

Love Loses

The Quantum Spirituality of Rob Bell: A review of “Love Wins”

Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (New York, NY: Harper One, 2011) xi + 198 pages, Acknowledgments and Further Reading. The back cover blurb first states and then incredulously asks: “God loves us. God offers us everlasting life by grace, freely, through no merit on our part. Unless you do not respond the right way. Then God will torture you forever. In hell.” *Huh?*

Recommended by a who’s who of emergent leaders, Rob Bell’s book *Love Wins* has, as it is calculated to do, stirred-up controversy. Recently, *Time* ran a front cover story on it. [1] Eugene H. Peterson lauds the book as being born out of a “thoroughly biblical imagination,” and a book “without a trace of soft sentimentality and without compromising an inch of evangelical conviction in its proclamation of the good news that is most truly for all.” (Front Cover Flap). Open theist Greg Boyd calls the book, “bold, prophetic, and a poetic masterpiece.” (Back Cover Flap). Andy Crouch sees Bell as “a central figure for his generation.” (Back Cover).

In his own hip way and as in his previous books (*Velvet Elvis* and *Sex God*), Rob Bell has written a book contending for universal reconciliation (UR); that based upon divine love eclipsing all other attributes of God (His justice, wrath, righteousness, etc.), everybody from everywhere and from all time and from all religions, without exception, are reconciled to God. [2] As the teacher at Mars Hill Bible Church in suburban Grand Rapids, Michigan, the reader is not surprised that *Love Wins* is inundated with scriptural references that cite book and chapter but omit the precise verse location. This means that readers will have to make an extra effort to locate the citation to determine if it and the context really support Bell’s interpretation.

A word about tone: For writing this book, Bell knows he’ll be criticized. Some will think he’s courageous for having stated in public what many contemporary pan-evangelicals believe in private. Survey says . . . [3] Purposely, I have not read any other Internet reviews of Bell’s book for the reason of trying to retain objectivity in this review. This pastoral evaluation results from my impressions of the book, period. The eternal destiny of human beings is a serious subject and should be treated as such. Bell writes of religious people, who “shaped by their God,” become violent, a violence manifesting itself in the “toxic, venomous nature of certain discussions and debates on the Internet.” (183) Recognizing that Bell does not articulate matters of faith as I do, and as I understand the Bible to state, I hope this review will not be taken as “violent, toxic, or venomous.” The only other option for a pastor is to say nothing, and that’s not an option.

After a Preface, the book consists of eight chapters, the last of which recounts Bell’s youthful conversion to the evangelical faith in his home near Lansing, Michigan, during the mid 70s. In reviewing the book, I shall attempt to follow the argument by which Bell builds his case for UR, and then comment upon it.

Preface—Millions of Us

Bell's thesis is that the "Jesus story is first and foremost about the love of God for every single one of us . . . a stunning, beautiful, expansive love . . . for everybody, everywhere." (*Love Wins*, vii) [4] This expansive love story includes all persons, from all times, from all places and from all religions . . . billions of people for whom Bell allows for no exceptions. God is reconciling to Himself Nero, Hitler, Stalin and the sick-o-father who, as he molested his daughter, recited the Lord's Prayer and sang Christian hymns. (7) Even the Canaanites were/are reconciled to Yahweh. That God's love may be discriminatory, that heaven might be limited to God's elect (Calvinism), or to a contemporary evangelical crowd that just wants a "personal-relationship" Jesus, Bell rejects. That's just their "version," he writes, a story that turns people off and away from Christianity. (viii) The idea that only a few will make it to heaven, Bell views as "misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus' message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy that our world desperately needs to hear." (viii)

In this introduction to UR, Bell plays an overwhelming numbers game—millions upon billions of souls in hell forever simply because they did not hear about Jesus. The thought is stunning. But on this point, my heart is comforted by John's vision that in heaven he saw "**a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues . . . clothed with white robes**" [incidentally, attire Bell derides, *Love Wins*, 24] (Revelation 7:9). How many people will be in heaven? Less than universalism believes, and more than what Bell thinks some of these other versions allow.

