

# God Is Still Holy and What You Learned In Sunday School Is Still True:

A Review of *Love Wins* by Rob Bell

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## *Love Wins*, by megachurch pastor Rob Bell,

is, as the subtitle suggests, “a book about heaven, hell, and the fate of every person who ever lived.” Here’s the gist: Hell is what we create for ourselves when we reject God’s love. Hell is both a present reality for those who resist God and a future reality for those who die unready for God’s love. Hell is what we make of heaven when we cannot accept the good news of God’s forgiveness and mercy. But hell is not forever. God will have his way. How can his good purposes fail? Every sinner will turn to God and realize he has already been reconciled to God, in this life or in the next. There will be no eternal conscious torment. God says no to injustice in the age to come, but he does not pour out wrath (we bring the temporary suffering upon ourselves), and he certainly does not punish for eternity. In the end, love wins.

Bell correctly notes (many times) that God is love. He also observes that Jesus is Jewish, the resurrection is important, and the phrase “personal relationship with God” is not in the Bible. He usually makes his argument by referencing Scripture. He is easy to read and obviously feels very deeply for those who have been wronged or seem to be on the outside looking in.

Unfortunately, beyond this, there are dozens of problems with *Love Wins*. The theology is heterodox. The history is inaccurate. The impact on souls is devastating. And the use of Scripture is indefensible. Worst of all, *Love Wins* demeans the cross and misrepresents God’s character.

### **A Few Preliminaries**

Before going any further with a critique, a number of preliminary comments are in order. A few opening remarks may help put this critical review in context and encourage productive responses.

**One**, although Bell asks a lot of questions (350 by one count), we should not write off the provocative theology as mere question-raising. Bell did not write an entire book because he was looking for some good resources on heaven and hell. This isn’t the thirteen-year-old in your youth group asking her teacher, “How can a good God send people to hell?” Any pastor worth his covenant salt will welcome sincere questions like this. (“Good question, Jenny, let’s see what the Bible says about that.”) But Bell is a popular teacher of a huge church with a huge following. This book is not an invitation to talk. It’s him telling us what he thinks (nothing wrong with that). As Bell himself writes, “But this isn’t a book of questions. It’s a book of responses to these questions” (19).

**Two**, we should notice the obvious: this is a book. It is a book with lots of Scripture references. It is a book that draws from history and personal experience. It makes a case for something. It purports one story of Christianity to be better than another. Bell means to persuade. He wants to convince us of something. He is a teacher teaching. This book is not a poem. It is not a piece of art. This is a theological book by a pastor trying to impart a different way of looking at heaven and hell. Whether Bell is creative or a provocateur is beside the point. If Bell is inconsistent, unclear, or inaccurate, claiming the “artist”

mantle is no help.

**Three**, I'm sure that many people looking to defend Bell will be drawn to a couple escape hatches he launches along the way. As you'll see, the book is a sustained attack on the idea that those who fail to believe in Jesus Christ in this life will suffer eternally for their sins. This is the traditional Christianity he finds "misguided and toxic" (viii). But in one or two places Bell seems more agnostic.

Will everybody be saved, or will some perish apart from God forever because of their choices? Those are questions, or more accurately, those are tensions we are free to leave fully intact. We don't need to resolve them or answer them because we can't, and so we simply respect them, creating space for the freedom that love requires. (115)

These are strange sentences because they fall in the chapter where Bell argues that God wants everyone to be saved and God gets what God wants. He tells us that "never-ending punishment" does not give God glory, and "God's love will eventually melt even the hardest hearts" (108). So it's unclear where the sudden agnosticism comes from. Is Bell wrestling with himself? Did a friend or editor ask him to throw in a few caveats? Is he simply inconsistent?

Similarly, at the end Bell argues, rather out of the blue, that we need to trust God in the present, that our choices here and now "matter more than we can begin to imagine" because we can miss out on rewards and celebrations (197). This almost looks like an old-fashioned call to turn to Christ before it's too late. When you look more carefully, however, you see that Bell is not saying what evangelicals might think. He wants us to make the most of life because "while we may get other opportunities, we won't get the one right in front of us again" (197). In other words, there are consequences for our actions, in this life and in the next, and we can't get this moment back; but there will always be more chances. If you don't live life to the fullest and choose love now, you may initially miss out on some good things in the life to come, but in the end love wins (197–198).

For anyone tempted to take these few lines and make Bell sound orthodox, I encourage you to read the whole book more carefully. Likewise, before you rush to accept that Bell believes in hell and believes Christ is the only way, pay attention to his conception of hell and in what way he thinks Jesus is the only way. Bad theology usually sneaks in under the guise of familiar language. There's a reason he's written 200 pages on why you must be deluded to think people end up in eternal conscious punishment under the just wrath of God. Words mean something, even when some of them seem forced or out of place. Take the book as a whole to get Bell's whole message.

**Four**, it is possible that I (like other critics) am mean-spirited, nasty, and cruel. But voicing strong disagreement does not automatically make me any of these. Judgmentalism is not the same as making judgments. The same Jesus who said "do not judge" in Matthew 7:1 calls his opponents dogs and pigs in Matthew 7:6. Paul pronounces an anathema on those who preach a false gospel (Gal. 1:8). Disagreement among professing Christians is not a plague on the church. In fact, it is sometimes

necessary. The whole Bible is full of evaluation and encourages the faithful to be discerning and make their own evaluations. What's tricky is that some fights are stupid, and some judgments are unfair and judgmental. But this must be proven, not assumed. Bell feels strongly about this matter of heaven and hell. So do a lot of other people. Strong language and forceful arguments are appropriate.

**Five**, I am not against conversation. What I am against is false teaching. I did not go to the trouble of writing a review because I worry that God can't handle our questions. The question is never whether God can handle our honest reappraisals of traditional Christianity, but whether he likes them.

