

## **Bell's Hell: A Review by Michael Horton**

***Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, Rob Bell (HarperOne, 2011)**

**Review by Michael Horton**

Are all of God's attributes subservient to his love? And does God's love demand the salvation of everyone? If you answer yes to both, then you're inclined to agree with everything else in Rob Bell's *Love Wins*. I say this because traditional views of God, salvation, heaven and hell are not really challenged through argument but are dismissed through a series of rhetorical questions that caricature conclusions that most Christians have historically maintained on the basis of looking at the relevant passages.

To be sure, a lot of us were raised in backgrounds where we expected to be saved *from* "the late, great planet earth" instead of *with* creation. Salvation was "going to heaven when you die"—that is, the real you—the soul, sloughing off its mortal coil. In spite of apparent disembodiment, heaven was like winning the national sweepstakes: your own mansion, streets of gold, jewels in your crown, and so forth. Before there was "Left Behind" there was "Thief in the Night," and I recall waking up in a cold sweat, wondering if my parents had been taken and I was left behind.

There are two "Gentile" ways of misreading the biblical plot with respect to the dawn of the kingdom of God.

The first is to think of salvation as the liberation of the soul from the body. As we see especially in Plato, there is an "upper world" of eternal spirit or mind and a "lower world" of mere appearances, the prison-house of the body, chained to the ever-changing realm of historical flux. So the soul or mind strives to ascend upward, away from the lower world.

The other Gentile misreading of the kingdom is to imagine that it's a perfection of human society from below, something that we can bring about gradually through our own activity. At least according to orthodox Jews, the kingdom of God is not an ethereal "other world," but this world re-created. Yet it is also something that comes to earth from heaven, through God's Messiah, not something that human beings can bring about. It's interesting to read contemporary Jewish scholars who point out that for orthodox Jews at least, not even the modern state of Israel can be identified with God's kingdom. In fact, some call this "blasphemy," because it confuses the work of human beings and their own political orders with that apocalyptic order that God will create when he sends his Messiah into our history.

Now, Jesus's religious contemporaries had their own misunderstandings of the kingdom, which even the disciples assumed until they understood the purpose of Christ's mission after his resurrection. However, their mistakes were different from the usual "Gentile" readings.

Bell avoids the first "Gentile" misreading. Rob Bell's vision of heaven in one sense is much closer to the Bible than the images of Sunday school. Whereas Greeks and Romans were looking for the release of their divine spirit from its bodily prison-house, Jews in the first century (at least the more orthodox) longed for the resurrection of the dead and everlasting life beyond the reach of sin, death, injustice, and

violence. At last, God would dwell in the midst of his people—in peace, as the source of the renewal of the whole cosmos. The categories were “this age” and “the age to come,” not “this world” of mere appearances (earth, body, history) versus the “other world” of eternal mind.

Jesus and Paul invoke these categories of “this age” and “the age to come” repeatedly. The Triune God who created the world also preserves it, redeemed it, and will one day bring it into the everlasting Sabbath that the head of the new creation—Jesus Christ—has already claimed for us at the Father’s right hand. So Christians confess, “I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.” Sure, there’s the intermediate state where our souls are guarded in God’s presence before the resurrection that we will all share together, but as glorious as that is, our ultimate hope is the consummation of God’s blessings for the creation that he has made. Salvation is not escape from everything worldly, but the liberation of everything worldly from its bondage to sin and death (Rom 8:23-25).

However, Bell escapes the jaws of the first Gentile error only to embrace the second. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that the new covenant is greater than the old because it is founded on better promises, with a better mediator, a better sacrifice, and an everlasting blessing based on God’s work instead of a temporal blessing (or curse) based on Israel’s obedience. Because the kingdom comes to earth from heaven, it is indestructible; it can’t be shaken, as even Israel was ever since the exile. We are not called to build the kingdom or to realize it by our effort, but to receive it. “Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe. For our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:28-29).

We’re not building the kingdom, but receiving it. The proper response is gratitude, not achievement. The Messiah did not come into the world to get the kingdom started, only to leave its results in our hands; he brought the kingdom, founded it in his own blood, and now his ambassadors are taking its message to the ends of the earth. “But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Mat 24:13-14). The end of what? The end of “this present evil age,” as the resurrection and last judgment turn the page on history as we know it and the everlasting history of God with his people endures from age to age. According to the prophets, John the Baptist, and Jesus, the arrival of the kingdom is not an era of gradual human improvement of the world’s conditions, but the radical inbreaking of God himself into our history, in judgment and grace. Wrath is just as evident in the kingdom motif as forgiveness. Blessing is not to be taken for granted by those who think they’re entitled to it. It’s a time of division within the house of Israel itself, where some are baptized with the Spirit and others with fire. But in this time between Christ’s two advents, it is an opportunity to proclaim the gospel and welcome people “of every nation, tribe, and tongue” to the feast of the Lamb (Rev 5:9). Christ did the work of redemption and reconciliation. Our work is merely to announce it to the world, as the Spirit gathers strangers into a communion of saints who are justified through faith in Christ.

