

Revising Hell Into the Heterodox Mainstream

by Denny Burk

Much has been made of Rob Bell's new book *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. Before the book was even released, promotional materials seemed to suggest that Rob Bell would be heading in an unorthodox direction in this book.

Now having read the book, I am convinced that the promotional materials were correct. Bell has launched out into a heterodox, un-Biblical accounting of sin and judgment, the cross and salvation, Heaven and Hell. He pictures a God without wrath who would never create a place of eternal conscious punishment for the wicked. No one needs salvation from God's wrath; they only need to be rescued from themselves. No one needs to have conscious faith in Jesus Christ in this life to find salvation in the next.

While Bell does not want to be labeled a universalist, this book does more to advance the cause of universalism at the popular level than any book I have ever seen.

The following review is long, but it is still too short to engage every exegetical and theological error in Bell's book. There are simply too many to respond to in a review. That being said, my aim is to walk through the main chapters giving you a brief look at his argument while providing some critiques along the way. So this review has eight headings that summarize the eight chapters of this book:

1. Questions Have No Questions
2. Heaven Has No Separation
3. Hell Has No Fury
4. God Has No Enemies (Maybe?)
5. The Cross Has No Center
6. Salvation Has No Conscious Faith Requirement
7. God Has No Anger
8. Concluding Observations

1. QUESTIONS HAVE NO QUESTIONS

At the outset, I want to say a word about how we should evaluate Rob Bell's "questions." Bell likes to make assertions that are cloaked in questions. It is a manipulative tactic that has an air of epistemological humility but which he employs with great skill to make theological arguments. Some have suggested that Bell's questions tell us very little about Bell's views because they are, after all, questions and not assertions. This seems to me an overly literalistic way of reading that suffers from acute naiveté about **how language actually works**.

Do we really believe that all questions are to be taken as literal queries? Is it not true that some questions are rhetorical and are really the semantic equivalent of an assertion? Is not this the way Paul spoke in Romans 6:1 when he asks, "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" Can we all agree that every question in this paragraph is not a true query but the rough equivalent of an assertion?

This is precisely how Bell frames some of his most controversial arguments. I will let the reader be the judge. Do the following questions from Chapter 1 consist of actual queries, or do they have the effect of an assertion?

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 will suffer in torment and punishment forever? Is this acceptable to God? Has God created millions of people over tens of thousands of years who are going to spend eternity in anguish? Can God do this, or even allow this, and still claim to be a loving God? Does God punish people for thousands of years with infinite, eternal torment for things they did in their few, finite years of life? This doesn't just raise disturbing questions about God, it

raises questions about the beliefs themselves. . . . What kind of faith is that? Or more importantly: What kind of God is that? (pp. 2, 3).

Because Bell has already labeled the traditional doctrine of Hell as “misguided” and “toxic” (p. viii), it is not difficult to see that Bell already has an answer in mind to these questions. Indeed, the very way in which they are phrased shows that these questions are leading to a conclusion. Bell suggests that God’s own character would be in question if the traditional doctrine of Hell is true. Thus these are assertions and not true queries. These are assertions about the reality of Hell and the nature of God.

I labor the point because this device will come into play in a big way throughout the book. Chapter 4 (“Does God Get What God Wants?”), for instance, is filled with a bevy of leading questions that make serious and subversive theological arguments in favor of a universalist perspective (pp. 97-98; 102-103).

We have all felt the sting of a deceptive rhetorical question. After all, it was Satan who tempted Eve with the line, “Has God really said?” Though rhetorical questions can be used for good or for ill, I think Bell uses them mainly for the latter.

2. HEAVEN HAS NO SEPARATION

Chapter 2 is Bell’s take on Heaven, and it is not quite the place where the sheep are separated from the goats. Bell wants to make his case Biblically, but his use of Scripture suffers from a myopic word-study approach to constructing doctrine. I am all for word studies, but there is much more to doing theology than collating lists of meanings for Biblical words (and occasionally slipping in novel meanings that no one has ever heard of!). Yet this is precisely how Bell approaches serious theological questions. Bell’s treatment of Heaven (and Hell) begins and ends with word studies on those terms—as if the doctrine of Heaven can be summed up in the various usages of the Greek and Hebrew terms that are commonly glossed in English as *Heaven, eternal, etc.*

Bell is most interested in what Jesus means by the word *Heaven*. After giving the range of possible meanings for the term in Jesus’ speech, he argues that Heaven only sometimes refers to that place where people go in the afterlife (or this life). He writes:

Heaven is that realm where things are as God intends them to be (p. 42).