On the subject of conversation, it's worth pointing out that this book actually mitigates against further conversation. For starters, there's the McLarenesque complaint about the close-minded traditionalists who don't allow for questions, change, and maturity (ix). This is a kind of pre-emptive "damned if you do, damned if you don't" approach to conversation (cf. 183). In essence, "Let's talk, but I know already that the benighted and violent will hate my theology." That hardly invites further dialogue. More practically, Bell includes no footnotes for his historical claims and rarely gives chapter and verse when citing the Bible. It is difficult to examine Bell's claims when he is less than careful in backing them up.

**Six**, this is not an evangelistic work, not in the traditional sense anyway. The primary intended audience appears to be not so much secularists with objections to Christianity (à la Keller's *Reason for God*), but disaffected evangelicals who can't accept the doctrine they grew up with. Bell writes for the "growing number" who have become aware that the Christian story has been "hijacked" (vii). *Love Wins* is for those who have heard a version of the gospel that now makes their stomachs churn and their pulses rise, and makes them cry out, "I would never be a part of that" (viii). This is a book for people like Bell, people who grew up in an evangelical environment and don't want to leave it completely, but want to change it, grow up out of it, and transcend it. The emerging church is not an evangelistic strategy. It is the last rung for evangelicals falling off the ladder into liberalism or unbelief.

Over and over, Bell refers to the "staggering number" of people just like him, people who can't believe the message they used to believe, people who want nothing to do with traditional Christianity, people who don't want to leave the faith but can't live in the faith they once embraced. I have no doubt there are many people like this inside and outside our churches. Some will leave the faith altogether. Others—and they are in the worse position—will opt for liberalism, which has always seen itself as a halfway house between conservative orthodoxy and secular disbelief.

But before we let Bell and others write the present story, we must remember that there are also a "staggering number" of young people who want the straight up, unvarnished truth. They want doctrinal edges and traditional orthodoxy. They want no-holds-barred preaching. They don't want to leave traditional Christianity. They are ready to go deeper into it.

*Love Wins* has ignited such a firestorm of controversy because it's the current fissure point for a larger fault-line. As younger generations come up against an increasingly hostile cultural environment, they are breaking in one of two directions—back to robust orthodoxy (often Reformed) or back to liberalism. The neo-evangelical consensus is cracking up. *Love Wins* is simply one of many tremors.

### **Where to Begin?**

With those as preliminaries, you know this won't be a brief review. The hard part is knowing where to begin. *Love Wins* is such a departure from historic Christianity, that there's no easy way to tackle it. You can't point to two or three main problems or three or four exegetical missteps. This is a markedly different telling of the gospel from start to finish. To fully engage the material would require not only deconstruction, but a full reconstruction of orthodoxy theology. A book review, however, is not the place to build a systematic theology. So where to begin?

I want to approach *Love Wins* by looking at seven areas: Bell's view of traditional evangelical theology, history, exegesis, eschatology, Christology, gospel, and God.

### **1. Not Your Grandmother's Christianity**

Perhaps the best place to start is to show that Bell routinely disparages the faith of traditional evangelicalism. 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. It's been clearly communicated to many that this belief is a central truth of the Christian faith and to reject it is, in essence, to reject Jesus. This is misguided, toxic, and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus' message of love, peace, forgiveness and joy that our world desperately needs to hear. (viii)

At least Bell is honest. In the next chapter, not even his grandmother gets off unscathed. Bell reminisces about the scary picture in her house of a floating cross-bridge to heaven. He likens it to a joint project from Thomas Kinkade and Dante or like Dungeons and Dragons, Billy Graham, and a barbecue pit rolled into one (22–23). He and his sister were freaked out. This story of leaving earth to go to heaven by means of faith in Christ is not the story he wants to promote anymore.

Later, Bell allows that traditionalists can believe their story of heaven and hell, but “it isn't a very good story” (110). Traditional Christians have inferior news to share because in their story so many people end up in hell. “That's why the Christians who talk the most about going to heaven while everybody else goes to hell don't throw very good parties” (179). Not only are they bad at parties, traditionalists are bad at art: “An entrance understanding 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” (180). So much for finding beauty or delight in Western civilization. I’ll leave it to the art critics and the party-goers to determine if it’s true that, second to blondes, universalists have more fun.

What’s interesting is that Bell struggles to leave his evangelical upbringing behind. He knows the temptation to be embarrassed that “we were so ‘simple’ or ‘naïve,’ or ‘brainwashed’ or whatever terms arise when we haven’t come to terms with our own story” (194). And yet, he believes it’s important to embrace past understanding of the faith, even if people like him were shaped by a certain environment and reared in certain experiences that can be easily deconstructed (e.g., praying the sinner’s prayer) (193–95). Again, we sense Bell is trying to reconcile an earlier faith with his present trajectory. The result is an awkward attempt to claim his past while still wanting to evolve out of it. This presumes, of course, that the Christian faith is not a deposit to guard or a tradition that must not change (2 Tim. 1:14; 2 Thess. 2:15). Much of Bell’s polemic fails if there is a core of apostolic teaching that we are called, not just to embrace as part of our journey, but to protect from deviation and defend against false teaching (Acts 20:29–31).

## **2. Historical Problems**

Bell maintains he is not saying anything new. And that’s right. The problem is he makes it sound like his everyone-ends-up-restored-and-reconciled-to-God theology is smack dab in the center of the Christian tradition.

And so, beginning with the early church, there is a long tradition of Christians who believe that God will ultimately restore everything and everybody, because Jesus says in Matthew 19 that there will be a “renewal of all things,” Peter says in Acts 3 that Jesus will “restore everything,” and Paul says in Colossians 1 that through Christ “God was pleased to . . .reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven.” (107, ellipsis in original)

It’s important to Bell that he falls within the “deep, wide, diverse stream” of “historic, orthodox Christian faith” (ix-x). Therefore, he argues that “at the center of the Christian tradition since the first church has been the insistence that history is not tragic, hell is not forever, and love, in the end, wins” (109).

