

Love Wins - Critique

The title is as captivating as it is broad. “A book about heaven, hell, and the fate of every person who ever lived. Love Wins.”

Rob Bell’s new book has stirred up controversy and heated debate like few books in recent memory.

Having my own feelings about the book – like a host of others – I’ll attempt to give a Scriptural response to the theories laid out in Bell’s latest project.

I begin with a quote from the Christian Post:

“Just a day before the release of his controversial book on hell, Rob Bell denied that he was a universalist. Answering the straightforward question ... posed by Newsweek’s Lisa Miller Monday night, Bell said, ‘No.’”

Having read the book twice, it’s a mystery to me how Bell can say he’s not a Universalist. If he’s not a “hard-core” Universalist; then he certainly displays some deep-rooted “Universalist tendencies”. Bell writes:

It’s written in the Bible that “God wants all people to be saved, and to come to a knowledge of the truth”. 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, medium great, great most of the time, but in this, the fate of billions of people, not totally great. Sort of great. A little great ... Will all people be saved, or will God not get what God wants? Does this magnificent, mighty, marvellous God fail in the end? (p. 97-98)

So, in Bell’s mind, if everyone isn’t saved in the end, then God is *not* great, and He must admit failure.

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’? (p. 103)

Fair question. What does the Bible say?

While our first response– “off the cuff” – might be to say, “Well, *certainly* God gets what He wants! After all, He’s God! He’s sovereign!” I believe the question deserves a closer look.

What does the Bible say?

Does God always get what He wants? Is His will always done? Let's look at a few examples:

1 Thess. 4:3, "This is the will of God, even your sanctification that you should abstain from fornication."

No fornication. Anytime, anywhere. Ever. That's the revealed will of God.

Now, let me ask you a question. Do you suppose anyone will fornicate today? Count on it.

Then, His will isn't always done, is it?

(Side thought: If God's will was always done, automatically, in every situation, just because "He's God" – then why would Jesus instruct His disciples to pray, "Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven"? Why would they have to pray it, if it was just automatic?)

Ready for another?

How about 1 Thess. 5:18? "In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God ..."

Once more, I ask: Is everyone on earth giving thanks in every situation? Or, are there folks who are griping and complaining? The answer is obvious.

So again, God's will isn't always done. If it's true in the situations we just looked at, then why would it seem strange that it could be "God's will that no one perish", but because of their free will and wrong choices, some people wound up perishing? Would that somehow make God "less great"?

As we look at this issue, we need to differentiate between God's "Will of Decree" (whereby everything He wills comes to pass, as in the plan of the ages – Eph. 1:11), and His "Will of Desire" (which, by *our* free will, can be rejected).

Concerning His "Will of Decree", He states: "Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure." (Isa. 46:9-10).

Yet, individually, we can use our free will to resist His "Will of Desire", and in those cases, His will *isn't* done. "And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared

not himself, **neither did according to his will**, shall be beaten with many stripes.”
(Luke 12:47)

In this paper, I won't attempt to deal with *every* theological problem found in “Love Wins”. Rather, I'll do my best to deal with some of the most damaging claims that fly in the face of Christian orthodoxy.

PROBLEM #1 - MISREPRESENTING HISTORICAL CHRISTIANITY

*“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.” (p. 107)*

Incredibly, Bell uses Jesus, Peter and Paul as examples of those who believed that “God will ultimately restore everything and everybody”. But, even a surface reading of their writings would reveal that this is *clearly* not what they taught.

Jesus spoke of the “damnation of hell” (Matt. 23:33), “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 24:51) and a rich man who was “tormented in this flame” (Luke 16:23).

Peter referred to the unjust as being “reserved ... unto the day of judgment to be punished ... in the mist of darkness forever” (2 Peter 2:9,17).

And, Paul spoke of the vengeance of “flaming fire” and those who would be “punished with everlasting destruction (away) from the presence of the Lord” (2 Thess. 1:8-9).