This seems to suggest that Heaven can be any place where there is obedience and justice. Yet the world will not experience perfect obedience and justice in this age, so believers look forward to a future age in which Heaven comes down to earth.

What Jesus taught, what the prophets taught, what all of Jewish tradition pointed to, and what Jesus lived in anticipation of was the day when earth and Heaven would be one. . . . The day when earth and Heaven will be the same place (pp. 42, 43).

Heaven can be right here right now, or it can be future. In the eternal state, however, Heaven and earth will no longer be separated.

Having said that, Bell confuses the eternal state with the final judgment. In Bell’s view, the flames of God’s judgment are present in “Heaven”—in the place where believers enjoy eternal life. Bell argues from 1 Corinthians 3 that the day of judgment will “bring everything to light” and “reveal it with fire” (p. 49). The fire from Heaven will “test the quality of each person’s work” (p. 49).

Yet Bell’s use of Scripture is usually facile, and it certainly is in the case of 1 Corinthians 3. What Paul intends as a narrow word about gospel ministers and their fruits, Bell turns into a paradigmatic description of every person’s experience at the final judgment. Those who do not contribute to God’s shalom now “will suffer loss but yet will be saved, even though only as one escaping through the flames” (p. 49). Thus, for Bell, Heaven is a place where our moral dross gets burned away. But this is not at all what Paul is teaching in this text.

What is the theological bottom line of Bell’s exegesis? Bell describes Heaven as a kind of purgatory—a place where sins are burned away over time.

Heaven also confronts. Heaven, we learn, has teeth, flames, edges, and sharp points . . . certain things simply will not survive in the age to come. Like coveting. And greed (p. 49).

Bell accesses a hypothetical scenario in which a racist inherits eternal life. The racist is not yet perfect when he enters “Heaven” but has to have his racism burned away by the remediating flames of Heaven:

Your racist attitude would simply not survive. Those flames in Heaven would be hot (p. 50).

Bell says that much of the “confusion” about Heaven stems from “the idea that in the blink of an eye we will automatically become totally different people who ‘know’ everything” (p. 51). Although Bell knows that the resurrection will happen “automatically,” he does not grant that holiness will happen “in the blink of an eye.” Rather, he says, “our heart, our character, our desires, our longings—those things take time” (p. 51). So for Bell, progressive sanctification continues in Heaven.

The Biblical and theological difficulties with Bell’s description of Heaven are significant. For starters, his view of the age to come allows for sin to be present in Heaven (cf. Psalm 24:3-4). While the inhabitants of Heaven will have glorified bodies, they will also have varying levels of sin in their hearts. Bell’s view runs roughshod over Biblical texts that indicate that it is not merely resurrection/glorification of the body that happens “in the twinkling of an eye,” but also final victory over the power and presence of sin in the life of the Christian (1 Corinthians 15:56-57; cf. 1 John 3:2). Bell’s view also allows the possibility for the impenitent to become penitent in Heaven. In other words, it allows for post-mortem salvation/conversion, a theological staple for Christian universalists.

In this chapter, Bell introduces a definition for the Greek word *aion*, which he says can refer to a period of time or “to a particular *intensity of experience that transcends time*” (p. 57). This is important because Bell views “eternal” not as an unending pro-

gression of days and years into the future, but “eternal” pertains to an intensity of experience. This definition will play a big role in Bell’s explanation of Hell.

3. HELL HAS NO FURY

Chapter 3 is the chapter on Hell, and it too suffers from the word-study approach that characterized the previous chapter. In this chapter, however, Bell really zeroes-in on Jesus’ use of the single term *Gehenna*. Here and elsewhere, Bell seems to place a hermeneutical priority on the words of Jesus. So Bell questions the traditional view of Hell with: “Is that what Jesus taught?” (p. 64). His narrow word-study focus on the words of Jesus end up giving a truncated vision of the total Biblical teaching concerning the wrath of God. In fact, there is no place at all for the punitive wrath of God in Bell’s doctrine of Hell (e.g., Romans 2:5).

Bell says that he believes in a “literal Hell” (p. 71). But the Hell that he believes in is nothing like the Biblical doctrine that Christians have held to over the centuries. For Bell, Hell is simply God giving us what we want (p. 72). He does not mean that eschatologically, but immediately. Bell’s Hell is a place where human evil reigns and thereby causes human suffering. One can be in Hell now, and one can be in Hell in the afterlife.

