

Bell's Hell: A Dialogue With *Love Wins*



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The evangelical world is all a twitter (literally) with the release of Rob Bell's book *Love Wins*.¹ For many it is a bold, Emergent declaration of God's love triumphing over evil, while for others it is merely repackaged Protestant Liberalism. It is my hope in this review to move beyond the labels that either side uses, labels that will leave most readers scratching their heads anyway about what exactly is Protestant Liberalism or the Emergent Movement. Instead, I want to focus on both the positive things that Bell has to say, and also those areas where he misses the point of the Biblical story, or leaves out part of the story, or appears to intentionally mischaracterize people who are discussing the issue of heaven, hell, and the fate of every single person on earth. Before we get into the heart of the review, it might be helpful to give a brief overview of the author, Rob Bell.

I. WHO IS ROB BELL?

Rob Bell is the forty year old founding pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church, the author of several books including *Velvet Elvis* and *Drops Like Stars*, and is probably most recognized for his prolific *Nooma* videos. He is an influential pastor that has had and is having an impact upon the evangelical landscape, and as such his book *Love Wins* must be addressed, as in it Bell sets out to establish the fate of every single person who has ever lived. As a side note to the title, the word "fate" is probably a poor choice given the fatalistic baggage that the word carries, and in

¹ Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

light of Bell's clarion call that a person's future is completely in his or her own hands. There is no outside force dictating a person's fate.

Bell was educated at Wheaton for his undergraduate degree and at Fuller Theological Seminary for his M.Div. He is a wonderful communicator and knows how to speak to his postmodern culture, and it is this ability to connect people with his message that proves to be one of the difficulties in reviewing his book. He knows how to strike the right chords in a person, but I don't think he ends up playing the right melody by the end of his song, at least when it comes to hell and judgment.

II. THE BIG PICTURE THAT BELL PAINTS

So what is the big picture of Bell's new book? To begin with, one must embrace two foundational assumptions to follow Bell on his journey. The first is that God loves everyone and desires everyone to be saved. While most Christians will follow Bell in this position, others will want to argue that God only loves the elect. For the latter sort Bell's book can be dismissed by the end of the first page. But if you are not willing to follow that path, then you will have to continue reading.

The second foundational assumption for Bell is that people are free at any time, before or after death, to turn to God. This freedom is absolute and is neither limited by any outside force, nor is it predicated upon a clear presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. A person can turn to God without explicit knowledge of Jesus, for all that is needed is a desire for truth, justice, and righteousness. The desire for these things will lead a person home. While God is the source of goodness and offers goodness to people, he does nothing in the person to enable them to come to him. In other words, Bell rejects the doctrine of total depravity and opts instead for a Pelagian, or at best semi-pelagian, understanding of human nature. Bell does not explicitly say this in the book, but the sum total of his argument leads one in this direction. His lack of discussion about the effect sin has upon a person's very nature given Paul's repeated claims that people are enslaved to sin is a decided weakness of the book. The issue of how enslavement to sin impacts a person's ability to come to God underlies the entire discussion of the book, but Bell never clearly addresses the issue, and in so doing leaves the reader to guess what his position is.

With these two foundational beliefs Bell sets out to show that at the end of the story, most, if not all people, will come home to God. He bases this upon the twin assertions that repentance is possible post-mortem and that all judgment is remedial and never retributive. Since God loves everyone and desires all to be saved, he will pursue people for

eternity, if need be, to have them repent and come home. Bell seems to believe that no one will be able to outlast the love/judgment of God, and therefore in the end everyone will come around to God's love, but he does leave open the real possibility that someone could resist God forever. It is this possibility that leaves Bell open to a confused understanding of this age and the coming new age, a confusion that results in a clash of the ages that ultimately leaves the new age's arrival in the hands of rebellious humans.

III. WHAT ABOUT THE FLAT TIRES Or, the art of deconstruction

In the first chapter of the book, Bell is at his postmodern finest. Now don't take that as a criticism against him. One thing that postmodernity does well is deconstruct established paradigms. It has a way, like sand, of getting into the tiniest cracks and slowly opening them up and exposing the structural fault lines in a person's belief. It is a position of skepticism, which can be helpful at times, but ultimately leaves a person only with deconstruction and no construction. Deconstruction is relatively easy, you just tear things down. Construction on the other hand takes more skill and precision, more patience, and a greater eye to detail. This is why youth groups often do demolition work on mission trips and adults do construction work.

One thing Bell does well in his book is ask questions, deconstruct. In almost every chapter the reader is bombarded with questions piled on top of questions like a wonderfully large deli sandwich. In many a good turn of phrase he is able to capture the questions that skeptics, as well as believers, are asking, or are wanting to ask, or don't know they should ask. By his raising these questions he allows a person who might have these questions, but be afraid to ask them, a chance to get an answer. Alas, however, he leaves many of his questions unanswered, like so much left over sandwich that was too big to finish. It looks appealing on the front end, but Bell does not seem to be up to task of finishing the sandwich he built. Nevertheless, the questions are still valid ones that deserve an answer, and those people who are asking questions also deserve answers, but this is an area where Bell and I may tend to disagree as to what the answers are.

