

MIDWESTERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

THE CHRISTIAN'S FALSE IDEAS OF THE AFTERLIFE AND WHERE THEY ORIGINATE

A RESEARCH PAPER

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT

OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE COURSE

DR30020 DOCTORAL STUDIES COLLOQUIUM

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KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI

NOVEMBER 12, 2022

## **INTRODUCTORY MATERIAL**

Evangelical Christians throughout the past two thousand years have had mixed ideas concerning their understandings of the afterlife, heaven, and hell. Most Christians today, though they may not realize this, have an understanding of the afterlife that mixes different worldviews, religious beliefs, and philosophical ideas, which has the effect of diminishing what the Bible teaches and elevating false teachings and misunderstandings. Essentially, many Christians today have mixed their understanding of heaven, hell, and the afterlife and because they have mixed their understanding of heaven, hell, and the afterlife with other beliefs, they do not understand what Scripture actually teaches concerning what is to come. In effect, it diminishes their view of Scripture, speaks of a lack of understanding concerning the sufficiency of God's Word, and encourages a pluralistic and post-modern understanding of Christianity. Most importantly, because modern-day Christians do not have a solid biblical worldview concerning the afterlife, they are entirely unable to defend against false teachings concerning the afterlife—they lack in the ability to define the Christian concepts of heaven, hell, and the afterlife, which renders them utterly useless in conversations concerning apologetics, polemics, and the afterlife.

### **THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE**

This topic and the problem at hand, though it does have attributes that can be considered both pure and applied research-wise, is primarily a pure research topic. At its core, the question concerning heaven, hell, and the afterlife is primarily focused on theoretical research with the focus of expanding knowledge concerning the afterlife rather than application. However, by expanding one's knowledge in this subject area, there are some natural applications that occur—it ought to motivate greater praise and worship of Jesus, provoke a higher view of Scripture, and provide hope to those who do believe. In essence, though there are some practical ramifications

to the study of the afterlife, the goal is not application, but rather the gaining of knowledge concerning various worldviews, religious beliefs, and philosophies in contrast to a biblical worldview.

This topic has great significance because it confronts false ideas that are already present within the universal church with truth, and challenges warped understandings of God, the afterlife, Scripture, and even within the local church. It calls the readers to greater understanding and better adherence to the Word of God and what the Word teaches concerning the topic. It will force the readers to recognize that in some cases, Scripture does not give much information concerning certain topics—this does not mean that we ought to add to Scripture to develop a comprehensive understanding of the topic, but rather we need to trust that what we have is exactly what God wants us to have.<sup>1</sup> For those outside of Christendom, this sort of research will give them a better understanding of what the Bible actually teaches and what Christians should believe concerning the afterlife, heaven, and hell. It is notable, that in many interdisciplinary approaches to world religions, the concept of the afterlife is almost completely ignored—and example of this is *Understanding World Religions: An Interdisciplinary Approach* by Irving Mexham, who summarizes the beliefs of various worldviews, but consistently avoids speaking of any sort of afterlife life belief even when speaking of Christianity.<sup>2</sup> This study will develop a comprehensive view of the afterlife from a Christian perspective in contrast to other religious beliefs and will help both believers and unbelievers understand truth according to God’s Word.

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<sup>1</sup> Too many Christians co-opt false ideas and tie them in with Scripture because they either do not take the time to learn precisely what Scripture teaches or they think the Bible is insufficient in the area or topic at hand. This must be resisted because it warps biblical teaching. The Christian must always be reforming their ideology and beliefs with what Scripture actually teaches; not what they think it should teach.

<sup>2</sup> Irving Mexham, *Understanding World Religions: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011, 15-464)

## **SIGNIFICANT SOURCES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF AFTERLIFE BELIEFS**

There are many different sources to research concerning a topic like this because the topic is frequently spoken about from many different perspectives. Because the afterlife concerns primarily religious and philosophical ideas, a person studying the different theories would have to start with primary sources concerning those religious and philosophical beliefs. For instance, one would have to determine what the primary world religions believe, what certain philosophers believe, and even what different denominations of Christianity and groups calling themselves Christian believe in order to come to a comprehensive understanding of what various worldviews state about the afterlife.

