

Fundamentalists might be wrong

Randy Pausch, my friend, class-mate and author of the bestselling "Last Lecture," has died of cancer. His selfless and inspiring life touched millions of people. My life goals are more modest. I just want convince you Randy is not burning in hell.

When I wrote about Randy last August, he had just given his famous Last Lecture. Millions of people all over the world have testified to the difference he has made in their lives, and mourn his loss deeply.

He left behind a wife and three children, two of whom will remember their father only in pictures.

But since Randy did not accept Jesus as his personal savior, some believe that none of that matters. To them, Randy Pausch is now suffering the torments of hell for all eternity.

Why bring up such a distressing topic? Because it is important, particularly in this town. Many Christians do not accept this particular interpretation of New Testament theology, but those who do are disproportionately influential.

I lack the space to make theological arguments here. I'll save that for the coming email flood. The best way I can convince you that Randy is not burning in hell is by appealing to your innate moral sense: You find the idea repugnant.

That's no surprise. The evidence shows that human beings, regardless of background, nationality or religion, have innate ideas of right and wrong. The idea that someone like Randy is now having his entrails plucked out by demons is repellent to our nature. It just doesn't make sense.

Claiming we cannot judge scripture doesn't cut it: We judge scripture all the time. To summarize the Jewish lay theologian Dennis Prager, "Ethics without God can give you Stalin, God without ethics can give you Khomeini". An appeal to inborn moral judgement is one of society's great checks on religious excess. Thoughtful people must always have the courage to ask "Does this make sense?"

This is where scriptural interpretation comes from. It is why Jews believe there is a place for all the righteous in the world to come. It is why the Catholic church abandoned the literal doctrine of "extra ecclesiam nulla salus" long ago.



OPINION

BARRY FAGIN

COLUMNIST

Does the image of Randy Pausch having his eyes demonically gouged out give you pause?

I've got another one: Pat Tillman personally disemboweled by Beelzebub. Tillman was a starting safety for the Arizona Cardinals who gave up a multimillion dollar NFL contract to become an Army Ranger. Cpl. Tillman was killed by friendly fire in 2004.

Tillman and his family were not Christian. An officer in Tillman's chain of command told ESPN that was exactly why Tillman's parents

had such difficulty accepting the first official (and wrong) account of their son's death. He told ESPN that because people who die without Christ die "for nothing" and are simply "worm dirt," Tillman's parents had more trouble coming to terms with their loss. Honest, I don't make this stuff up.

One prominent local church goes farther, proclaiming unbelievers in Christ will be "sent to hell where they will be eternally tormented with the devil and the fallen angels." What comfort could they offer, I wonder, if they were to meet Tillman's family?

It does no good to offer platitudes like "We can never know his heart." That avoids the issue. Far too many of his fellow Americans "know" that Tillman is now burning in hell. Despite his giving up his life to protect their freedom to believe exactly that. Despite Jesus' own words on the greatest love a man can have.

Which is more likely: That men like Randy Pausch and Pat Tillman, who lived and died as they did, are now having their flesh burned in a sulfurous lake of lava? Or that in the 2,000 years between the original vision of Saul of Tarsus and the present incarnation of fundamentalist theology, somebody made a mistake?

Randy Pausch and Pat Tillman need no encomiums from me to mark their passing. The arcs of their lives are greater than anything I'll ever do. But if their deaths could get even a few true believers to wonder about a monopoly on the here-after, I will weep for joy. It will add even more good to lives that overflowed with it.

Fagin, of Colorado Springs, is a senior fellow at the Independence Institute. His column appears on alternate Thursdays. Readers can e-mail him at barry@faginfamily.net.