Bell states in the preface of his book that "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 debates and opinions and longings and desires and wisdom and

insights.”² I wonder if for Bell the white space is not more important than the black letters. While the white space opens up room for dialog, the dialog should point us toward an understanding of the black letters. Words on a page have meaning, they are not free floating texts that can be interpreted as the reader desires. While a reader-response approach is clearly the hermeneutic of choice for the postmodern age, it is also clearly a hermeneutic that does not seek meaning, but opinion. The quest for knowledge, while perhaps enjoyable and enriching is not the same as arriving at the knowledge after which one quests, any more than a road trip is the destination. Bell appears to value the journey as much as the destination, but in so doing he leaves the destination undefined and the signs on the road have no clear meaning, but are only spaces meant to elicit discussions and questions. This approach to textual meaning might work well in Starbucks as one sits safely with a group of friends, but ignoring a red light at a busy intersection can have disastrous results. Semi-Trailers don't care much for what one's opinion is of the variegated meanings that can be inferred from the color red. Semi-Trailers simply plow through the intersection when they have a green light. Red lights have meaning and black letters do also, and ignoring the meaning of either for the joy of open debate and free discussion can ultimately be disastrous.

When Bell asks about flat tires hindering missionaries from getting the gospel to a group of people in his first chapter he is asking the question about how people come into a saving relationship with God. Bell adeptly shows the complex and varied ways in which people come to God in Scripture. From being let down through a rooftop by friends, to crying on Jesus' feet and wiping them dry, Bell reveals the richness of the biblical narrative and leaves the reader aware that there is no formulaic method of coming to God. There is no fixed paradigm that a person must follow, no standard prayer that one must pray to come to God. In presenting this multidimensional picture of how people come to God, Bell asks the simple question what if the missionary who is heading to a village to tell them about Jesus gets a flat tire? What happens to those people in the village? Bell never answers the question, but suggests that God has it covered somehow. What Bell fails to wrestle with is God's providence over creation. Bell presents the flat tire as if it throws a kink in God's plan as it related to the gospel being presented. Since a flat tire happened, those people will perhaps need to come to God through some other mechanism than a clear gospel presentation.

² Bell, *Love Wins*, x.

Additionally, Bell struggles with the concept of the many and the “few.” And by the ‘few’ Bell is pejoratively talking about the understanding that wide is the gate that leads to destruction and many are they who take it, while narrow is the gate that leads to life and few there are who find it. While I sympathize deeply with Bell’s concern over the many, and we should all feel this concern for people, it is Jesus himself who talked about the narrowness of the way. And Jesus who says that only a few will find it. So for Bell to use this phrase in the rhetorical fashion that he does is simply disingenuous. At the least, he should address why Jesus would use this type of language and why in fact the road is not narrow and those who find it are not few, if indeed it is not and they are not. What exactly did Jesus mean by this phrase? Bell does not address this verse. This is but one example of a pattern in the book in which he does not address those verses that cause his position difficulty. By ignoring verses though, one is not embracing the whole story of Scripture. It would have been more helpful if Bell was upfront with those verses that point away from his conclusion, even if he only admitted that he does not know what to do with them. At the least, he would leave the reader with the full story of what Scripture presents, but as it is, he leaves the unsuspecting reader only hearing a partial account of the biblical evidence. This selective use of scripture is a problem for both liberals and conservatives, for both moderns and post-moderns, and it is a practice that should be avoided by all people who want to hold that the entire Bible is needed for a full picture of our doctrinal positions.

One highlight of the chapter is that Bell introduces a recurring theme that appears throughout the book, and that is the tension he sees in the North American church between orthodoxy and orthopraxy, right belief and right practice. Bell is concerned because he sees many people who claim to be orthodox in their beliefs, but seem to have little or no concern for the suffering in the world. To Bell’s credit, he is deeply concerned with what the church is doing for “the least of these” among us. He is not willing to leave his spirituality as an internal reality that refuses to see suffering in the world and do nothing about it. While I agree with Bell that there are people and churches that have orthodox beliefs, but are unconcerned with the suffering in the world, this caricature cuts across the belief spectrum. While Bell wants to imply that if a person embraces the traditional view on hell, then most likely they will not care about the suffering in this world, he never proves this point, and I don’t think that he can. Nevertheless, his call for the church to reach out to a hurting world with the love of Christ is one that we all need to hear and take seriously. All of us, both individually and as churches, should take a

long, hard look at our budgets to see if in fact we are unduly neglecting those who are suffering in this world.