This bold claim flies in the face of Richard Bauckham’s historical survey:

Until the nineteenth century almost all Christian theologians taught the reality of eternal torment in hell. Here and there, outside the theological mainstream, were some who believed that the wicked would be finally annihilated. . . . Even fewer were the advocates of universal salvation, though these few included some major theologians of the early church. Eternal punishment was firmly asserted in official creeds and confessions of the churches. It must have seemed as indispensable a part of the universal Christian belief as the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation. (“Universalism: A Historical Survey,” *Themelios* 4.2 [September 1978]: 47–54)

Universalism (though in a different form than Bell's and for different reasons) has been present in the church since Origen, but it was never in the center of the tradition. Origen's theology was partly anticipated by his fellow Platonist Clement of Alexandria and later shows up in the Cappadocian Gregory of Nyssa. But according to William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson in the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* series, Gregory's theology of hell is hard to pin down. He makes much of God being "all in all" and evil being eradicated, but he also warns of the final judgment and the flames ready to engulf the wicked (NPNF ser. 2, 5:16). Whatever Origen's influence on the Cappadocian fathers (and it was considerable), Origen's views were later refuted by Augustine and, as Bauckham notes, condemned in 543 in a council at Constantinople.

Bell also mentions Jerome, Basil, and Augustine because they claimed many people in their day believed in the ultimate reconciliation of all people to God (107). But listing all the heavyweights who took time to refute the position you are now espousing is not a point in your favor. Most egregiously, Bell calls on Martin Luther in support of post-mortem salvation (106). But as Carl Trueman has pointed out, anyone familiar with Luther's creedal statements and overall writing, not to mention the actual quotation in question, will quickly see that Luther is not on Bell's side.

Universalism has been around a long time. But so has every other heresy. Arius rejected the full deity of Christ and many people followed him. This hardly makes Arianism part of the wide, diverse stream of Christian orthodoxy. Every point of Christian doctrine has been contested, but some have been deemed heterodox. Universalism, traditionally, was considered one of those points. True, many recent liberal theologians have argued for versions of universalism—and this is where Bell stands, not in the center of the historic Christian tradition.

### **3. Exegetical Problems**

Some people may be impressed by the array of biblical texts Bell employs. But there is less here than meets the eye. Time after time, key points in Bell's argument rest on huge exegetical mistakes.

A partial list—an even ten—in no particular order:

**One**, Bell cites Psalm 65, Ezekiel 36, Isaiah, Zephaniah, Philippians 2, and Psalm 22 to show that all peoples will eventually be reconciled to God. He does not mention that some of these are promises to God's people, some are general promises about the nations coming to God, and others are about the universal acknowledgement (not to be equated with saving faith) on the last day that Jesus Christ is Lord. Not one of his texts supports his conclusion.

**Two**, similarly, Bell lists a number of passages that point to final restoration—Jeremiah 5, Lamentations 3, Hosea 14, Zephaniah 3, Isaiah 57, Hosea 6, Joel 3, Amos 9, Nahum 2, Zephaniah 2, Zephaniah 3, Zechariah 9, Zechariah 10, and Micah 7 (86–87). Anyone

familiar with the prophets knows that they often finish with a promise of future blessing. But anyone familiar with the prophets should also know that these promises are for God's covenant people, predicated on faith and repentance, and fulfilled ultimately in Christ.

**Three**, Bell seems to recognize the covenantal nature of the promised restoration, so he goes out of his way to point out that the restoration is not just for God's people. To prove this point he cites a passage from Isaiah 19 where it is predicted that an altar to the Lord will be in the midst of the land of Egypt. Bell concludes that no failure is final and that consequences can always be corrected (88–89). But Isaiah 19 is not remotely about postmortem opportunities to repent. The text is about God's plan to humble Egypt to the point where they cry out to Israel's God for deliverance: "The Lord will strike Egypt, striking and healing, and they will return to the Lord, and he will listen to their pleas for mercy and heal them" (Isa. 19:22, ESV). God makes no promise that every soul in Egypt will be saved. Rather he promises, like the prophets do time and time again, that if they call on the Lord he will have mercy on them. There is no thought that they will do this calling in the afterlife.

**Four**, Bell makes no attempt to understand John 14:6 in context. After acknowledging that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life and the only way to the Father, Bell quickly adds, "What he doesn't say is how, or when, or in what manner the mechanism functions that gets people to God through Jesus. He doesn't even state that those coming to the Father through Jesus will even know that they are coming exclusively through him. He simply claims that whatever God is doing in the world to know and redeem and love and restore the world is happening through him" (154). Even a cursory glance at John 14 shows that the *through* in verse 16 refers to *faith*. The chapter begins by saying, "Believe in God; believe also in me." Verse seven talks about knowing the Father. Verses nine and ten explain that we see and know the Father by believing that Jesus is in the Father and the Father in him. Verses 11 and 12 touch on belief yet again. Coming to the Father through Christ means through faith in Christ. This is in keeping with the overall purpose of John's gospel (John 20:31).

**Five**, Bell thinks the rich man's question "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" has nothing to do with the afterlife. He isn't asking about how to go to heaven when he dies (30). He's simply wondering how to get in on the good things God is doing in the age to come (31, 40). Again, Bell ignores all contextual clues to the contrary. Given the resurrection discussion alive in Jesus' day (see Mark 12:18–27), the rich man is likely asking, "How can I be sure I'll be saved in the final resurrection?" He is thinking of life after death. That's why he says "inherit" and why the previous section in Mark discusses Bell's dreaded "entrance" theology (Mark 10:13–16). What's more, verse 30 makes clear that some of the blessings in following Jesus come in the next life, what Jesus calls "in the age to come, eternal life." If eternal life is equivalent to saying the age to come (31), then Jesus is the master of redundancy. But the two terms are not identical. Eternal life here means life that lasts forever.

