

AN ANALYSIS OF
LOVE WINS, by ROB BELL
By Jack Cottrell

Before reading Rob Bell's book, *Love Wins*, I tried to avoid reading any reviews of it (I may have read a couple of short ones). The reason was that I intended to read the book and wanted to draw my own conclusions about it, uninfluenced by what others have said.

I have now read it, and have definitely drawn some conclusions about it. First, and very generally, I found *not one single redeeming quality* in the book. It has not one shred of value for anyone seeking a Biblical understanding of God, heaven, hell, or anything else.

Second, my overall impression of the book's viewpoint is this: it sounds very much like the old, classical, early-20th-century Liberalism wearing an Evangelical mask—and a rather beat-up one at that.

To be sure, there are numerous references to the Bible, but in general the Bible is used very selectively and is interpreted very creatively. Attention is drawn to the words, texts, and stories that can be turned toward Bell's agenda. E.g., he makes much of the literal meaning of *gehenna* as a garbage dump (67ff.), and all but ignores the massive amount of Biblical teaching about God's wrath as such. (The "gnashing of teeth" in *gehenna* he interprets thus: "Wild animals fought over scraps of food along the edges of the heap. When they fought, their teeth would make a gnashing sound" [68]. Also, Jesus' warnings of the "coming wrath" refer to the imminent attacks by the Roman government [81].)

For other examples of Bell's inventive approach to the Bible, one may consider how he transforms "eternal punishment" in Matt. 25:46 into a limited but intense "period of pruning" (Biblical writers did not use the concept of "forever," he says), pp. 91-92. Also, Bell transforms the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19ff. into a lesson on social justice: the rich man even in hell still considers Lazarus to be his slave, according to v. 27 (74ff.). Bell uses the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11ff. as a metaphor of heaven and hell, taking it as an example of how we create our own heaven or hell here on earth (165ff.).

My conviction is that the most fundamental doctrine of all is one's doctrine of God. What one believes about God will for the most part determine the rest of his beliefs. This is certainly true of Bell. He accepts and emphasizes one of the most common heresies about God, namely, that the essence of God is *love* and *love only*. The "recurring question," he says, is this: "What is God like?" (182). God's "very essence . . . is love," is his conclusion (177). "Love is what God is, love is why Jesus came." He came so that we may "experience this vast, expansive, infinite, indestructible love" (197-198).

This one-dimensional, love-only view of God has a direct effect on Bell's interpretation of the work of Jesus, especially the cross. He declares that the Biblical writers present a considerable number of different views of what Jesus was accomplishing on the cross, implying that these views are neither literal nor consistent with one another; and he specifically asserts that none of these views is necessarily the "correct" or "right" view (128-129).

He particularly does not like the substitutionary atonement view, described in the language of propitiation (182-184), because this by its very nature understands Jesus as satisfying the need for God to pour forth his wrath upon sinners. This, says Bell, leaves the impression that Jesus must "rescue" us from God by paying the price for our sin. Such a God, however, is totally unacceptable: he is destructive and violent, an angry and demanding slave driver, one from whom we need to be rescued. But "let's be very clear, then: we do not need to be rescued from God. God is the one who rescues us from death, sin, and destruction. God is the rescuer" (182).

It is quite clear that Bell is either deliberately giving a caricature of propitiation because it does not fit his agenda, or is ignorant of its true nature.

The fact is that Bell is more interested in Christ's resurrection than in his death, since the former fits better into Bell's concept of heaven as a kind of restored earthly paradise (134).

That God is *love only* is the main reason why Bell rejects the traditional view of hell as eternal punishment for unrepentant sinners. "How can God do this, or even allow this, and still claim to be a loving God?" (2). The traditional view that hell is eternal conscious torment requires a schizophrenic God. As Bell sees it, when an unrepentant sinner dies, "God would, in essence, become a fundamentally different being to them in that moment of death A loving heavenly father" would "become a cruel, mean, vicious

tormenter” handing out “an endless future of agony.” Here God instantly switches gears: he is loving and kind in one moment, then vicious and cruel in the next. What kind of God is this? (173-175).

Bell obviously does not understand that God’s moral nature is eternally a combination of love and grace on the one side, along with holiness and wrath on the other side: “Behold then the kindness and severity of God” (Rom. 11:22). The failure to understand this twofold nature of God is a sure path to all kinds of doctrinal error.