IV. HERE IS THE NEW THERE Or, how Bell got it Wright and wrong

In Bell's second, and what I feel to be his best, chapter in the book, he describes his view of heaven. If you ever read the wonderful book by N.T. Wright called *Surprised by Hope* you will find much familiar here. Bell asserts that many people (a rather vague phrase that Bell throws around quite often) have an escapist understanding of heaven, in which we get saved in this world only in order to have our ticket punched for the next one. With this perspective, people place all their future in this "other" world and sit back to await the arrival of the bus that will take them to that location. The bus could either be their own deaths or the return of Jesus, but either way, they are simply biding time until they go to the shiny, bright new place. Bell counters this perspective with one in which this fallen, broken age is renewed, recreated in the new age. There is a strong overlap between these two ages, while there is also a stark difference. What Bell wants to emphasize is that our eschatological perspective should impact our current ethic. What we think about the future will impact how we live today, and from this perspective Bell wants to urge a life of present concern for the weak and suffering in this world. Bell is nothing if he is not concerned for those who are down trodden in this life, and for that he should be applauded, regardless of his position on hell.

The Bible is clear that God has a soft spot for the weak and those suffering from injustice in this present world, and that we are called as his people to do something about it now, in this life, and not merely to await a glorious future in which suffering will be vanquished for good. While there is coming an age in which God will wipe the tears from every eye, we are not to sit idly by waiting for that time, but are to be wiping those tears ourselves, even if it makes us cry in the process. Love is costly, love is painful at times, but God has called us to love the world that he loves, to suffer for the world as his Son suffered for the world. As David Platt has written, God has called us to a radical life of service for Him. (As a side note, I wonder if Bell would lump an author like David Platt in with the caricature he creates of those who endorse the traditional view of hell as uncaring of this present world). This eschatological ethic can have a deep motivational factor as we seek to bring God's love and justice into a dark world. There are times when we might be tempted to

give up in the face of darkness, but we can rest assured that one day justice will roll down like waters and cover the earth. It is this eschatological hope of a better dawn that impels us to continue the struggle in the dark night to reveal that dawn, however imperfectly and fragmentary the revealing might be, in the present time. I give Bell a hearty amen to his concern for this present world and his ethical connection between the coming age and present age in which we live.

While I found most of what Bell says in this chapter to be quite helpful and inspiring, there is chaff among the wheat, and it is the chaff that is directly related to Bell's thesis about the fate of every single person who ever lived. So while I think he gets heaven right, he plants the seeds for his thesis in this chapter and so we need to uncover those seeds to see exactly what might grow from them.

First, Bell presents the story of the rich young ruler in an attempt to describe how a 1st century Jewish person would understand heaven not as some other place, but as life in the age to come. It is not Bell's description of heaven though that is the problem, but his truncation of scripture. Let me quote Bell directly in order to show you what I mean. When describing Jesus' answer to the rich young ruler about what he needs to do to have eternal life Bell writes that, "Jesus then tells him, 'Go sell your possessions, and give to the poor, and you will have treasures in heaven,'" which causes the man to walk away sad, "because he had great wealth."³

If a person did not pick up the Bible to check and see if that is what Jesus said they would not have a problem with Bell's quote, it sounds right, and in fact it is right, just not complete. If one looks at the entirety of Jesus' statement one finds the following. "'If you want to be perfect,' Jesus said to him, 'go, sell your belongings and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow Me.' When the young man heard that command, he went away grieving, because he had many possessions."⁴ It is the final clause, the "come, follow me," that is truncated.

Bell might be assuming that if the rich young ruler sold his possessions he would in fact be following Jesus, even if he did not physically follow Jesus. Bell does not say this though, he merely leaves the reader with a partial quote. Now while it might be acceptable in the world of political talk radio shows and TV pundits to selectively quote people to score political points, it should have no place in our formulation of doctrinal beliefs. If Bell's move is innocent, it leaves his

³ Ibid., 29

⁴ Matt 19:21-22

readers with the picture that all Jesus demanded of the rich young ruler was to give up his greed and selfishness, when in fact Jesus also added the stipulation that the rich young ruler needed to follow him; both are necessary, the selling of his goods and the following of Jesus. The rich young ruler could not follow Jesus without selling his possessions, but conversely, it does not appear that he could sell his possessions and by so doing claim that he was following Jesus. Jesus' command to follow comes on the heels of the command to sell and is a separate, albeit connected, command. In order to have eternal life the rich young man must sell everything, give up his idol in other words, and follow Jesus. He must turn from his false idol to the true God. If all he did was give up his former idol by selling his possessions, but refused to follow Jesus explicitly, then another idol would arise in the place of Christ and the man would be back in the same position, if not a worse one.

