

When Theology Meets Grief: Choosing Love Over Fear

May 26, 2026

This past Tuesday night, our service took a different turn than originally planned. Due to a few technical difficulties, we didn't share a worship song as we normally do, but what unfolded instead became a deeply meaningful and honest conversation around one of Christianity's most emotionally charged topics: the doctrine of hell.

The discussion began after two people shared painful experiences they had encountered at funerals. In both situations, they had arrived grieving the loss of someone they loved, expecting comfort, remembrance, and healing. Instead, the services became heavily centered on fear-based messaging about hell and eternal punishment. For them, the experience felt less like hope and more like emotional trauma layered on top of grief.

As a church family, we talked openly and respectfully about how theology affects people emotionally and spiritually. We acknowledged that many sincere Christians hold to traditional teachings about hell, and we emphasized that our goal is never to become bitter, divisive, or dismissive toward people who see things differently. For some believers, fear has genuinely been part of their spiritual journey and understanding of God.

At the same time, we explored how church history reveals that Christians have not always agreed on the nature of final judgment. We briefly discussed historical and modern theologians such as Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, John Stott, Brian McLaren, Rob Bell, and others who have challenged or reexamined the idea of eternal conscious torment. These voices, while diverse in their conclusions, all wrestled honestly with the same question:

"What kind of God is revealed in Jesus Christ?"

We also reflected on the reality that there are some theological questions we simply "know in part." While Scripture speaks clearly about God's justice, holiness, and redemption, faithful Christians have interpreted passages about hell

differently throughout history. For us, this becomes one of those areas where humility, compassion, and continued study matter deeply.

What became most important throughout the conversation was not merely debating the afterlife, but remembering what we as a church want to be known for.

We want to be a church defined more by what we stand for than what we stand against.

We want people to encounter the goodness of God, the beauty of partnership with Him, and the transformative power of love. Jesus said the greatest commandments are to love God and love others. He also said the world would recognize His disciples not by fear, intimidation, or theological arguments, but “by the way you love one another.”

For those of us walking closely with God, the conversation about hell becomes secondary to the daily reality of living connected to Him — step by step, moment by moment, in trust, love, growth, and relationship.

We also acknowledged something important about today’s culture: fear-based approaches to faith are increasingly ineffective. Many people have become desensitized to messages rooted primarily in condemnation and threat. What truly changes hearts is not terror, but authentic love, grace, compassion, truth, and genuine spiritual transformation.

The Gospel is still compelling — not because people are afraid of God, but because they discover how deeply loved they already are.

As always, our desire is not to force conclusions onto anyone, but to create space for thoughtful faith, honest questions, healing conversations, and deeper encounters with the heart of God.

We are grateful for a church community willing to engage difficult topics with humility, maturity, and love.

— Pastor Cindy H. Carr
River of Life Ministries
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