There are all kinds of hells, because there are all kinds of ways to resist and reject all that is good and true and beautiful and human now, in this life, and so we can only assume we can do the same in the next (p. 79).

Whenever or wherever a person rejects their God-given “goodness and humanity,” Hell is on the scene. So yes he believes in a Hell, just not the Biblical one.

Gone from Bell is any notion of Hell as a place of God’s wrath. In fact, Bell goes to great lengths to show that Scriptural passages referring to “judgment and punishment” do not really refer to God’s wrath in Hell (p. 79). When Jesus warned of the “coming wrath,” He only meant to warn Jews against revolting against Roman occupiers (pp. 80, 81). It

was Rome's wrath, not God's wrath.

For Bell, Hell is not like the Hotel California. You can check into Hell any time you like, and then you are free to leave. He points to the example of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Biblical paradigm of human evil under God's judgment. He notes that Ezekiel 16 says that the fortunes of Sodom and Gomorrah will be restored (pp. 83-84) and that even Jesus says in Matthew 10 that there is still hope for Sodom and Gomorrah (pp. 84, 85). God's judgment against sin can never be permanent because God aims to restore all things. He writes,

No matter how painful, brutal, oppressive, no matter how far people find themselves from home because of their sin, indifference, and rejection, there's always the assurance that it won't be this way forever (p. 86).

Bell says that Biblical warnings about "eternal punishment" are not what they appear to be. He argues that "eternal" (Greek, *aion*) does not mean "forever." Rather, *eternal* denotes "intensity of experience" (p. 91). So when Jesus speaks of "eternal punishment" in Matthew 25:46, He is talking about a limited period of time of *intense pruning* that aims to restore the sinner to eternal life. For Bell, Hell is not eternal punishment, but temporary discipline. He writes,

Failure, we see again and again, isn't final, judgment has a point, and consequences are for correction (p. 88).

Bell's definition of *aion* as a limited period of time of *intense experience* is highly problematic. In Matthew 25:46, Jesus' warning about eternal punishment has a context that Bell fails to mention. There is a separation of sheep from the goats. The goats enter into "eternal punishment" and the sheep into "eternal life." Is Bell suggesting that "eternal life" is also temporary intense experience? This is shoddy exegesis on Bell's part that results in a massive theological error that would put a stopwatch on Heaven.

So in Bell's view, Hell really hath no fury. It is not a place of where sinners experience

the punitive wrath of God forever. It is a place where sinners experience the temporary, loving correction of a Father. If there was ever an example of someone not leaving room for the wrath of God, this is it (Romans 12:19).

So, yes, Bell believes in "Hell"—a Hell so redefined that it no longer resembles what the Bible actually teaches. There are lots of ways to reject Biblical teaching. This is rejection by redefinition.

4. GOD HAS NO ENEMIES (MAYBE?)

Chapter 4 ("Does God Get What God Wants?") is a chapter like no other chapter I have ever read. At the heart of it is a contradiction that is impossible to reconcile. Bell begins by quoting 1 Timothy 2:2, and then he asks a question:

"God wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2). So does God get what God wants? (p. 97)

Bell answers the question in the affirmative by marshalling a string of Biblical texts that he thinks support a universal and salvific restoration of all things to God. He even suggests that if God does not save everyone that God has somehow "failed" (p. 98) and is not as great and powerful as He is made out to be in the Bible.

*So does God get what God wants?
How great is God?
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 (pp. 97, 98).*

The foregoing paragraph begins with a rhetorical question to which the presumed answer is *yes*. Later in the chapter, there are a string of other rhetorical questions that favor a kind of universalist perspective. I quote at length:

*Is history tragic?
Have billions of people been created only
to spend eternity in conscious punish-*

*ment and torment, suffering infinitely
for the finite sins they committed in the
few years they spent on earth?*

*Is our future uncertain,
or will God take care of us?*

Are we safe?

Are we secure?

Or are we on our own?

*Is God our friend, our provider, our pro-
tector, our father—or is God the kind of
judge who may in the end declare that
we deserve to spend forever separated
from our Father?*

*Is God like the characters in a story Jesus
would tell, . . .*

or, in the end, will God give up?

*Will “all the ends of the earth” come, as
God has decided, or only some?*

*Will all feast as it’s promised in Psalm 22,
or only a few?*

*Will everybody be given a new heart,
or only a limited number of people?*

Will God, in the end, settle, saying:

*“Well, I tried, I gave it my best shot,
and sometimes you just have to be okay
with failure”?*

*Will God shrug God-size shoulders and
say,*

“You can’t always get what you want”?
(pp. 102, 103).