To ignore their clear belief in a very real place called “hell”, on the basis of the above Scriptures (regarding a “renewal of all things”), is to grossly misrepresent their teachings.

Having turned to Jesus, Peter and Paul for support; Bell then appeals to the “beliefs” of the early church fathers:

“In the third century the church fathers Clement of Alexandria and Origen affirmed God’s reconciliation with all people. In the fourth century, Gregory of Nyssa and Eusebius believed this as well.” (p. 107)

The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology has this to say about Origen: "Origen taught the pre-existence of souls, universal salvation and a limited hell, doctrines for which he was

posthumously condemned as a heretic." (Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, 803; Millard Erickson, Christian Theology, 1015.)

Whatever Origen may have said about it, overwhelmingly, the early church fathers believed in the doctrine of an eternal hell. Consider the following quotes from the first and second centuries:

Ignatius of Antioch - "A man become so foul will **depart into unquenchable fire**: and so will anyone who listens to him" (Letter to the Ephesians 16:1–2 [A.D. 110]).

Clement - "If we do the will of Christ, we shall obtain rest; but if not, if we neglect his commandments, **nothing will rescue us from eternal punishment**" (Second Clement 5:5 [A.D. 150]).

"But when they see how those who have sinned and who have denied Jesus by their words or by their deeds are **punished with terrible torture in unquenchable fire.**" (ibid., 17:7).

Justin Martyr - "No more is it possible for the evildoer, the avaricious, and the treacherous to hide from God than it is for the virtuous. Every man will receive **the eternal punishment or reward** which his actions deserve. Indeed, if all men recognized this, no one would choose evil even for a short time, knowing that he would **incur the eternal sentence of fire.**" (First Apology 12 [A.D. 151]).

" We believe that they who live wickedly and do not repent will be **punished in everlasting fire**" (ibid., 21).

"Then he will clothe the worthy in immortality; but the wicked, clothed in eternal sensibility, **he will commit to the eternal fire**, along with the evil demons" (ibid., 52).

Polycarp - "Fixing their minds on the grace of Christ, [the martyrs] despised worldly tortures and purchased eternal life with but a single hour. To them, the fire of their cruel torturers was cold. They kept before their eyes their **escape from the eternal and unquenchable fire**" (Martyrdom of Polycarp 2:3 [A.D. 155]).

Mathetes - "When you know what is the true life, that of heaven; when you despise the merely apparent death, which is temporal; when you **fear the death which is real, and which is reserved for those who will be condemned to the everlasting fire**, the fire which will punish even to the end those who are delivered to it, then you will condemn the deceit and error of the world" (Letter to Diognetus 10:7 [A.D. 160]).

Theophilus of Antioch - "Give studious attention to the prophetic writings [the Bible] and they will lead you on a clearer path to **escape the eternal punishments** and to obtain the eternal good things of God . . . there will be wrath and indignation,

tribulation and anguish; and in the end, such men as these will be **detained in everlasting fire**" (To Autolycus 1:14 [A.D. 181]).

Irenaeus - "[God will] send the spiritual forces of wickedness, and the angels who transgressed and became apostates, and the impious, unjust, lawless, and blasphemous among men into **everlasting fire**" (Against Heresies 1:10:1 [A.D. 189]).

"The penalty increases for those who do not believe the Word of God and despise his coming. . . . [I]t is **not merely temporal, but eternal**. To whomsoever the Lord shall say, 'Depart from me, accursed ones, into the everlasting fire,' **they will be damned forever**" (ibid., 4:28:2).

Tertullian - "After the present age is ended he will judge his worshipers for a reward of eternal life and **the godless for a fire equally perpetual and unending**" (Apology 18:3 [A.D. 197]).

"But the godless and those who have not turned wholly to God will be **punished in fire equally unending**, and they shall have from the very nature of this fire, divine as it were, a supply of incorruptibility" (ibid., 44:12–13).