In Rob Bell’s vision, though, the uniqueness of Christ’s person and work in this unfolding drama is seriously undermined. Striking the pose of a radical reformer, Bell asserts in the preface that “Jesus’s

story has been hijacked by a number of other stories....The plot has been lost, and it's time to reclaim it." In fact, the author seems to regard the traditional doctrine of hell as a strange and shocking heresy that has lately corrupted the church's faith: "A staggering number of people have been taught that a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven, while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chance for anything better." However, this belief "is misguided and toxic." "And so this book."

But has he gone too far?

### **Rhetorical Questions**

Stepping down from the pulpit, the author bends over backwards to join the gallery of those who have been burned by the church. "Lots of people" with questions are just told "'We don't discuss those things here.'" What follows are lots of questions—actually rhetorical questions: implied answers disguised as questions. In fact, it's more like cross-examination ("Where were you on the night of October 33<sup>rd</sup>?") than wondering out loud. Good questioning leads you to evaluate the options. In this book, though, I get the impression that the questions—many of them caricatures—are more of a quick-and-easy way of dismissing rival views.

At the heart of these nearly rhetorical questions there seems to be a cluster of *a priori* dogmas. That is, a set of assumptions he already has decided determine the possible results in advance of examining the passages. Though Bell might not agree with my interpretation, I think these central dogmas can be summarized in the following syllogisms:

**God:** God's attributes are reducible to love; Love requires the best outcome for the greatest number of people. Therefore, God's nature requires universal salvation.

Examples of this argument abound: Will only some be saved, and the rest damned? "Can God do this, or even allow this, and still claim to be a loving God?" (2) Yet the author alternates between contradictory assumptions: on one hand, an Arminian view of God's universal saving intention, dependent for its realization on human choice, and on the other hand, a quasi-Calvinist emphasis on God's grace winning out over human sin and unbelief. "Will all people be saved, or will God not get what God wants? Does this magnificent, mighty, marvelous God *fail* in the end?" (98). Of course, this is the question that Calvinists ask their Arminian friends. But Bell wants to have his cake and eat it too: "Although God is powerful and mighty, when it comes to the human heart God has to play by the same rules we do. God has to respect our freedom to choose to the very end, even at the risk of the relationship itself" (103-4).

**Us:** Human beings are basically good, but some of us especially do terrible things and these acts combine to create terrible systematic injustices and evils in the world. We have autonomous free will and can either choose to make the world (and ourselves) better (heaven-like) or worse (hell-like). Therefore, with enough time, people will change.

**Gospel:** And how are the few saved in the traditional view? “Chance? Luck? Random selection? Being born in the right place, family, or country? Having a youth pastor who ‘relates better to the kids’? God choosing you instead of others? What kind of faith is that? Or, more important: What kind of God is that? And whenever people claim that one group is in, saved, accepted by God, forgiven, enlightened, redeemed—and everybody else isn’t—why is it that those who make this claim are almost always part of the group that is ‘in’?” (3). Perhaps because most advocates for the gospel are themselves adherents? Just another “wink-wink-nudge-nudge” kind of question that promises more than it delivers. Bell relates overhearing a conversation in which some Christians were lamenting the fact that someone had died as an atheist to the end, without hope. “Is this is the sacred calling of Christians—to announce that there’s no hope?” (4). Again, dismiss views by caricaturing them—this seems to be Bell’s policy in this book. It may well be that someone in that number had been proclaiming the hope of the gospel to the dying man every day until the end.

For Bell, the nearly ubiquitous call to “live the gospel” is apparent. More than the unique redeemer of the world, Jesus becomes an instrument of God’s work of rebuilding society that we are called to complete. “God is doing a new work through Jesus, calling all people to human solidarity. Everybody is a brother, a sister. Equals, children of the God who shows no favoritism. To reject this new social order was to reject Jesus, the very movement of God in flesh and blood” (75-6). So just as heaven is subjectivized as a state of social peace and justice, hell is an existential condition. Concerning the parable of rich man and Lazarus, Bell explains with regard to the rich man, “He’s dead, but he hasn’t died. He’s in Hades, but he still hasn’t *died* the kind of death that actually brings life” (77). The chasm separating them is “a widening gap between the rich and the poor” (78). True: Some focus on systemic evils, others on individual sins (78). “There are individual hells, and communal, society-wide hells, and Jesus teaches us to take both seriously. There is hell now, and there is hell later, and Jesus teaches us to take both seriously” (79). After this, though, there is no word about “hell later,” except to say that it doesn’t exist, at least as a place of everlasting judgment.

