

# Hell? No, most pastors insist when it comes to sermon topics

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BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (RNS)—Just when it seemed to have cooled off, the topic of hell is back on the front burner—at least for pastors learning to preach about a topic most Americans would rather not talk about.

Only 59 percent of Americans believe in hell, compared with 74 percent who believe in heaven, according to the recent surveys from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

“I think it’s such a difficult and important biblical topic,” said Kurt Selles, director of the Global Center at Samford University’s Beeson Divinity School. “There’s a big change that’s taken place as far as evangelicals not wanting to be as exclusive.”

✘ At the recent annual Beeson Pastors School, Selles led two workshops to discuss, “Whatever happened to hell?” He asked how many of the pastors had ever preached a sermon on hell. Nobody had, he said.

“I think it’s something people want to avoid,” he said. “I understand why. It’s a difficult topic.”

Fred Johns, pastor of Brookview Wesleyan Church in Irondale, Ala., said after a workshop discussion of hell that pastors do shy away from the topic of everlasting damnation.

“It’s out of fear we’ll not appear relevant,” he said. “It’s pressure from the culture to not speak anything negative. I think we’ve begun to deny hell. There’s an assumption that everybody’s going to make it to heaven somehow.”

The soft sell on hell reflects an increasingly market-conscious approach, Selles said.

“When you’re trying to market Jesus, sometimes there’s a tendency to mute traditional Christian symbols,” he said. “Difficult doctrines are left by the wayside. Hell is a morally repugnant doctrine. People wonder why God would send people to eternal punishment.”

Speakers said the seriousness of Jesus dying for man’s sins relates to the gravity of salvation versus damnation, according to Johns.

“If you don’t mention God’s judgment, you are missing a big part of the Christian gospel,” Selles said. “Without wrath, there’s no grace.”

Pope John Paul II stirred up a debate in 1999 by describing hell as “the state of those who freely and definitely separate themselves from God, the source of all life and joy.”

Some U.S. evangelicals expressed misgivings about the implication that hell is an abstract separation from God rather than a literal lake of fire as described in the Book of Revelation.

The pope’s comments on hell stirred up the ancient debate about whether hell is a real place of burning fire or a state of mind reflecting a dark, cold emptiness and distance from God.

Evangelical Christians have traditionally offered a sterner view of salvation and damnation.

A Southern Baptist Home Mission Board study in 1993 estimated 70 percent of all Americans are going to hell, based on projected numbers of those who have not had a born-again experience.

Pretending hell doesn’t exist, or trying to preach around it, short-circuits the Bible, Selles insisted.

“This is a doctrine, a teaching, that’s being neglected in churches,” he said.  
“It needs to be preached. It’s part of the gospel.”