Hippolytus - "... **the lovers of evil shall be given eternal punishment**. The **unquenchable and unending fire awaits these latter ...**" (Against the Greeks 3 [A.D. 212]).

I could go on, but the point is made.

PROBLEM #2 – MISINTERPRETED AND OUT-OF-CONTEXT SCRIPTURES

We'll look at several examples, in no particular order:

A. The Restoration of all Things

Bell writes: "*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 ..."***" (p. 107)

So, in Bell's mind, when Jesus says, "there will be a renewal of all things", that means a "restoration of every**thing** and every**body**". And, thus, everyone will be saved.

There are multiple problems here:

First, there's a law in Bible interpretation called "the Law of Complete Mention". It states that the **correct interpretation** of a **single verse** can only be determined upon a consideration of the **complete mention of the subject** in Scripture."

In other words: When you're interpreting an **individual verse** of Scripture, you can't just look at **that one verse** by itself. You have look at **every other time** the Bible brings up **that subject**. And, **consider those verses**, too.

If your interpretation of the "single verse" **denies the clear teaching** of the "**other verses**", then you've **misinterpreted** the "single verse". (Make sense?)

So, in order to look at a statement regarding the "restoration of all things", and apply that to *people*, and say that all "people" will be saved – then, the rest of the Bible would have to support that same idea. But, that's clearly not the teaching of the rest of the Bible.

When Jesus spoke of a "renewal of all things" (in Matthew 19:28), He wasn't talking about *people*. He was talking about the earth itself.

If you look up the verse in other translations, it reads this way:

"The re-creation of the world" – MSG
"When the world is made new" – NLT
"In the future world" – CEV
"In the world to come" – GW
"When all things are made new" – NiRV
"In the new world" – WENT

Even the NIV, which Rob Bell quotes, it doesn't mention "people" being restored. It's all "things" that are restored.

(Note: Even the context itself militates against Bell's interpretation. The previous verses speak of the "narrowness" of the way of the Kingdom, by saying, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom" [v. 24]. If that's true, then it would be possible that some will remain "outside" the kingdom.)

The passage in no way indicates that every unsaved person will be reconciled to God. It simply affirms that creation itself will return to God's original plan.

Peter's comment in Acts 3:21, that Jesus will "restore everything" has a similar tone:

"The times of the restitution of all things" isn't referring to individuals. It's referring to a time when everything will once again come under the Lord's dominion and rule.

B. Chapter One

Probably the most disturbing thing about “Love Wins”, in my opinion, is chapter one. Bell’s method of arguing his point seems to be “to cast doubt on the reliability of the Bible as a whole”. To do this, he attacks the doctrine of salvation.

In the first chapter, Bell cites several examples of people who were saved (or otherwise commended) in the Bible:

- A sinner who cried out for mercy – Luke 18.
- The thief on the cross who said, “Remember me” – Luke 23.
- Nicodemus, who was told, “Ye must be born again” – John 3

Then amazingly, he interjects several verses that don’t have *anything* to do with salvation:

- A centurion who had faith for his servant’s healing – Luke 7.
- Jesus’ teaching on forgiveness and staying in fellowship with God – Matt. 6.
- Zacchaeus, who desired to make amends to those whom he hurt – Luke 19.
- And, four men who let their sick friend down through a hole in the roof – Mark 2.

And, he ties them all together – applies them all to the question of salvation – and asks, “So, which is it?” (p. 14)

“Is it what you say,
Or who you are,
Or what you do,
Or what you say you’re going to do,
Or who your friends are,
Or who you’re married to,
Or whether you give birth to children?
Or it is what questions you’re asked?
Or is it what questions you ask in return?
Or is it whether you do what you’re told and go into the city?” (p. 16-17)

Without taking the time (and space) to examine each of these incidents, I’ll say this:

In this chapter, Bell violates the most basic principles of Biblical interpretation.

