

Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all” (Col. 3:11).

There is one Holy Spirit who is presented as the seven spirits of God (Rev. 1:4; 4:5) to indicate the many covenant graces, blessings and gifts that He communicates to the one catholic church saved by the Lord Jesus (Acts 2; I Cor. 12-14).

Scripture uses many images of the church to bring out the fact that it is both one and many (in different senses): one flock consisting of many sheep (John 10:16), one temple made of many living stones (I Pet. 2:5), one (spiritual) kingdom or nation or city with many citizens, one army of many soldiers (Num. 1:3), etc. There is one image and one chapter that especially speak of its unity and multiplicity: the church is one body consisting of many members in I Corinthians 12 (cf. Rom. 12:4-5).

By way of comparison, in the Old Testament the unity of God’s Being and the unity of His church have a greater prominence, whereas the New Testament places more emphasis on the threeness of God’s Persons and the catholicity of His church.

Yet, even in Old Testament days, the church included believers of different nations and peoples (geographical and ethnic catholicity). Rahab was from the Canaanite city of Jericho (Josh. 2), the widow of Zarephath from the territory of Tyre and Sidon (I Kings 17), Naaman from Syria (II Kings 5), and Moses’ wife and Ebedmelech from Ethiopia (Num. 12:1; Jer. 38-39). Ruth was a Moabitess, Uriah was a Hittite, Ittai the Gittite was a Philistine and Ornan was a Jebusite. Space forbids listing the many Psalms and Old Testament prophecies that predict the catholicity of the church in the last times.

The *Second Helvetic Confession* (1566) states it well, “These all are citizens of one and the same city, living under one Lord, under the same laws, and in the same fellowship of all good things; for the apostle calls them ‘fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God’ (Eph. 2:19); terming the faithful upon the earth saints, who are sanctified by the blood of the Son of God. Of these is that article of our Creed wholly to be understood, ‘I believe in the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints.’ And, seeing that there is always but ‘one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ’ (I Tim. 2:5); also, one Shepherd of the whole flock, one Head of this body, and, to conclude, one Spirit, one salvation, one faith, one Testament, or Covenant—it follows necessarily that there is but one Church, which we therefore call CATHOLIC because it is universal, spread abroad through all the parts and quarters of the world, and reaches unto all times, and is not limited within the compass either of time or place. Here, therefore, we must condemn the Donatists, who pinned up the Church within the corners of Africa; neither do we assent to the Roman clergy, who vaunt that the Church of Rome alone is in a manner Catholic” (17). *Rev. Stewart*

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The Basis and Unity of Christ’s Catholic Church

What is the deepest theological basis for the catholicity of the church? God in the plurality of His Persons and the riches of His attributes! Thus the revelation of the mystery of the full equality of Jews and Gentiles in the catholic church to both angels (Eph. 3:10) and men (9) speaks frequently of God (2, 7, 9, 10, 19), the Father (14), Christ (1, 4, 6, 8, 9, 11, 14, 17, 19, 21) and the Spirit (5, 16), as well as His “manifold wisdom” (10), grace (2, 7, 8), love (19) and power (7, 20), yea, “all the fulness of God” (19).

In His eternal counsel, the infinitely perfect Triune God decreed the diversity of creation and the multifariousness of providence. Is the church’s geographical, anthropological and historical catholicity not what rich Trinitarian decretal theology would lead us to expect?

The Jews or any other nation could never be the number one idea or dominant party in God’s eternal plan and historic work of saving His people. He is the God of three Persons and unsearchable virtues! Could one nation (out of hundreds) really be His special goal? How could he display His manifold riches in them alone or chiefly?

Jehovah is the Lord of all creation and providence, of time and space! How could one earthly land or country be uppermost in the mind of the Creator? How could one earthly people be central in the purposes of the Governor of all the nations? Dispensationalism and Jewish premillennialism do not fit with the three Persons, infinite perfections and eternal purpose of God with His one catholic church in Jesus Christ.

Credal Trinitarian Christianity places great emphasis upon, and is the only solid basis for, catholicity. This stands over against all unitarian religions, such as Judaism, Islam (with its ummah) and Sikhism (about 90% of all Sikhs live in India and some 76% of all Sikhs live in the one north Indian state of Punjab).

Now let us consider two of the church’s attributes together: unity and catholicity, the one and the many. The God who is one in nature and three in Persons saves a church that is one and catholic. The Bible, which is one book consisting of 66 books, teaches one truth richly presented, including the unity and catholicity of the church. Protology (first things) and eschatology (last things) proclaim that both this creation and the new creation include the one and the many, with both creations as the realms of God’s one catholic church, one for the church now and the other for the church in the future.

Jesus Christ is one Person (the Son of God). He possesses two natures as God and man, uniting eternity and time (as the preexistent and incarnate One), and heaven and earth (cf. Eph. 1:10). The inscription on His cross “was written in Hebrew, and Greek, and Latin” (John 19:20). Thus in God’s one catholic church, “there is neither Greek nor

Is Hell Fire Literal?