Chapter 1—What about the Flat Tire?

In this chapter Bell attacks the doctrines of grace (Calvinism) by asking, "Of all the billions of people who have ever lived, will only a select number 'make it to a better place' and every single other person suffer torment and punishment forever?" (2) After pulling readers' heart strings by alluding to Mahatma Gandhi and an atheist teenager killed in a car accident, Bell asks, "Is this the sacred calling of Christians to announce that there's no hope [if they had not believed on Jesus]?" (4) What if Christians fail their missionary calling? What if in route to share the Gospel a missionary gets a flat tire? Will the persons he was supposed to bring the Gospel to go to hell because the missionary had mechanical failure? The author fails to recognize that absent one human messenger, whether by default or disaster, the sovereign God is capable of sending another messenger, perhaps an angel, to preach the Gospel (See Revelation 14:6-7). *God can fix flats!* And in the end, "**Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?**" (Genesis 18:25).

In addition to attacking the doctrine of election, this chapter questions, I think legitimately, how evangelicals have peddled the Gospel over the last half century—the "personal-relationship-with-Jesus" Gospel. Bell observes "that the phrase 'personal relationship' is found nowhere in the Bible." (10)

To make his argument, Bell weaves together, by my count, twenty-two passages, all of which, by his interpretation, present a little different slant on what it takes a person to do or believe to get to heaven. About these passages, and as he casts an aura of suspicion about how evangelical Protestants have understood the Gospel from the time of the Protestant Reformation, the author asks questions . . . questions . . . and more questions. Welcome to *Chaos 101*. Bell thus lays the groundwork for constructing his colorful and symmetrical fractal of

universal reconciliation. The chapter's tone manifests "**a morbid interest in controversial questions and disputes about words**" (1 Timothy 6:4, NASB).

Chapter 2—Here Is the New There

We've all heard the expression, "Life is hell!" Well to Bell, if lived according the standards of Jesus, our reality can also be heaven. Life exists as a continuum of order from above (heaven) mixing with disorder below (hell). But if we cooperate and do the right as Jesus tells us, the fractal from above can bring order to chaos on earth. "Jesus invites us," Bell writes, "in this life, in this broken, beautiful world, to experience the life of heaven now [As above, so below]." (62) That's why here is the new there. As Bell writes later on of Jesus' *Parable of the Prodigal Son*, "In this story, heaven and hell are within each other, intertwined, interwoven, bumping up against each other." (170) [5]

To support his there-is-here view of reality, Bell appeals to string theory, that untested quantum physical worldview that posits the existence of several dimensions beyond spacetime—the three spatial dimensions (length, height and width) plus time. Bell tells readers that string theorists suppose "We live in several dimensions [at least eleven]. Up and down. Left and right. Forward and backward. Three to be exact If we count time as the fourth dimension, that's seven beyond what we now know." (59-60) In that string theory remains unproven, how does Bell know the universe exists in dimensions beyond spacetime? How can these dimensions be experienced?

Bell notes that occasionally we've all had "experiences when those three dimensions weren't adequate. Moments when we were acutely, overwhelmingly aware of other realities just beyond this one." (58) We know other realities exist because we've experienced them. We know they're there because we feel they are. With this, the author reveals mysticism that posits realities beyond spacetime because at one time or another, we've all experienced them. Down here we can intuit what's out there. Experiences can bring heaven into our reality as here becomes the new there, as our consciousness below connects to the new above.

But according to Jesus' worldview, human reality is not so mixed, for He told his audience of "string theorists": "**Whither I go, ye cannot come . . . Ye are from beneath; I am from above: ye are of this world; I am not of this world. I said therefore unto you, that ye shall die in your sins: for if ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins**" (John 8:21-24). To Jesus, reality was two dimensional: below and whatever this reality consists of—I believe time, matter and space—and above and whatever that reality consists of—God knows (See Genesis 1:1.). But Jesus said that below is below, above is above, and never the twain shall meet, except in the *I am*, who "**when all things are subjected to Him,**" He in turn "**will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, that God may be all in all**" (1 Corinthians 15:28, NASB).