### **KEY ARGUMENTS FROM RELIGIOUS BELIEFS**

Though there are many, perhaps thousands, of distinct religious beliefs throughout the world, this study will focus primarily on what the Pew Research Center calls major religious groups—Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists.<sup>3</sup> All smaller religious groups are beyond the scope of this study, primarily because many of those groups have too many varying ideas concerning the afterlife, heaven, and hell.

### **CHRISTIANITY**

Most Christians today, as noted in the introductory material have a deficient understanding of biblical views of the afterlife. Many Christians have views in which they have integrated false religious beliefs or philosophical ideas to develop an amalgamation of various beliefs. Because of the various misunderstandings of heaven, hell, and the afterlife, some

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<sup>3</sup> “The Global Religious Landscape: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Major Religious Groups as of 2010,” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (December 2012), <https://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2014/01/global-religion-full.pdf>

Christians have determined to not know much more than just the fact that there is an afterlife in which believers will experience everlasting life in the presence of God.<sup>4</sup> It does not help that Christian authors and even unbelieving authors have taken the teachings of Scripture and misinterpreted them to the extent that they do not represent what the original author intended to say to the original audience—a good example of this is *The History of Hell* by Alice Turner, who misrepresents the text of Scripture in such a way to make it sound as if only the Gospel of Matthew really speaks of the afterlife authoritatively. According to Turner, the Gospel of Matthew really only speaks of the afterlife this way for moralistic teaching.<sup>5</sup> It also does not help that many Christians today will take ideas from popular culture and integrate them into their understanding of the afterlife; and it does not help that different denominations and groups that claim to be Christian have differing ideas of what occurs after life on earth.

The reality is that if Christians today want to get a comprehensive understanding of the biblical view of heaven, hell, and the afterlife, they really ought to look at the Word of God itself with the understanding that Scripture is all that is necessary for life and godliness (2 Pet 1:3).<sup>6</sup> Of course, the word *afterlife* does not appear in Scripture, but the Bible utilizes the terms *Sheol*<sup>7</sup>, *hell*, and *heaven* to speak of the places in which people are taken after their temporal life on earth.<sup>8</sup> *Sheol* is used exclusively in the Old Testament in which it can either refer to the grave

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<sup>4</sup> A mistake similar to the mistake of determining not to learn of the *eschaton* whatsoever because of difficulties with interpretation. In both cases, there are difficulties of interpretation, but difficulties of interpretation should not result in the Christian not trying to know anything about the details whatsoever.

<sup>5</sup> Alice Turner, *The History of Hell*, (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993, 52-65)

<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all Bible references in this paper are to the New American Standard Bible, (NASB) (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 2020.)

<sup>7</sup> *Sheol* is a transliteration that is often translated either as *hell* (often in the KJV, though not always) or *grave*. It is important to differentiate between the different uses of the term *Sheol* because it often refers to the grave or death, but not a location in which people go after this life on earth.

(*cf.*, Gen 37:35) or to an afterlife location (*cf.*, Ps 139:8). The term translated as *hell* is used exclusively in the New Testament in which we see it utilized to primarily describe a place of torment with an unquenchable fire (Mark 9:43), as a pit of darkness, and a place to hold the rebel angels for judgment (2 Pet 2:4). The term *heaven* is utilized throughout the Old and New Testaments and speak both of the physical heavens—the stars, the moon, the planets (Ps 19) and the spiritual location yet to be seen by living believers (Matt 3:2). It is worth noting that *heaven* is far more utilized than *hell* or *Sheol*, but the descriptions of heaven are somewhat vague. It helps to see what certain authors have written to describe hell, such as L. L. Morris' article concerning heaven in the *New Bible Dictionary*. Morris writes:

Heaven is the abode of God, and of those closely associated with him . . . God is not alone there, for we read of 'the host of heaven' which worships him (Ne. 9:6), and of 'the angels in heaven' (Mk. 13:32). Believers also may look forward to 'an inheritance kept in heaven' for them (1 Pet. 1:4). Heaven is thus the present abode of God and his angels, and the ultimate destination of his saints on earth.<sup>9</sup>

Heaven in the Bible is described as a place in which genuine believers will eventually go, but with the exception of Revelation 21, which describes a new heaven and new earth created when the first heaven and first earth pass away, there really is not much information of what heaven looks like or is like. Beyond the descriptions of the new Jerusalem, the River of Life within the new heaven and the descriptions of the second death, the lake of fire in Revelation 20, the believer is left with little to no information. When systematized and compiled, the believer is left with the understanding that after death comes judgment (Heb 9:27), after which comes placement in heaven for those who have experienced genuine repentance and belief in Jesus

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<sup>8</sup> Depending on the translation being utilized, readers of Scripture may also see words like *Gehenna*, the *pit*, or *everlasting punishment* to describe hell; words like *paradise* or *Abraham's bosom* to describe a heaven-like place; and *eternity* to describe the afterlife.

<sup>9</sup> L.L. Morris, "Heaven," *New Bible Dictionary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 457)

Christ (John 14:2; Phil 3:20-2; 1 Thess 4:13-18) or placement in hell for those who have rejected the truth of the Gospel. Beyond this, there really is not much information; this lack of information is probably why so many believers have taken to other religious beliefs, popular culture, and philosophical ideas to “bolster” their understanding of the afterlife.<sup>10</sup>

## **FALSE RELIGIONS CLAIMING TO BE CHRISTIAN**

Now, one issue that does need further exploration when concerning religious beliefs and their understanding of the afterlife are the many organizations and groups that claim to be Christian, but do not have a proper understanding of the truth, let alone a proper understanding of the afterlife. Some instances of false religions that claim to be Christian and have unbiblical understandings of the afterlife include Roman Catholicism, which believes in a purgatory prior to entering into paradise; Mormonism, which believes that adherents to their faith can become like god in the next life; and Seventh Day Adventism, which rejects the traditional idea of hell for Annihilationism and believe a conditional immortality rather than an immortality of the soul.

It is easy to see how the blurring of lines and a more universalist mindset concerning Christianity and these groups claiming to be Christian can cause actual believers to have warped ideas concerning the afterlife. If the lines between Roman Catholicism, Mormonism, and Seventh Day Adventism are blurred then actual Christians are more liable to take aspects of these false teachings and apply it to their own understanding of life, death, the afterlife, and heaven and hell. This explains why modern-day Christians tend to be more accepting of the concept of purgatory or why they have a misunderstanding of what Christians will be like in the next life.

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<sup>10</sup> It is of note that many modern-day Christians have an understanding of the afterlife that differs from that which is found in Scripture. For many modern-day Christians, the afterlife is an amalgamation of various belief systems whether they recognize that it is or not.

## ISLAM

According to William C. Chittick, Muslims have accepted the existence of heaven and hell as fundamental beliefs concerning their religion.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the belief in the afterlife is such a basic or fundamental belief to Islam that Islamic thought is divided into three basic categories—the Unity of God, prophecy, and eschatology.<sup>12</sup> After earthly death, the Qur’an speaks of a barrier that separates the land of the living from those who have died, which means that Muslims have no belief in reincarnation or multiple lives.<sup>13</sup> Most Christians studying or researching Islamic belief concerning death and the afterlife will notice that much of what Muslims believe concerning the afterlife actually coincide with Christianity, at least, until further investigation is done concerning the Islamic ideas of the garden and the fire, many of fundamentalist Islamic ideas concerning death, judgment, and the afterlife is almost the same. An exception to similarities includes the Islamic idea of *barzakh*, which is a sort of purgatory in which the individual experiences the painful process of decomposition as part of his punishment for evil deeds.<sup>14</sup>

There is, however, a notable difference concerning Islamic belief of the afterlife and Christian belief of the afterlife in that some Muslims hold to the idea that those who are martyred or sacrificially give of their own life receive greater recompense in the afterlife, but most

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<sup>11</sup> William C. Chittick, “‘Your Sight Today is Piercing’: The Muslim Understanding of Death and Afterlife,” in *Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions*, ed. Hiroshi Obayashi (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), 125.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Jane Idleman Smith, “Islam,” in *How Different Religions View Death and Afterlife*, ed. Christopher Jay Johnson and Marsha G. McGee (Philadelphia, PA: The Charles Press, Publishers, 1998), 137.

