

If Love Wins, What is Lost?

A Response to *Love Wins* by Rob Bell

(2011, London: Collins; ISBN: 978-0-00-742073-5)

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Introduction – why all the fuss and why this response?

Love Wins is the latest book by Rob Bell, author of *Velvet Elvis* (Zondervan, 2005), *Sex God* (Zondervan, 2007) and *Drops Like Stars* (Zondervan, 2009), presenter of the *Nooma* videos and founding pastor of megachurch Mars Hill Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The American edition of *Love Wins* (although not the British edition) is subtitled *A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, and indeed the central concern of the book is with the nature of Heaven and Hell and who ends up in either place. The book has been at the centre of significant controversy since even before its launch, with accusations being made that Bell is a Universalist and a heretic and counter-criticisms of those who are prepared to reach such dramatic conclusions without even having read the book. The debate around the book's message has centred on questions about the existence and nature of hell and who, if anyone, will end up there, although the book is more generally about the nature of salvation.

Social networking allows bloggers and tweeters to respond to news stories and book releases with much greater rapidity than was previously the case. The Christian world is no exception and in the case of *Love Wins* several high profile Christian leaders in the USA have responded to the book by denouncing Bell. On 26th February 2011 Justin Taylor, Vice President of Editorial at publishing house Crossway, commented on his Gospel Coalition blog that Bell, “seems to be moving farther and farther away from anything resembling biblical Christianity” and that:¹

It is unspeakably sad when those called to be ministers of the Word distort the gospel and deceive the people of God with false doctrine.

But it is better for those teaching false doctrine to put their cards on the table (a la Brian McLaren) rather than remaining studiously ambiguous in terminology.

So on that level, I'm glad that Rob Bell has the integrity to be unambiguous about his Universalism. It seems that this is not just optimism about the fate of those who haven't heard the Good News, but (as it seems from below) full-blown hell-is-empty-everyone-gets-saved Universalism.

Although the post has since been modified by Taylor, it originally ended with a reference to 2 Corinthians 11:14-15, which speaks of Satan's servants disguising themselves as servants of righteousness. When Taylor says “as it seems from below” he is referring to the publisher's description of the book,² which he proceeds to quote. Although he admits that the author of a book often does not write such descriptions, Taylor also refers to a promotional video that Bell posted to video sharing website Vimeo on 22nd February 2011.³

Also on 26th February 2011, author and pastor of Covenant Life Church in Gaithersburg, Maryland, Joshua Harris tweeted “*There's nothing loving about preaching a false gospel. This breaks my heart. Praying for Rob Bell*”,⁴ while well known pastor and author John Piper tweeted simply the poetic statement, “*Farewell Rob Bell*.”⁵ Both men included links to Taylor's blog post in their tweets. On 28th February 2011, Kevin DeYoung, author and senior pastor at University Reformed Church in East Lansing, Michigan, wrote on his *Gospel Coalition* blog in defence of Taylor's decision to comment before the book was released claiming that the promotional video by Bell was sufficient grounds to conclude that, “*We don't have to guess if Bell will say something dreadfully, horribly, disgracefully wrong. He already has.*”⁶ DeYoung has since placed a review of *Love Wins* online.⁷

¹ <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2011/02/26/rob-bell-Universalist/> (accessed 27.6.11)

² Available at: <http://www.harpercollins.com/books/Love-Wins-Rob-Bell/?isbn=9780062049636> (accessed 27.6.11)

³ <http://vimeo.com/20272585> (accessed 27.6.11)

⁴ <http://twitter.com/#!/HarrisJosh/statuses/41560790603407360> (accessed 27.6.11)

⁵ <http://twitter.com/#!/JohnPiper/statuses/41590656421863424> (accessed 27.6.11)

⁶ <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2011/02/28/bell-brouhaha/> (accessed 27.6.11)

⁷ DeYoung, Kevin. 2011. *God Is Still Holy and What You Learned in Sunday School Is Still True: A Review of Love Wins by Rob Bell*. Available: <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/files/2011/03/LoveWinsReview.pdf> (accessed 27.6.11)

The difficulty that Bell's supporters have with these responses is two-fold. Firstly, these comments were made before the book was released on 15th March 2011, resulting in the criticism that they were poorly informed. Although Bell's promotional video contains an outline of the questions he raises in the book, it would indeed appear to be premature to criticise a book without actually having read it. Secondly, the comments, at least some of which appear to pronounce a final judgement on Bell that places him outside the camps of evangelicalism and perhaps of Christian orthodoxy, were criticised for being too hasty and symptomatic of a tendency to be closed to any reconsideration of cherished traditional theological formulations. Such comments raise important questions about the way in which Christians debate their differences and what exactly it means to speak about a "*false gospel*". In defence of Bell it is claimed that he is only asking questions with the intention of engaging in discussion and that there is nothing in his book that has not been part of Christian thought for many centuries.

In the United Kingdom, responses to *Love Wins* appear to have been more measured. The UK Evangelical Alliance responded to the book two weeks after its release (on 29th March 2011) in two ways.⁸ Firstly, they issued a statement calling for "*debate about the book*" to be "*characterised by respect, humility and grace, particularly where Christians disagree with one another*" and directing readers to the Alliance's own work on the doctrine of Hell which resulted in the 2000 document *The Nature of Hell*. The statement also quoted the Alliance's general director, Steve Clifford, calling Bell "*a valued brother in Christ*". Secondly, the Alliance posted a brief review by author Derek Tidball. Tidball applauds Bell's "*well-established communication skills*" and "*passion to make God's love known*" but describes *Love Wins* as "*full of confusing half-truths*". Although Tidball accepts that *Love Wins* contains truth, including in some of its attacks on popular evangelical understandings of the gospel, his main criticisms of the book are that it deals with only some of the biblical evidence while ignoring other passages that do not suit Bell's argument and that the language is confusing, full of questions with few answers, leaving the reader unclear about what Bell actually believes. In particular, Tidball asserts (in contradiction to Taylor's confident expectation that Bell would be unambiguous) that the book does not show clearly that Bell is a Universalist.

I must say something about my reasons for taking the time to write this response and my general attitude to books like *Love Wins*. I undertook this task because I was approached by some individuals who were interested in *Love Wins* and who wanted help in thinking through the message of the book. I am grateful to Rob Bell for stimulating this kind of discussion about issues of major importance in our understanding of God and the message of Jesus Christ. Given the controversy about *Love Wins*, the confusion about its message and the undoubted popularity and influence of Rob Bell it is my intention in this review to consider the book thoughtfully and in the spirit that the Evangelical Alliance UK commends, of "*respect, humility and grace*". I am not concerned with attacking Rob Bell personally but with engaging seriously with what he has written. As I engage in a critique of the book, then, I will do my utmost to ensure that I reflect what he has said fairly and do not misrepresent him, but if I fail to do so it is accidental and I would appreciate clarification or correction from Bell himself or from any other reader of this review. I will attempt to distinguish between those things Bell says clearly and those views that I believe to be implicit in his writing but that he does not state unambiguously. It is my conviction that such discussion should never be off limits and that Christians should always engage in thoughtful reflection on what they believe. I am convinced, however, that the correct way to approach such questions is with reference to what God has revealed about Himself. This article is an attempt to consider the book's teaching in light of Scripture.

As I have written this response I have felt myself torn between a desire to be generous and gracious and a realisation that the New Testament has much to say about false teachers and that the church in every generation must be alert to teachings that are contrary to the gospel. Bell maintains that, "*the historic, orthodox Christian faith [is] a deep, wide, diverse stream that's been flowing for thousands of years, carrying a*

⁸ <http://www.eauk.org/articles/love-wins-response.cfm> (accessed 27.6.11)

staggering variety of voices, perspectives, and experiences" (pp.x-xi) and harks back to this metaphor later in the book when he says that, "It is, after all, a wide stream we're swimming in" (p.110). Underlying this metaphor is, undoubtedly, a concern to say that he remains within orthodox Christianity and a hope that readers will not be too quick to judge him as falling outside it. The metaphor, of course, raises questions. Does the orthodox faith have any limits and how do we decide whether someone is in the stream or not? At the risk of pushing the stream metaphor too far, if we imagine heresy as a branch that diverges from the main stream, eventually petering out into a stagnant, crocodile-infested swamp, it becomes vital to know how we can identify that we have taken a wrong turning so that we can get back into the main stream. My concern here will not be so much to consider whether Bell's suggestions are 'orthodox', since the definition of 'orthodoxy' is open to dispute, but whether they are a possible understanding of God's revealed truth in Scripture. I will not attempt to show whether or not there have, as Bell claims, been people in the history of Christianity who have thought as Bell does (we have no reason to doubt that there have) or even whether or not they were accepted by the church in their time as 'orthodox', although I do take issue with his claim that those who "insist that history is not tragic, hell is not forever, and love, in the end, wins and all will be reconciled to God" have been "at the center of the Christian tradition since the first church" (p.109). I accept that these views have been present in the Christian tradition repeatedly throughout history but reject the claim that they form an unbroken chain or that they can be said to be "at the center" as opposed to minority views. Still, my focus will not be on historical theology but simply on attempting to understand what Bell is saying and to comment upon it in light of Scripture. I do not consider myself to possess a definitive map of the stream of Christian orthodoxy, still less to be its gate-keeper, but I appeal to Bell as a fellow swimmer to join me in looking to Scripture as the final arbiter.