**Six**, Bell reads too much into Paul's discipline passages. Paul handed over Hymenaeus and Alexander to teach them not to blaspheme. He disciplined the man in Corinth so that

his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord. Therefore, Bell reasons, failure is never final (89–90). But stating the purpose and hope of discipline (as Paul does) is one thing, assuming the repentance happened is another, and thinking any of this opens the door to postmortem second chances is a thing the text never hints at.

**Seven**, sometimes Bell just ignores the verses that don't support his thesis. While arguing that we should be extremely careful about making negative judgments on people's eternal destinies, Bell cites Jesus' words in John 3:17 that he "did not come to judge the world but to save it" (160). This Jesus, Bell says, is a "vast, expansive, generous mystery" leading us to conclude hopefully that "Heaven is, after all, full of surprises." Bell's lean into universalism here would be significantly muted had he gone on to Jesus' words in verse 18: "Whoever believes in him [i.e., the Son] 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." Likewise, according to John 3:36, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him."

**Eight**, Bell's overview of Revelation skims along the surface of the book in a way that misses all the hard parts he doesn't want to see. Bell explains that Revelation is a book written for God's people during a time when they were being persecuted. As such, there are lots of pictures of wrongs being righted and people being held accountable (112). But, he says, "the letter does not end with blood and violence" (112). It ends with the world permeated with God's love (114).

This is not a bad summary, but the three points he draws from this narrative are problematic. First, he explains the judgments by reminding us that people often reject the love and joy in front of them and "choose to live in their own hells all the time" (114). But even a cursory read through Revelation shows that violent judgments issue from God's throne. They are poured out from bowls and thrown down on the earth. Christ comes on a war horse with a sharp sword in his mouth. There's no sense that the wicked are suffering only from their poor decisions in life. They wail for fear because the one whom they pierced is coming with the clouds for recompense (Rev. 1:7).

Second, Bell suggests that maybe the gates in heaven are "never shut" because new citizens will continue to enter the city as everyone is eventually reconciled to God (115). This interpretation is clearly at odds with the rest of Revelation 21-22 which emphasizes several times that there are some accursed ones left outside the city (21:8, 27; 22:3, 14–15, 18–19). The theme of judgment carries through right to the end of the book. What's more, those facing this judgment will be thrown into the lake of fire where torment never ends, which is the second death (20:10; 21:8). There is never a hint of postmortem second chances and every indication of an irreversible judgment decreed of every soul at the end of the age. The gates are open as a sign of the city's complete safety and security, not as an indication that more will be saved after death.

Third, according to Bell, the announcement "I am making all things new" suggests new possibilities. This, in turn, means we should leave the door open that the final eternal state of every person has not been fixed (116). Again, this is a supposition without any

warrant in the text, where the newness of heaven speaks of a new holiness, a new world, a new pain-free existence, and a new closeness with God. Heaven is not new because people in hell get new chances to repent.

**Nine**, what Bell does with Sodom and Gomorrah should make even his most ardent supporters wince. Really, you have to wonder if Bell has any interest in being constrained by serious study of the biblical text. In one place, Bell argues from Ezekiel 16 that because the fortunes of Sodom will be restored (Ezek. 16:53), this suggests that the *forever* destiny of others might end in restoration (84). But it should be obvious that the restoration of Sodom in Ezekiel is about the city, not about the individual inhabitants of the town who were already judged in Genesis 19. The people condemned by sulfur and fire 1,500 years earlier were not getting a second lease on postmortem life. The current city would be restored. And besides, the whole point of Sodom's restoration is to shame wicked Samaria (Ezek. 16:54) so that they might bear the penalty of their lewdness and abominations (Ezek. 16:58). This hardly fits with Bell's view of God and judgment.

If that weren't bad enough, the other discussion on Sodom is even worse. Because Jesus says it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for Capernaum (Matt. 11:23–24), Bell concludes that there is hope for all the other Sodoms and Gomorrahs (85). Bell takes a passage about judgment—judgment that will be so bad for Capernaum it's even worse than God's judgment on Sodom—and turns it into tacit support for ultimate universalism. Jesus' warning says nothing about new hope for Sodom. It says everything about the hopelessness of unbelieving Capernaum.

**Ten**, not surprisingly, Bell frequently harkens back to the Pauline promise in Ephesians 1 and Colossians 1 that God is reconciling or uniting all things together in Christ (149). These are favorite passages of universalists, but they cannot carry the freight universalists want them to. Take Ephesians 1, for example. Paul says that God's plan in the fullness of time is to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth (Eph. 1:10). The Greek word for "unite" is a long one: *anakephalaio sasthai*. It means to sum up, to bring together to a main point, to gather together. It is like an author finishing the last chapter of his book or a conductor bringing the symphony from cacophony to harmony. It's a glorious promise, already begun in some ways by the word of Christ. But we know from the rest of Ephesians that Paul does not expect all peoples to be reconciled to God. He speaks of sons of disobedience and children of wrath in chapter two. In chapter five, he makes clear that the sexually immoral and covetous have no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ. In Ephesians 5:6 he warns that the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. The uniting of all things does not entail the salvation of all people. It means that everything in the universe, heaven and earth, the spiritual world and the physical world, will finally submit to the lordship of Christ, some in joyful worship of their beloved Savior and others in just punishment for their wretched treason. In the end, God wins.

