

Can heaven- and hell-bound find some common ground?



Highland Views
Chris Highland

I'm a frequent visitor to the edges of faith and beyond. Exploring along the "borderlines" between any group can be eye-opening, if not mind-opening. The fences are often well-defended but invite honest reaching out and reaching across.

As I continually reflect back to the years when I imagined the world divided between "God's People" and everyone else, I often meet up with that wall in my head. It was very simple, or so we thought at the time: "God takes sides, we believe, so we are on God's side and God is on ours."

The dividing line was clear. Our chosen mission was to walk along this line and convince the world to cross over to our side. We were confidently on the road to the heavenly kingdom; all others were bound for hell.

To get more perspective on these "lines," I grabbed a local ginger beer and sat down with Jazz Cathcart, a founding pastor at Reach Life Church in Asheville. On any given Sunday, Jazz and co-pastor James Naisang see 150-200 people at worship. When they gather, he says, it is "not an occasion; it's a congregation."

Both of these youthful pastors wanted to form a community of believers with a focus on inner-city families. They seek "a village not just an event" with a guiding sense that diversity means "things that bring us together are stronger than those that divide."

As Jazz sees it, "ethnic, socioeconomic and generational diversity" is centered around the "core message of the Gospel." In this view, the emphasis is on breaking barriers to emphasize "one race" — the human race — rather than trying to be "interracial."

Jazz consults with other congregations on "how to foster diversity" and he has relationships that include members of the Muslim, Jewish, "spiritual" and secular communities. Those with no faith affiliation visit his church, and some choose to become believing members.

His love for the Reach Life "family" (a word he uses frequently) is evident. The first image he used was that it's growing like an oak tree. There is "healthy, patient growth."

Outside the church he feels it's important to be "sensitive, gentle" and aware toward others loved by God. It's essential for believers to "share the message with your life not just your lips."

My curiosity gets jabbed awake on these things, so I wondered, how does he or his congregation view nonbelievers like me or even people of different faiths? Jazz looked me straight in the eye: "I do believe you're going to hell." He smiled but emphasized his sincerely held belief. Raising my eyebrows, I thanked him for his unequivocal statement (at least I knew where I stood, and my feet were getting hot).

This led us to discuss some of the classic arguments for and against a place of divine punishment (I said "torture," but Jazz softened it, so to



Old tracks, new trails reaching beyond. CHRIS HIGHLAND

speak, to "torment"). Given that so many good people who have lived well are sent to hell, I assured him I'd rather go where they are.

As he grew more determined with his "apologetics" (defense of the faith) I reminded him that I once saw the world as he does. I remembered an earlier comment Jazz made that he rarely finds "an open-minded liberal willing to change their mind." I wondered: How open is a committed believer to change their mind?

That change only happened to me through years of honest reflection.

I was particularly impressed hearing Jazz describe his work outside the walls of the church. He goes into jails to speak with prisoners and joins members of Reach Life serving breakfast one Saturday each month on downtown streets. He's particularly proud of the Urban Mentoring Academy he founded and directs. In his words, the academy is "a non-faith-based, secular organization" pairing mentors with high school students in Asheville.

As I half-joked with Jazz, "maybe this is where the heavenbound and hellbound are finding some common ground." Until we humanize each other beyond the fences and borderlines, the colors and creeds, we're doing little more than guarding the walls.

We have to ask ourselves if we really want to spend our lives "holding the line" along the guarded boundaries, or make the effort to learn about those on the other side. Might we begin to dismantle the fences without taking sides, in fact, side by side?

As we got up to leave, we shared a tight handshake and hug.

I'm grateful that Jazz was so willing to discuss his views and consider new ways of reaching out toward a common life. He may think I'm heading toward simmering torment, but somehow I think we found cooler ground.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer, free-thinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.