Chapter 3—Hell

If down is really up, and taking cue from the preceding chapter, Bell, his editor or publisher could have titled this chapter, *There is the New Here*. In this chapter pastor Bell attempts to deconstruct the traditional notion of hell.

To demolish it, the author points out that “the actual word ‘hell’ is used roughly twelve times in the New Testament, almost exclusively by Jesus himself.” (67) Rightly, he notes out that the biblical words for hell—*sheol*, *hades*, *gehenna* and *tartaros*—carry a temporal nuance about them. Bell points out that *sheol* or the grave, is an ambiguous term referring to the realm of the dead (See Genesis 37:35; Job 17:16.) or to trouble in life (See Psalm 86:13; Jonah 2:2.). The term does not refer to a fixed state after death. *Hades*, the New Testament equivalent of *sheol*, carries the same hazy nuance about it—grave or netherworld. *Gehenna* is a picturesque word Jesus uses to refer to the city dump to the south of the Old City of Jerusalem, suggesting to Bell that people can “trash” life, making it “hell” both for themselves and those around them. *Tartaros* is a term Peter imports from Greek mythology designating “the place where the Greek demigods were judged in the ‘abyss’.” (69) After taking his readers through a concordance tour of these words, Bell makes the bold claim: “And that’s it. Anything you have ever heard people say about the actual word ‘hell’ in the Bible they got from those verses you just read.” (69)

Anything you have ever heard people say about the actual word “hell” they got from those verses . . . Right? What about the lake of fire? Is not this “**for ever and ever**” place—*where* God imprisons “**the beast**” and “**the false prophet**” (Revelation 19:20; 20:10); *into which* God throws “**the devil**” (Revelation 20:10); *where* death and hades are consumed (suggesting the dimension when *hades-the-temporal* becomes *hades-the-eternal*, Revelation 20:14); and finally, *where* those who were “**not found written in the book of life**” are consigned (Revelation 20:15)—is not this forever place relevant to any discussion about hell? Bell mentions the lake of fire, but only in passing. (112)

Nevertheless, what kind of time frame does John ascribe to the lake of fire? Bell notes that in biblical usage *aion* often nuances “a period of time with a beginning and an end,” or an “intensity of experience that transcends time.” (32, 57) So confidently, he asserts that *aion* “doesn’t mean ‘forever’ as we think of forever.” (31-32) Seemingly there is no “forever” category of time for Bell. But John expresses the time frame for the lake of fire in *multiples of forever-s!* Literally, the lake of fire’s duration is for *ages of ages*, the longest period of time the Greek language, perhaps any language, can conceptualize (Greek plurals, *tous aionas ton aionon*, Revelation 20:10). Combined with “**day and night**” (Greek, *hemeras kai nyktos*), “**for ever and ever**” becomes an atemporal statement meaning that 24/7, for ages of ages, the unholy trinity—the beast, the false prophet, the devil—and others will be confined. The whole clause “expresses the unbroken continuity of their torment” in perpetuity. [6]

Based upon Jesus’ statement that the goats “**shall go away into everlasting** (Greek, *aionios*) **punishment: but the righteous into life eternal** (Greek, *aionios*)” (Emphasis added, Matthew 25:46), Charles Ryrie notes: “Because the same word is used it is impossible to argue that eternal punishment is not unending in the same way that eternal life is.” [7] In that Paul employs the same word “eternal” (*aionios*) to refer to the “**everlasting God**” (Romans 16:26), it becomes difficult to see how Bell’s temporal understanding of *aion* pre-empts the biblical teaching that the dimensions of hell and heaven exist in eternity and in perpetuity.