Another bit of chaff in this chapter is Bell's assertion that "heaven has the potential to be a kind of starting over. Learning how to be human all over again."⁵ The problem that Bell creates for himself with this statement is that he is clear that in the new heaven and new earth there will be no injustice or evil. Bell writes that heaven is "a real place, space, and dimension of God's creation, where God's will and only God's will is done. Heaven is that realm where things are as God intends them to be."⁶ I believe Bell is referring to that heaven to which we go in the intermediate state between death and resurrection that will one day be manifested completely on this earth when heaven and earth come together in the new age. Bell describes this new age as "the day when earth and heaven *will be the same place*."⁷ If Bell is correct—and I think that he is—that in the new age there will not be any evil or injustice, then he has a problem with how people can be in the new age and still have desires that are contrary to God's will.

Bell asserts that heaven has teeth and sharp edges for those who are not ready for it. He gets this idea from C.S. Lewis' book *The Great Divorce*, but unlike Lewis, Bell thinks most people will return to heaven from hell. But Bell's real problem in his understanding of how the Day of the Lord impacts humanity comes when he expands Paul's imagery in 1 Corinthians 3 of a believer's work for the kingdom being judged by fire to include all of humanity. In context, Paul is addressing how a person builds upon the foundation of Christ that was laid in the Corinthian church. A person should check his work to make sure it is not

⁵ Bell, *Love Wins*, 50.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

wood, hay, stubble, but instead precious stones. The fire at the end of the age will test the believer's work, and if the work has value it will pass through the fire, while if the work does not have value it will not survive, but the person will escape as one jumping through fire with only his own life. Bell expands this fire to include all of humanity, a universal purgatory in other words, and in so doing he argues that each person will pass through this fire and have his or her evil burned off. Of course, in Bell's system a person could choose to remain in this fire for all eternity.

Bell posits an end time conflagration that will prepare people for the new age. The new age is on the other side of the fire and so to get to the new age one has to pass through the fire. Bell further asserts that much of the confusion about heaven "comes from the idea that in the blink of an eye we will automatically become totally different people who 'know' everything. But our heart, our character, our desires, our longings—those things take time."⁸ It would appear that Bell is willing to have people in the new age, in the age where only God's will is done, who have desires and longings that are not fully in line with God. But how can this be if in fact in the new age only God's will is done? Bell has confused our present sanctification, in which we are seeking to throw off the sin that so easily entangles, and our future glorification, in which the entanglements of sin are removed completely. In so doing, he has left the arrival of the new age, where God's will is completely done, in the hands of humans who are completely free to accept or reject God.

As long as one person holds out against God the new age cannot fully dawn and God cannot put an end to injustice. So in Bell's effort to keep everyone out of hell, he has also potentially kept everyone out of the new age also. I simply disagree with Bell that heaven, the new age, is the slow burn of a divine do over? When Christ returns he puts down evil decisively and it is this exclusion of evil and all who do evil from the new age that demands, not a slow burn, but the consuming fire of which Peter spoke in his second letter. God is not a divine chauffeur who will wait endlessly for people to stop being evil before he removes evil from his creation, but quite the contrary, God will end evil on his own timetable, not ours. It is our job to be awake and watchful for his return, and so show ourselves as wise and not foolish. This does not mean that God is unloving, but that God is so loving that he will not allow injustice to continue indefinitely, but will bring it to a decisive end.

⁸ Ibid., 51.

V. HELL

Or, now! and later?

I love to buy candy when I go to the movies. 'Now and Laters' are one of my favorites. Rob Bell's conception of hell fits well with the brand-name of that candy with a few punctuation changes. For Bell, hell is Now! And Later? As Bell unfolds his argument for hell, one is tempted to rise to his feet and applaud how he describes the deep desire that we have for a God of wrath who judges the evil in the world. In our post-judgmental culture we prefer to ignore those things that cry out for judgment, but when rape, genocide, murder, or child abuse rear their demonic heads in our faces we long for someone to put an end to these crimes, to restore the victims and bring justice. Bell sounds the clarion call that deep down people need and crave a God who is not apathetic to the evil in the world, and unless one thinks that Bell only majors on the high profile sins, he also says that each of us in our own ways, from our dismissive eye rolls to that well-placed verbal jab that cuts so deep, adds to the misery and suffering in the world. No one is exempt from the defendant's dock.

We have all created hell on earth! Hell is indeed Now! All you have to do is turn on the TV to see that, whether it is the news or our voracious appetite for entertainment that glorifies evil. Bell is clear that there is hell on earth Now, but he is not sure if there will be hell Later. He gains this perspective on the future harrowing of hell from a multitude of passages from the Bible that speak of a final restoration of the earth, a grand coming home of God's rebellious creation. There is a famous poem called *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and one of the lines reads "water, water, everywhere and all the boards did shrink." I feel much the same way about how Bell uses Scripture in this chapter, "texts, texts everywhere, and all the contexts did shrink."