I proceed on the basis that Scripture is God-breathed, that it is, therefore, completely true and trustworthy, and that it is therefore the ultimate authority for all that we believe. I am convinced of the divine origin and authority of Scripture because it has been the testimony of the church throughout the centuries and because the Bible claims it to be true. To paraphrase Paul's words to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:14-16, I trust those from whom I have received the Scriptures and the gospel to which they testify and I accept that all Scripture is God-breathed and is therefore able to make people wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. Bell makes extensive reference to Scripture in *Love Wins*, but he does so in a way that has been all too common within the evangelical tradition from which he has emerged, which he critiques and within which I would locate myself. Sadly, although evangelicals have been known as people who take a particularly strong view of the active authority of Scripture, we have not always been exemplary in our use of Scripture in theology. We have too often mined the Bible for proof texts that suit our conviction and ignored other passages that don't suit it so well. More importantly, we have ripped apart the grand story of the Bible in our pursuit of systematic statements of faith and coherent theologies. I believe that the Bible, taken as a whole and read as the unfolding story of redemption, forms a coherent whole and that through it God reveals Himself, His heart and His purposes to us. That is not to say that the Bible answers every question we might ask or provides us with an iron cast theology of everything – too often we have approached it with that expectation and our theological systems have ended up constraining our interpretation of Scripture – but that it is sufficiently clear on those matters that are most central to our faith. Hence my primary concern in this response will be to understand Scripture faithfully and to test Rob Bell's ideas against its truth.

After making some general comments about the nature of the book including Bell's style of writing and his motivation, I will consider what Bell says about five key Christian doctrines: the nature of God, the eternal destiny of human beings, who will be saved, on what basis people will be saved, and what response is necessary on the part of a person for them to be saved. I will then turn to what this I consider to be a significant underlying issue, Bell's view of and use of the Bible. Lastly I will attempt to reach some conclusions about the book.

General Reflections – Bell’s style and his reasons for writing

Before considering the book’s message in detail it is necessary to say something more general about the kind of book it is. It is not an academic text and has clearly been written for a popular audience. It is relatively brief, extending to around 200 pages of generously spaced text in a large font size and with multiple paragraph breaks. Bell is especially fond of short snappy sentences and he alternates between longer prose paragraphs and shorter paragraphs, often consisting of one sentence of a few words, which are structured almost like poetry. As with most poetry these sections are often emotive and lack precision or clarity. They often impact the reader through an overall impression as much as through the logical imperatives they contain. Bell is also a fan of elaboration and has a strong tendency to build lists and use multiple verbs, adjectives or adverbs in one sentence with apparently synonymous meanings. Although this style of writing can be provocative, creating a sense of the dynamic, at times it can become laborious. More significantly, it contributes to the general lack of precision in language that is evident within the book. The style of the language together with Bell’s fondness for questions rather than answers makes it difficult to pin down exactly what Bell is saying about some issues. Despite the fact that he claims that *“this isn’t just a book of questions. It’s a book of responses to these questions”* (p.19), it is impossible to decide conclusively from the book exactly what answer Bell would give to many of the questions he raises. Having said this, the book is clearly, as we shall see, about theology and it does contain some clear statements of belief. It is not intended as devotional material or simply to provoke thought but to present a case for rethinking the way many Christians have thought about key Christian doctrines. In some cases he argues that it is impossible to conclude upon a single answer but at the same time he is abundantly clear, often using forceful propositions, about what answers he believes to be inadmissible. He does not attempt to consider all alternative perspectives on these questions within the broader sweep of Christian tradition and it is normally fairly obvious which answer he finds the most appealing.

These aspects of Bell’s style of writing are thoroughly postmodern. His communication style is undoubtedly suited to a postmodern audience, making him a highly attractive communicator to the younger generations in modern middle class America. Bell says explicitly in his preface that, *“I believe the discussion itself is divine”* (p.ix). Much as I agree that discussion is to be commended, I do not find the same degree of confidence in Bell’s writing that discussion can ever lead to a conclusion or a settled place of conviction. The difficulty with his approach is that it implies not only that questions are good and some things are uncertain but also that there are no ultimate answers and everything is uncertain. The rejection of absolute truth is, of course, a fundamental aspect of full blown philosophical postmodernism, but it is hardly consistent with Christianity, which is based on the revelation of a personal God who is Himself the ultimate truth who makes sense of all that exists. I am not suggesting that Bell denies the concept of absolute truth and, in fact, he clearly defends certain truth claims such as the existence of God, the historicity of Christ and the love of God for all people as well as defending a concept of meta-narrative⁹ that is foreign to postmodernism. His style of writing, however, may appear to be supportive of the postmodern rejection of absolute truth and certainly does little to challenge it.

One challenge in analysing the book is that Bell does not provide any footnotes or references. He includes very few quotations in the book and although he acknowledges in the preface that *“nothing in this book hasn’t been taught, suggested, or celebrated by many before me”* (p.x), he doesn’t provide us with many leads as to who these predecessors are or where their writings can be found, with the exception of a brief list of names on page 107. He does quote Martin Luther in support of the idea that people may be given a second chance to accept God after death (p.106), but this quotation, which is in any case merely saying that God would be capable of doing this rather than that he does do it, is not referenced. Likewise, although the book makes

⁹ A meta-narrative is a grand story that lies behind existence of which all individual stories are part. Hard postmodernism denies the possibility of a meta-narrative.

numerous criticisms of certain expressions of Christianity there are no indications of who exactly is being attacked. These omissions would not be serious if the book was a work of fiction, but in a book intended to challenge theological concepts and to provoke thought it makes it difficult to pick up the threads of thought and take them further. Bell does list seven books in a “Further Reading” section at the end of the book (p.201) but, although the influence of these books can be detected in at least some of what he has written, he does not indicate the degree to which the books or their authors support his views. The lack of referencing is particularly frustrating when it comes to dogmatic pronouncements about the meaning of certain Hebrew and Greek words and claims about historical details and persons as we are unable to ascertain whether Bell’s view has any substantiating support from experts in these fields. It is possible that Bell chose to avoid footnotes and referencing to make the book an easier read, but I mention it at this point to highlight a challenge for the more inquisitive reader. I believe that it is a fundamental principle of discussion that the views of partners in the discussion are listened to and represented fairly, on their own terms wherever possible. Bell fails to do this in his caricatures of those he disagrees with and his failure to quote them. In a similar vein it is interesting that when Bell quotes from the Bible he includes only the chapter reference in brackets, without specifying which verse he is quoting from. Although I am not sure of his reasons for doing this, I personally found it helpful since it forced me to consider again the context of the verses quoted (although, as I will show later, I frequently found that the context militated against his interpretation), but for the reader who has less time to cross-reference the Scriptures I wonder if the lack of verse numbers might not actually act as a deterrent from directly consulting the biblical text.

A major feature of this book is the degree to which it is a reaction to forms of Christianity that Bell judges to be unsavoury and unhelpful. In chapter 1, *What about the flat tire?*, Bell engages in a critique of popular evangelicalism, or at least certain expressions of it, much of which I sympathise with. He exposes some of the careless language and extra-biblical conventions surrounding conversion that are commonplace amongst some evangelicals, for example, the idea that a specific prayer is necessary for salvation (p.5). I was deeply grieved by the examples he quotes of a person pronouncing an anonymous judgement on Gandhi in a public manner (p.1), a Christian who told a grieving girl that there was no hope for her dead brother because he had professed to be an atheist (p.3), and a lady called Renee Altson who suffered horrific abuse by her father who professed some kind of Christian faith (p.7). These examples are shocking and inexcusable in their arrogance, insensitivity and hypocrisy, but are they typical of Christians generally and of evangelicals? Bell seems so intent on challenging this kind of travesty that he fails to acknowledge the many examples of humility, compassion and integrity among people who hold the views he attacks. As the book progresses it is clear that his concern is not simply with the language and practices of evangelicals but with aspects of their theology, including beliefs about heaven, hell, the exclusivity of the Christian message, the significance of the cross of Christ and what is required for a person to be saved.