Nevertheless, Bell dismisses mention of the lake of fire for reason that “the Book of Revelation” is “a complex, enigmatic letter” written “in an apocalyptic, heavily symbolic way” (111-112). He

gives no attention to *the ages of ages*, the eternal maximum security prison into which the jail of *hades* will one day be cast, and he does so despite the fact that on other occasions, where it suits his purpose, he draws upon the Apocalypse to make the point that the presence, blessing and bliss of heaven are already here. (43, 48, 114-115) So it must be asked, by what imagination does an interpreter of Revelation pick and choose what is literal and what is not? Why not dismiss the whole book as symbolic of who knows what? But then, such an approach raises a bigger problem, doesn't it? For John warns:

For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book. (Revelation 22:18-19)

Chapter 4—Does God Get What God Wants?

Admittedly, certain biblical texts suggest universalism. For example, Bell quotes Paul's letter to Timothy, "God wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth' (1 Tim. 2)." (97) Other texts suggesting universalism are extant in the New Testament (See John 3:17; Titus 2:11; 2 Peter 3:9, etc.). Dealing with every text suggesting universal reconciliation goes beyond the scope of this review. But let's look at the Timothy text which Bell employs to initiate his discussion.

Note: That God wants/wills/wishes (Greek, *thelei*) that all be saved indicates all are not saved, which is the point arguing against this verse teaching UR. If in the divine reality all persons from all times from all places from all religions are saved, then why "the divine wish"? Everybody's saved, aren't they? The fact that God wills/wishes/wants all to be saved indicates that all are not! Mounce comments that "the text does not move into universalism," and then points out that the statement resists "the synagogue's belief that God hates the sinner and wishes to save only the righteous" and "the gnostic belief that salvation is only for those 'in the know'." [8]

It can be charged that UR is fatalistic. Freedom of choice is violated to such a degree that even atheists are forced to spend eternity with a Person they do not like in a place where they did not want to go—with God in heaven. [9] There are fools who mutter in their hearts, "**No God**" (Psalm 14:1; 53:1). Sadly, the Bible describes some people as reprobate and "**haters of God**" (Romans 1:26-28, 30). Are we to project that those individuals who possessed a deep and abiding animus against God in this life, both denying and despising Him, will derive one moment's pleasure from being in the presence of the One whom in this life they loathed? Will God take them by the nape of their necks and drag them "kicking and screaming" into heaven? Where is the responsibility of man? This raises the following question about hell: Never mind does God get what God wants (as if God is "needy"), but *does man get what man wants?* So "in the end," writes Alistair McGrath, "God cannot and does not make that decision for us. To affirm human dignity is to affirm our ability to say 'No!'" [10] Similarly, C.S. Lewis wrote of hell:

There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in Hell,

choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. [11]

McGrath concludes that, “Universalism perverts the gospel of the love of God into an obscene scene of theological rape quite unworthy of the God whom we encounter in the face of Jesus Christ.” [12] In a universal scheme of salvation like that proposed by Bell, *love loses*. [13]

Chapter 5—Dying To Live

If UR is true, then what is to be made of Jesus’ death? Why did He die? Why the cross? In light of the Son’s agonizing death on the cross, are we to think of God like a liberal preacher of another generation thought of Him, as “a dirty bully”? Robertson McQuilken summarizes the dilemma:

For if all sin will ultimately be overlooked by a gracious deity, Christ never should have died. It was not only unnecessary, it was surely the greatest error in history . . . Universalism . . . demands a view of the death of Christ as having some purpose other than as an atonement for sin. [14]

When for reason of universalism the penal substitutionary atonement is rejected—that Jesus died for our sins—the only explanation left to explain Jesus’ death is that He died as a selfless example to others, the moral influence view of the atonement. In referring to the heroes of 9/11 and indicating he’s disposed toward such an explanation of Jesus’ death, Bell writes:

Who isn’t moved when they hear those stories of selfless heroism. We talk about how inspiring it is when people sacrifice themselves for the well-being of another. To inspire is to give life. Their deaths for others’ lives. (131)