The author buries us in a barrage of questions, and asks them in such a way as to give the impression that (a) the answer he rejects is traditionally held or stated by most Christians and (b) there is no way to reach a conclusion other than his own given these options. There are so many worrying questions about whether salvation depends on the age of accountability, saying a prayer or having an emotional experience (5-6). “What about people who have never said the prayer and don’t claim to be Christians, but live a more Christlike life than some Christians?” (6). Again, his assumption seems to be that we are saved by our works, as if a “more Christlike life” trumps faith in Christ.

But then there’s the question of whether the gospel is something that has to be announced, as Romans 10 teaches. “If our salvation, our future, our destiny is dependent on others bringing the message to us, teaching us, showing us—what happens if they don’t do their part? What if the missionary gets a flat tire? This raises another, far more disturbing question: Is your future in someone else’s hands? Which raises another question: Is someone else’s eternity resting in your hands?” (9).

Nowhere does Bell entertain the possibility that God has chosen not only whom he will save but the means and that he will ensure that everyone he intends to save will in fact hear the gospel through

messengers. That kind of God cannot exist, because it would violate his a priori assumptions about who God is in the first place.

Even if some say that we aren't saved by works, "Accepting, confessing, believing—those are things we do. Does that mean, then, that heaven is dependent on something I do? How is any of that grace?" (11). Bell does not entertain the reply that faith itself is a gift of God and therefore of grace alone (Eph 2:8-9).

Then Bell turns to examples in the Gospels. The implication is that even Jesus is somewhat confusing in laying out the conditions of salvation. There is the Roman centurion to whom Jesus said in Luke 7, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel" (12). "Then in Luke 18," the Pharisee and the tax-collector says, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." "And then in Luke 23, the man hanging on the cross next to Jesus says to him, 'Remember me when you come into your kingdom,' and Jesus assures him that they'll be together in paradise" (12). "So is it what you say that saves you? But then in John 3 Jesus tells a man named Nicodemus that if he wants to see the 'kingdom of God' he must be 'born again.' And in Luke 20, when Jesus is asked about the afterlife, he refers in his response to 'those who are considered worthy of taking part in the age to come.' So is it about being born again or being considered worthy? Is it what you say or what you are that saves you?" Then in Matthew 6 it seems to be contingent on forgiving others (13). In Matthew 7 and 10, Jesus teaches that we must do the will of his Father and stand firm to the end to be saved. "Which is it? Is it what we say, or what we are, or who we forgive, or whether we do the will of God, or if we 'stand firm' or not?"

"Which of course raises the question: Is that the best God can do? Which leads to a far more disturbing question. So is it true that the kind of person you are doesn't ultimately matter, as long as you've said or prayed or believed the right things?" A gospel about going "somewhere else" instead of making a difference here (6).

"Then which Jesus?" He quotes a writer who was raped by her father while he was reciting the Lord's Prayer and singing hymns. "That Jesus?", Bell asks (7). The Jesus of a group of Christians who rounded up Muslims and shot them? "Some Jesuses should be rejected" (9). Of course. I don't know any Christian who would disagree with that ostensibly radical conclusion.

The drive-by citations continue, as Bell multiplies the list of conditions (or questions). "But this isn't just a book of questions. It's a book of responses to these questions" (19). Actually, in every series of questions there are already implied answers. He's not working inductively (from questions to particular passages to a conclusion), but deductively (from central a priori conclusions to passages that somehow have to fit with his system).

Of course, we all interpret the parts (specific passages) in the light of the whole (what we believe to be consistent with the rest of the Bible's teaching). However, theology has to be attentive to the biblical text, corrected by it. You know you're not just talking to yourself when you meet up with passages that confuse you, frustrate you, that you can't fit into your system. Ironically, Bell seems to think that this is the sin that others commit, but there is remarkably little—indeed, no—wrestling with any passage that might prove challenging to his thesis. And most inclusivists I know would say that there are passages

like that for them. These central dogmas make it impossible not to agree with Bell's conclusions—unless you have a problem with the dogmas. And I do.

## Answers

Implied already in the “questions” are the following answers the pre-determine Bell's assertions. At the heart are the following assumptions:

1. God's Love Trumps Everything—including God's Other Attributes
2. Sin is Subjective
3. Salvation is Subjective
4. Heaven and Hell are Subjective

### *Chapter 2 Here is the New There*

Salvation isn't just about your soul going to heaven when you die. Whatever Dante and pious grandmothers have taught us, the mainstream theology of the church has always focused the Christian hope on “the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.” Nevertheless, N. T. Wright, Brian McLaren, and now Rob Bell announce this as if it were a press release for some shocking new revision of Christianity.