The second chapter, *Here is the New There*, is a challenge to common perceptions of Heaven, and does much to correct the wrong view that is commonplace amongst Christians that Heaven is a disembodied reality and that God has no future plan for the universe we inhabit. Bell writes that, “*The day when earth and heaven will be the same place. This is the story of the Bible. This is the story Jesus lived and told*” (p.43). He emphasises the fact that God’s purpose is to renew and restore the created world and that we are called now to be agents of God’s Kingdom in the present. Later in the book he says that, “*there is no place in this new world for murder and destruction and deceit. There can’t be because this new world is free from those evils, which means that it is free from those who would insist on continuing to perpetuate those evils*” (p.113). Bell’s vision of ‘Heaven’ as the “*new world*” is, in my view, both thoroughly biblical and positively exciting. This vision flows from an understanding of the gospel that is much more than just the message of individual salvation that evangelical preaching has sometimes made it. As Bell writes (p.134):

When Jesus is presented only as the answer that saves individuals from their sin and death, we run the risk of shrinking the Gospel down to something just for humans, when God has inaugurated a movement in Jesus’s

resurrection to renew, restore, and reconcile everything 'on earth or in heaven' (Col. 1), just as God originally intended it. The powers of death and destruction have been defeated on the most epic scale imaginable. Individuals are then invited to see their story in the context of a far larger story, one that includes all of creation.

This understanding of the gospel as a story is a necessary corrective to the postmodern tendency to reject any sense of a meta-narrative, a grand story that embraces all the smaller stories and explains the ultimate significance of life in the world. So far we can agree with Rob Bell. Modern evangelicalism has often made the gospel too narrow, adopting too individualistic a perspective and neglecting the grand sweep of God's story. We must, however, ask what that story is, how individuals become part of it and where the story ends. Importantly we must also ask how we know this story – how has God revealed it to us, and is the Bible a faithful record of it? Before turning to Bell's perspective on these questions, however, we must say something more about the way in which he attacks contemporary Christianity.

Whilst I have already acknowledged that Bell makes some valid points in his criticism of the contemporary evangelical world, I do have concerns about some of what he says and the language he chooses to express his concerns. He creates something of a 'straw man' to attack by painting a caricature of evangelicals. He is excessively focused on terminology rather than engaging with the ideas that underlie the words used. For example, he correctly says that "*the phrase 'personal relationship' is found nowhere in the Bible*" (p.10), but he neglects to consider whether this common evangelical phrase may be a useful short-hand for a truth that is described in the Bible. Personally, I do not particularly like the term 'personal relationship', since it is non-biblical and suggests a very individualistic faith, but I understand that those who use it are referring to a kind of experience of God that Scripture bears testimony to and which is surely a desirable thing. If Bell wants to critique the usefulness of such phrases he must expend more ink in explaining what he doesn't like about them and what alternative he would propose. Another problem with Bell's critique of evangelicalism is that he implies that different ways of describing the conversion experience, which is generally recognised as a hallmark of evangelicalism, are contradictory where they are not necessarily so. This extends to highlighting throughout chapter 1 different scriptural passages as if they are in contradiction to one another. He writes:

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 is it 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? (pp.16-17)

Each of these questions is based on a passage that says something about 'salvation' or that describes the conversion experience of an individual but Bell does not consider what kind of 'salvation' is meant in each passage (the word often means salvation from the consequences of sin but it may be used to describe salvation from other threats) or whether the passage itself suggests that what happened to that individual was intended to be seen as normative for all people. It is one thing to say that every individual has a different story of how they came to saving faith in Christ, but it is quite another to imply, as Bell appears to, that such saving faith may not be necessary. Furthermore, Bell makes no attempt to synthesise the teaching of these passages and does not acknowledge that many biblical scholars have seen no contradiction in these passages and have understood them to be complementary in building a picture of salvation. I find it difficult to believe that this is because he is unfamiliar with the body of scholarship and it seems that he is intent upon disorienting the reader, leaving them unclear about what, if anything, is necessary for a person to receive salvation. A secondary effect is to leave the reader unsure about whether Scripture can actually be synthesised or whether it is intrinsically contradictory. We will return to the questions of Bell's view and use of Scripture and whether he believes faith to be necessary for salvation later in this review, but for now our concern is with his purpose for writing in this way. Why is he so intent on deconstructing evangelical ideas?

It is always dangerous to attempt to infer what an author's motives are in writing a book, but Bell does give us some insights in *Love Wins* into what caused him to write. Chapter 2 reveals that Bell's reaction against popular evangelical thinking stems at least in part from his own childhood experience. He refers to a painting

that hung in his grandmother's house (p.20) which apparently scarred the young Bell to such a degree that he links it to Jesus' warning in Matthew 18:6 about the consequences of causing people to stumble. The fact that Bell is motivated at least partly by a reaction to personal childhood experiences does not, of course, negate his message, but he ought to be careful to ensure that he does not write excessively subjectively and that his reaction does not drive him to opposing extremes. Bell does not, however, acknowledge these dangers in the book, nor does he express a desire to be moderate in his criticisms. In fact, he says nothing positive about his background or evangelicalism generally. Another motivating factor behind *Love Wins* is a concern that the "traditional view" of Hell "ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus's message of love, peace and joy that our world desperately needs to hear" (p.viii). Bell is convinced that a:

story about a God who inflicts unrelenting punishment on people because they didn't do or say or believe the correct things in a brief window of time called life isn't a very good story. [...] Many people find Jesus compelling, but don't follow him, because of the parts about 'hell and torment and all that' (p.110).

Furthermore, he is concerned that these ideas about Hell are a significant reason for people dropping out from the Christian faith. He writes of "people who were Christians, but can't do it anymore because of questions about these very topics" (p.ix). Bell appears to be concerned to make the Christian message more acceptable to a generation of Americans who reject notions of Hell that have held sway throughout most of Christian history. I am not suggesting that this leads him to deliberately distort the gospel message, as he seemingly believes that he is helping to restore the true message of Jesus which is about "love, peace and joy", but it is worth noticing that it is at least part of the motivation behind the book. It does, however, raise two important questions. Firstly, is Bell's accusation that the "traditional view" of Hell is responsible for the failure of the spread of the message of Jesus fair? Is this demonstrable? He does not provide any corroborating evidence and, even if studies were to show that people report that this view of Hell is a reason why they do not embrace Christianity, this would not necessarily be a basis for rejecting it if it is in fact true. We might also note that Bell's problem is a particularly Western one. Christianity, including the "traditional view" of Hell, is spreading rapidly in other regions of the world including Africa, parts of Asia and South America. Is Hell the real reason why many people in the Western world reject the gospel? In fairness to Bell he does not proceed to make his case for a rethinking of ideas about Hell on the basis of market research or what might be popular, but by considering numerous Bible passages, and that leads to our second concern. How are we to decide whether or not the offense that is caused is because of a distorted message or an unavoidable part of a message that is unchanging? Our answer must be to return to what God has revealed to us in Scripture, and so once again we find ourselves driven back to the question of Bell's view of the Bible. Is it possible that Bell's concern to see the message of Jesus spread might have influenced him towards an approach to the Bible that could distort the message? Could his engagement with culture have led him to develop a version of the Christian message that suits the culture but that is no longer faithful to what God has revealed in Scripture? In fact, does Bell actually accept that Scripture is God's revelation and that there is an unchanging gospel that must be translated into all cultures but cannot be adapted to suit them?

Bell on the character of God

God is ...

Bell identifies God's love "for every single one of us" as the starting point of the Christian message (p.vii). In fact, he believes that "God's very essence [...] is love" (p.177). He has clearly grasped the fact that "God is love" (1 John 4:8) but he appears to miss the equally important biblical truth, emphasised in the very same book, that "God is light" (1 John 1:5), meaning (in context) that he is entirely pure and holy, and that as a result he cannot and will not tolerate sin. Throughout the Bible God is seen to be the One who is full of grace and truth – both perfectly loving and perfectly just. God revealed His character to Israel in the time of Moses as "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished" (Exodus 34:6-7). The Psalms repeatedly praise God for these two aspects of His character which are perfectly interwoven (Psalm 33:4-5; 36:10; 40:10; 85:10; 86:15; 89:14; 103:17) and the narratives of the Old Testament consistently reveal God to be both the righteous judge and the loving Saviour. The Law given to Moses emphasised these two qualities. In His love God desired His people to know Him and be with Him (the Tabernacle was His dwelling place in their midst) but their sin meant that they could not have direct access to Him and so He provided a system of priesthood and sacrifice to enable them to come to Him and express their faith in Him. For God to be trustworthy He must be truthful and for Him to be trusted He must be loving. When John wrote about the person of Jesus he said that He was demonstrably the incarnate God because his character was that of the Father, "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). The great question that the Old Testament raises is how the righteous God can declare sinners whom he loves to be righteous without compromising His justice. The cross is the answer to this problem. It demonstrates both the love of God (Romans 5:8) and His justice (Romans 3:26).