With that statement Bell tells us why he thinks Jesus died. He gave up His life to “inspire” mankind—*death for life*. To Bell, the cross (like that he observed the rapper Eminem wearing in 2010) is “a religious icon, it’s a symbol of an elemental reality, one we all experience every time we take a bite of food.” (131) To press Bell’s explanation, Jesus’ death might be compared to an act as common as a human eating an apple—*death for life*. Bell explains that, “This death-and-life mystery, this mechanism, this process is built into the very fabric of creation.” (131)

Of course, if Christ’s death is to be an influence, there must be something within the human heart—we might call it divineness—that will respond in kind to the example of Jesus. Yet radical depravity deters humanity from making an in-kind response to Jesus’ death. His death may move our emotions, but whether it will affect our wills is an entirely different matter.

Chapter 6—There Are Rocks Everywhere [15]

Remember (during the 1970s) when “pet rocks” were the rage? As he continues building his case for UR and employing Paul’s metaphorical reference to the pre-Christian Rock that followed and sustained the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings (See 1 Corinthians

10:4; Exodus 17:6; Numbers 20:11.), Bell tells readers, “Paul finds Jesus there, in that rock, because Paul finds Jesus everywhere.” (144) With rocks everywhere, it’s as if, in some incarnating way, rocks are “Jesus-ed,” that a *Jesus-Force* permeates the whole of nature investing it with *I-am-ness*. [16] Betraying a pantheistic tendency, Bell describes Jesus: “He is as exclusive as himself, and as *inclusive as containing every single particle of creation*.” (Emphasis added, 155) Jesus is as everywhere as rocks. In Bell’s worldview, an immanent Jesus consumes the transcendent Christ. [17]

Drawing upon the Genesis account—which he calls a creation poem in which the Word speaks order out of chaos—and upon Paul’s letters where he mentions Christ created and sustains the cosmos (See John 1:1-3; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:2.), Bell suggests that a Jesus-Force permeates nature. “This energy, spark, and electricity that pulses through all creation sustains it, fuels it, and keeps it going. Growing, evolving, reproducing, and making more,” says Bell. (145, 144)

The inclusive everywhere-in-everything Jesus eschews any exclusivity—the Jesus only-ism of the other versions of the Gospel story. Yes Jesus is alone says Bell in alluding to John 14, but “What Jesus does is declare that he, and he alone is saving everybody.” (155) This exclusivity/inclusivity is of, “The kind that is open to all religions, the kind that trusts that good people will get in, that there is only one mountain, but it has many paths.” He goes on to say, “This inclusivity assumes as long as your heart is fine or your actions measure up, you’ll be okay.” (154-155) Bell writes that inclusivity “leaves the door way, way open. Creating all sorts of possibilities.” (155) Bell’s you’re-okay explanation is obviously pluralism, that many and variegated are the spiritual paths that lead up the mountain to God. Bell’s version of the Gospel also necessitates salvation by works, which according to Paul is another Gospel, one that deserves to be censored (Galatians 1:6-9). And all of this is premised upon a Jesus-Rock that accompanied Israel in her wilderness wanderings.

But does the author’s rock(s) analogy conform to Scripture, to what Paul actually wrote? Did Paul really believe there are rocks everywhere? Note he wrote: “**The Rock was Christ**” (1 Corinthians 10:4). Literally the Greek reads “but the rock was the Christ” (*n petra de nv o Christos*). In both instances, the articles, first prefacing rock and then prefacing Christ, are monadic. In other words, there is only one rock and only one Christ, for monad means “one”! [18] So the foundational biblical text, out of which Bell develops his rocks-are-everywhere thesis, actually contradicts his argument. And so does the word of Yahweh to the ancient Jewish nation. Through the prophet He told them: “**Do not fear, nor be afraid; / Have I not told you from that time, and declared it? / You are My witnesses. / Is there a God besides Me? / Indeed there is no other Rock; / I know not one**” (Isaiah 44:8, NKJV; Compare 1 Samuel 2:20.). Say it again. *There is no other Rock*, says the Lord God, *I know not one*.