One last general point about Bell's exegesis: Bell has a reputation for being brilliant and creative, and he probably is in certain spheres. But his use of Scripture exhibits neither characteristic. In fact, it is naïve, literalistic biblicism. He flattens everything, either to

make traditional theology sound ridiculously inconsistent or to make a massive point from one out-of-context verse. He makes no attempt to understand metaphors, genre, or imagery (either in Scripture or in his grandmother's painting). He does not try to harmonize anything that might rot his fresh take on the Bible. He loves Jewish background and context, but he shows very little familiarity with the actual storyline and the shape of the Old Testament. His style may be engaging to some, but look up the passages for yourself and then pick up a reputable study Bible or a basic commentary series. You'll seriously question Bell's use of Scripture.

#### **4. Eschatological Problems**

Bell's eschatology is muddled. On the one hand, he goes to great length to argue that eternal life is not really forever life, just abundant life or life belonging to the next age (57, 92–93). He maintains that the images of hell refer to the pain we create for ourselves on earth and to the impending disaster on Jerusalem in AD 70 (81). Bell sounds like an overwrought preterist at times, having no place for end-times judgment or an unending existence after death. But on the other hand, he seems to leave all these arguments behind later when he talks about an eternal postmortem existence. He does believe in heaven after you die, and he believes in hell.

But in a strange bit of logic arising out of the parable of the prodigal son, Bell maintains that heaven and hell exist side by side. It's not always clear what Bell thinks, but it seems he believes everyone goes to the same realm when they die; but for some people it is heaven, and for others it is hell (170). If you don't accept God's story about the world and resist his love, heaven will be hell for you, a hell you create for yourself. We are supposed to see this in Luke 15 where both brothers are invited to the same feast but one can't enjoy it. Heaven and hell at the same party (176). To call this a little stretch is like calling pro wrestling a little fake. Jesus told all three "lost" parables to explain why he was eating with "sinners" (Luke 15:2–3), not to posit a thoroughly un-Jewish notion that the afterlife is whatever you make of it. If the parable of the prodigal son teaches Bell's theology of heaven-and-hell-at-the-same-time, then the Bible can teach anything Bell wants it to.

In a similar vein, Bell seems unaware that theologians of various traditions have talked about the two sides of God's will (or two lenses through which God views the world). To be sure, there is mystery here, but it's common to distinguish between God's will of decree, whereby everything that he wills comes to pass (Eph. 1:11), and his will of desire which can be rejected (Matt. 7:21). And yet one of Bell's main planks in support of universal reconciliation is that if God wants all people to be saved, then all people must eventually be saved. "How great is God?" Bell asks. "Great enough to achieve what God sets out to do, or kind of great, great most of the time, but in this, the fate of billions of people, not totally great. Sort of great. A little great" (97–99). The strong insinuation is that a God who does not save everyone is not totally great.

All this is built on the statement that God wants everyone to be saved. There's no exegetical work on the meaning of "all people" and no discussion on the dual-nature of God's will. In Bell's mind, if all people do not end up reconciled to God it's tantamount to God saying, "Well, I tried, I gave it my best shot, and sometimes you just have to be okay with failure" (103). Bell has taken one statement from 1 Timothy 2:4 (God desires all people to be saved), avoids any contextual work on the passage (e.g., all probably means "all kinds of people"), and refuses to bring any other relevant passages to bear on this one (e.g., Rom. 9:22, "What if God desiring to show his wrath and make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?") The result is a simplistic formula: "God wants all people to be saved. God gets what he wants. Therefore, all people will eventually be saved." This is a case of poor theologizing beholden to mistaken logic. If it is "the will of God" that Christians "abstain from sexual immorality" (1 Thess. 4:3), does that mean God's greatness is diminished by our impurity?

In the blog buzz leading up to the release of *Love Wins*, there was a lot of discussion about whether Bell is or is not a Christian universalist. After reading the book, I see no reason why the label does not fit. Now it's true, Bell believes in hell. But he does not believe that God pours out his wrath on anyone forever (I'm not sure he thinks God actively pours out wrath on anyone at all). Hell is the sad suffering of this life (71). Hell is God giving us what we want (72). Postmortem hell is what we create for ourselves when we refuse to believe God's story, when we resist his love (170-71, 172, 177). There is hell now and hell later. "There are all kinds of hell because there are all kinds of ways to reject the good and the true and the beautiful and the human now, in this life, and so we can only assume we can do the same in the next" (79).

So why do I say Bell is a universalist if he believes in hell? Because he does not believe hell lasts forever. It is a temporary "period of pruning" and "an intense experience of correction" (91). Bell's hell is like purgatory except his "period of pruning" is for anyone, not just for Christians who die in a state of grace as Catholicism teaches. For Bell, this life is about getting ourselves fitted for the good life to come. Some of us die ready to experience God's love. Others need more time to sort things out. Luckily, in Bell's scheme, there is always more time. "No one can resist God's pursuit forever because God's love will eventually melt even the hardest hearts" (108). Bell does not believe every road leads to God. He is not a moral relativist. You can get your life and theology wrong. Heaven is a kind of starting over, a time to relearn what it means to be human. For some this process may take a while, and during the process their heaven may feel more like hell. But even those who get everything wrong in this life, will eventually get it right over time in the next life. In Bell's theology, ultimately, everyone will be saved. If he's right, most of church history has been wrong. If he's wrong, a staggering number of people are hearing "peace, peace" where there is no peace.

What's wrong with this theology is, of course, what's wrong with the whole book. Bell assumes all sorts of things that can't be shown from Scripture. For example, Bell figures God won't say "sorry, too late" to those in hell who are humble and broken for their sins. But where does the Bible teach the damned are truly humble or penitent? For that matter, where does the Bible talk about growing and maturing in the afterlife or getting a second

chance after death? Why does the Bible make such a big deal about repenting “today” (Heb. 3:13), about being found blameless on the day of Christ (2 Pet. 3:14), about not neglecting such a great salvation (Heb. 2:3) if we have all sorts of time to figure things out in the next life? Why warn about not inheriting the kingdom (1 Cor. 6:9–10), about what a fearful thing it is to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb. 10:31), or about the vengeance of our coming King (2 Thess. 1:5–12) if hell is just what we make of heaven? Bell does nothing to answer these questions, or even ask them in the first place.