Bell is absolutely correct to suggest that the starting point of the gospel is the character of God, but in neglecting the holiness and righteousness of God he ends up with a distorted version of the story. He claims that God gets angry when people are mistreated (p.38), but he fails to clarify whether or not God also gets angry at kinds of sin that do not directly hurt other people. Sin, in biblical terms, always boils down to pride (confidence in ourselves rather than in God) and idolatry (the worship of things that are not God whether ourselves, false gods, other people, or things). Bell does seem to recognise this as the heart of sin when he talks about people acting as their own god and making the world in their own image (p.115), but he seems to think that God is dispassionate about this other than regretting the fact that we will not embrace his love, whereas the Bible speaks about God's wrath being revealed against this kind of behaviour (Romans 1:18). Bell recognises that people are capable of sinning against others but does not identify this behaviour as a symptom of the root disease, which is their rejection of God. This underestimating of the seriousness of sin in God's estimation is directly related to Bell's misunderstanding of the character of God. If God simply loves people then it is obvious that he will be angry when someone he loves is hurt, but if, as Scripture maintains, God is holy and concerned with purity and righteousness then He will be equally angry when people sin against him. Scripture consistently presents sin as first and foremost against God and only secondarily against other people – consider the account of 'the Fall' in Genesis 3, David's expression of repentance in Psalm 51:4, or Paul's description of sin progressing from a rejection of God towards actions that are harmful towards others in Romans 1. It is from God's wrath against sin things that we need to be saved (Romans 1:18; 2:5; 3:5; 5:9), although Bell explicitly denies this when he writes that:

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. This is crucial for our peace, because we shape our God, and then our God shapes us (p.182).

What happened to wrath?

Bell seems intent on explaining away any biblical reference to the wrath of God. In Jeremiah 32:37, he writes of, *“what the prophet interprets and understands to be God’s ‘anger and wrath’”* (p.85), placing a question mark over the accuracy of Jeremiah’s understanding of God’s character. The implications for our view of Scripture and our understanding of inspiration (especially given that Jeremiah claims in this passage to be quoting what God has said) should be clear. In dealing with another passage where Jesus speaks about judgement (Matthew 24), Bell writes that:

Because of this history, it’s important that we don’t take Jesus’s very real and prescient warnings about judgment then out of context, making them about someday, somewhere else. That wasn’t what he was talking about. (p.81)

The history to which he is referring is the Jewish uprising of AD 66 and the Roman reprisals that followed including the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Although there is a variety of opinion amongst Christian scholars over how much of Matthew 24 refers to the end times in addition to the events of that period, Bell does not mention the two verses in this chapter that can hardly be explained as a reference to the events of the first century:

At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other. (Matthew 24:30-31)

Clearly this did not happen in AD 66-70 and the only way to argue that Jesus was referring to the immediate future in these verses is to claim that He was mistaken. Bell adds in his discussion of this chapter that, *“When [Jesus] warns of the ‘coming wrath,’ then, this is a very practical, political, heartfelt warning to his people to not go the way they’re intent on going”* (p.81). His error in this statement is twofold. Firstly, Matthew 26 does not mention the word ‘wrath’ and even the parallel passage in Luke, which does speak of wrath (Luke 21:23), does not use the phrase *“coming wrath”* that Bell attributes in this context to Jesus. This phrase is, in fact, spoken not by Jesus but by John the Baptist (Matthew 3:7; Luke 3:7) and so it cannot be explained away as a reference to the wrath of the Romans in AD 70 since John clearly applies it to the coming Messiah who will both baptise with fire and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11-12), meaning that He will bring both judgement and salvation. Secondly, Bell is selective in his use of Scripture. By dealing only with this passage in Matthew 26 he gives the impression that wrath is not attributed to God in Scripture, but he fails to engage with any of the passages, including those in Romans listed above and John 3:36 where wrath is described unambiguously, perhaps by Jesus Himself,¹⁰ as an attribute of God towards people.

Does God punish people?

Given his imbalanced view of God’s character, how does Bell account for the many biblical passages that speak about God’s judgement? He attempts to show that they always speak about restoration rather than punishment. He lists numerous Old Testament prophetic utterances about God’s planned restoration of Israel as if they mean that God’s judgements are always restorative (pp.85-87). This does no justice to the part these passages play within the story of God’s covenant relationship with Israel. God made promises to Judah as she faced the exile to Babylon that he would remember his covenant promises to his people and restore them. This was part of the outworking of His plan of redemption and should not be made the basis for a belief that God never judges anyone or any nation irreversibly. Bell wrongly concludes from these promises that, *“Failure, we see again and again, isn’t final, judgment has a point, and consequences are for correction”* (p.88). We even learn from *Love Wins* that Ezekiel 16 teaches that Sodom and Gomorrah have a future prospect of restoration (p.84). Once again Bell bases a radical claim on one verse (Ezekiel 16:53) wrested from its context! He claims that, *“Ezekiel says that where there was destruction there will be restoration”* (p.84), but he is simply wrong. In reality, the figurative language in Ezekiel 16 is based around a proverb (vv.44ff.) and God is speaking about how he will shame Jerusalem by showing that its people are even more sinful and guilty than the people

¹⁰ I say “perhaps” because there is a difference of opinion over where the quotation of Jesus’ words to Nicodemus ends in John 3, as noted in the footnotes of modern English translations.

of Sodom. Firstly, this poetic passage cannot be taken literally to imply an actual restoration of Sodom and, secondly, it is actually a passage about the seriousness of sin and the reality of God's judgement. In the same discussion, Bell completely misrepresents Matthew 10:15, where Jesus says "*it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgement than for that town*", to mean that there is hope for the cities (p.84), when in actual fact it is speaking about degrees of punishment (Jesus' words were probably inspired by Ezekiel 16). Another passage about restorative judgement that Bell refers to is 1 Timothy 1:20, which speaks about Hymenaeus being handed over to Satan by Paul. Bell writes that:

The point of this turning loose, this letting go, this punishment, is to allow them to live with the full consequences of their choices, confident that the misery they find themselves in will have a way of getting their attention. (p.90)

We should notice the words that Bell uses as synonyms – he implies that punishment is nothing more than "letting go", rather than an active process. The overall impression that he is trying to create is that God never finally judges anyone, and that this means that Hell cannot be final either. The case of Hymenaeus, however, does not say anything about Hell since it is about Paul's hope for his restoration in this life, not after death! He has handed him over so that he can be taught not to blaspheme but Hymenaeus is very much alive since he crops up again in 2 Timothy 2:17 although, sadly, he has not repented and is now spreading false teaching. As regards the difference between 'letting go' and 'judgement' we may turn to Romans 1 and 2. In Romans 1 we learn that God now 'lets mankind go' to follow their own desires, but in chapter 2 we discover that in the future he will bring them to account in a decisive judgement based on this life. Importantly, both the 'letting go' now and the future judgement are expressions of His personal wrath against our sin, a concept that Bell appears to have no time for anyway. Sadly he does not consider Romans 1 and 2 in *Love Wins*.

How great is God?

This distorted view of God's character and neglect of the biblical concept of God's wrath is important as it explains why Bell proceeds to open up the possibility of Universalism. In discussing the statement in 1 Timothy 2:4 that God "*wants all men to be saved*", Bell asks:

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. (pp.97-8)

Leaving aside the significant differences among theologians over how this verse relates to God's saving purposes,¹¹ we must take issue with Bell's claim that God's greatness would somehow be less if not all people are actually saved in the end. What is his basis for making this judgement? If, thinking entirely hypothetically, God were to ensure universal salvation in a way that compromised his holiness and righteousness then he would not be great at all. God's greatness is not simply defined by his mercy, love and grace, wonderful as those are, or even by his power and glory, might and majesty, but also by his holiness, faithfulness and righteousness. The gospel must explain how a holy and loving God could pardon sinful human beings without compromising his holiness, but even in making this statement we must be careful. God's love and holiness are never understood in Scripture as conflicting attributes or 'sides of a coin' but as perfectly harmonised aspects of His character. He is always both perfectly loving and perfectly true.

If love wins, what loses?