Chapter 7—The Good News Is Better Than That

What’s the “that” which the Good News is better than? Well it’s the old way of understanding an exclusive gospel that restricts heaven for only God’s elect or the “I-just-want-a-personal-relationship-with-Jesus” crowd. Bell writes: “So when the gospel is diminished to a question of whether or not a person will ‘get into heaven,’ that reduces the good news to a ticket, a way to get past the bouncer and into the club.” (178) “That” refers to attitudes like the older brother in

Jesus' *Parable of the Prodigal Son*, who begrudged that his younger brother, after he had messed up his life, returned home to be reconciled to his father (Luke 15:11-32). So those not believing in UR are compared to that older brother who with a bitter and begrudging spirit, while the party was going on celebrating the return of his younger brother, refused to join in, thereby making his own hell.

So any who do not believe in the magnanimity of a God who will reconcile every person from every place from all time and from all religions, Bell compares to the older brother—and for reason of peer pressure, who wants to be considered to be like him? As Bell writes, “An entrance understanding [that’s the older brother’s] of the gospel rarely creates good art. Or innovation. Or a number of other things. It’s a cheap view of the world, because it’s a cheap view of God. *It’s a shriveled imagination.*” (Emphasis added, 179-180) [19] And who wants to be reputed to be an unimaginative or ungracious cheapskate, a Scrooge? We want to think, we want others to think about us, that we are better than that kind of person. But if you believe in the traditional heaven/hell realities after death, if you believe that stingy version of the Gospel, you’re like a bunch of killjoys who “don’t throw very good parties”? (179) In this, Bell consolidates his following by flattering his readers’ egos—“us” is better than “them.”

Noting that “we do not need to be rescued from God,” but that “God is the one who rescues us,” that “God is the rescuer,” Bell states: “This is crucial for our peace, because *we shape our God*, and then our God shapes us. (Emphasis added, 182) Hum . . . we shape our God . . . isn’t that idolatry? Old Testament scholar Peter Craigie cautions regarding idols, not of wood, but of words:

Too easily in our modern world we forget the implications of the second of the Ten Commandments; it prohibits the construction of images of God. And although few of us are tempted to construct an image of wood or stone, too soon we construct images of words, which can constrict the conception of God as readily as the material image. [20]

Wouldn’t it be ironic, if in his desire to imagine who/what we want God to be, the author actually constricts the understanding of Deity? Do we really presume to be able to find God out? “**For who hath known the mind of the Lord?**” asks Paul. “**Or who hath been his counsellor?**”(Romans 11:34). Do Christians live in a Magic Kingdom?

Chapter 8—The End Is Here

Bell recounts his conversion to Jesus as a young boy, when he said yes to God’s love. “That prayer” he writes, “was a defining moment in my life.” To Bell, this love is expansive and “Jesus invites us to say yes to this love of God, again and again and again.” (194) To make life heaven, God’s love must be trusted, the barriers to which are cynicism and skepticism. (195) And that makes trusting difficult. Those who can’t make the leap of trust and choose to live without God’s love permeating, activating and controlling them are people “who “miss out on the rewards and celebrations and opportunities” that life (heaven) offers. (197)

Bell then ends his book with a poetic benediction to his readers:

May you experience this vast, expansive, infinite, indestructible love that has been yours all along. May you discover that this love is as wide as the sky and as small as the cracks in your heart no one else knows about. And may you know, deep in your bones, that love wins. (198)

Conclusion

In *Love Wins*, Rob Bell talks about a “better story,” presumably the one he, in an imaginative way, has created. But of his story, readers must ask the question: Is it just another story, a self-styled narrative parading as a metanarrative? In light of the very serious and eternal issues the book raises, the question needs to be answered by every reader.