## 5. Christological Problems

Most readers of *Love Wins* will want to talk about Bell’s universalism. But just as troubling is his Christology. Bell has a Joseph Campbell “The Hero with a Thousand Faces” view of Christ. Jesus is hidden in various cultures and in every aspect of creation. Some people find him and some don’t. Some call him Jesus; some have too much baggage with Christianity, so they call him by a different name (159).

Bell finds support for this Christological hide-and-seek in 1 Corinthians 10. This is where Paul calls to mind the Exodus narrative and asserts that the rock (the one that gushed water) was Christ (1 Cor. 10:4). From this Bell concludes, “There are rocks everywhere” (139). If Paul saw Christ in the rock, then who knows where else we might find him (144)? Jesus cannot be confined to any one religion, Bell argues. He transcends our labels and cages, especially the one called Christianity (150). Christ is present in all cultures and can be found everywhere. Sometimes missionaries travel around the world only to find that the Christ they preach was already present by a different name (152).

This does not mean Christ is whatever you want him to be. Some Jesuses should be rejected, Bell says, like the ones that are “anti-science” and “anti-gay” and use bullhorns on the street (8). But wherever we find “grace, peace, love, acceptance, healing, forgiveness” we’ve found the creative life source that we call Jesus (156, 159).

Elsewhere, after describing a false Jesus “who waves the flag and promotes whatever values they have decided their nation needs to return to,” Bell offers the promising alternative: “the very life source of the universe who has walked among us and continues to sustain everything with his love and power and grace and energy” (156).

These [Eucharist] rituals are true for us, because they’re true for everybody. They unite us, because they unite everybody. These are signs and 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. (157)

This is classic liberalism pure and simple, a souped-up version of Schleiermacher’s feeling of absolute dependence. This is all immanence and no transcendence. This is not the objective gospel-message of Christ’s work in history that we must announce. This is an existential message announcing a rival version of the good news, the announcement that you already know Christ and can feel him in your heart if you pay attention.

To suggest the Lord’s Supper unites all people makes a mockery of the sacrament and the Christ uniquely present in the bread and the cup. The Table is a feast for those who trust

in Christ, for those who can discern his body, a family meal for those who together will proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again. It brings us together under the sign of the cross. The sheep "not of this pen" are not adherents of other religions who belong to Christ without knowing it (152), but Gentiles who can now fellowship with Jews through the blood (Eph. 2:11–22).

And let's not forget all of this rests on an illegitimate reading of 1 Corinthians 10. First, the fact that Paul found a type of Christ in the Old Testament does not give us warrant to find whatever types we like *in the world*. Second, Paul did not mention the rock willy-nilly because it seemed beautiful to him. The gushing rock was a picture of God's provision and salvation for his people in the Old Testament just like Christ is for the church in the New Testament. Third, the rest of 1 Corinthians 10 militantly opposes everything Bell wants to get out of the chapter. The reason Paul brought up the rock in the first place was as an example, "that we might not desire evil as they did" (1 Cor. 10:6). Paul wants the Corinthians to avoid being "destroyed by the Destroyer" (1 Cor. 10:10) and to "take heed lest [they] fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). There's no thought that the Corinthians should find Christ in ten thousand places. The whole chapter is a warning against idolatry, to flee from it (1 Cor. 10:14), not to embrace it in the name of mystery.

## 6. Gospel Problems

This review is too long already, but I really must say something about the two most grievous errors in the book: Bell's view of the cross and his view of God.

According to Bell, salvation is realizing you're already saved. We are all forgiven. We are all loved, equally and fully by God who has made peace with everyone. That work is done. Now we are invited to believe that story and live in it (172–73).

Bell is not saying what you think he might be saying. He's not suggesting faith is the instrumental cause used by the Spirit to join us to Christ so we can share in all his benefits. That would be evangelical theology. Bell is saying God has already forgiven us whether we ask for it or not, whether we repent and believe or not, whether we are born again or not. "Forgiveness is unilateral. God isn't waiting for us to get it together, to clean up, shape up, get up—God has already done it" (189). This means the Father's love just is. It cannot be earned and it cannot be taken away. God's love is simply yours (188). Heaven and hell (however Bell conceives them) are both full of forgiven people.

So what does Bell believe about the atonement? He starts with the familiar refrain that there are many images for what the death of Jesus accomplished and none of them should be prized more than another (though he claims *Christus Victor* was the dominant understanding for the first thousand years of church history). The point is not to argue about the images. "The point then, as it is now, is Jesus. The divine in flesh and blood. He's where the life is" (129).

You may wonder where the sacrificial system is in all this. After all, as a friend reminded

me, years ago Bell was best known for being the pastor who started his church by preaching from Leviticus. I'm not sure what Bell taught back then, but now it appears his understanding of sacrifice is almost entirely negative. Sacrifice in the ancient world (and he fails to distinguish between Israel and other nations) meant "Offer something, show that you're serious, make amends, find favor, and then hope that was enough to get what you needed" (124). Sacrifice is a kind of plea bargain, not a substitution.

Consequently, Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was a generic doing-away of all sacrifices. It means "no more wondering if the gods were pleased with you and or ready to strike you down" (125). Notice, Bell does not say that Jesus' death appeased the anger of God/gods, only that his sacrifice shows us we don't have to wonder any more if the gods are angry. Sacrifice, whether in the Old Testament or on the cross, is not about loving divine self-substitution, but the divine manifestation of love already present in the world, a love whose only obstacle is our ignorance of it and unwillingness to receive it. For all the talk of social justice, there is apparently no need for God to receive his justice.