First, (as I’ve already mentioned), not all of those verses are discussing salvation. They discuss everything from “How to be healed” to “Staying in Fellowship with God, as a believer” to “How to be born again”.

So, *certainly*, they will differ!

His *misapplication* of Scripture creates what *appears* to be several contradictions. Thus, he's positioned to ask, "So, which is right?"

He sets up a "straw man", and then proceeds to knock it down.

Secondly, Bell never bothers to take into consideration the difference between the Old and New Covenants.

He takes what Jesus said to someone under the *Old* Covenant, and compares it with what the *New* Covenant teaches. And, then says, "So, which is right?"

(Is Bell is *really* that uninformed?)

He throws out this "mess" of "supposed contradictions" and then echoes the question that Satan asked Eve in the Garden: "Hath God really said?"

The clear message of chapter one is that we really can't know what the Bible says about salvation, because it's so full of contradictions.

Without question: To me, this is the most disturbing aspect of the book.

C. Sodom & Gommorrah

"Early the next morning Abraham ... looked down toward Sodom and Gommorah ... and he saw dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace" ... But this isn't the last we read of Sodom and Gommorah. The prophet Ezekiel had a series of visions in which God shows him what's coming, including the promise that God will "restore the fortunes of Sodom and her daughters" and they will "return to what they were before" (Chap. 16).

Restore the fortunes of Sodom? The story isn't over for Sodom and Gomorrah? What appeared to be a final, forever, smoldering smoking verdict regarding their destiny ... wasn't? What appeared to be over, isn't? (p. 83)

It should be obvious, to even the casual reader, that the "return of Sodom" in this passage is referring to the city, not the wicked individuals who were destroyed some 1500 years earlier in an act of Divine judgment. There's no indication, anywhere in the passage, that the *individuals* who inhabited Sodom at the time of God's judgment were somehow getting a "second chance" beyond the grave.

Peter's commentary should clarify this: "And turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes condemned them with an overthrow, making them an example unto those

that after should live ungodly ... The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished.” (2 Peter 2:6, 9)

The city may have been “restored”, but the individuals were reserved “unto the day of judgment to be punished”.

Bell continues:

But that still isn't the last we hear of these two cities ... In Matthew 10 (Jesus) warns the people living in the village of Capernaum, “It will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for you.”

More bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah? He tells highly committed, pious, religious people that it will be better for Sodom and Gomorrah than them on judgment day?

There's still hope? And if there's still hope for Sodom and Gomorrah, what does that say about all of the other Sodoms and Gomorrahs?”

Clearly, the passage says nothing about new hope for Sodom. Conversely, it speaks of the hopelessness of unbelieving and rejecting Capernaum. Worse than that of Sodom.

D. Jesus: The Way, the Truth & the Life

Bell writes:

*John remembers Jesus saying, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”. This is as wide and expansive a claim as a person can make. **What he doesn't say is how, or when, or in what manner the mechanism functions that gets people to God through Jesus.** (p. 154)*

Seriously?

Clearly, (besides what we already know from John 3:16), Jesus' statements were in the context of believing in and receiving Him. (Not just “any old way”, following “any old religion”.) Look again at the context:

Verse 1 – “Ye believe in God, **believe also in me** ... I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” Clearly, the “mechanism” is believing in Him.

Bell continues:

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." (p. 154)

And:

What Jesus does is declare that he, and he alone is saving everybody. And then he leaves the door open, way open. Creating all sorts of possibilities ... People come to Jesus in all sorts of ways ... Sometimes people use his name; other times they don't. Some people have so much baggage with regard to the name "Jesus" that when they encounter the mystery present in all of creation – grace, peace, love, acceptance, healing, forgiveness – the last thing they are inclined to name it is "Jesus". (p. 157-159)

Bell's comments echo the theology of other Emergent leaders:

*"What can I say to an Islamic brother who has fed the hungry, and clothed the naked? You say, 'But he hasn't a personal relationship with Christ'. I would argue with that. And I would say from a Christian perspective, inasmuch as you did it to the least of these you did it unto Christ. **You did have a personal relationship with Christ. You just didn't know it.**" (Tony Campolo, *Evangelicals and Interfaith Cooperation*, an interview with Shane Claiborne.)*

*"Jesus is the only Savior, but **not everybody who is being saved by Him is aware that He is the one doing the saving.**" (Tony Campolo, *EP News Service*, Oct. 4, 1985)*

The implication is that *whatever* path (or religion) that an individual might seek as a way of salvation; Jesus is standing in the shadows, as the *real* Saviour "behind the scenes". They may never utter His name, or even know it – but He's saving them, nonetheless.

But, that's not the New Testament picture of salvation. Salvation is received *exclusively* by calling on His name (Ro. 10:13). "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven, given among men, whereby we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)

E. Other Religions

"He is for all people, and yet he refuses to be co-opted or owned by any one culture. That includes any Christian culture. Any denomination. Any church. Any theological

system. We can point to him, name him, follow him, discuss him, honor him, and believe in him – but we cannot claim him to be ours any more than he's anyone else's ...

*As Jesus says in John 10, I have **other sheep that are not of this sheep pen** ... this is crucial for how we understand ... world religions. (p. 151-153)*

The “other sheep” Jesus speaks of in John 10, aren't people following other religions (who somehow will be included in redemption, while being unaware of, or even hostile to, the gospel of Jesus Christ).

He's referring to the Gentiles. The “mystery” that the Jews never grasped in the Old Testament, was that God would break “down the middle wall of partition (between the Jews and the Gentiles)” and make in Himself “of two, one new man” (the Church). (Eph. 2:13-15)

The *Gentiles* are the “other sheep” – and in order to be included in the “sheep pen” of the Church, they must repent and believe.

F. The Nature of God

*“Millions have been taught that if they don't believe, if they don't accept in the right way, that is, the way the person telling them the gospel does, 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 ensure that they had no escape from an endless future of agony ...*

*That kind of God is simply devastating. Psychologically crushing. We can't bear it. No one can. And that is the secret deep in the heart of many people, especially Christians. They don't love God. They can't, because the God they've been presented with and taught about can't be loved. **That God is terrifying and traumatizing and unbearable ...***

*Many 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.**” (p. 173-175, 182)*

What Bell fails to recognize is the duplicity of God's nature. Yes, He is loving; but He's also just. God's justice demands that sin be punished, while His mercy moved Him to provide a way out.

As I reflect on the magnitude of the sin problem (and the holiness of God), to me, the wonder isn't that "some will spend eternity in hell". The *real* wonder is how any of us escaped it!

Sin, viewed from a human standpoint, may seem like something that's easily excused or swept under the carpet. But sin, from God's standpoint looks entirely different.

When we consider the holiness of God; and the fact that man willingly bowed his knee to God's enemy ... along with the atrocities that have been committed since the garden of Eden; the untold pain that sin has caused; and the blatant rejection of the Son who paid the ultimate price for our redemption – then, *grace* becomes the *real* wonder – not that some who persist in their rebellion will finally be held accountable.

Justice is as much a part of God's nature as His love. And, as Bell points out, "He cannot deny Himself" (1 Tim. 2:13).

G. The Nature of Jesus' Mission

Rob Bell isn't the only emergent leader who has confused the purpose of Jesus' mission. Brian MacLaren comments:

"The church has been preoccupied with the question: What happens to your soul after you die? As if the reason for Jesus' coming can be summed up in, "Jesus is trying to help get more people into heaven, as opposed to hell, after they die". I think a fair reading of the gospels blows that out of the water." (PBS Special on the Emergent Church)

Bell concurs:

*"The gospel Jesus spreads in the book of Luke has as one of its main themes that **Jesus brings a social revolution**, in which the previous systems of hierarchies of clean and unclean, sinner and saved, and up and down don't mean what they used to. God is doing a new work through Jesus, **calling all people to human solidarity**. Everybody is a brother, a sister. Equals, children of the God who shows no favouritism. To reject **this new social order** was to reject Jesus, the very movement of God in flesh and blood." (p. 75-76)*

Is that really why Jesus came? To bring social revolution?