We don't deny the realities of which Bell speaks: the end of oppression, injustice, poverty, violence, and the reign of righteousness and love. However, we cannot bring new creation into existence. With Christ, the age to come has been inaugurated, but it will not be consummated until Christ's returns. In the meantime, we proclaim the gospel, baptize, and teach everything Christ delivered, and we love and serve our neighbors in our callings in the world.

In Rob Bell's account, though, it is up to us to bring about this consummation. Jesus didn't tell the rich young ruler that it's all by grace, a gift. Rather, he told him to keep the commandments. “This wasn't what Jesus was supposed to say” (27). “Jesus blurs the lines, inviting the rich man, and us, into the merging of heaven and earth, the future and present, *here* and *now*” (59). Jesus was preparing his followers for a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-everything feast (33-34). This obviously changes the way we live now (a point on which I can only enthusiastically agree). Bell nicely observes that the way we talk about crowns, mansions, streets of gold, and so forth, make it sound as if the age to come fulfills our greed rather than creating delight in each other without coveting or going to war over it (46-48). However, ironically his exegesis of 1 Cor 3 (works being tested by fire) is similar to the misunderstanding of many conservatives. Where Paul is focusing on the ministry of pastors who build on the foundation with flimsy versus precious materials watching their work exposed as a sham, Bell interprets the passage as “flames in heaven,” where individuals suffer the purging of their inmost attitudes and actions. “The ones you've despised for years. Your racist attitude would simply not survive. Those flames in heaven would be hot” (50). As in most doctrines of purgatory, the line between heaven and hell becomes thin indeed.

“Heaven, it turns out, is full of the unexpected. In a story Jesus tells in Luke 18 about two men going up to the temple to pray, it’s the ‘sinner,’ the ‘unrighteous man,’ who goes home justified, while the faithful, observant religious man is harshly judged. Again, surprise” (52). This is what “heaven” and “hell” are all about: existential judgment versus existential blessing. Bell imagines a woman who has struggled to raise her children alone. This is what it means for Jesus to invite people to enter his kingdom. “Does God say to her, ‘You’re the kind of person I can run the world with?’” (53). Who is the ‘kind of person’ God ‘can trust run the world with’?

So getting into Christ’s kingdom is based on our works after all. Wow, given how badly I’ve run my own life, I’m pretty sure I’m—we’re—lost unless God comes down and take care of things himself. Isn’t the creation of the new world a gift? These religious people—they’re always talking warmly and sweetly about this really easy salvation plan and then they come back with some serious fine print. Is this the fine print? And this leads to a far more disturbing question: If “salvation” is basically a project that we’re completing with God right now on earth, then is there really any hope for anyone else either? Bell says that to the rich and famous Jesus asks, “Where did they spend those millions of dollars? What did they do with those talents? How did they use their influence? Did they use any of it to help create the new world God is making?” (54). “When it comes to people, then—the *who* of heaven—what Jesus does again and again is warn us against rash judgments about who’s in and who’s out” (54). Some people *are* “out”?

Then there is the thief on the cross: “He simply asks to be remembered by Jesus in the age to come...Jesus assures him that he’ll be with him in paradise...that day. The man hadn’t asked about today; he had asked about that day. He believes that God is doing something new through Jesus and he wants to be a part of it, whenever it is. And that’s all Jesus needs to hear to promise him ‘paradise’ later that day. Just around the corner. In a few hours” (55). Bell does affirm the intermediate state—namely, the soul’s presence with God until the resurrection (56). Nevertheless, he doesn’t show how this—and the believing thief’s presence with Jesus later that day “in paradise”—fit with his subjective definition of heaven and hell.

### *Chapter 3 Hell*

Like heaven, hell is described in Scripture with vivid metaphors and analogies drawn from everyday experience. Whatever is meant by such images and expressions as “lake of fire,” where “the smoke goes up forever” and “the worm doesn’t die,” the referent is clearly a place and not just a state of mind. Every evangelical expositor I’ve come across points out the term for hell as Gehenna, referring to the city dump near Jerusalem. However, for Bell, once again it’s subjectivized: “So the next time someone asks you if you believe in an actual hell, you can always say, ‘Yes, I do believe that my garbage goes somewhere...’” (68). “Gehenna, the town garbage pile. And that’s it. Those are all the mentions of ‘hell’ in the Bible” (69). Also Hades (69). Hell is Rwanda and rape (70-1).