The main subjects of *Love Wins* are heaven and hell, reinterpreted according to Bell’s understanding. Most of the public’s attention to the book has focused on what he says about hell, but what he says about heaven is just as seriously wrong, if not more so. As with his treatment of most doctrines, his description of the traditional view of heaven is a caricature. His own view can be summed up thus: heaven is mainly a specific way of life we as individuals create for ourselves in the here-and-now world, the world in which we presently live.

He says the traditional view is that heaven is “somewhere else,” like a “perfect floating shining city hanging suspended there in the air” (21-26). On the contrary, as the title of Bell’s chapter on heaven says, “Here Is the New There” (21ff.). When Jesus talked with people about “going to heaven,” he was telling them how to live—how to “enter life”—*now* (27-30). “He was talking about our present *eternal, intense, real* experiences of joy, peace, and love in this life, this side of death *and* the age to come. Heaven for Jesus wasn’t just ‘someday’; it was a present reality” (58-59). The heavenly city described in Revelation 21 and 22 is “a new world that God makes, right here in the midst of this one” (112).

What makes this “new world” different from the old one? Here is where the resemblance to the old Liberalism arises. What Bell considers to be the environment of heaven sounds almost exactly like the 100-year-old concept of the social gospel: a “post-millennial” kind of world in which social justice in all forms has been realized, because it will be a world in which *love reigns*. It will be multiracial, multicultural, “multieverything,” with “staggering levels of diversity” (33-34). There will be no more war, greed, injustice, violence, exploitation; no “oppressors who prey on the weak and vulnerable,” and no more weapons (34-37). “Love doesn’t wield a sword” (80).

The whole reason God chose Israel in the first place was so they could be a model for this heavenly kind of earthly society. Their election by God “was always, only, ever about their being the kind of transformed, generous, loving people *through whom* God could show the world what God’s love looks like in flesh and blood” (83). Jesus tried to put them back on the road to “social revolution” through the story of the rich man and Lazarus. The point of the story was that even after he died, the rich man was still in hell, because he still thought of Lazarus as his servant (as when he requested that Lazarus bring him some water). Heaven, though, is a world where we are all “equals, children of the God who shows no favoritism.” The rich man, though, just did not understand the “new social order” Jesus came to establish. “He’s still clinging to his ego, his status, his pride—he’s unable to let go of the world he’s constructed, which puts him on the top and Lazarus on the bottom, the world in which *Lazarus* is serving *him*” (76). Thus “the plot of the story spins around the heart of the rich man” (74-77), which represented what the hearts of the Israelites had become.

Does Bell believe there will be an actual heaven after we die, and after this world possibly comes to an end? He is quite ambiguous about this. Paul seemed to believe it (55-56); Jesus sometimes spoke of life in “the age to come” (31, 55, see 61). But Jesus’ (and Bell’s) main emphasis is the heaven of the here-and-now. Bell leaves the distinct impression that the main thing we have to look forward to is a better future, a transformed future for *this* world. “Jesus invites us, in this life, . . . to experience the life of heaven now” (62).

Both the OT and Jesus, Bell says, pointed ahead to “the day when earth and heaven would be one,” the day “when earth and heaven *will be the same place*” (42-43). God is “actively at work” within human history, “taking it somewhere.” He is dragging the future into the present, bringing heaven to earth right now. When earth and heaven become one, we will be doing all the positive things we are doing now, but in active partnership with God to make this a new and better world (45-47).

“Life in the age to come. If this sounds like heaven on earth, that’s because it is. Literally” (33). People in the first century, including Jesus, “did not talk about a future life *somewhere else*, because they anticipated a coming day when the world would be restored, renewed, and redeemed and there would be peace on earth” (40). Jesus’ message is summed up thus: “Heaven and hell, here, now, around us, upon us, within us” (190). “Jesus passionately urges us to live like the end is here, now, today” (197).

Everything Bell says about heaven, he also says about hell. The traditional concept of hell—as eternal punishment for the wicked imposed by God’s holy justice—is rejected. Hell is reinterpreted mainly as the state of sin and suffering that individuals bring upon themselves (and others) *now*, in this present life. In fact, there are “all kinds of hells,” “on earth right now” (78-79; we can think of these as “Bell’s hells,” I guess). All the dimensions of life where people express and experience meanness and cruelty and degradation and ugliness are “a literal hell” (70-72). This is what Jesus’ hyperbolic metaphors about hell are teaching us (73).