Not according to Paul, (or any other of the New Testament writers, for that matter). Paul reveals the purpose of his coming: "Jesus Christ came into the world **to save sinners**, of whom I am chief." (1 Tim. 1:15)

H. The Nature and Duration of the Afterlife

*“It’s important here to remember that the Israelites, who wrote the Hebrew scriptures, had been oppressed and enslaved by their neighbors the Egyptians, who built pyramids and ornate coffins and buried themselves in rooms filled with gold, because of their beliefs about life after death. Those beliefs appear to have been a turnoff for **the Jews, who were far more interested in the ethics of and ways of living in this life ...** Simply put, **the Hebrew commentary on what happens after a person dies isn’t very articulated or defined ...** For whatever reasons, the precise details of who goes where, when, how, with what, and for how long simply **aren’t things the Hebrew writers were terribly concerned with.** (p. 66-67)*

Then, the New Testament. The actual word ‘hell’ is used roughly twelve times in the New Testament, almost exclusively by Jesus himself. The Greek word that gets translated as “hell” in English is the word ‘Gehenna’. Ge means ‘valley’, and henna means ‘Hinnom’. Gehenna, the Valley of Hinnom, was an actual valley on the south and west side of the city of Jerusalem. Gehenna, in Jesus’s day, was the city dump ... Gehenna was an actual place that Jesus’s listeners would have been familiar with. So the next time someone asks you if you believe in an actual hell, you can always say, ‘Yes, I do believe that my garbage goes somewhere’.

Jesus says in Matthew 5, ‘Anyone who says, ‘You fool! Will be in danger of the fire of hell’, and ‘it is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell’. In Matthew 10 and Luke 12, he says, ‘Be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hel” and in Matthew 18 and Mark 9 he says, ‘It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell’ ...

Gehenna. The town garbage pile.

And that’s it. These are all the mentions of hell in the Bible ...

The other Greek word is ‘Hades’. Obscure, dark, murky – Hades is essentially the Greek version of the Hebrew word ‘Sheol’. We find the word ‘Hades’ in Revelation 1, 6 and 20 and in Acts 2, which is a quote from Psalm 16 ... 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. (p. 68-69)

The implication is that the Biblical teachings on hell come from a few, obscure, unclear passages that are somehow disconnected from reality – certainly nothing we could build a doctrine on. The truth is, the Bible provides much more insight into the nature of both the present hell and the lake of fire, than Bell would have us believe.

Isaiah 14:9-11 – “Hell from beneath is excited about you, To meet you at your coming; It stirs up the dead for you, All the chief ones of the earth; It has raised up from their thrones All the kings of the nations. They all shall speak and say to you: 'Have you also become as weak as we? Have you become like us? Your pomp is brought down to Sheol, And the sound of your stringed instruments; The maggot is spread under you, And worms cover you.'” (NKJV)

Revelation 14:10-11 – “The same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation; and shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb: And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night ...”

Add to that, the account of the rich man and Lazarus, and we have (in those three passages alone) a clear description of the nature and duration of hell.

Bell continues (referring to Matthew 25):

*The goats are sent, in the Greek language, to an aion of kolazo ... Depending on how you translate aion and kolazo, then, the phrase can mean ‘a **period of pruning**’ or ‘a **time of trimming**’, or an intense **experience of correction**. In a good number of English translations of the Bible, the phrase ‘aion of kolazo’ gets translated as ‘eternal punishment’, which many of them read to mean ‘punishment forever’, as in never going to end. But, **forever is not really a category the biblical writers used.** (p. 91)*

No? How about these for starters?

