

Why does the Christian Union deserve to go to hell?

Cumbria Lunchbar - 2nd May 2008

Intro

Good afternoon, thanks for coming. As you just heard, my name's Gareth. I work for a church in Southend-on-Sea, all the way down in Essex. I'm delighted to be here, not least because I'm a big fan of lunch! But I've also been asked to spend a few minutes helping you to think through this question: "*Why does the Christian Union deserve to go to hell?*"

To get to the answer to this question, I think we need to know two things: **what is hell**, and **why do people end up there?**

I guess there are lots of different ideas about "hell," aren't there? Whether it's Dante's Inferno or Homer Simpson getting force-fed donuts for eternity, there are all sorts of interpretations. One which I find the most amusing is the "...*From Hell*" series of documentaries from ITV. There are loads of them: Teenagers from Hell, Builders from Hell, Salesmen from Hell, Gardeners from Hell, Garages from Hell, Neighbours from Hell, Holidays from Hell, Weddings from Hell...

Is Hell really full of teenaged builders, salesmen and gardeners with terrible garages and awful neighbours and spend all their time going on holiday or getting married?

Of course not. But you get the point – the idea of hell means all sorts of things, and most of the time it's something we treat quite lightly. We can even think that Hell will be quite a fun place to be – after all, a lot of cool people will probably be there.

In preparation for this talk, I did an internet quiz to find out if I would be going to hell. I scored 42.5%, which apparently wasn't good enough. The results said:

You are going to Hell! But, you may like it there. You are a bad ass and you don't listen to the rules. It's okay though, you'll stay warm and enjoy meeting the devil.

But is this what really what we're talking about when we think about the question, "*Why does the Christian Union deserve to go to hell?*" You probably won't be too shocked when I say no, it isn't. I want to try to answer this question from the Bible, but I don't want to just quote you a list of references to hell. We need to see the bigger picture. It's really important that, as well as working out what hell *is*, that we see where it fits in to this bigger picture.

When we look at the world, it's hard to deny that it's in a mess – just looking at the news headlines, it's pretty obvious. The explanation the Bible gives is that it was messed up by us, by human beings. Humans have rejected and ignored God, and decided to do things their own way. And that has had massive repercussions. The whole way the world works has been ruined, and we're dealing with the consequences. When you turn on the news and see the headlines, whether it's about natural disasters or war or crime, they're all consequences of what we did to God.

But the thing is, it won't always be like this. God is bothered, and there is a plan. One day, everything bad will be removed. The damage will be repaired, and every trace of evil will be gone.

So, where do we fit in? Would that include you? I know it would include me. The uncomfortable truth is, all of us are imperfect. Every single one of us. Some friends of mine have a two young children, and they're great. They're lovely kids. But they have a real talent for being naughty! How did they develop their talent? Well, no-one taught them – they didn't pick it up from CBeebies. They're naturally imperfect - we all are.

If God were to suddenly remove all traces of evil from the world, we'd have to go too. If we're talking about getting rid of every trace of badness, that means God's standard is perfection - and we fall woefully short.

And when you see it in those terms, it becomes pretty clear that we can't work our way out of it. Even if we were to live moral lives and do lots of good things, we're still rebels against God. It's like swabbing the deck on a pirate ship – however much you following order, however good a job you do, it's still a pirate ship – you're still a criminal! We can't sort this out ourselves.

The one who said most about all this was Jesus Christ – that might surprise you if you think he only ever talked about love and tolerance. One of the key themes he used was **separation**. He used picture-language to explain his point, pictures like **wheat and weeds** which grow together, but eventually have to be separated. Or **sheep and goats** which are sorted into two groups. The point is that there are two groups: one which is kept, 'good' people, or those who haven't rejected God; and one which is discarded – 'bad people,' those who are still turned against God, or 'bad' people. The uncomfortable truth is that we all fall into the second category – we're all turned against God.

Those who are counted as 'good' people, those who are with God, spend forever with God in a future with no trace of anything bad or evil. The rest spend forever without God, in the place the Bible calls **hell**.