The book's title says that love wins and within the book Bell writes, "*God says yes, we can have what we want, because love wins*" (p.119). The problem with this statement is that it implies that love is involved in a conflict or competition, but Bell does not specify what it is that love is victorious over. Is it victorious over a conflicting attribute of God? Does His love win out over His justice? Hardly, since Bell says nothing about His justice. Is it victorious over our resistant wills? This cannot be his meaning, since he is adamant that God's love can be resisted and is not coercive. Or does it simply win over unspecified powers that are set against God? This lack of clarity is typical of Bell's style of writing. Biblically speaking, both love and justice must win, for God must

¹¹ Calvinists claim that "*all men*" means 'all kinds of people', while others argue that it means all people without exception.

win and He is both love and light, full of grace and truth. Not only does Bell fail to explain what love wins over but he also fails to adequately define this 'love' that is victorious. The closest he comes to a definition is the statement that:

History is about the kind of love a parent has for a child, the kind of love that pursues, searches, creates, connects, and bonds. The kind of love that moves toward, embraces, and always works to be reconciled with, regardless of the cost. (p.99)

This description is appealing and it is reminiscent of much of what Scripture says about the love of God, but it falls short of the full biblical picture. Where is the sense of love rejoicing with the truth (1 Corinthians 13:6)? True love, as described in Scripture, is indeed relentless and sacrificial, but it is also discerning and honest. It is not blind. If Bell had taken time to consider a biblical definition of 'love' he would soon have been drawn back to a healthy harmony of grace and truth, for the two are never far removed in Scripture. So, even the title of *Love Wins* is confusing and unclear. It leaves us wondering what love is, what fight it wins and what loses in that fight.

Bell on Heaven and Hell

Is Heaven now or then?

As we have already said, much of what Bell writes about Heaven as the “new world” free from evil and the perpetrators of evil (p.113) is a helpful corrective to popular misconceptions. Bell does, however, play down the radical difference that Scripture anticipates between the new world and the present world, the present age and the age to come.¹² Bell writes that:

heaven is both the peace, stillness, serenity, and calm that come from having everything in its right place – that state in which nothing is required, needed or missing – and the endless joy that comes from participating in the ongoing creation of the world. (p.48)

Although this language helps us towards a picture of how eternal existence with God could be exciting and constantly fresh, it implies that Heaven is a continuation of God’s action of creation in this world rather than a re-created, restored world. Admittedly the key passages of Scripture (Revelation 21 and Isaiah 65) that describe the ‘new world’ are poetic, but they leave no doubt that the curse that came upon the world as a result of human sin (Genesis 3) will be removed and the biblical vision of this “new world” comes after the climactic events that the Old Testament prophets called the ‘Day of the Lord’ and that the New Testament connects with the personal return of Christ. That day will come suddenly, “like a thief in the night” and will mean wrath and destruction for some but salvation for those who trust in Christ (see 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11). It will involve the melting down of the so that they can be re-formed into a new world (2 Peter 3:10-13). Bell says nothing about the personal return of Christ in glory or any such final judgement, suggesting that he does not think of the future in these terms.

Are Heaven and Hell fixed destinies?

The absence of a final decisive judgement means that there is no fixed divide between Heaven and Hell, which are closely intertwined. This concept is clear in the way he handles two passages from the Gospel of Luke. In writing about the parable of the ‘Lost Son’ in Luke 15, Bell claims from the way the father responds to the son who returns home that, “*What the gospel does is confront our version of our story with God’s version of our story. It is a brutally honest, exuberantly liberating story, and it is good news*” (pp.171-2). On the basis of this reading he defines Hell as “*our refusal to trust God’s retelling of our story*” (p.170). Since the two sons are physically present with the Father at the end of the story but only one is able to enjoy the party while the other is stuck in his own indignation, Bell claims that, “*In this story, heaven and hell are within each other, intertwined, interwoven, bumping up against each other*” (p.170). Although this understanding of the gospel as a retelling of our story is appealing and has much to commend it, Bell is fundamentally mistaken in reading this parable as a description of Heaven and Hell. The story was told by Jesus in the context of people who were self-righteous and did not recognise their need of God’s grace (represented by the older son). Through it Jesus challenges such people to realise that they are missing out on the joy of joining in God’s celebration because they are caught in their pride in themselves and their judgement of those repentant sinners who Jesus embraced (represented by the younger son). In other words, rather than being about Heaven and Hell this is a parable about the love of God, the universal need for repentance and the danger of missing out on the former because of neglecting the latter. It is a parable about the here and now that challenges us to repent and join in God’s celebration.

The other passage in Luke is the story of the rich man and Lazarus in chapter 16. This passage is, of course, a favourite one in any discussion of the Christian view of the afterlife. Bell interprets it to describe the destiny of people who reject God’s love in this life, although he stops short of saying for certain that the passage says anything about the next life. He writes:

¹² In theological terms he appears to argue for an overly realised eschatology.

What we see in Jesus's story about the rich man and Lazarus is an affirmation that 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)

One may wonder how Bell can find “different kinds of hells” in this story that seems to describe only one place of suffering. His basis for the claim appears to be his interpretation of the reason why the rich man is in ‘hell’. He suggests that it is because he continues to expect Lazarus to serve him – he is trapped in his own hell because of his self-centred thinking. This, rather than a plea for relief from his agony, is supposedly the reason why he asks for Lazarus to be sent with water for his tongue (verse 24, see p.75). Bell is trying to say that the rich man’s ‘hell’ is of his own making and that he only continues to be there so long as he remains proud enough to expect to be served. Bell writes, “It’s no wonder Abraham says there’s a chasm that can’t be crossed. The chasm is the rich man’s heart!” (p.75) This is in direct contradiction to what the passage says about the chasm. Abraham says it “has been fixed” and that no one can cross it in either direction if they “want to” (verse 26). How can the chasm be of the rich man’s making yet he cannot cross if he wants to? It is remarkable that Bell can turn a chasm that cannot be crossed by people who want to into one that is only there so long as people want it to be! Clearly this story is telling us something quite different – that there are two destinies after death and that which we end up in depends on how we live during this life, with no possibility of a second chance. We must acknowledge also that the story does not speak about the ultimate destiny but the condition of departed people as they await the future resurrection.¹³ This story speaks of *Hades* (the place of the dead) as opposed to *Gehenna*, although the NIV confuses matters by translating *Hades*, which it usually leaves untranslated, as “hell” in verse 23. Bell makes no distinction between the two in his treatment of the passage. If we follow the New Testament through to its end we discover that *Hades* is destroyed at the final judgement by being thrown along with death into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:14), which is generally accepted to be synonymous with *Gehenna*. It appears that Bell has twisted the passage beyond recognition in an attempt to make it fit his own thesis. Bell does continue to explain what he means by “different kinds of hells”, saying, “There are individual hells, and communal, society-wide hells, and Jesus teaches us to take both seriously. There is hell now, and there is hell later, and Jesus teaches us to take both seriously” (p.79). Bell may be correct in claiming that Jesus wants us to take seriously our impact on the world now as well as our future destiny, but Jesus never uses the Greek word *Gehenna* in this elastic way, and to do so seriously risks making the word meaningless. Hell, for Jesus, is somewhere people end up after death because of how they have lived in this life. Once again we note that Bell is blurring the line between this life and the age to come.

This way of thinking about the proximity of Heaven and Hell allows Bell to envisage people passing from Hell to Heaven but, more remarkably, he also appears to imply that people may actually pass the other way, out of Heaven into Hell. In writing about the gates of the New Jerusalem which will never be shut (Revelation 21:25) he says that, “gates are for keeping people in and keeping people out. If the gates are never shut then people are free to come and go” (p.115). Although Bell’s concern here is undoubtedly primarily to suggest the possibility of people entering Heaven his mention of ‘going’ as well as ‘coming’ implies that movement can happen in the other direction. What we are left with is a situation of flux where people, both in this life and after it, can freely choose to follow God or to reject Him. There is no sense of finality or of certainty, since the gates will never shut. There are numerous problems with this use of Revelation 21:25. Firstly, Bell completely ignores the fact that this scene comes only after the climactic judgement of Revelation 20 in which sin is finally dealt with. The city with wide open gates is only revealed after the dead whose names are not in the book of life have been thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15). Since Revelation 21 says nothing at all about the lake of fire, and certainly does not imply that anyone can escape from it, we are straying way beyond the text in suggesting that people can come in and out of Heaven to and from Hell! Secondly, Bell misses the point of this statement in the context of Revelation 21. Verse 25 clearly says that the gates will never be closed because “there will be no night there”. The reference is to the fact that ancient walled cities closed their gates

¹³ In theological parlance this is called the ‘intermediate state’.

at night time for security reasons. This city does not need such security because there will be no night (the glory of God and the Lamb give it light according to verse 23) and because there is no threat to its security since any threats have been eliminated in the victory of Christ that Revelation describes. This discussion highlights the danger, which Bell himself acknowledges in this context, of speculating about the meanings of details in highly figurative passages such as this. Bell turns Revelation 21 into an allegory, in which every detail corresponds to a specific truth, whereas it is, in fact, a vivid image describing God's perfect future. Thirdly, Bell's interpretation fails when we understand what the city actually symbolises. Revelation 21 says that the whole city is an image of the redeemed people of God (verses 2, 9-10). If the city is a people, who are the people who enter it? The imagery breaks down when forced in this way.