So when people say they don’t believe in hell and they don’t like the word ‘sin,’ my first response is to ask, ‘Have you sat and talked with a family who just found out their child has been molested? Repeatedly? Over a number of years? By a relative?...And that’s what we find in Jesus’s teaching about

hell—a volatile mixture of images, pictures, and metaphors that describe the very real experiences and consequences of rejecting our God-given goodness and humanity. Something we are all free to do, anytime, anywhere, with anyone. He uses hyperbole often....Other times he sounds just plain violent. But when you've sat with a wife who has found out that her husband has been cheating on her for years,...and you see the concentric rings of pain that are going to emanate from this one man's choices—in that moment Jesus's warnings don't seem that over-the-top or drastic; they seem perfectly spot-on...Some agony needs agonizing language. Some destruction does make you think of fire. Some betrayal actually feels like you've been burned. Some injustices do cause things to heat up (73).

Jesus didn't come to drive out the Romans. "He was trying to bring Israel back to its roots, to its divine calling to be a light to the world, showing the nations just what the redeeming love of God looks like" (80). Although he's right about the Romans, Bell repeats his assumption that we've just fallen off the glory road and can get back on track with the right program. Is this really what Jesus was trying to do: to show "just what the redeeming love of God looks like"? Or was he actually achieving redemption through his obedient life, death, and resurrection? He points out that Jesus predicted the destruction of the temple in Matthew 24-25. The Romans did crush Jerusalem and destroy the temple. However, he adds, "Because of this history, it's important that we don't take Jesus's very real and prescient warnings about judgment *then* out of context, making them about someday, somewhere else. That wasn't what he was talking about" (81).

This is a good place to see where Bell collapses the future events of Christ's return into the present tense. In that Olivet discourse (Mat 24-25), Jesus does indeed predict the temple's destruction within the lifetime of some of his hearers. Nevertheless, he also speaks clearly of an apparently lengthy period marked simultaneously by suffering and the proclamation of the gospel—after which, he will return in glory to judge the living and the dead. In Bell's telling, however, *all* of this has already happened and is already happening. Furthermore, Jesus speaks clearly in that discourse concerning the pattern of events at his coming. First, with his angels he "will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other" (Mat 24:31). "As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man." Just as "they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man" (vv 37-39). In that day, the master will come to the faithless servant "and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (v 51), cast "into the outer darkness" (v 30). The Son of Man will separate the sheep from the goats, welcoming the sheep. However, the goats will be condemned. "And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Mat 25:31-46).

Of course, Jesus speaks of judgment, Bell allows. "But in reading all of the passages in which Jesus uses the word 'hell,' what is so striking is that people believing the right or wrong things isn't his point. He's often not talking about 'beliefs' as we think of them—he's talking about anger and lust and indifferent...about the kind of effect they have on the world" (82). In other words, deeds, not creeds. Yet not even a mention is made of the many references to faith in Christ, believing in his name, and similar phrases as the way of receiving forgiveness and entrance into his kingdom. Jesus presses Martha to make this confession in John 11:24-27: not only assent to the doctrine of the resurrection, but faith in

him as “the Resurrection and the Life.” Similarly, he presses his disciples on just this point (Mk 8:29). Bell simply does not deal with some of the most obvious texts on this question.

Bell’s interpretation of Jesus’s teaching in Matthew 10 concerning the judgment of the people in Capernaum being worse than the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah is especially creative. Of course, in Genesis 19 there is a historical narrative of an actual historical event in which these cities were destroyed by fire. But in Ezekiel 16, it’s promised that people will return and God will restore the fortunes of the cities. Therefore, Bell draws this conclusion: “What appeared to be a final, forever, smoldering, smoking verdict regarding their destiny...wasn’t? What appeared to be over, isn’t.” Ezekiel says that where there was destruction there will be restoration.” Then in Mat 10 Jesus “warns the people living in the village of Capernaum, ‘It will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for you.’ More bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah? He tells highly committed, pious, religious people that it will be better for Sodom and Gomorrah than them on judgment day? There’s still hope? And if there’s still hope for Sodom and Gomorrah, what does that say about all of the other Sodoms and Gomorrah?” (84-5).

There is no wrestling here with the difference between the temporal judgments of temporal nations, pointing typologically to Christ’s final judgment and everlasting reign. Instead, Sodom and Gomorrah become allegorized as examples of a purgatory that leads to refinement and hope. Taking *aion* in Matthew 25 to mean “age” or “period of time” and *kolozo* as “pruning or trimming,” Bell concludes that the everlasting judgment to which Jesus refers is actually “‘a period of pruning’ or ‘a time of trimming,’ or an intense experience of correction” (91). Similarly, the Hebrew word “*olam*” is also “a versatile, pliable word, in most occurrences referring to a particular period of time” (92). This is simply poor exegesis. What about *aion* in John 3:16? In Bell’s view, Jesus brings not everlasting life but “life for a period of time.” And although *olam* is often used in the Old Testament to refer to God as eternal, it too must mean that God’s existence is similarly “for a period of time.” In John 3:18 Jesus says of himself, “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” There is no reason take “condemnation” here to be any less everlasting than the salvation that he promises.