So, we've finally got to the heart of what we're talking about. As part of God's plan to sort out our messed up world, there has to be separation – everything that spoils is has to be removed. And hell is the destination for everything that's removed.

The main 'picture' Jesus used to talk about hell was Gehenna, named after a valley in Jerusalem. He described it as a place where, “there worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.” If you went there today, you'd find a nice garden. But it hasn't always been like that. Historically, it was a place where people burned their children as sacrifices to idols. By Jesus' day, it was used as a rubbish dump, where rubbish was burned constantly. When Jesus talked about Gehenna, it would have been crystal clear what he was getting at – this is definitely not a nice place to go! It had a horrific reputation, and was still pretty nasty. So the language he used makes sense he's using the most powerful picture he could to get across to people the force of what he was saying.

I said there were two things we need to work out as we try to get to the answer to this question – what is hell, and why do people go there. Well we've seen that hell is a horrific place, and it's the destination for everyone who bears any trace of evil. And that means that, by rights, it's a place we all deserve.

So, let's go back to the question: *why does the Christian Union deserve to go to hell?*

The answer is simple – they're just like you and me. They're no better than anyone else – they deserve to be removed from God's world as much as the rest of us. And there's nothing they can do to earn their way out.

I don't know if that's what you were expecting... But if that *is* the answer, then why bother telling people about it? Surely the CU have got bigger things to worry about...

The reason the Christian Union want you to know that they deserve to go to hell is because it's not the end of the story. That's not all there is to it. There's an alternative.

To explain the last (and most important) bit of the story, I want to go back to Jesus, and I want to read you something he said. It's recorded for us by John, who was a friend of his. Jesus said,

“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

In that single sentence, Jesus explains the alternative to hell. And it's brilliant!

Jesus tells us what God did:

He gave his **One and Only Son** – Jesus himself, the only one who has ever lived who didn't reject God, and didn't deserve hell like we do.

But “**gave**” means more than just sending. Jesus **died in our place**. He gave up his life to pay for our rebellion against God.

Jesus also tells us why he did it:

He did it so that we wouldn't perish. That doesn't mean we never physically die - he's talking about a new kind of life, something bigger and better and longer lasting. Jesus died in our place – the death we rightfully deserve, and now we can be forgiven. Our guilt can be completely taken away, which means our destiny can be changed. Jesus died so that, rather than hell (this horrible place separated from God), we can have this new kind of life with God.

But why on earth would he do that? Well, these words of Jesus point to God's reason – **love**. God loved us enough to do this for us. It cost him his Son, but he loved us enough to give him up for us.

Sometimes we can end up thinking that God likes sending people to hell, as though he's just waiting to catch us out. But that's completely untrue – he was so desperate that we should avoid hell that he made the ultimate sacrifice for us. Would he have done that if he wanted us to go to hell?

The other important thing **these words of Jesus tell us is what we have to do to be able to know God** properly, and to spend forever with him. The answer is: Nothing. Again, that might be a surprise to you. But Jesus said that this applies to “whoever believes in him.” He meant that we don't have to earn this treatment. We *can't* do anything to deserve it. It's not based on something we do, like keeping rules or doing nice things. It's based on God giving his only Son to die in our place. Because of him, the damage can be repaired, and we can have that new, eternal life with God.

Why does the Christian Union deserve to go to hell? Because they're normal human beings, who turned their backs on God and deserve to be cut off from him. But *why should they bother telling you that?* Because their situation has been turned around. That isn't the end of the story. God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only son, so that whoever believes in him would not perish, but have eternal life. God doesn't leave us to get what we deserve. Instead, he gives us what we don't deserve. He gives up his own Son so that we can spend forever with him.

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There's a lot there. You can ask me about it later, either while I'm up at the front, or we can talk afterwards. But if what I've said is true, then you need to find out. The CU would be delighted to help you think through this, and we can talk about the best way for you to find out more.