Bell routinely offers the reader a single verse to prove his point, but fails to consider the wider context of the verse. As one example, Bell highlights that Ezekiel 16:53 says Sodom will be restored, and this gives him confidence to say that restoration is available for all people. In context, however, Ezekiel is talking about the collective nation of Israel, both in how it committed greater sins than Sodom and how it would be restored. It is clear though that not everyone in the nation was restored, but only a few. Bell disregards this context and suggests that this verse shows that Sodom, and by this he means every single person who ever lived in Sodom throughout time, would be restored. While this might be a possible interpretation of the passage, although I highly doubt it, he

never addresses that Ezekiel is talking about Sodom as a collective entity, and therefore every single individual might not be in view. It is clear that the nation of Israel would come back into the Promised Land from this passage, but that does not include ever individual. There were many Jews that died in Babylon and never saw the restoration promised in Ezekiel 16.

In all the verses he mentions he see a pattern of judgment leading to restoration. He then applies this to each and every individual in the world. God's judgment is always for restoration according to Bell, but he ignores those passages in the Bible where judgment does not lead to restoration. Furthermore, Bell's confidence in judgment always leading to a person or nation repenting is unfounded. Bell uses Jeremiah 5:3 to show that judgment is for correction, but what he does not address is that they refused correction. In spite of this verse, Bell is confident that if God cranks up the correction/judgment pressure enough that everyone will eventually give in. But this assumption is not based upon the biblical text, but instead upon Bell's own hope that people would eventually succumb and allow themselves to be saved.

Bell clearly describes God actively bringing judgment to a sin filled world. On the Day of the Lord God will say ENOUGH to injustice and all those who practice it. He will bring judgment. Bell also posits that all judgment is meant for restoration. All judgment is motivated by love for the person being judged. It is in this light that he can talk about God's love eventually melting every human heart and breaking down all resistance through painful judgment.⁹ But what I would like to know is if a person feels love as judgment, as sharp and painful, what would make them melt and return to God, what would make them see the judgment as love? Would they not see this love/judgment as torture, as God forcing them to do something they do not wish to do, and if that is the case, would they not become more steed against this God who is loving/judging them? While I would affirm with Bell that we should desire and hope that every person would succumb to the love/judgment of God, the Bible does not show us that they will, but that there will be people who will never see God's judgment as love, but only as judgment. They will never see his judgment as remedial, but only retributive.

⁹ Bell, *Love Wins*, 106.

VII. DOES GOD GET WHAT GOD WANTS? Or, rhetoric meets reality

In a great flourish of rhetorical prowess Bell begins his fourth chapter by describing church websites that affirm that the unsaved will be separated from God for all eternity. After lightly mocking these doctrinal affirmations by saying “welcome to our church,” he goes on to say that these same church websites talk about the love and greatness of God. He points out these apparently contradictory declarations to ask the question, “Does God get what God wants?” I agree with Bell that God desires all people to be saved, but I strongly disagree with his use of rhetoric in this chapter. The manner in which Bell establishes his questions leads the reader down a path to conclude that if God is indeed great then people could not be in hell at the end of the story, for if they were then God is not great or loving. In fact, Bell asks, “is God our friend, our provider, our protector, our father – or is God the kind of judge who may in the end declare that we deserve to spend forever separated from our Father?”¹⁰ The not so subtle hint from Bell is that God is indeed not a judge who would declare that we should spend an eternity separated from him, but Bell’s rhetoric does not match his reality for he clearly states that if a person wants to remain away from God for all eternity they are free to do just that. God will love/judge them for all eternity.

While Bell’s rhetoric presents God one way, his reality about the very nature of God points in a different direction. So the false rhetorical dichotomy that Bell establishes between God as father and God as judge falls apart under his own construction. According to Bell, God is indeed the type of father who will eternally declare that we deserve to spend forever separated from him. So while Bell wants to caricature how people who believe in the traditional doctrine of hell understand God’s nature, he ends up in the exact same place, but somehow feels better by having asked the question. I guess asking the question can make you feel better, but the proof is in the pudding, and the pudding of God’s nature that Bell makes has a God that will eternally punish a person.

As Bell runs through all the options of what happens after a person dies from judgment with no hope of change, to a person completely losing the image of God, to annihilationism, and finally, to his own position of endless opportunities of repentance, he finally arrives at the

¹⁰ Ibid., 102

conclusion that love wins. It feels though that Bell has stacked the decks. If a person returns to God then love wins, but if a person rejects God forever then love wins. Let me explain. For love to be love, it has to allow the other person to be free to reject or accept love. I am sure you remember the poster with some animal on it, take your pick of your favorite pet, which says if you love something let it go, if it comes back to you it was meant to be. That is the picture that God has hanging up in his room under Bell's scheme, it is not a pet in the picture though, but each one of us. Love demands freedom to not love, so God has to let people not love him. At the end of the story Bell believes all people will come home, but he can't say this with supreme confidence, because maybe it was not meant to be, maybe people won't love God in the end, but even if they don't, love wins because God honored their freedom. Of course, that does not feel much like winning to most people and it is not consistent with the rhetoric that Bell pursues, but it is the conclusion that he has to reach given his assumptions.