This is the point of the story of the prodigal son’s older brother: he was creating his own hell while everyone else around him was having a party, i.e., experiencing heaven (166ff.). “In this story, heaven and hell are within each other, intertwined, interwoven, bumping up against each other” (170). The older brother was suffering in his own self-made hell because he refused to accept the father’s explanation of things. Thus “hell is our refusal to trust God’s retelling of our story” (170). “We create hell whenever we fail to trust God’s retelling of our story” (173). People choose to live in their own hell all the time” (114).

For Bell, it is important to see that we create our own hell, because this allows him to attribute hell to God’s love rather than to some imagined divine wrath. If we create our own hell, that is our own free-will choice, and God’s allowing us to exercise our free will, even in this way, is the result of his love. “Love demands freedom. It always has, and it always will. We are free to resist, reject, and rebel against God’s ways for us. We can have all the hell we want” (113). I.e., God loves us enough to allow us to “get what we want. God is that loving” (116-117). “If we want isolation, despair, and the right to be our own god, God graciously grants us that option” (117).

The bottom line, then, is this: even if some insist on staying in their own self-made hells, love still wins! It is because God *loves* us that he allows us this freedom.

The big question about this kind of hell is whether it will last forever, and Bell’s answer is that, at the very least, it does not *have* to. Since the essence of “living in hell” is living an anti-social lifestyle that is basically the opposite of the social-justice lifestyle that constitutes “living in heaven,” one can “enter life” now through repentance and a change of heart and life.

This is the basic meaning of the “judgment day,” the (figurative) flames of which are purging and corrective. Sodom and Gomorrah indeed experienced judgment, but it was the judgment of restoration (85). God’s judgment is always for the purpose of healing and redemption; “judgment has a point, and consequences are for correction” (88). By allowing people to suffer the full consequences of their choices, this misery they bring on themselves will get their attention, and “wrongdoers will become right doers” (90-91). Thus the “flames” usually associated with hell are actually the flames of heaven: “heaven . . . has teeth, flames, edges, and sharp points” designed to change us (49-50).

The main point of gospel preaching thus seems to be to motivate sinners to accept the challenge to abandon the present hells they have created for themselves and to allow the love of God to transform their lives now. This was Jesus’ purpose. He was not concerned to tell people “how to get to heaven” when they die (30). He was showing them how to be a part of “a social revolution,” a “new social order” in the here-and-now (75-76). Jesus told stories about judgment “to wake us up,” to warn us not to miss out on the heavenly life into which we can enter now (197). His teaching about “hell” was especially designed to warn the Jews “about the consequences of straying from their God-given calling and identity to show the world God’s love” (82).

This leaves us one final subject to discuss, namely, the question of universal salvation. Whether this salvation is limited to this restored earth or will somehow embrace a future “new heavens and new earth” is not made clear in this book, but one thing does ring clear throughout, namely, that the door is open for all people ultimately to be saved. Bell’s is the gospel of universalism, or as close to it as one can get without specifically saying so.

Bell cites the many Bible texts, OT and NT, which declare that “all people” or “all nations” will ultimately come to the Lord. He implies that the texts that affirm the inclusion of the nations (Gentiles) in the people of God are referring to every *individual* within those nations (99ff.). Old Testament promises of *Israel*’s restoration from captivity are used to show a future universal restoration of all people to God (85-89). That “every knee shall bow” (Phil. 2:10) is taken as a universal willing acceptance of Christ’s Lordship, rather than (in some cases) forced acceptance (99-100). The cross and resurrection of Jesus are pictured as having reconciled and restored everything to himself (125, 134-135). “In spite of our sins, failures, rebellion, and

hard hearts, in spite of what's been done to us or what we've done, God has made peace with us" (172). Forgiveness is universal and unilateral (188-189).