What is Hell, then?

We have already encountered one definition of Hell in Bell's comments on Luke 15, but what else does he say about Hell? His main concern, as we have already seen in our comments about his motivation in writing, is to challenge the traditional view of Hell as a place of unending punishment by God for sin. In the book's *Preface* he says that this view is "*misguided and toxic*" (p.viii). Laying out this view in the book's *Preface* may seem premature if Bell's intention were to consider seriously the alternative perspectives on Hell in the Christian tradition, but he clearly has no intention of doing so. There are three predominant ways in which Christians have understood Hell:¹⁴

- *That it is a place of eternal punishment for sin* – this is what Bell calls the "*traditional*" view and has been the predominant view among evangelicals. It includes two variations: the 'literal' view, which understands biblical references to fire and weeping and gnashing of teeth as descriptions of the true physical nature of Hell, and the 'metaphorical' view, which sees these details as images of spiritual and emotional realities.
- *That the souls of the unrepentant are ultimately annihilated* – this is the 'Annihilationist' view and depends on an understanding of human beings as possessing only 'conditional immortality' (that is that the human soul only exists for as long as God sustains its life rather than possessing immortality as an inherent trait). It understands the biblical references to "*eternal destruction*" to mean destruction with no possibility of return and considers the lake of fire to be an image of annihilation after final judgement. This view has currency with a significant minority of evangelicals.¹⁵ Bell does not engage with it as a possibility in *Love Wins*, except for a reference to the idea that those who continue to reject God may be progressively dehumanised until they are no longer truly human (p.105). This concept is a variation on the idea of Annihilationism although, significantly, it sees the final extinguishing of the human soul as a passive consequence of continued rejection of God rather than a result of active judgement by God.
- *That Hell refers to a place where the souls of dead people spend a period of time before being admitted to Heaven* – this is the 'purgatorial' view. Like Annihilationism, this view can be thought of either as a consequence of God's action in judgement or of the individual's continued rejection of God after death. The former is seen in the traditional Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory, which understands it as a part of Hell where people who are not deserving of eternal judgement but not ready for Heaven are temporarily subject to active purifying judgement from God until they are ready to be admitted to

¹⁴ For a discussion of these views the reader is referred to *Four Views on Hell* edited by William Crockett (Zondervan, 1996), which outlines each view with responses by the other contributors.

¹⁵ The Evangelical Alliance UK recognises that evangelicals are divided between the view of Hell as eternal conscious punishment, which they call the "*classic mainstream evangelical position*" and the Annihilationist view that the immortality of the human soul is conditional and that those who are unrepentant cease to exist after the final judgement, which they recognise as "*a significant minority evangelical view*". The Alliance's report on this has issue has been published as *The Nature of Hell* (Paternoster, 2000) and the book's conclusions and recommendations are available as a free download from the Alliance's website, www.eauk.org.

Heaven. The alternative is that Hell is purgatory in the sense that people continue to choose isolation from God until they finally come to their senses and accept him.¹⁶

Although Bell falls short of explicitly endorsing the purgatorial view, the way he writes about two New Testament passages reveals that this is the direction in which he is pointing. The first is Paul's discussion of judgement in 1 Corinthians 3. Bell strips this passage out of its context by implying that Paul is writing about the judgement of all people and the purification of our attitudes (pp.49-50) when, in fact, he is specifically talking about how people build in the church on the foundation that he has laid, which is Christ (verses 9-11). Since this passage says that even those whose work is burnt up will be saved, even if only "*escaping through the flames*" (verse 15), reading it as a comment about God's judgement of all people turns it into a useful text for the 'Universalist', but realising that Paul is actually speaking about the purification of the church means that we cannot read this passage as being about how someone is saved. Bell writes of the flames described in 1 Corinthians 3 as "*Flames in heaven*" (p.50) and claims that they are involved in removing our "*sins and habits and bigotry and pride and petty jealousies*" (p.50). We might note that he has placed purgatory in Heaven. Bell seems to be committed to the need for a purgatorial dimension to Heaven because "*Jesus makes no promise that in the blink of an eye we will suddenly become totally different people who have vastly different tastes, attitudes, and perspectives*" (p.50). The process of purification takes time in this life and he believes that its completion will also take time in the next life:

Much of the speculation about heaven – and, more important, the confusion – comes from the idea that in the blink of an eye we will automatically become totally different people who 'know' everything. But our heart, our character, our desires, our longings – those things take time. (p.51)

Although Bell is correct in saying that Jesus did not speak of an instantaneous transformation, Bell ignores two other New Testament passages that explicitly speak about transformation. 1 John 3:2 says, "*we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is*". John does not leave any room for the kind of purgatorial process Bell envisages and seems to describe exactly the kind of instant transformation that Bell dies. The instant nature of the transformation is even clearer in Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52, where he says that "*we will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye*". Once again Bell blurs the line between this life and the age to come since he connects the time that it takes to change us with the process of discipleship, yet then returns to speaking about "*The flames of heaven*" which "*lead us to the surprise of heaven*" (p.51). Bell appears to see Heaven and Hell as realities that begin now and continue beyond death and that are never far removed from one another.

Following his discussion of 1 Corinthians 3, Bell turns to the account of the 'sheep and goats' in Matthew 25 (p.51-2). He says that the sheep say "*When did we ever see you?*" (p.52), implying that they are people who had no relationship with Jesus at all. In fact they don't say this. Their surprise is not that Jesus was unknown to them but that they hadn't realised the many ways in which they had served him unawares, and Bell is correct to suggest that their words mean something akin to "*What did we ever do to deserve it?*" (p.52). The passage says that these people acted for the sake of Jesus' "*brothers*" (verse 40) and in doing so they were acting for him without knowing it. It is not that they did not know Jesus – in fact, if anything, it is because they blessed those who belonged to him. In any case, the account does not say how people become sheep or goats (it is on the basis of what they are that they are separated), but it does show that there will be a future day of judgement when they are separated from one another based on their nature, a concept that does not fit with 'Universalism'. In its context within Matthew the real scandal of this account has to do with the fact that the

¹⁶ This view is often attributed to C.S. Lewis on the basis of his 1946 book *The Great Divorce*, which is acknowledged by Bell on his *Further Reading* page, although that book is written as a dream vision (so that it is difficult to say conclusively whether it represents Lewis's fully thought through position) and the vision also includes a concept of a coming morning when the ultimate destiny of souls will be fixed possibly including annihilation for those who have persistently rejected God, so that Lewis cannot truly be claimed as a supporter of either Universalism or a purely purgatorial view of Hell. Where Lewis does appear to concur definitely with Bell is in the view that Hell can be thought of as purely self-inflicted rather than as a punishment by God.

nations are gathered (verse 32) and that the decision as to who ends up in the kingdom is based not on membership in national Israel, or even how people had treated the Jews, but on the basis of how people had responded to the brothers of Christ irrespective of their national background. It is a parable of inclusivity, in that both Jew and Gentile can be in the Kingdom, but not of universality, since some are 'in' and others are 'out'. Bell returns to this passage later in *Love Wins*. He claims that the judgement on the goats is *"a period of pruning' or 'a time of trimming,' or an intense experience of correction"* (p.91), denying that it is a final, decisive judgement. He bases this claim on the use of the Greek word *kalazo* in verse 46 (NIV *"punishment"*). He chooses to interpret the word in this way despite the fact that in the context verse 41 (which Bell does not mention) qualifies it as the *"eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels"*. Does Bell believe that the devil and demons can be saved after a period of *"correction"*? Furthermore, this is one of a number of parables in Matthew 25, all of which are set in the context of the glorious appearing of the Son of Man when he will separate his people from the world (Matthew 24:30-31) on a future unknown date (Matthew 24:36). Again we see Bell wrenching verses from their context to support a view he wants to promote – the idea of purgatorial suffering after death before admission to God's kingdom.