Bell categorically rejects any notion of penal substitution. It simply does not work in his system or with his view of God. "Let's be very clear, then," Bell states, "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" (182). I see no place in Bell's theology for Christ the curse-bearer (Gal. 3:13), or Christ wounded for our transgressions and crushed by God for our iniquities (Isa. 53:5, 10), no place for the Son of Man who gave his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45), no place for the Savior who was made sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21), no place for the sorrowful suffering Servant who drank the bitter cup of God's wrath for our sake (Mark 14:36).

In Bell's theology, God is love, a love that never burns hot with anger and a love that cannot distinguish or discriminate. "Jesus' story," Bell says, "is first and foremost about the love of God for every single one of us. It is a stunning, beautiful, expansive love and it is for everybody, everywhere" (vii). Therefore, he reasons, "we cannot claim him to be ours any more than he's anybody else's" (152). This is tragic. It's as if Bell wants every earthly father to love every child in the world in the exact same way. If you rob a father of his unique, specific, not-for-everyone love, you rob the children of their greatest treasure. It reminds me of the T-shirt, "Jesus Loves You. Then Again He Loves Everybody." There's no good news in announcing that God loves everyone in the same way just because he wants to. **The good news is that in love God sent his Son to live for our lives and die for our deaths, suffering the God-forsakenness we deserved so that we might call God our God and we who trust in Christ might be his children.** The sad irony is that while Bell would very much like us to know the love of God, he has taken away the very thing in which God's love is chiefly known: "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10).

## 7. A Different God

At the very heart of this controversy, and one of the reasons the blogosphere exploded over this book, is that we really do have two different Gods. The stakes are that high. If Bell is right, then historic orthodoxy is toxic and terrible. But if the traditional view of heaven and hell are right, Bell is blaspheming. I do not use the word lightly, just like Bell probably chose “toxic” quite deliberately. Both sides cannot be right. As much as some voices in evangelicalism will suggest that we should all get along and learn from each other and listen for the Spirit speaking in our midst, the fact is we have two irreconcilable views of God.

Here’s how Bell understands the traditional view of God:

Millions have been taught that if they don’t believe, if they don’t accept in the right way according to the person telling them the gospel, and they were hit by a car and died later that same day, God would have no choice but to punish them forever in conscious torment in hell. God would, in essence, become a fundamentally different being to them in that moment of death, a different being to them *forever*. 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 insure that they would have no escape from an endless future of agony.

If there was an earthly father who was like that, we would call the authorities. If there was an actual human dad who was that volatile, we would contact child protection services immediately. If God can switch gears like that, switch entire modes of being that quickly, that raises a thousand questions about whether a being like this could ever be trusted. Let alone be good.

Loving one moment, vicious the next. Kind and compassionate, only to become cruel and relentless in the blink of an eye. Does God become somebody totally different the moment you die? That kind of God is simply devastating. Psychologically crushing. We can’t bear it. No one can. . . . That God is terrifying and traumatizing and unbearable. (173–75)

Of course, this is a horrible caricature that makes God seem capricious and vindictive. No one I know thinks God is loving one minute and cruel the next. But God is always holy. And holy love is not the same as unconditional affirmation. Holy love is more terrifying than even Bell thinks and more unbelievably merciful and free than Bell imagines. Bell’s god is a small god, so bound by notions of radical free will that I wonder how Bell can be so confident God’s love will melt the hardest heart. If God’s grace is always, essentially, fundamentally, resistible (72, 103–4, 118–19), how do we know some sinners won’t suffer in their own hell for a million years?

Bell’s god may be all love, but it is a love rooted in our modern, Western sensibilities more than careful biblical reflection. It is a love that threatens to swallow up God’s glory and holiness. But, you may reply, the Bible says God *is* love (1 John 4:16). True, but if you want to weigh divine attributes by sentence construction, you have to mention God is spirit (John 4:24), God is light (1 John 1:5), and God is a consuming fire (Heb. 12:29). The verb “is” does not establish a priority of attributes. If anything, one might mention

that the only thrice-repeated attribute is “holy, holy, holy.” And yet this is the one thing Bell’s god is not. Having preached through Leviticus he should remember that holiness is the overarching theme. The sacrifices are a pleasing aroma in God’s nostrils because they satisfy his justice, making way for a holy God to dwell in the midst of an unholy people. That Christ’s sacrifice is the same pleasing aroma to God (Eph. 5:2) undercuts Bell’s insistence that God did not need to rescue us from God.

It would be unfair to say Bell doesn’t believe in sin. He clearly does. But his vice lists are telling: war, rape, greed, injustice, violence, pride, division, exploitation, disgrace (36–37). In another place, he says that in heaven God will say “no” to oil spills, sexual assault on women, political leaders silencing by oppression, and people being stepped on by greedy institutions and corporations (37–38). These are real problems and throughout the book Bell mentions many real, heinous sins. But all of these sins are obvious to almost everyone in our culture, especially progressives. What’s missing is not only a full-orbed view of sins, but a deeper understanding of sin itself. In Bell’s telling of the story, there is no sense of the vertical dimension of our evil. Yes, Bell admits several times that we can resist or reject God’s love. But there’s never any discussion of the way we’ve offended God, no suggestion that ultimately all our failings are a failure to worship God as we should. God is not simply disappointed with our choices or angry for the way we judge others. He is angry at the way we judge *him*. He cannot stand to look upon our uncleanness. His nostrils flare at iniquity. He hates our ingratitude, our impurity, our God-complexes, our self-centeredness, our disobedience, our despising of his holy law. Only when we see God’s eye-covering holiness will we grasp the magnitude of our traitorous rebellion, and only then will we marvel at the incomprehensible love that purchased our deliverance on the cross.

