly live in sin, are headed for hell as Jesus clearly teaches. We have the truth – God's word - and we refuse to play games with it. May God continue to keep us in the one true faith, as we live each day with repentant hearts, seeking to do His will. Amen.

Pastor Travis

(1) Chicago Sun Times Podcast, March 7, 2018.