Although Bell falls short of a clear statement about what Hell is like, his attack on the *"traditional"* view is so vitriolic that he clearly intends to leave no possibility of his readers accepting it. Consider this emotionally charged description and the force of his rhetorical questions:

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. [...] Does God become somebody totally different the moment you die? (pp.173-4)

In considering Annihilationism and the purgatorial view, Bell only mentions the versions that do not include the concept of active judgement by God, which is unsurprising given what we have already discovered about his view of God's judgement. Bell does not believe that God will judge anyone:

God has no desire to inflict pain or agony on anyone. God extends an invitation to us, and we are free to do with it as we please. Saying yes will take us in one direction; saying no will take us in another. God is love, and to refuse this love moves us away from it, in the other direction, and that will, by very definition, be an increasingly unloving, hellish reality. We do ourselves great harm when we confuse the very essence of God, which is love, with the very real consequences of rejecting and resisting that love, which creates what we call hell. (p.177)

This view is clearly only compatible with the 'dehumanisation' view and the second understanding of the 'purgatorial' view. Bell spends very little space (just over half a page) describing the 'dehumanisation' option and it seems as if he is pushing the reader inevitably towards the conclusion of a 'purgatorial' view of Hell.

Hell of our own making for as long as we want?

So, then, Bell does not deny the possibility of Hell, but he is firmly committed to two principles that restrict the possible range of ways in which Hell can be envisaged. Firstly, he believes that Hell cannot be inflicted by God because he believes this to be incompatible with God's love. The possibility of Hell is, in fact, a necessary consequence of the way he thinks about God's 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"* (p.113). Elsewhere he makes the same point: *"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. We are that free"* (p.72). As we have already seen, Bell understands biblical passages about God's judgement to refer to restoration and he has no room for the concept of God's wrath and so it is inevitable that Hell must be a place of our own making rather than a place created by God. It is a useful word to *"describe the very real consequences we experience when we reject the good and true and beautiful life that God has for us"* (p.93). Any talk of 'punishment' in Hell is only a way of describing the self-inflicted misery that comes from rejecting God: *"To reject God's grace, to turn from God's love, to resist God's telling, will lead to misery. It is a form of punishment, all on its own"* (p.176). This concept of Hell is directly contradictory to the biblical evidence, however, which presents God as the one who judges (Romans 2:1-4)

and the final destiny of those who reject God being a lake of fire that was prepared by God (Revelation 20:11-15).

Bell's second conviction about Hell is that it must not be fixed, but that it must always be possible for people to leave Hell if they embrace God's love (unless the 'dehumanisation' theory is correct and they simply cease to exist). This theory depends on the belief that Hell is not a place where people are subject to God's judgement but free to live in sin and independence from God. The following lengthy quotation, which echoes some of the sentiments of the quotations above, emphasises this and says something about the nature of Hell in Bell's conception:

'Do we get what we want?' And the answer to that is a resounding, affirming, sure, and positive yes. Yes, we get what we want. God is that loving.

If we want isolation, despair, and the right to be our own god, God graciously grants us that option. If we insist on using our God-given power and strength to make the world in our own image, God allows us that freedom; we have the kind of license to that. If we want nothing to do with light, hope, love, grace, and peace, God respects that desire on our part, and we are given a life free from any of those realities. The more we want nothing to do with all God is, the more distance and space are created. If we want nothing to do with love, we are given a reality free from love. (pp.116-7)

This description would probably be quite accurate were it only describing the nature of sin and its effects in this life, but Bell implies that people could continue like this after death, perhaps eternally. This is clear in the following quotation, which draws together his ideas of sin as our own version of our story (from his discussion of Luke 15) and of the gates of Heaven being permanently open (from his discussion of Revelation 21):

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? Will everyone eventually be reconciled to God or will there be those who cling to their version of their story, insisting on their right to be their own little god ruling their own little miserable kingdom? (p.115)

So Bell is allowing for the possibility that sin can continue forever and that God will tolerate the continued situation of people in defiance of him. Clearly his belief in a perfect new creation does not depend upon a final solution to the problem of sin. This picture of people continuing eternally in their rejection of God, worshipping themselves as their own God, is a denial of the biblical teaching that one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to God's glory (Philippians 2:10). Although that verse raises the question, to which we will turn in due course, of whether or not all those who bow the knee will be saved, it does not leave any room for the idea of the eternal existence of sinful human beings who have set themselves up as rival gods to the one true God. There is no room for such a possibility in the grand vision of Revelation, in which the kingdom of the world becomes the kingdom of Christ (Revelation 11:15) or in Paul's confident hope that all authority will be made subject to Christ (1 Corinthians 15:25-28).

Is Hell just a rubbish dump?

So, then, Bell does allow for the theoretical possibility of Hell as an endless place of suffering (or misery), although he seems not to be able to believe that anyone will actually end up there eternally. His view of Hell can be summarised by saying that it is a place of our own creating that is the result of our rejection of God and where we endure our self-inflicted misery until we come to our senses and embrace God's love. How, then, does Bell deal with the numerous passages in the Gospels where Jesus refers to Hell? At this point we must consider the Greek word that is usually translated 'Hell' in these passages, *Gehenna*. This word appears twelve times in the New Testament – once in James 3:6 and the other eleven times on the lips of Jesus in the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). Bell recognises that this word derives from the name of the "Valley of Hinnom" (p.67), which was close to Jerusalem and was probably the site of a dump for the city and suggests that what Jesus meant by talking about people ending up in 'Hell' would be akin to saying that they end up in the garbage (p.68). This appeal to the semantic roots of the word fails to do justice to either the

contemporary usage of the word at the time of Christ or, more importantly for this study, to the way in which Jesus himself uses it. The Valley of Ben Hinnom was associated with child sacrifice and occult practices in Old Testament times (2 Kings 23:10; 2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:6; Jeremiah 7:31-32, 35) and may well have been used at a later stage as a dump, but these associations led by the time of Christ to the word *Gehenna*, which is derived from the name but not identical to it, being a term for a place of spiritual judgement from God. It is a cardinal error in biblical exegesis to base the meaning of a word on its historical roots rather than on its meaning at the time of writing (consider the confusion that may arise today from someone referring to a 'gay pork' when they mean a 'happy pig').¹⁷ Jewish usage of *Gehenna* in later rabbinical writings varies from concepts of temporary purgatorial suffering to eternal punishment, and it seems likely that there was the same range of meaning at the time when Jesus lived and taught. To understand what Jesus meant in using the word, then, we must consider the way in which he used it. This, rather than the word's etymology or the interpretations put on it by other Jewish thinkers, must be the deciding factor. Jesus speaks of the fire of *Gehenna* as somewhere that people can be thrown or condemned to (Matthew 22:33; Luke 12:5) as an alternative to entering the life of God's Kingdom (Matthew 18:9; Mark 9:43, 45, 47) and where the soul can be 'destroyed' (Matthew 10:28) as a result of failing to deal with the root of sin (Matthew 5:22, 29-30). These references clearly show that Jesus had more in mind than simply the local dump, unless we think that God's Kingdom, which Jesus contrasts with *Gehenna*, meant nothing more than a contemporary physical reality. Jesus was using a word derived from the name of the valley where the dump was located to refer to a spiritual reality.

Despite playing down the significance of the word *Gehenna*, Bell does acknowledge that 'Hell' is a strong word and claims that:

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 teaching about hell – a volatile mixture of images, pictures, and metaphors that describe the very real experience and consequences of rejecting our God-given goodness and humanity. Something we are all free to do, anytime, anywhere, with anyone. (pp.72-3)

Undoubtedly Jesus does speak about Hell using rich imagery, but is it true to suggest that he portrays it as a place solely of our own choice? This is certainly not the case in any of the parables of Jesus that make reference indirectly to Hell since in each of them it is someone else (usually a master) who consigns the people who are judged to a place of "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 13:41-42, 49-50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30), which is also described variously as a place of "darkness" (Matthew 22:13), a "fiery furnace" (Matthew 13:42, 49), and "eternal punishment" (Matthew 25:46). On the one occasion when Jesus uses this same phrase outside the context of a parable it is to describe the place where faithless Jews would end up, and it is again clear that they will be thrown into it against their volition (Matthew 8:12). This usage shows that he did not consider this place to be simply an imaginary image within a story but a reality, although the degree to which the detail of fire can be thought of literally is debatable, especially given the fact that is often highlighted that darkness and fire would appear to be incompatible. Likewise, in Matthew 10:28 it is clearly God who can destroy the soul in *Gehenna*. In every one of these instances, then, Hell is a judgement inflicted by God.