Bell says that God’s goal is to save every human being who has ever lived and who ever will live and that God will never give up this goal.

*God has a purpose. A desire. A goal. And
God never stops pursuing it. . . . The God
that Jesus teaches us about doesn’t give up
until everything that was lost is found. This
God simply doesn’t give up. Ever* (p. 101).

God may have enemies now, but that will not always be the case. God will pursue His enemies even in the age to come until they repent and are reconciled. God will do this, and nothing can thwart God. He will not give up until every one of his enemies is converted.

If that were the end of the chapter, we would conclude that Rob Bell is an unabashed universalist. But here is where the contradiction seeps in. After a *tour de force* in favor of universalism, after listing text after text teaching God’s inability to fail in His purpose to save all, Bell says that

sometimes God fails at saving all. Because God will not “hijack the human heart” and violate human free will (p. 104), some people may remain recalcitrant in their rebellion against God in the afterlife. Bell allows that some people will remain in Hell for a very long time, though it is not clear if he thinks they will be there forever (pp. 113, 114). I think he at least leaves the “forever” part as a possibility.

In my view, this argument is hopelessly inconsistent. God either will fail in His purpose to save all or He will not. Bell cannot have it both ways, but he certainly tries. This section of the book will allow Bell to say “I am not a universalist.” Even though his heart is clearly with the universalist position, he gives himself a back door to deny it. This is why Bell’s teaching is so subversive. He presents one of the most compelling cases in favor of universalism that one will ever read in a popular book while denying that he is one himself. From a pastoral perspective, this is the very definition of a wolf in sheep’s clothing (cf. Acts 20:29-30).

5. THE CROSS HAS NO CENTER

Chapter 5 is Bell’s take on the Gospel—a message about “Dying to Live.” Bell describes the various metaphors in Scripture that are used to depict the meaning of Christ’s atoning work. He writes,

*What happened on the cross is like . . .
a defendant going free,
a relationship being reconciled,
something lost being redeemed,
a battle being won,
a final sacrifice being offered,
so that no one ever has to offer another one
again,
an enemy being loved”* (p. 128).

Bell says that none of these images are central, and he even suggests that some of them may not have much relevance for the modern reader. In particular, Bell questions the relevance of the imagery about Jesus dying as a sacrifice to pay for sins.

*This is especially crucial in light of how
many continue to use the sacrificial
metaphor in our modern world. There’s*

nothing wrong with talking and singing about how the "Blood will never lose its power" and "Nothing but the blood will save us." Those are powerful metaphors. But we don't live any longer in a culture in which people offer animal sacrifices to the gods. People did live that way for thousands of years, and there are pockets of primitive cultures around the world that do continue to understand sin, guilt, and atonement in those ways. But most of us don't (p. 129).

For those with ears to hear, this is a subtle jab at penal substitutionary atonement as the central meaning of the cross. Never mind the fact that Paul says that God put Jesus forward on the cross as a wrath-bearing sacrifice for sins (Romans 3:25). Never mind Isaiah's prophecy that Jesus would be "smitten of God" and that God Himself put Jesus forward as an offering for sin (Isaiah 53:4, 10). Bell rejects this view of Christ's atoning work as irrelevant in the modern world. The view of Christ's sacrificial death is a quaint accommodation to the superstitions of the original readers of Scripture. And just like that, Bell dismisses the innermost meaning of the cross.

This review is not the place to defend a position on the atonement. That has already been done ably by others. I simply point this out as another reason that Bell is an unreliable guide when it comes to the most important doctrines of the Bible.

6. SALVATION HAS NO CONSCIOUS FAITH REQUIREMENT

Chapter 6 is Bell's attempt to explain how people can have eternal life while never having conscious faith in Jesus Christ in this life. He affirms that salvation only comes through Jesus, but he also affirms that people need not know that to be saved. Even though Jesus says in John 14:6 that "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me," Jesus does not specify that people have to know Jesus in order to be saved by Him.

What [Jesus] doesn't say is how, or when, or in what manner the mechanism functions that gets people to God through Him.

He doesn't even state that those coming to the Father through Him will even know that they are coming exclusively through Him (p. 154).

So Bell makes the case for inclusivism. People respond to whatever light they have, and that can lead them to Christ. Sometimes the light comes through other religions.

There is inclusivity. 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. This inclusivity assumes that as long as your heart is fine or your actions measure up, you'll be okay (p. 155).