Bell begins the book by noting how fed up he is with the traditional story about Jesus. He insists on telling a different story. And he does. His story, as I’ve noted before, is “first and foremost about the love of God for every single one of us. It is a stunning, beautiful, expansive love and it is for everybody, everywhere” (vii). On the right lips, this might possibly be a fine statement. But from Bell it signals a deviation from the Bible’s plotline. Look at God’s people in the garden, then kicked out of the garden; God’s people in the promised land, then booted out of the promised land; God’s people in the New Jerusalem, then the wicked and unbelieving locked outside the New Jerusalem. Trace this story from tabernacle to temple through the incarnation and Pentecost and the coming down of the new heaven and new earth and you will see that the Bible’s story is about how a holy God can possibly dwell among an unholy people. The good news of this story is not that God loves everybody everywhere and you just need to find Christ in the rocks all around you. The good news is that God over and over makes a way for his unholy people to dwell in his holy presence, and that all these ways were pointing to the one Way, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

At bottom, Bell’s vision of heaven and hell doesn’t work because his vision of God is false. I cannot imagine the angels singing “holy, holy, holy” or Isaiah crying out “woe is me” at the feet of Bell’s god. I see no place for divine wrath or divine justice in Bell’s theology. All our punishment, in this life and the next, is manmade. We get what we want

and it makes our lives miserable, now and for a while in heaven. There is some truth to this. The pain of hell is our fault. But it's also God's doing. Hell is not what we make for ourselves or gladly choose. It's what a holy God justly gives to those who exchange the truth of God for a lie. The bowls of wrath in Revelation are poured out by God; they are not swum in by sinners. The ten plagues were sent by God, they were not the product of some Egyptian spell gone wrong. God's wrath burns against the impenitent and unbelieving; they do not walk into the fire by themselves.

Bell's god is wholly passive toward sin. He hates some of it and says no to it in the next life, but he does not actively judge it. There's no way to make sense of Nadab and Abihu or Perrez-Uzzah or Gehazi or Achan's or Korah's rebellion or the flood or the exodus or the Babylonian captivity or the preaching of John the Baptist or the visions of Revelation or the admonitions of Paul or the warnings of Hebrews or Calvary's cross apart from a God who hates sin, judges sin, and pour out his wrath—sometimes now, always later—on the accursed things and peoples of this world. God is God and there is no hope for non-gods who want to be gods, except through the God-man who became a curse for us.

That's bad news for some, and unfathomably good news for all those born again by the sovereign Spirit of God unto faith in Christ and life eternal.

### **A Concluding Pastoral Postscript**

The tendency in theological controversy is to boil everything down to a conflict of personalities. This is the way the world understands disagreement. This is how the world sells controversy. It's always politician versus politician or pastor versus pastor. But sometimes the disagreement is less about the men (or women) involved and more about the truth.

This is one of those instances.

I have not spent hours and hours on this review because I am out to get another pastor. I may be a sinner, but with four young children and a very full church schedule, I have no time for personal vendettas. No, this is not about a single author or a single church. This is about the truth, about how the rightness or wrongness of our theology can do tremendous help or tremendous harm to the people of God. This is about real people in East Lansing where I serve and real people an hour down the road in Grand Rapids where I grew up. This is about real people who have learned from Bell in the past and will be intrigued by his latest book, wondering if they should be confused, angered, or surprised to hear that hell is not what they've been told.

No doubt, Rob Bell writes as a pastor who wants to care for people struggling with the doctrine of hell. I too write as a pastor. And as a pastor I know that *Love Wins* means God's people lose. In the world of *Love Wins*, my congregation should not sing "In Christ Alone" because they cannot not believe, "There on the cross where Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied." They would not belt out "Bearing shame and scoffing rude, in my

place condemned he stood.” No place for “Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted” with its confession, “the deepest stroke that pierced him was the stroke that Justice gave.” The jubilation of “No condemnation now I dread; Jesus, and all in him, is mine!” is muted in *Love Wins*. The bad news of our wrath-deserving wretchedness is so absent that the good news of God’s wrath-bearing Substitute cannot sing in our hearts. When God is shrunk down to fit our cultural constraints, the cross is diminished. And whenever the cross is diminished we pain the hearts of God’s people and rob them of their joy.

Just as damaging is the impact of *Love Wins* on the nonbeliever or the wayward former churchgoer. Instead of summoning sinners to the cross that they might flee the wrath to come and know the satisfaction of so great a salvation, *Love Wins* assures people that everyone’s eternity ends up as heaven eventually. The second chances are good not just for this life, but for the next. And what if they aren’t? What if Jesus says on the day of judgment, “Depart from me, I never knew you” (Matt. 7:23)? What if at the end of the age the wicked and unbelieving cry out, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb” (Rev. 6:16)? What if outside the walls of the New Jerusalem “are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood” (Rev. 22:15)? What if there really is only one name “under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12)? And what if the wrath of God really remains on those who do not believe in the Son (John 3:18, 36)?

If *Love Wins* is wrong—if the theology departs from the apostolic good deposit, if the biblical reasoning falls short in a hundred places, if the god of *Love Wins* and the gospel of *Love Wins* are profoundly mistaken—if all this is true, then what damage has been done to the souls of men and women?

Bad theology hurts real people. So of all the questions raised in the book, the most important question every reader must answer is this: is it true?

Whatever you think of all the personalities involved on whatever side of the debate, that’s the one question that cannot be ignored. Is *Love Wins* true to the word of God? That’s the issue. Open a Bible, pray to God, listen to the faithful Christians of the past 2000 years, and answer the question for yourself.

Delight or deception, suffering or salvation—yes, even heaven or hell—may hang in the balance.

## For Further Study

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