“If any man eat of this bread, he shall live **forever.**” (John 6:51)

“... to whom the mist of darkness is reserved **for ever.**” (2 Pet. 2:17)

“... and the smoke of their torment ascendeth up **for ever and ever.**” (Rev. 14:11)

“... and shall be tormented day and night **for ever and ever.**” (Rev. 20:10)

“... and they shall reign **for ever and ever.**” (Rev. 22:5)

In Bell’s theology, hell isn’t a punishment. It’s “trimming”, “pruning” or “correction”. But the Bible paints an entirely different picture. Not one word is said about hell being for “pruning” or “correcting”. Hell is a punishment.

Matthew 25:46 – “And these shall go away into **everlasting punishment ...**”

2 Thess. 1:9 – “These shall be **punished** with **everlasting destruction** from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power.”

Hebrews 10:29 – “Of how much sorer **punishment**, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy ...”

2 Peter 2:9 – “The Lord knoweth how ... to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be **punished**.”

Bell defines his version of “hell” as follows:

So, how should we think, or not think about hell? ... Have you ever sat with a woman while she talked about what it was like to be raped? ... I've seen what happens when people abandon all that is good and right and humane ... God gives us what we want, and if that's hell, we can have it. We have that kind of freedom, that kind of choice ...

So when people say they don't believe in hell and they don't like the word “sin”, my first response is to ask, “Have you sat and talked with a family who just found out their child has been molested? Repeatedly? Over a number of years? By a relative?”

*Some words are strong for a reason. We need those words to be that intense, loaded, complex, and offensive, because they need to reflect the realities they describe. And, **that's what we find in Jesus's teachings about hell – a volatile mixture of images, pictures and metaphors that describe the very real experiences and consequences of rejecting our God-given goodness and humanity.** Something we are all free to do, anytime, anywhere, with anyone.*

*He uses **hyperbole** often – telling people to gouge out their eyes and maim themselves rather than commit certain sins. It can all sound a bit over-the-top at times, leading us to question just what he's so worked up about. Other times he sounds just plain violent. But, when you've sat with a wife who has just found out that her husband has been cheating on her for years, and you realize what it is going to do to their marriage ... and you see the concentric rings of pain that are going to emanate from this eon man's choices – in that moment, Jesus's warnings don't seem over-the-top or drastic; they seem perfectly spot-on.*

Some agony needs agonizing language. Some destruction does make you think of fire. Some betrayal actually feels like you've been burned. Some injustices do cause things to heat up ...

*To summarize, then, we need a loaded, volatile, adequately violent, dramatic, serious word to **describe the very real consequences we experience when we reject the good and true and beautiful life that God has for us.** We need a word that*

*refers to the big, wide, terrible evil that comes from the secrets hidden deep within our hearts all the way to the massive, **society-wide collapse and chaos that comes when we fail to live in God's world God's way.** And, for that, the word "hell" works quite well. Let's keep it. (p. 70-73, 93)*

I. Man's Spiritual Condition & the Plan of Salvation

*The writers of the scriptures constantly affirm that **we're all part of the same family.** (p. 99)*

That sounds nice. And, tolerant. And, inclusive.

There's only one problem. It's not true.

There are *two* spiritual families in the earth. In John 8:44, Jesus referred to the Pharisees as being "of (their) father, the devil".

"In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil." (1 John 3:10)

We're *not* all members of God's family. That's why a new birth is necessary.

*On the cross, Jesus says, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing". Jesus forgives them all, **without their asking for it.** Done. Taken care of. Before we could be good enough or right enough, **before we could even believe the right things. Forgiveness is unilateral ... God has already done it.** (p. 188-189)*

In Bell's theology, believing (or even "asking") is unnecessary.