<sup>14</sup> Alan F. Segal, *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in the Religions of the West* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2004), 652-653.



practicing Muslims today would argue that the concept of jihadists gaining greater reward in the afterlife is contrary to the Qur'an's teaching.<sup>15</sup> In fact, many modern-day Muslims distance themselves from those who have done significant harm to others by focusing on the Qur'an's teachings of non-violence and the pursuit of peace. Many scholars note a striking similarity between the religions of Islam and Christianity in their understandings of metaphysics, which could be explained by their common root as Abrahamic religions.<sup>16</sup> However, someone with a discerning understanding of the Bible and the Qur'an will note differences between the afterlife teachings of both religious beliefs—particularly concerning what the garden in Islam is like and what heaven is described as in Christianity.

Though similar to Christianity, when further researched, the afterlife understandings of the Islamic faith differ significantly. For instance, whereas Christianity teaches that true salvation is attained only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Eph 2:8), Islam has a high emphasis on works. Qur'an 4:97 teaches that when a person is taken away by angels the angels will ask "what state were you in" and when the individual responds that they were oppressed in the land, the response is "was not Allah's earth vast enough so that you might migrate in it?" The refuge of such shall be hell, and it is an evil destination." The idea being that if on earth, a person finds themselves in a difficult position, it is within their power to move and essentially work harder.<sup>17</sup> The one exception is found in Qur'an 4:98-99 for "helpless men, women, and children who cannot afford a way out." In these cases, the person ought to "hope that Allah will pardon them.

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<sup>15</sup> Alan F. Segal, *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in the Religions of the West* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2004), 677.

<sup>16</sup> F.E. Peters, "Broadcasting the Word: Prophet, Preacher, and Saint in Islam," in *The Meaning of Life in the World Religions*, ed. Joseph Runzo and Nancy M. Martin (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000), 93)

<sup>17</sup> Abdul Husayn Dastghaib Shirazi, "Death," Ahlul Bayt Digital Islamic Library Project, n.d., [https://www.al-islam.org/hereafter-maad-sayyid-abdul-husayn-dastghaib-shirazi/death#quran\\_ref\\_123126](https://www.al-islam.org/hereafter-maad-sayyid-abdul-husayn-dastghaib-shirazi/death#quran_ref_123126)

For Allah is Ever-Pardoning, All-Forgiving.” The Qur’an teaches a works-based understanding of the afterlife in which believers in Allah need to live in a way that pleases Allah and if they do not, they must pay recompense before being admitted into the garden—a significant contrast from Christianity.

## **HINDUISM AND BUDDHISM**

Those who practice Hinduism also find themselves in a position of works-based religious ideology that results in their works being the key that earns their way into what is referred to as moksha, which is really just an end to samsara.<sup>18</sup> This same concept of breaking the cycle of reincarnation is also referred to as samsara in Buddhist belief and it results in the entrance into Nirvana. In both religious systems, the concept of reincarnation is the vehicle through which an individual is to continue in their cosmic and spiritual journey—in Hinduism, cosmic forces determine whether the individual advances or regresses through the caste system; in Buddhism, a similar system is utilized, though officially, Buddha had rejected the idea of the caste system because he emphasized the equality of man.<sup>19</sup>

In both religions, lives are judged based on how the individual lives their present, earthly life. In the case of adherents to Hinduism, their lives are judged based on their ability to fulfill their Purusharthas or their objectives of human life—including Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha. Buddhism relies on the individual doing good deeds to push the cosmic karma in their favor, which then results in a good judgment concerning life that eventually results in samsara. Essentially, the goal of Buddhism and Hinduism is to reach a state in which the individual no

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<sup>18</sup> *Samsara* refers to the process of reincarnation that all mankind works through—it is a cycle of death and rebirth in which the person’s standing from life-to-life changes depending on how well-lived the previous life was deemed.