#### *Chapter 4: Does God Get What God Wants?*

In this chapter the central dogma becomes especially evident. It’s the old conundrum: God is either sovereign or loving. Bell bases his conclusion on the premise that God has determined to save everyone and that it’s only their absolutely free will that makes the difference. “Will all people be saved, or will God not get what God wants? Does this magnificent, mighty, marvelous God *fail* in the end?” (98). He turns to passages that speak of God’s gracious purpose including all nations, not just Israel, to justify his claim that God has chosen to save each and every person. He switches back and forth between an Arminian argument for free will and a Calvinist emphasis on God’s sovereign grace. God always get what God wants, but God wants to save everybody and ultimately some people may choose their own private hell even in heaven.

Bell refers to a church website that says, “‘We get one life to choose heaven or hell, and once we die, that’s it. One or the other, forever.’ God in the end doesn’t get what God wants, it’s declared, because some will turn, repent, and believe, and others won’t” (103). However, that website appears to be paraphrasing Hebrews 9:27: “And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.” (In fact, the writer to the Hebrews warns in the next chapter—10:27, 31, 39—that those who turn away from Christ of “a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries...It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God...But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls”.)

Back to the Arminian argument: “Although God is powerful and mighty, when it comes to the human heart God has to play by the same rules we do. God has to respect our freedom to choose to the very end, even at the risk of the relationship itself” (103-4). Given what Bell already knows—namely, that love is God one defining attribute, God has chosen to save everyone, but genuine love demands that free will have the last word, it must be that people have a second chance at salvation after they die. I confess that this part confused me at first. Why do people need a second chance for salvation if they aren’t un-saved in the first place? But then the logic becomes clearer: given enough time, even the hardest hearts will open themselves to God’s goodness. So maybe there are “endless opportunities in an endless amount of time for people to say yes to God. As long as it takes, in other words” (106-7). Apparently, the only thing sinners need is more time plus suffering/mercy. Just as subjective as that blurry line between heaven and hell is the line between mercy and judgment. God’s justice is never retributive, but only restorative. Not surprisingly, he calls upon Origen for support (107), as if the ancient theologian had offered a legitimate option in church history. At the center of the Christian tradition since the first church have been a number who insist that history is not tragic, hell is not forever, and love, in the end, wins and all will be reconciled to God...Or, to be more specific, serious, orthodox followers of Jesus have answered these questions in a number of different ways” (109).

However, Origen’s views—especially the eternal pre-existence of the soul, the questioning of the bodily nature of the resurrection, and the restoration of all souls through a series of purgative re-incarnations (*apocatasis*) were condemned at the Synod of Constantinople in 543.

Rather than engaging in serious exegesis, Bell simply asserts another deductive dogma: “Restoration brings God glory; eternal torment doesn’t” (108). Everlasting punishment just “isn’t a very good story” (110). “Many have refused to accept the scenario in which somebody is pounding on the door, apologizing, repenting, and asking God to be let in, only to hear God say through the keyhole: ‘Door’s locked. Sorry. If you had been here earlier, I could have done something. But now, it’s too late’” (108). Indeed, many have refused to accept such a scenario, including Noah’s neighbors, but God did shut the door. And Jesus explicitly draws on this example in his warning of judgment (Mat 24:37-39).

The vivid warnings of escaping the coming wrath that we find in the epistles (Rom 1:8; 2:2-5; 5:9; 9:22-24; 14:10; 2 Cor 5:10; Eph 2:3; 5:6; Col 3:6; 1 Thes 5:1-11; Heb 9:27; 10:27; 2 Pet 2:9; 3:1-13; Jude 1:6, etc.) are simply not addressed in this book.

Not even in the Book of Revelation, where we read of “the wrath of the Lamb” and the last judgment in the most vivid terms, making the holy wars of the old covenant pale in comparison, is there any place for everlasting punishment. Everyone is in heaven. Everyone is at the party, even if some insist on sitting in the corner in defiance, creating their own private hell. Thus, even in the New City we’re free to embrace our own hell if we want. “Let’s pause here and ask the obvious question: How could someone choose another way with a universe of love and joy and peace right in front of them—all of it theirs if they would simply leave behind the old ways and receive the new life of the new city in the new world?” (113-14). Again, the deep depravity of the fallen heart is not appreciated in Bell’s account. He assumes that, given enough time and enough experience of the joys of the party, sooner or later the most resolute unbeliever will join in. For Bell, the fact that the gates are never shut means that there’s always an opportunity for those who choose hell to join in the celebration (114-15).