In pan-evangelicalism’s big tent, Bell wants us to make room for his story, his version. “Whatever objections a person might have to this story,” he writes, “one has to admit that it is fitting, proper, and correct to long for it.” (111) Bell then pleads, “To shun, censor, or ostracize someone for holding this belief is to fail to extend grace to each other in a discussion that has had plenty of room for varied perspectives for hundreds of years now.” (111) Are those who might reject his version of the story guilty of being ungracious? In the spirit of grace, should his version of the story to be given a pass?

So we ask, is Judas in heaven? To his face Jesus told him: “**Woe unto that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! it had been good for that man if he had not been born**” (Matthew 26:24; Mark 14:21). Are we to think that Judas’ life was Judas’ hell, and that’s it? Are we to think that despots like Nero, Hitler, Stalin, etc., men who presided over the genocide of millions, only made life hell for themselves and others, and that’s it? Is not the lake of fire as much a danger for them as for “the beast, the false prophet and the devil”? Will divine justice to be meted out by God in the next reality based upon what men do in this reality? Throughout its pages, from beginning to end, the Bible anticipates there will be justice. (Revelation 20:11-15) If in the end only love wins, what kind of God are we talking about? Are we to think that heaven totally eclipses hell because we simply can’t get past the emotional revulsion of the idea of it?

I hope Internet readers will not take this review to have been written in a censorious spirit. In a way, Bell is to be commended for stating in public what many post-evangelicals now believe in private. As a student of Scripture too, I want to know the truth about heaven and hell. But I do not find that Bell’s story of it conforms to Scripture; that the narrative he creates eclipses the metanarrative revealed by God in the Bible. Even though he quotes and argues from the Bible, in the end his story, no matter how he imagines it to be otherwise, just doesn’t fit the Book. So the reader must ask, does the author employing biblical allusion to peddle spiritual illusion? In answering the question, remember, that’s what imagination can do (See Matthew 4:1-11.).

On this point, it might be noted out that what one might long for does not make it true. We may wish upon a star, but it makes a difference what we are. Once upon a time I wished I could play football in the NFL. But reality settled in—too slow, not strong, big, or quick enough. That persons might enter into eternity separated from the life of God forever is a stunning thought, something too many of us are far too casual about. It’s a final state no Christian wishes upon anyone, even their worst enemies. But the final disposition of the matter, as it should, rests in

the hands of the Father and His Son (John 5:26-29).

Finally, does God possess wrath? Arthur Pink (1886-1952) observed: “A study of the concordance will show that there are more references in Scripture to the anger, fury, and wrath of God, than there are to His love and tenderness.” [21] We might imagine that it’s otherwise, but if the Bible is true, it’s not. Wrath is the other side of love. Subtract wrath from love and love is no longer love, the tension between which the vicarious and penal substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ’s for sin solves. Absent divine wrath, divine love gets lost.

Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in which all that are in the graves shall hear the Son of Man’s voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto *the resurrection of life*; and they that have done evil, unto *the resurrection of damnation*. Jesus, the Gospel of John 5:28-29, Emphasis added.

ENDNOTES

[1] John Meacham, “What If There’s No Hell?” *Time*, April 25, 2011.

[2] *The Shack* (Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007), the best selling story by Wm. Paul Young, also opts for UR. In a comfortable, schmoozing, and relational conversation about the Canadian rock musician Bruce Cockburn, Papa says to Mack, “Mackenzie, I have no favorites; I am just especially fond of him.” Mack then responds, “You seem to be especially fond of a lot of people . . . Are there any who you are not especially fond of?” After pensively contemplating the question, Papa responds, “Nope, I haven’t been able to find any. Guess that’s jes’ the way I is.” (*The Shack*, 118-119) Bingo! God is as “fond” of Judas, Nero, Hitler, Stalin, and Osama bin Laden as He is of Jesus. It’s all one big “circle of relationship” (*Kum Ba Ya*).

[3] Greg Garrison, “Many Americans don’t believe in hell, but what about pastors?” *USA Today*, August 1, 2009. Online at: http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2009-08-01-hell-damnation_N.htm.