No doubt it is this inclusivism that causes Bell to question the possibility that Gandhi might be in Hell (p. 1). One need not be a Christian to be saved by Christ. One only need to live a good life within the light one has received. Once again, there is a contradiction here. Bell still says it is important to believe in Jesus, but the urgency of doing so certainly is diminished if Bell's framework is accepted. This kind of doctrine is way out of step with Scripture (not least John 14:6 in context), and it kills fervency for evangelism and missions.

7. GOD HAS NO ANGER

In Chapter 7, Bell tries to convince readers that God is not angry. You may have heard that He is angry about sin (or something like that), but that is not at all what He is really like. A God of love cannot be one who would create Hell as a place of eternal conscious punishment. God is not like that. Those who describe God in that way are actually driving people away from Jesus.

*Because if something is wrong with your God,
if your God is loving one second and cruel the next,
if your God will punish people for all eternity for sins committed in a few short years,
no amount of clever marketing
or compelling language
or good music
or great coffee
will be able to disguise
that one, true, glaring, untenable,
unacceptable, awful reality (p. 175).*

As the title of the chapter suggests, “the good news is better than that” God.

Many people have heard the gospel framed in terms of rescue. God has to punish sinners, because God is holy, but Jesus has paid the price for our sin, and so we can have eternal life. However true or untrue that is technically or theologically, what it can do is subtly teach people that Jesus rescues us from God. Let’s be very clear, then: we do not need to be rescued from God (p. 182).

Here Bell lays his cards on the table. He does not believe that Jesus died to rescue us from the wrath of God. The notion that God would have wrath toward His creatures is an unconscionable suggestion to Bell. He does not like this version of the Gospel (which happens to be the historic evangelical position) because he does not like this version of God.

8. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Bell presses the boundary issue in this book. Even though he does not want to be labeled a universalist, he clearly wants universalism to be seen as a legitimate, orthodox option for Christians (p. 109-110). Yet universalism is anything but orthodox. It was condemned as a heresy at the Second Council of Constantinople (A.D. 553), and Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestants all eschew the idea that ultimately Hell will be empty with all people eventually inheriting eternal life. Bell’s attempt to enlist Martin Luther, Augustine, and others in his apology for universalism is a real howler. To say that universalism is in the orthodox mainstream is simply an historical error.

Contrary to Bell’s telling of the story, Hell is real (Luke 12:5). God’s wrath is real (Romans 2:5). Eternal punishment is real (Matthew 25:26), and Jesus Himself will be the one doling out retribution at the last day (2 Thess. 1:7-10). Nevertheless, Bell says that anyone who objects to a universalist perspective should at least admit that “it is fitting, proper, and Christian to long for it” (p. 111). Is this really true? Are Christians really supposed to wish that uni-

versalism were true, even if it isn’t?

Though we may feel tempted to despise Hell in this life and to be drawn away to heresies that deny it, we will not always deal with such temptations. In Revelation 18:20 as Babylon is cast down in final judgment, God issues a command:

Rejoice over her, thou heaven, and ye holy apostles and prophets; for God hath avenged you on her.

And then later, the praises of Heaven break out as Babylon receives her punishment:

Alleluia; Salvation, and glory, and honour, and power, unto the Lord our God: FOR TRUE AND RIGHTEOUS ARE HIS JUDGMENTS: for he hath judged the great whore, which did corrupt the earth with her fornication, and HATH AVENGED THE BLOOD OF HIS SERVANTS AT HER HAND. . . . ALLELUIA. AND HER SMOKE ROSE UP FOR EVER AND EVER (Rev. 19:1-3).

In the new heavens and the new earth, there are no people who despise God for creating Hell. On the contrary, there is only praise for God’s holiness and justice. If this strikes you as terrifying, that is a good thing. That is precisely what it is meant to do. It is designed to awaken sinners to the greatness of God, the gravity of His judgments, and the inviolability of His holiness. It is designed to awaken people to realities that *Love Wins* would blind them to. And that is why Bell’s book is so misleading and dangerous.

In the final chapter of the book, Bell shares a poignant story from his childhood. He describes praying to receive Christ as his Saviour while kneeling beside his bed with his parents on either side of him. He describes trusting Jesus to save him from his sins. It sounds like Bell had a more Biblical view of the faith at an earlier point in his life. I hope and pray that he returns to what he learned as a child. What he is advocating now in *Love Wins* is a long way from where he began, and it is a long way from orthodoxy. ■

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