#### *Chapter 5: Dying to Live*

For me, the greatest danger of Bell’s interpretation in this book is his view of Christ’s cross. Obviously, if there is no wrath or judgment, then whatever Christ achieved for us on the cross cannot be understood in terms of a vicarious substitute. There is no objective propitiation and, since everyone is already God’s friend (regardless of whether God is theirs), no objective reconciliation.

So it’s not surprising that Bell explicitly downplays this aspect of Christ’s work:

There’s nothing wrong with talking and singing about how the ‘Blood will never lose its power’ and “nothing but the blood will save us.’ Those are powerful metaphors. But we don’t live any longer in a culture in which people offer animal sacrifices to the god. People did live that way for thousands of years, and there are pockets of primitive cultures around the world that do continue to understand sin, guilt, and atonement in those ways. But most of us don’t. What the first Christians did was look around them and put the Jesus story in language their listeners would understand...They were reading their world, looking for ways to communicate this epic event in ways their listeners could grasp (128-9).

This is exegetically untenable, historically inaccurate, and spiritually destructive. First, the reference point for Christ’s substitutionary atonement is the sacrificial system instituted by God, not pagan sacrifices. Second, the Christians who wrote the hymns to which he refers were no closer to the world of pagan sacrifice than are we. Third, Christ’s work on the cross was not an object lesson. What kind of a father would offer up his own son in the place of his enemies simply as a way of teaching something about something else? Scripture clearly teaches that the Father gave his Son in our place, that Jesus bore our sins in his body on the cross. This is not a metaphor or a way of putting things in terms that first-century pagan-sacrificers would have understood; it is God’s saving gift in history. To be sure, in doing this, God accomplished more. Because this vicarious sacrifice absorbed the legal debt that we owed, Satan, death and hell no longer have a claim on us. The powers of darkness are defeated and Christ is the victor. Yet none of this is possible unless Christ’s death is first of all a satisfaction of God’s justice.

Bell is no more helpful when it comes to the resurrection of Christ. Although he affirms the resurrection, he turns it into a species of natural religion. Ironically, he death not as “the last enemy to

be destroyed” (1 Cor 15:26), but, ironically, in a more Greek (Platonic) way, as the natural portal to life. Rather than a surprising announcement that God has broken the vicious cycle of death, death-and-resurrection become an eternal truth that the cross and resurrection represent: “For nature to spring to life, it first has to die. Death, then resurrection. This is true for ecosystems, food chains, the seasons—it’s true all across the environment. Death gives way to life” (130). “Death is the engine of life in the relational realm as well...So when the writers of the Bible talk about Jesus’s resurrection bringing new life to the world, they aren’t talking about a new concept. They’re talking about something that has always been true. It’s how the world works. Although the cross is often understood as a religious icon, it’s a symbol of an elemental reality, one we all experience every time we take a bite of food. Once again, death and rebirth are as old as the world” (131). This is pure Romanticism, natural theology at its worst.

#### *Chapter 6: There Are Rocks Everywhere*

Speaking of natural religion, Bell collapses saving grace into common grace and general revelation into special revelation. In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul speaks of the Rock that followed Israel in the wilderness as Christ. “Paul finds Jesus there, in that rock, because Paul finds Jesus everywhere” (144). Literally, everywhere: “There is an energy in the world, a spark, an electricity that everything is plugged into. The Greeks called it zoe, the mystics call it ‘Spirit,’ and Obi-Wan called it ‘the Force’” (144).

The Bible calls this the Word of God and the Word became flesh (146). Therefore, although Christ is the only Savior, he is restoring all things through various religions. “As soon as the door is opened to Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Baptists from Cleveland, many Christians become very uneasy, saying then that Jesus doesn’t matter anymore, the cross is irrelevant, it doesn’t matter what you believe, and so forth. Not true. Absolutely, unequivocally, unalterably not true. What Jesus does is declare that he, and he alone, is saving everybody. And then he leaves the door way, way open” (155). So, like Christ’s death and resurrection, the Word and the sacraments are symbolic of eternal truths in the sacred cosmos. “These rituals are true for us, because they’re true for everybody. They unite us, because they unite everybody. These are signs, glimpses, and tastes of what is true for all people in all places at all times—we simply name the mystery present in all the world, the gospel already announced to every creature under heaven...He is the sacred power present in every dimension of creation” (157). So whatever you do to show you accept God’s love, do it. “Whatever words you find helpful for describing this act of trust. Jesus invites us to say yes to this love of God, again and again and again” (194).

#### *Chapter 7: The Good News is Better Than That*

According to Bell, heaven and hell are not actual places but subjective states in which people live. To be sure, living “heavenly” or “hellishly” will affect the people around us and the wider society. In the parable of the prodigal son, we are at a party and it’s up to us whether we’ll join in or sit off to the side in protest. “In this story, heaven and hell are within each other, intertwined, interwoven, bumping up against each other” (170).