[4] From hence forth, number(s) in parentheses refer to the page of Love Wins from which the quote is taken or the illustration occurs.

[5] Of heaven and hell, Bell writes: “Everybody is already at the party. Heaven and hell, here, now, around us, upon us, within us.” (190).

[6] Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8-22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1995): 427.

[7] Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1999): 608.

[8] William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles: Word Biblical Commentary*, Volume 46 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000): 85.

[9] Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York, NY: Hachette Book Group, 2007). Interview of Hitchens on the Charley Rose Show regarding his book “Hitch-22” available at: <http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/11168>. In the interview and in explaining his family atmosphere, Hitchens reflects that his grandfather was a very strict and austere Baptist who didn’t believe in life that was fun. He also takes the opportunity to dispel any rumor that in the face of death, there might be a last minute conversion with him. No, his mind is made up.

- [10] Alister McGrath, *Justification by Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988): 106.
- [11] C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce: The Best of C.S. Lewis* (New York: Christianity Today, Inc., 1969): 156.
- [12] McGrath, *Justification*, 106. Though he was an Arminian within the camp of open theism, Clark Pinnock (1937-2010) stated: "Universalism is not a viable position because of the gift of human freedom." See William Crockett, General Editor, *Four Views on Hell* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996): 128.
- [13] Bell notes "Love demands freedom. It always has, and always will. We are free to resist, reject, and rebel against God's ways for us. We can have all the hell we want." (113) But such freedom exists only in the "now"—in the "lower stakes" of life. Where is freedom regarding the "higher stakes," heaven or hell "not yet"? Is not freedom consequential to the coming reality after death? Given his overall argument, Bell's admission of freedom is like so much window dressing. As regards this life all free to choose, but as regards the next life all are not. In Bell's scheme, freedom has everything to do with the temporal, but is inconsequential for the eternal.
- [14] Robertson McQuilken, *The Great Omission: A Biblical Basis for World Evangelism* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2002): 41.
- [15] Compare Pastor Larry DeBruyn, "Here a 'Christ,' There a 'Christ,' Everywhere a 'Christ-Christ!'" *Guarding His Flock Ministries*. Online at : <http://guardinghisflock.com/2010/03/14/here-a-christ-there-a-christ-everywhere-a-christ-christ/>.
- [16] Frederic Louis Godet (1812-1900) commented on this point: "But the idea of the incarnation of the Christ in a rock is so contrary to the spirit of St. Paul, that one cannot entertain it seriously, and ver. 9 represents the Christ in the wilderness acting as the representative of Jehovah, from the midst of the cloud!" *Commentary on First Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, Reprint of 1889 ed.): 485. Personally, I agree with Garland that Paul's Rock reference illustrates Christ to be the source for divine blessing; that as He supplied sustenance and guidance to Israel in the wilderness, so He "is the source of all divine gifts and succor" for the Church. See David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003): 458.
- [17] See Pastor Larry DeBruyn, "The 'Holy' God: From Immanence to Idolatry," *Guarding His Flock Ministries*. Online at: <http://guardinghisflock.com/2011/05/08/the-holy-god/#more-1768>.
- [18] See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996): 223-224. Wallace writes that "the monadic article points out a unique object . . . For example, 'the sun' is monadic because there is only one sun. It is not the best of many suns, but is the only one." So Paul's monadic use of the article does not allow for many "rocks," but only for one Rock.
- [19] "God has an imagination," writes Bell. (116) So using our imagination/mind becomes a means of connecting to the divine imagination/mind. Interesting . . . but also idolatrous. Of a pagan frame of mind, Paul wrote, "Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened" (Romans 1:21, KJV). Other versions variously translate "imagination" (Greek *dialogismos*) as "speculations, reasoning, thinking, thoughts." What do we think God is like? "Simon says God is _____. You fill in the blank. Do you think that's how God desires to be known? What do you think about people who make up stories about you? Are we God's counselors to tell Him what He's to be like?"
- [20] Peter C. Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B.

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Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978): 95.

[21] Arthur W. Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1975): 82.