Bell's conception of love having to be free to reject the other in order to be truly love also has other difficulties. If one were to apply this criterion to the Trinity, then the Son must be free to reject the Father if the Son is to truly love the Father. In essence, God must be able to deny Himself in order to truly love Himself. On a human level, there could be no assurance that in the new age people will not turn away from God, for as Bell asserts for love to truly be love one must be able to reject the beloved. I assume that Bell sees this as true in this age and in the next. The problem with this position, as I see it, is that perfect love casts out fear, that love never fails. If in the new age we cannot fall away from God because all evil is removed, then we cannot cease to love him. Therefore, a love that can walk away, that can reject the beloved is a broken, defective love. Bell's idea that love, true love, must be able to reject the beloved simply will not hold as a universal truth for all time.

I want to mention one final thing Bell does in this chapter that betrays his ignorance of history at best or a clear intent to deceive at worst. I want to give Bell the benefit of the doubt, so I am going to assume he is ignorant of Martin Luther's position on post-mortem repentance. As Bell argues for the possibility of a person repenting after death he calls upon Martin Luther to support his position. Bell writes, "In a letter Martin Luther, one of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation, wrote to Hans von Rechenberg in 1522 he considered the possibility that

people could turn to God after death, asking: 'Who would doubt God's ability to do that?'"¹¹

It seems harmless enough until you actually read the letter that Martin Luther wrote. In the letter Luther is addressing the question of whether or not a person can come to God apart from faith. Luther is clear that a person cannot come to God apart from faith, but he does further entertain the question of whether or not God could give a person faith after they die. Let's hear Luther in his own words. He writes,

It would be quite a different question whether God can impart faith to some in the hour of death or after death so that these people could be saved through faith. *Who would doubt God's ability to do that?* No one, however, can prove that he does do this. For all that we read is that he has already raised people from the dead and thus granted them faith. But whether he gives faith or not, it is impossible for anyone to be saved without faith."¹²

Two things are clear from this fuller quote, one is that Luther does not really entertain the possibility that people will repent after death and the other is that even if someone did repent after death it would be because God gave them faith to do so. In Bell's understanding of how love operates God cannot give a person faith in order to believe, because this would jeopardize the freedom of love. Yet again we see Bell truncating a quote to fit his agenda. It is historically inaccurate and unfair to imply that Luther is on the side of Bell, when in context Luther's quote not only renders Bell's assertion fallacious, but also undermines Bell's own understanding of faith.

VIII. DYING TO LIVE

Or, substitute another metaphor for substitution

In the fifth chapter Bell argues that we need to embrace the rich array of metaphors that the Bible presents in regard to the atonement. The atonement is cast in terms of ransom, victory of evil, cleansing from sin, reconciliation, and sacrifice, but it is the last one with which Bell takes issue. He argues that in our culture we do not understand the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, and as such it is a metaphor that will not

¹¹ Ibid., 106

¹² Martin Luther, "A Letter to Hans von Rechenberg," (*Luther's Works* 43; ed. and trans. G. Wienke and H. T. Lehmann; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), 54 (italics mine).

easily be grasped by people. He further states that the writers of the New Testament explained the cross in language and metaphors that they understood. The point is not to focus on one metaphor as the right one, but to let each metaphor contribute to the total picture. I wholeheartedly agree with Bell on this, but one gets the feeling that he dispenses with the sacrificial metaphor, which is the basis for the substitutionary atonement, a bit too quickly. He does not seem willing to allow this metaphor to have as much room in the total picture as the Biblical writers give it.

From this reduction of substitution Bell moves to challenge the idea that on the cross Jesus in some way rescued people from God. Bell writes:

Many have heard the gospel framed in terms of rescue. God has to punish sinners, because God is holy, but Jesus paid the price for our sins, and so we can have eternal life. However, true or untrue that is technically or theologically, what it can do is subtly teach people that Jesus rescues us from God. Let's be very clear, then: we do not need to be rescued from God. God is the one who rescues us from death, sin, and destruction. God is the rescuer.¹³

Bell is right that God is the rescuer, but he fails to consider that God is also rescuing us from the just judgment that we should receive from God from our sins that bring destruction and misery into His creation. Paul says as much in Romans 3:26 that by Christ's death on the cross he became a propitiation for sins so that God could be both just and the justifier of those who have faith in Christ. Our sin does not create a merely horizontal, anthropocentric problem, but it also creates a vertical, theocentric one as well. Because God is holy he cannot pass over the damage we have done to his creation. God is too good and loving to allow injustice to stand. God is love though, and so God himself steps into time in the incarnation to achieve that which humanity could not achieve, the reconciliation between a holy, righteous, loving God and fallen, rebellious sinners. In the cross God both upholds his holiness and his love.

While Bell has much that I don't agree with in this chapter, he does beautifully portray the biblical truth that we must die in order to live, that a seed must be buried in the ground before it can grow into new life. At times his writing sings and it is at those moments that I thoroughly enjoy

¹³ Ibid., 182.