<sup>19</sup> Y. Krishan, “Buddhism and Caste System,” *East and West*, 48, no. 1 (June 1998), 41.

longer exists, but is rather part of the universe, which is done primarily through working good deeds throughout one's life.

Buddhism and Hinduism clearly have significant differences in contrast with Christianity concerning the afterlife, heaven, and hell. In fact, according to Buddhism and Hinduism, the concepts of heaven and hell really do not exist and the concept of the afterlife is relegated to an almost non-existence. Whereas Christianity focuses on the forgiveness of sins after repentance and belief for salvation, Buddhism and Hinduism relies on the individual's ability to live a better life each time the individual is reincarnated whether through the caste system or by other means. It is, however, easy to see that some of the ideas of Buddhism and Hinduism, particularly that of karma, has seeped into the ideology of Christians today and have had detrimental effects on Christians without acknowledgment.

#### KEY ARGUMENTS FROM PHILOSOPHICAL BELIEFS

Philosophically, at least in the western tradition of philosophy, there are varying understandings of the afterlife determined by the philosopher's own understanding of the universe and what surrounds him. For the case of philosophers who take a purely materialistic view of the universe, there is nothing after death, let alone an afterlife, or heaven and hell.<sup>20</sup> In such cases, the philosophers would argue that just as there was nothing before life there is nothing after life.<sup>21</sup> Some philosophical writers such as R.W.K. Paterson wrestle with different philosophical ideas of the afterlife in a way that integrates some religious beliefs with

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<sup>20</sup> William Hasker and Charles Taliaferro, "Afterlife," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, March 21, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/afterlife/>

<sup>21</sup> Adolf Grunbaum, *Philosophy of Religion, Physics, and Psychology: Essays in Honor of Adolf Grunbaum*, (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2009), 228-229.

philosophical beliefs.<sup>22</sup> Other philosophers take a view of the afterlife that admits the need of a creator without necessarily agreeing to a specified being as the creator.<sup>23</sup> Occasionally, philosophers take a theistic approach through life, death, and heaven and hell, in such a way that affirms the Christian faith.<sup>24</sup> The reality is that the vast differences in ideology concerning life, death, heaven, and hell amongst philosophers causes a complication in summarizing a statement concerning these concepts and philosophical arguments concerning these topics.

Since philosophers take varying perspectives concerning life after death, heaven, and hell, it is difficult for anyone to write a comprehensive statement concerning all philosophical ideas of the afterlife. However, with the majority of philosophers throughout western philosophy taking an atheistic or naturalistic approach to life, death, and what is to come—and because modern philosophy has influenced popular culture, religious thinking, and philosophical beliefs about life—it can be assumed that unbiblical attitudes and mindsets concerning life, death, and the afterlife have crept into the church and the modern Christian’s conceptual knowledge of such ideas. The common materialism and humanistic mindsets of the world have influenced the Christian faith by providing alternatives to the biblical worldview concerning the issues of death and the afterlife.

#### CURRENT IDEAS CONCERNING HEAVEN, HELL, AND THE AFTERLIFE

Of course, since the ideas of heaven, hell, and the afterlife are integrally tied to religious belief systems, many people adhere to the system that they claim to believe. For instance, all

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<sup>22</sup> R.W.K. Paterson, *Philosophy and the Belief in a Life After Death*, (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, Inc., 1995), 191-211.

<sup>23</sup> Consider Aristotle’s idea of the Prime Mover.

Buddhists and Hindus who are strict adherents to their faiths will seek samsara for the purpose of achieving nirvana or moksha. Muslims who are strict adherents to their faith will seek continuously to work the five pillars of Islam with the intent of being judged by Allah as worthy of entering into the garden. Strict adherents to Christianity will recognize the slim details given in the Old and New Testaments and yet, still know that there is hope to be had in Jesus Christ and His promise to prepare a home for them (John 14:2).