Any other interpretation would violate the central dogmas that Bell has already made evident. “A loving heavenly father who will go to extraordinary lengths to have a relationship with them would, in

the blink of an eye, become a cruel, mean, vicious tormenter who would ensure that they had no escape from an endless future of agony. If there were an earthly father who was like that, we would call the authorities" (173-4). "That kind of God is simply devastating. Psychologically crushing. We can't bear it. No one can" (174). "We're at the party, but we don't have to join in. Heaven or hell. Both at the party" (176).

So we can ultimately choose our own personal "hell" and, evidently, inflict pain on others by not joining the party. So, I ask Rob Bell, does God *really* get what he wants? Does love *really* win? Even when heaven—the age to come—is still a place where people can still sit the party out, presumably along with the hellish effects that Bell has already acknowledged such resistance to entail?

The gospel is better than "me and my personal relationship with God." It is truly cosmos-encompassing, not only with people from every nation and tongue gathered around the Lamb, but with a new heavens and earth. And this does change our existence here and now, as we are transferred from the kingdom of death to the kingdom of life in God's Son. However, in *Love Wins*, the rich and surprising story of God's indefatigable love is thinned out to something that is more palatable to a culture that cannot face the reality of a God who is still just and holy, and therefore "a consuming fire," apart from the mediation of his Son, whom he has freely given—and still freely gives—to all who will receive him.

#### *Chapter 8: The End is Here*

The title of this chapter reinforces the impression that Bell has simply collapsed the future into the present.

I share Bell's sense of confusion with many of the mixed messages of my evangelical childhood. On one hand, we sang, "This is My Father's World." On the other hand, we sang, "This world is not my home; I'm just passing through." One of the things that struck me about Reformed theology is that its view of redemption was as encompassing as sin. As the Calvinist hymn-writer Isaac Watts put it, "Joy to the world...as far as the curse is found." I agree wholeheartedly when Bell writes, "A gospel that leaves out its cosmic scope will always feel small" (135). Paul joyfully includes not only our souls but our bodies—and not only our bodies, but the whole expanse of the creaturely world, in the train of Christ's victory (Rom 8:20-23). "For in this hope we were saved" (v 24). Yet Paul adds, "Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience" (v 25).

I also share Bell's verdict that some churches are toxic places. "That God is angry, demanding, a slave driver, and so that God's religion becomes a system of sin management, constantly working and angling to avoid what surely must be the coming wrath that lurks behind every corner, thought, and sin" (183). The gospel message I recall from my childhood was a mixed message. On one hand, salvation was by grace alone in Christ alone through faith alone. On the other hand, everything depended ultimately on me: my decision, my prayer, my "walking with the Lord," my commitment, and—at least if I wanted jewels in my crown—on extraordinary piety beyond the entrance requirements.

However, Rob Bell is far more confusing (and “toxic” is probably not too strong) on just these points. First, the age to come is so identified with this present age that I’m not sure how he thinks the two collide here and now, apart from our own determination to make heaven on earth through social renewal. What exactly makes Jesus Christ the unique Savior of the world? And what is qualitatively new when he returns? For what are we still longing, that only his presence in the flesh can satisfy—not only for us but for the restoration of the created order? Second, no less than those he criticizes, Bell alternates between salvation by grace and works. Do we enter the new creation, justified and forgiven, because of our “Christlike life” or by Christ’s life, death and resurrection alone through faith alone? “Forgiveness is unilateral,” he says. “Not because of anything we’ve done” (189). Apparently, faith is not a gift of God, but an act of our own free will. Yet not even this faith in Christ is necessary. Just be open to God’s love. And even if you’re not, it’s fine. Given enough time, you’ll come around—even if it takes suffering “the flames of heaven.” Is this a kinder, gentler sort of purgatory?

It’s time for us to stop the speculation. Dante and the old revivalists were wrong to speculate about the details of heaven and hell that God has not been pleased to reveal to us. But Rob Bell is no less speculative. Where Scripture has clearly spoken, Bell has not wrestled sufficiently. Yet where Scripture is silent, he unleashes his imagination.

Bell still claims to be working within the ambit of “the historic, orthodox Christian faith” (x). The questions—or rather, objections—he has raised are simply part of an “ongoing discussion” in the church, with “all its vibrant, diverse, messy, multivoiced complexity” (xi). He interprets Jesus as inviting this kind of questioning: “‘What do you think? How do you read it?’ he asks, again and again. The ancient sages said the words of the sacred text were black letters on a white page—there’s all that white space, waiting to be filled with our responses and discussions and opinions and longings and desires and wisdom and insights” (x). However, Jesus did not believe that God’s Word is a three-ring binder in which we can add our own ruminations. At some point, believers have to wrestle with the passages. And this is something I did not see in *Love Wins*.

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