Bell and find myself caught up in his message. To give a brief example, Bell writes:

He [Jesus] calls us to let go, turn away, renounce, confess, repent, and leave behind the old ways. He talks of the life that will come from his own death, and he promises that life will flow to us in thousands of small ways as we die to our egos, our pride, our need to be right, our self-sufficiency, our rebellion, and our stubborn insistence that we deserve to get our way.¹⁴

Now those are words to stir the soul, but after the soul has been stirred, one has to ask just how we go about doing all this dying. It is at this point that one wishes Bell would address Paul's claim in Romans 7 about how before he came to Christ he wanted to do good, but couldn't and the very things he did not want to do he did. Paul said he found himself enslaved to sin and asked who would deliver him from this body of death. The answer for Paul comes in Romans 8 where it is Christ through the Spirit that frees the sinner from his slavery.

Bell, however, offers no such answer, at least not directly. He leaves the reader with the impression that Jesus' death did something, although it's hard to determine exactly what it accomplished. Instead, Bell sidesteps a person's allegiance to Jesus and posits that one should be committed to doing good in order to die so as to truly live. It reminds me of the song from the old Christmas cartoon *Santa Claus is Coming to Town* in which a young Kris Kringle gave a choo-choo train to the Winter Warlock. After the evil Warlock received the train he asked Kris how he could change from being such an evil person to a good one, and Kris tells him it is as easy as putting one foot in front of the other and soon you'll be walking out the door. At least that is how the song goes: One step at a time, one good deed at a time, one choice at a time, and you will find that you have died and are now living the life that Jesus offers. This sounds good, right, and helpful, especially when set to a catchy tune, whether it's coming from Santa Claus or Rob Bell, but the Bible does not tell us that we must pull ourselves up by our moral boot straps in order to be saved. It tells us repeatedly that we are trapped in sin and need someone to rescue us, to free us, to deliver us. The Bible tells us we cannot do this for ourselves, but for Bell I think the cross functions for humanity much like the choo-choo train did for old Winter Warlock. It

¹⁴ Ibid., 136.

lets us know that we can change, but does not actually give us the ability to do so. We must find that ability within ourselves.

IX. THERE ARE ROCKS EVERYWHERE Or, what does Emeth have to do with Aslan?

In a chapter in which Bell borrows heavily from both C.S. Lewis and Clark Pinnock, without mentioning either though, we learn that an explicit allegiance to Christ is not necessary to be in Christ. Bell agrees with Karl Rahner that there are a large number of anonymous Christians in the world; people who are in fact followers of Christ, but have no idea that they are such. C.S. Lewis in the final book in the Narnia series entitled *The Last Battle* presents a scene in which Emeth, a person who had outwardly served the evil Tash all his life, but inwardly strived to be righteous and honest, finds himself in the presence of Aslan, who he believed all his life was the enemy. Emeth, realizing the truth, is prepared to be judged by Aslan, but finds instead that Aslan accepts him into his kingdom. Aslan tells Emeth that all the good deeds he did in the name of Tash were actually in service to Aslan. Emeth responds that he had been seeking Tash all his days, but Aslan tells him that in truth he had been seeking Aslan. Bell believes at the end of the story there will be many Emeth's standing before Jesus.

In order to ground this doctrine in the Bible, Bell has an interesting interpretation of 1 Corinthians 10:4 in which Paul writes that the rock that followed the Israelites during the desert wanderings was Christ. The story of the rock that gave water is found in Exodus 17. This story, interestingly does not say anything about the rock moving with the Israelites from place to place. Paul, however, says the rock followed the people and the rock was Christ. Paul was drawing a parallel between crossing the Red Sea and baptism, and the drinking from the rock and the Lord's Supper in order to warn the Corinthians that their baptism and participation in the Lord's Supper was not a guarantee that they would not be judged by God. Bell, however, takes Paul's statement about the rock that followed the Israelites and interprets it to mean that there are in fact rocks everywhere. No one in Exodus 17 knew the name of Jesus, yet he was there as lifesaving water. Bell states, "Paul finds Jesus there, in that rock, because Paul finds Jesus everywhere."¹⁵ This is indeed a bold claim to make given that Paul was not inclined to see Jesus in the pagan worship of the Corinthians' past, nor in the worship of those he

¹⁵ Ibid., 144.

encountered on Mars Hill. Paul did not confront people with the message that they already knew God, they just needed to get his name right, but that they were enemies of God and needed to come to him for salvation.