The issue is that because of the vast influences of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism<sup>25</sup>, and even unbelieving philosophical ideology, modern-day Christians in America have a very warped understanding of what heaven, hell, and the afterlife are. And as stated previously, because different denominations and different supposed Christian groups have given different understandings of the afterlife, most Christians are left with an amalgamation of false teachings that have hindered their understanding of heaven, hell, and the afterlife, which in effect have lowered their view of Scripture and caused damage to their own faith. Some examples of this include Christians that have integrated eastern or new age beliefs into their understanding of life after death, those that have inordinate affections for supposed paranormal activity, and Christians that have abandoned developing a truly biblical understanding of heaven, hell, and the afterlife in favor of popular books and movies that teach false ideas that manipulate people.<sup>26</sup>

The lack of consensus amongst various people groups concerning the afterlife has bred a significant amount of false teaching that hinder Christians from understanding the truth. Until a proper understanding of the afterlife is understood amongst Bible-believing evangelical Christians, these false ideas and understandings of heaven, hell, and the afterlife will continue to

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<sup>25</sup> And really, we could add a long list of eastern religions that have influenced modern-day American Christianity.

pervade Christian thought in a way that poisons modern-day believers' understanding of the truth.

### UNRESOLVED QUESTIONS

Concerning unresolved questions regarding this topic, there is but one—how vast and comprehensive should the study itself be? With regard to apologetics and polemics, this study can continue indefinitely to speak of various religious beliefs. This state of the question has focused intentionally on major religious and philosophical ideas, but the reality is, that the same questions concerning life, death, and the afterlife can be viewed from other perspectives as well—whether one determines to evaluate as many religious beliefs as possible or as many different philosophical views of the afterlife as possible. This question can be expanded to ask whether a study of major religious views on the afterlife in comparison to Christianity is worthwhile or if it would be better to focus specifically on the Abrahamic faiths and compare and contrast the beliefs to better show the biblical worldview. Of course, one would have to determine to evaluate the orthodox views of Christianity concerning the afterlife in comparison to unorthodox views of Christianity as part of the process and a study of this sort would be incomplete without reviewing what theologians throughout church history have postulated concerning the afterlife as well.

### HOW ADDITIONAL RESEARCH WILL CONTRIBUTE TO THE DISCUSSION

Much of the various books, journal articles, and resources concerning the afterlife, heaven, and hell come from unbiblical, unbelieving perspectives or perspectives that integrate various worldviews to form a cohesive yet not biblical view. Though there are some conservative, evangelical writings on the topic at hand, there are not many and what has been

written from a conservative, evangelical perspective no longer fits the category of modern scholarship. In addition, the few conservative evangelical writings concerning the afterlife were not written with an apologetics or polemics mindset—they exist to provide much needed information concerning the afterlife from the various religious beliefs and religious mindset, but none of the resources do a comprehensive job at explaining how a Christian ought to defend the biblical understanding of the afterlife against false ideas concerning life after death.

While the nature in this sort of research is primarily pure, there are applications to be made based on the research in the realm of the local church. The goal of this sort of research would be to expand the knowledge of and scholarship of studies concerning the afterlife, but to do so with no hope of helping the church grow in its ability to reach the lost and proclaim the Gospel would be vain. Ideally, this sort of research project would provide a comprehensive understanding of what different religious beliefs believe concerning the afterlife and how it compares and contrasts with true, biblical Christianity. Only when believers understand what the Bible teaches concerning life after death can they properly defend the teachings of Scripture against teachings that wish to subvert the truth or contradict Scripture itself. In addition, it will provide unbelievers, believers, and scholars in general with a scholarly resource that comprehensively looks at various views of the afterlife from an evangelical Christian perspective with the purpose of showing how unbiblical ideology has influenced modern-day Christian thoughts. Ultimately, research in this topic will better disciple the church of Jesus Christ while equipping Christians to better understand what Scripture teaches and how they ought to both conform their beliefs to Scripture and defend their then Scriptural beliefs.

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