This article is a follow-up of a previous article. One of our readers has disagreed with what I wrote about hell. He says, “I refer to the *CR News* of March 2021 in which Ron Hanko does not believe in hell fire. To my understanding of Scripture, this is a reality. Jesus quotes this as a fact in Mark 9:43-48, as well as Revelation 19:20 and other references. I feel Ron is using human logic to explain divine truth by not accepting the ungodly being in the fire without being consumed. I have no difficulty in accepting this, believing that with God it is possible. It is what the rich man in Luke 16:24 experienced, the flame of fire. I would rather believe Jesus than Ron Hanko. Is it just his opinion or the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRC)? If God can cause a bush to remain unconsumed as in Exodus 3:2, He can also enable the wicked to experience eternal fire in hell without being consumed. Ron needs to reflect on this.”

It is really not correct to say that I do “not believe in hell fire.” It would be more correct to say that I do not believe in *literal* hell fire. God’s wrath is often described as fire in Scripture (e.g., Ps. 11:6; 18:8, 12-13; 21:9; 78:21; 89:46; Isa. 5:24-25; 10:16-18; 30:33; 66:16, 24). Sometimes His wrath is revealed in literal fire as in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and in the destruction of the universe at the end of time, but not always.

God’s wrath was kindled again Job’s three friends, but that does not mean that they were actually and literally burned with fire (Job 42:7). The kindling of God’s wrath against Israel in Deuteronomy 31:17 was not in fire, but in other troubles and judgments. Wrath, especially God’s wrath, is like fire in its consuming power and destructiveness. It is *even worse than fire!* God Himself, as a God of wrath and judgment, is described as a “consuming fire” in Deuteronomy 4:24 and Hebrews 12:29, but that cannot be literally true. He is not something but someone, three Persons in one God, yet the descriptions of His wrath and even of His nature as fire ought to cause us to tremble.

The other argument for a metaphorical or non-literal understanding is that Scripture uses many different descriptions of hell and its suffering, and it is difficult to see how they can all be taken literally. Is hell literally being consumed by worms (Mark 9:44, 46, 48) or a moth (Isa. 51:8)? Is it also literally darkness (Jude 13)? Do those in hell physically drink the cup of the wine of God’s wrath (Rev. 14:10)? Is the punishment of hell literally all these things at the same time?

What needs to be emphasized is that coming under the judgment and wrath of God in time or for eternity is the worst thing that can happen to anyone. I have no doubt that God is able to burn the wicked with literal fire for all eternity without them being consumed, but the point is, even then, that the horror of hell is eternal suffering under the terrible wrath and hot displeasure of God.

In any case, it is not something I would argue long about or insist that my interpretation is correct. Much more important than believing or not believing in *literal* fire is believing that hell is a real place of eternal punishment where the ungodly and

unbelieving suffer forever. That is a doctrine under attack. The doctrine of hell and of eternal punishment is denied by many leading evangelicals, such as John Stott, and some of the modern versions like the NIV have all but eliminated hell from the Bible. That important doctrine is also denied by many cults.

As to the members or leaders of the PRC, I do not know what they believe, nor is it a matter of debate in those churches. There are and have been different views among respected leaders and theologians. John Calvin indicates that he believed that the references to hell fire were metaphorical in his commentary on Matthew 3:12. Martin Luther did not think it necessary to believe in literal fire. Charles Hodge said, “There seems to be no more reason for supposing that the fire spoken of in Scripture is to be literal fire, than that the worm that never dies is literally a worm” (*Systematic Theology*, 3:868).

On the other hand, Louis Berkhof leaned to the view that the fire is literal: “Some deny that there will be a literal fire, because this could not affect spirits like Satan and his demons. But how do we know this? Our body certainly works on our soul in some mysterious way. There will be some positive punishment corresponding to our bodies.” Yet he then adds, “It is undoubtedly true, however, that a great deal of the language concerning heaven and hell must be understood figuratively” (*Systematic Theology*, p. 736).

There are, however, several important points here about interpreting Scripture. First, not everything in Scripture can be or must be taken literally. In Revelation 20:1-3, it is impossible to take everything, including key, chain, bottomless pit and dragon, literally. Nor is it necessary to take everything literally in order to maintain the truth that Scripture is the inspired and infallible Word of God. That must be taken into account when dealing with the Bible’s descriptions of hell. It is not necessary to believe that hell is *literally* darkness, a moth, a worm, a cup, and fire to maintain what the Bible does teach about eternal punishment.

Second, the principle for interpreting any passage of Scripture is that Scripture interprets itself. That is true of the references to hell. If the brother who has submitted the disagreement above is convinced on the basis of Scripture itself that the fire of hell is literal, then I am satisfied and ask him to make the same charitable judgment. It is not what he thinks or what I think that matters but what Scripture itself says, and I am convinced, as John Calvin was, that a study of Scripture shows that the references to fire are metaphorical. I am also convinced, however, that the punishment of the ungodly and unbelieving is terrible and forever.

One other thing we should remember is that the biblical doctrine of hell is not just a matter of theology and of theological debate, but a testimony to the righteousness and justice of God, the necessity of believing in Jesus Christ, and the evil of rejecting and despising Him. The sad thing is, however, that no one will ever be scared into heaven by the Bible’s teaching on hell and hell fire. The only way anyone sees his great peril and turns to Jesus Christ in repentance and faith is by the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit, implanting and giving the gift of faith, and opening one’s ears and heart to the sweet call and good news of the gospel of God’s free grace.

Rev. Ron Hanko