In effect, Bell wants to connect the immanence of God in His creation, with the various religions found throughout the world, at least the ones that appear to be morally upright. Since God is everywhere, that means that as people tap into their religious nature they will find God. Paul, however, argues in Romans 1 that although people have a true knowledge of God they suppress the truth that they have and become idolaters. He does not say that they become authentic worshippers of the true God. Bell must address this passage from Paul in his attempt to convince us that other religious/spiritual paths are valid expressions of worship from God's perspective. This is especially needed from Bell given the Bible's repeated warnings about worshipping other gods. I, like Bell, have deep questions about what happens to the unevangelized. I struggle with the tension between God's holiness, justice, and love, and humanity's sin. It would be comforting to adopt Bell's perspective, to believe that there are rocks everywhere that are secretly Christ, but I don't think the Bible gives us grounds to see all these rocks as manifestations of Jesus Christ, by another name

X. THE GOOD NEWS IS BETTER THAN THAT

Or, a good story isn't always a true story

In his final chapter Bell wants to argue that the story he has presented in his book is a better story than one which says large numbers of people will end up in hell for eternity. On one level I agree completely with him, in that I too long to see everyone return to God. The question though is not what story we think is better, but what story the Bible actually tells. Bell's omission of the large number of verses that speak of people being in hell for eternity or his straining attempts to reinterpret verses to fit his agenda simply do not convince. In the end, the Bible leaves us with a tension that we cannot resolve. God loves everyone, but there will be people who do not return to God.

As Bell explores his understanding of the good news, he employs the parable of the Prodigal Son to show that what ultimately separates people from God is an unwillingness to trust their Father's version of their story. Both the prodigal son and his older brother are confronted with the father's version of how he loves them. The prodigal must put away his own version of the story in which the father has rejected him because of his sin and embrace the truth that he is indeed his father's son. The older

brother must put aside his bitterness at his father accepting the younger son back into the family. He must come to realize that all the father has is his and that he could have had a fattened calf party at any time. To arrive at this conclusion, Bell adopts the position of Karl Barth that God has already forgiven everyone; all someone needs to do is realize this truth.

In employing the parable of the Prodigal Son Bell does two things. The first is to have both the prodigal and the older brother at the party. It is being at the party that makes hell so hellish for the older brother. Bell also continues his confused intertwining of this fallen age and the coming new age. I am not sure which heaven/hell Bell is discussing in this section, whether he is talking about the heaven/hell that is now present on earth or the coming new age heaven/hell. It is this confusion that I believe will lead most readers to assume Bell is talking about the final coming together of heaven and earth. If this is the case, then many people will have a version of the new age in which people who reject God, who don't want to trust him will be intermingled with those who do trust God. In turn this will lead to a new age in which there is still suffering and rebellion. In Bell's last chapter though he uses imagery from other parables that speak of separation; goats being sent away, wedding guests turned away, and outer darkness. Bell needs to clarify which image goes with which age.

In this final chapter Bell also seeks to show that both our badness and our "goodness" can keep us from God. The younger brother must realize that he is forgiven and the older brother must realize that his "goodness" does not earn the father's love. This love can only be embraced by trust. Bell writes,

Your deepest, darkest sins and your shameful secrets are simply irrelevant when it comes to the counterintuitive, ecstatic announcement of the gospel. So are your goodness, your rightness, your church attendance, and all of the wise, moral, mature decisions you have made and actions you have taken. It simply doesn't matter when it comes to the surprising, unexpected declaration that God's love is simply yours. There is nothing left for both sons to do but to trust.¹⁶

The question that lingers for me at the end, though, is what exactly Bell wants his readers to trust?

¹⁶ Ibid., 187-88.

Does he want them to trust in the message of Jesus as their Savior and Lord?

Or maybe it's that we should seek beauty?

Or is it that we should seek love?

Who gets to define love anyway? Does the Buddhist's definition work, one in which ceasing to love frees one from the entangling desires of this life?

Or what about the love that says only love those who love you? That love?

Or maybe it's the kind of love that makes us tingly inside, but doesn't lead to action? That love?

Would love of country qualify as a valid love? Or maybe love of family? Or love of hot dogs?

Which love?

What love?

Whose love?

Maybe we are to trust in God's love? And if it is God's love, then which god?

And what would that god's love look like, so that when I see it I can trust it?

Maybe Bell would answer yes to all these questions, maybe he wouldn't, and therein we see the major problem with Bell's book. He leaves his reader with no clear direction to God. He leaves the reader to respond with his own interpretation of what God demands, with his own definition of love, with his own god in which to trust. The reader is then left to hope that this undefined trust will be sufficient in the end. While this postmodern reader response plays well in our culture, ultimately red lights have meaning that is extrinsic to our opinion. Bell has left his readers hoping that their understanding of the shade of red will get them

through the busy intersection that is ahead for each of us. I prefer to hold to the belief that:

If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. With the heart one believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth one confesses, resulting in salvation. Now the Scripture says, No one who believes on Him will be put to shame, for there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, since the same Lord of all is rich to all who call on Him. For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But how can they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe without hearing about Him? And how can they hear without a preacher? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: How welcome are the feet of those who announce the gospel of good things!¹⁷

¹⁷ Romans 10:9-15