Indeed, says Bell, this has been God's *purpose* from the beginning: "God wants all people to be saved" (1 Tim. 2:2). Interpreting this as God's *purpose* as well as his *desire*, Bell asks: "So does God get what God wants?" (97). "Will all people be saved, or will God not get what God wants? Does this magnificent, mighty, marvelous God *fail* in the end?" (98). No. God never stops pursuing his goal; he "simply doesn't give up. Ever" (101). Universal restoration is the only way God can be glorified (108).

But what of those who never hear of Christ? It doesn't matter. "Jesus is bigger than any one religion. . . . He will always transcend whatever cages and labels are created to contain and name him, especially the one called 'Christianity'" (150). He draws all people to himself. "He is present within all cultures," including "any Christian culture" (151). All people are coming to God through Jesus, even if they don't know about Jesus (154). "What Jesus does is declare that he, and he alone, is saving everybody" (155). "People come to Jesus in all sorts of ways. . . . Sometimes people use his name; other times they don't" (158-159).

One of the most disturbing elements of Bell's universalism is his mystical, almost occult, almost pantheistic interpretation of how Jesus is present in all the universe by virtue of his role in the creation (144ff.). "There is an energy in the world, a spark, an electricity that everything is plugged into. The Greeks called it *zoe*, the mystics call it 'Spirit,' and Obi-Wan called it 'the Force'" (144). "This energy, spark, and electricity that pulses through all of creation sustains it, fuels it, and keeps it going" (145). This is explained in the "creation poem" in Genesis 1 as the "Word of God" that speaks life into the universe. Then this same life-giving "Word of God" later "took on flesh and blood" and became Jesus. So, to the early Christians, Jesus was that Word, "that *divine* life-giving energy that brought the universe into existence" (145-146).

This is the same Jesus through whom "God is putting the world back together" (148), through whom God is reconciling all things back to himself. "He holds the entire universe in his embrace. . . . He is the sacred power present in every dimension of creation" (157-158). This is why all people, everywhere, can just "bump into" Jesus, without knowing what or who he is (158).

The role of the *preached* word of God as the only means of sharing in the blessings brought by Jesus is ignored by Bell (see Rom. 10:14-17).

But what of the many who refuse to go through the hell-to-heaven transformation during this lifetime? For one thing, Bell does not say very much about "the afterlife" in this book; its exact nature is quite ambiguous and unclear (see, e.g., p. 55). But he does seem to acknowledge that many will pass from this life without the necessary conversion. The rich man, in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, is a model for such a one, namely, one whose heart never embraces social justice in this life (76ff.).

The bottom line for Bell, though, seems to be thus: those who depart this life without yet accepting God's love will in some way or other have continuing opportunities to do so in the "next life," whatever that is. "So will those who have said no to God's love in this life continue to say no in the next?" We can assume so, but we cannot say they will do so forever (114-115).

We do know this, however: God will never give up on them. True, many believe that "we get this life and only this life to believe in Jesus" (105), but others "insist that there must be some kind of 'second chance' for those who don't believe in Jesus in this lifetime" (106). Then there are others who say, if there is an after-death possibility of converting, why limit it to just one more chance? Why not "endless opportunities in an endless amount of time for people to say yes to God"? In this last scenario, ultimately "everybody will turn to God and find themselves in the joy and peace of God's presence. The love of God will melt every hard heart," and "God will ultimately restore everything and everybody" (106-107).

"Which is stronger and more powerful, the hardness of the human heart or God's unrelenting, infinite, expansive love?" Does not 1 Corinthians 13:8 say, "Love never fails"? (109). In the end Bell leaves it as a question: "Will everybody be saved, or will some perish apart from God forever because of their choices?" He says we don't really have to answer this question, but we do have to leave room for the love of God to do what love requires (115).

Indeed, all the way through the book much of what Bell presents is in the form of questions. This ultimately gives him some "wobble room" if he wants to deny that he has actually affirmed this or that. The direction which Bell always seems to be leaning, however, is quite clear. The title says it all: LOVE WINS.

Postscript: Most of this "review" has been in the form of an exposition of what Bell is actually teaching in his book. I acknowledge that I have not attempted to stop and refute or critique him at each point, by

presenting what I consider to be the Biblical view. The reason is that, since practically everything he is saying in his book is contrary to the traditional conservative understanding of Biblical teaching, a point-by-point critique would be the equivalent of a full-sized book. Also, I assume that most of those who read this critique will already have a basic understanding of the Biblical teaching which this book repudiates.