*Many people in our world have only ever heard hell talked about as the place reserved for those who are "out", **who don't believe**, who haven't "joined the church". Christians talking about people who aren't Christians going to hell when they die, because they aren't ... Christians. **People who don't believe the right things.** But, in reading all of the passages in which Jesus uses the word "hell", what is so striking is that **people believing the right or wrong things isn't the point.** (p. 82)*

But, how many Scriptures discuss the necessity of believing?

John 1:12 – "... even to them that **believe** on his name ..."

John 3:16 – “...whosoever **believeth** in him ...”

John 3:36 – “... he that **believeth** on the Son hath everlasting life ...”

John 3:18 – “... he that **believeth** not is condemned already ...”

Romans 10:9 - “... with the heart man **believeth** unto righteousness ...”

Need I go on?

In my opinion, a gospel with *no repentance* and *no believing*; where everyone is *already* “part of the same family” and forgiven “without asking” – is no gospel at all. It’s clearly “another gospel”.

“But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.” (Gal. 1:8)

J. Multiple Post-Mortem (After Death) Chances to Get Saved

*Somewhere along the way they were taught that the only option when it comes to Christian faith is to clearly declare that a few, committed Christians will “go to heaven” when they die, and everyone else will not, **the matter is settled at death, and that’s it.** One place or the other, no looking back, **no chance for a change of heart, make your bed now and lie in it ... forever. Not all Christians have believed this, and you don’t have to believe it** to be a Christian. The Christian faith is big enough, wide enough and generous enough to handle a vast range of perspectives. (p. 110)*

Could God say to someone truly humbled, broken and desperate for reconciliation, “Sorry, it’s too late”? Many have refused to accept the scenario in which somebody is pounding on the door, apologizing, repenting, and asking God to be let in, only to hear God say through the keyhole: “Door’s locked. Sorry. If you had been here earlier, I could have done something. But now, it’s too late. (p. 108)

Again, I say, “Really?” Who can read this and not recall the unwise virgins, who did *exactly* what Rob Bell insinuates could never happen? Again, Rob Bell’s quote: “... the scenario in which somebody is pounding on the door, apologizing, repenting and asking God to be let in ...”

Now, the words of Jesus: “And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: **and the door was shut**. Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, **Lord, Lord, open unto us**. But, he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not.” (Matt. 25:10-12)

Interestingly, there’s no “shut door” in Bell’s theology. He quotes the following verse from the Book of Revelation:

*Second, we read in these last chapters of Revelation that **the gates of that city in that new world will “never shut”**. That’s a small detail, and it’s important we don’t get too hung up on details and specific images because it’s possible to treat something so literally that it becomes less true in the process. But gates, gates are for keeping people in and keeping people out. If the gates are never shut, then people are free to come and go. Can God bring proper, lasting justice, banishing certain actions – and the people who do them – from the new creation, while at the same time allowing and waiting and hoping for the possibility of the reconciliation of those very same people? Keeping the gates, in essence, open? (p. 115)*

As with many of the arguments found in this book, that explanation might hold water, if we didn’t take the time to read the passage in context.

Is John really suggesting that the gates are kept open, to allow entrance to some poor repentant soul who might turn to Christ after death? Again, I appeal to the context:

“And the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there ... And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination ... but they which are written in the Lamb’s book of life.” (Rev. 21:25-27)

At this point, all of the unsaved are in the lake of fire. The gates of the city are open as a sign of the city’s complete safety and security, not as an indication that more will be saved after death.

Why Does It Matter?

Why have I taken the time to critique Bell’s book? Because of Paul’s charge to Timothy:

“**Watch your life and doctrine closely**. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will **save both yourself and your hearers**.” (1 Tim. 4:16)

If Rob Bell is right, and there is no hell ... well then, no harm done.

But, if he's wrong, and there is a heaven to gain and a hell to shun, then "Love Wins" becomes a tool of deception, leading many astray.

"Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to **seducing spirits** and **doctrines of devils.**" (1 Timothy 4:1)

"These (Bereans) were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so." (Acts 17:11)

Let's continue to be Bereans until He comes.