Of course there are other New Testament passages that describe Hell without using the word *Gehenna* or the word picture "weeping and gnashing of teeth", although because of constraints of time and space we cannot examine them in detail. Philippians 3:19 speaks of "destruction" (Greek *apōleia* meaning destruction or loss), which is either understood to mean perpetual loss (in the traditional view) or annihilation (in the Annihilationist view) as the destiny of enemies of the cross of Christ. In 2 Thessalonians 2:3, *apōleia* is said to be the destiny of "the man of lawlessness". 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9 speaks of people who do not know God and do not obey the gospel being "punished with everlasting destruction [Greek *olethros*, meaning 'ruin']" and "shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power". This can only mean active punishment by God and it is said to happen on the decisive day when Christ returns to be glorified in his own

¹⁷ For more on this theme Chapter 1 of D.A. Carson's *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd edition (Baker Books, 1996) is recommended.

people (verse 10). He will be revealed “in blazing fire” on that day (verse 7). Hebrews 10:39 speaks of people being “destroyed” (Greek *apōleia* again) and the context shows that this is through “judgement and [...] raging fire that will consume the enemies of God” (verse 27). 2 Peter 2:17 and Jude 13 speak of “blackest darkness” being reserved for false teachers. Revelation speaks of the “second death” that cannot hurt those who overcome (2:11) and has no power over those who are raised in the first resurrection to reign with Christ (20:6). The “second death” is later defined as “the lake of fire” (20:14) and the “fiery lake of burning sulphur” (21:8), which is the destiny of those whose names are not in the book of life and who practice the sins listed in 21:8. The devil, the beast and the false prophet will be “tormented” there “day and night for ever and ever” (19:20; 20:10). Those who worship the beast will be “tormented with burning sulphur” and the resulting smoke “rises for ever and ever” (14:10-11). None of these passages makes easy reading but it should be noted that the dominant images of Hell within them are fire and smoke and that it clearly involves suffering. Each passage can be understood in either traditional (unending conscious punishment) or Annihilationist terms, with some words favouring one or the other, but none of these passages would appear to fit with the idea of purgatorial suffering. In every case the context leaves no doubt that the suffering is the result of active punishment from God and not simply a consequence of his abandoning people to their own choice.

Does ‘eternal’ mean ‘forever’?

Another major strand to Bell’s arguments against the ‘traditional’ view of Heaven Hell relates to the meaning of another Greek word *aiōn*,¹⁸ which is commonly translated ‘eternal’ in English versions of the Bible, for example in the “eternal punishment” of Matthew 25:46 and in John’s numerous references to “eternal life” (e.g. John 3:16). It is also translated “everlasting” in the “everlasting destruction” of 2 Thessalonians 1:9 and “for ever” in Revelation 14:11 and 20:10.¹⁹ If the biblical references to eternal punishment (e.g. Matthew 18:8, “eternal fire”) are taken literally, then Hell must be a permanent verdict (either eternal conscious punishment or annihilation) and there can be no possibility of a decision after the final judgement to accept God and enter life. If Bell is correct in believing that Hell does not necessarily last forever then an alternative translation of *aiōn* must be possible. On page 31, Bell correctly shows that *aiōn* literally means not “eternal” but “of the age”. Bell claims that an *aiōn* “refers to a period of time with a beginning and an end” (p.32) and he is perfectly correct that this is the standard meaning of the word in Greek usage (our English word ‘aeon’, which can have this meaning, is in fact derived ultimately from *aiōn*). This allows Bell to claim that:

heaven is not forever in the way that we think of forever, as a uniform measurement of time, like days and years, marching endlessly into the future. That’s not a category or concept we find in the Bible. This is why a lot of translators choose to translate aion as ‘eternal.’ By this they don’t mean the literal passing of time; they mean transcending time, belonging to another realm altogether. (p.58)

What Bell does not demonstrate, however, is that the word *aiōn* **cannot** mean eternal. We may, in fact, question on what basis he claims that translators use an English word that always means ‘unending’ to translate a word that they do not believe can include that meaning. When Jesus speaks about the life ‘of the age’ (‘eternal life’ in most English versions of the Gospels) he is clearly speaking of the life of the age of God’s Kingdom, the age that is to come. In asking whether or not this life is eternal we must then ask whether or not that age to come is eternal. The Bible does describe it as an eternal Kingdom without end (Isaiah 9:7; Luke 1:33) and Jesus said unambiguously that whoever has the “eternal life” that he gives will “never perish” (John 10:28) so that the life he offers must indeed be eternal in the common meaning of the English word. The *aiōn* to come is, therefore, different from past *aiōns* in that it has a beginning but no end.

Bell does acknowledge that *aiōn* can have more than one meaning in Scripture. He writes that, “Another meaning of aion is a bit more complex and nuanced, because it refers to a particular intensity of experience that transcends time” (p.57). Again he claims that, “eternal life is less about a kind of time that starts when we

¹⁸ I shall follow Bell here in failing to distinguish the noun *aiōn* from the adjective *aiōnios* for ease of reading.

¹⁹ Although these two verses in Revelation use a specific phrase that contains *aiōn* twice and is hence translated “for ever and ever”.

die, and more about a quality and vitality of life lived now in connection to God" (p.59). If he said that eternal life is both a quality of life now **and** a life that will have no end we could not take issue with him since this is clearly what Jesus teaches when he defines eternal life as knowing God (John 17:3), but by making it a question of **either** unending duration **or** deeper quality of life Bell creates a false dichotomy that fails to do justice to the richness of Jesus' use of the word. Since the 'eternal life' that Jesus spoke of means sharing in God's life it must mean a life that has no end since God cannot die.²⁰ In any case, Bell's argument from the semantic range of *aiōn* falls down by his own admission. On page 31 he equates *aiōn* with the Hebrew word *olam* in the Old Testament and on page 92 he accepts that *olam* can mean something like our common meaning of 'eternal', at least when it refers to God as being God "*from everlasting to everlasting*" (Psalm 90:2). This amounts to an admission that *aiōn* can indeed mean everlasting, and this conclusion is backed up by its usage in the New Testament in contexts where it must include the meaning 'unending'. It is used to describe God (Romans 16:26) and elsewhere Paul says that God is worthy to receive "*honour and might for ever*" on the basis that he is "*immortal*" (1 Timothy 6:16). Surely he did not mean to say that the immortal God who will live forever deserves to be honoured and has power only for an age! Similarly Paul calls the resurrection body an "*eternal house*" (2 Corinthians 5:1) while in another passage he says it is imperishable and immortal (1 Corinthians 15:53). We must conclude, then, that Bell is wrong (indeed he contradicts himself) when he says elsewhere in categorical terms that "*aion [...] doesn't mean 'forever' as we think of forever*" (p.31). His error is not in recognising that *aiōn* has a range of meanings in the New Testament (any Greek lexicon of the New Testament will reveal that it can) but in his attempt to narrow the range of possible meanings in relation to the life Christ gives and the nature of Hell and Heaven. *Aiōn* does not only mean 'eternal' but 'eternal' is contained within its range of possible meanings as defined by New Testament usage. Whether or not it means 'eternal' in a given usage can only be determined by a careful study of the context and I maintain that the usage to refer to the life that Christ gives, the Kingdom over which he rules and the punishment of which he warns must include the sense of 'unending' when the context and the wider New Testament evidence are taken into consideration.

²⁰ Bell's argument (p.92) that *olam* is "*a versatile, pliable word*" is not disputed here, I am simply arguing that the meaning should be determined by the context and that in respect of 'eternal life' as Jesus spoke of it (accepting that *olam* and *aion* equate) that means that the meaning must include the idea of unending since God's life is unending. I do, however, take issue with what Bell says about the meaning of *olam* in Jonah. He says that Jonah was said to be in belly of the fish forever (*olam*) when, in fact, he was only there for three days and nights. Bell seems to be referring to Jonah 2:6, but this is part of a poetic prayer which is not intended to be read literally and does not say that Jonah understood *olam* to mean three days and nights but that at the time when Jonah was speaking it felt like he had been there for an age (anyone who has spent a period of days in darkness would undoubtedly agree with his sentiment). This is another example of Bell's careless use of Scripture.

Bell on the scope of salvation

Exclusivity, inclusivity or universal salvation?

The core accusation about Bell's view of salvation is that he advocates 'Universalism', which is one of three views of the scope of salvation that have been found within Christian thinking. The three positions are:

- **'Exclusivism'** – the belief that only those who have heard the proclaimed message of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection and have responded to it in faith will be saved. This view takes New Testament texts that speak of those who believe in Christ being saved and those who do not believe being condemned (e.g. John 3:18; 1 John 5:11-12) to refer to all people rather than simply those who have heard the gospel. Three distinct schools of thought can be identified within this Exclusivist camp, each of which represents a different view about what happens to people who have never heard the gospel prior to death:
 - **'Restrictivism'** ²¹ – the opportunity to respond in faith to the gospel is restricted to this life alone. Those who die without hearing the gospel cannot be saved. Historic proponents of Restrictivism have included Augustine of Hippo, John Calvin, Carl Henry and Jonathan Edwards. More recent proponents include R.C. Sproul and Ronald Nash.
 - **'Postmortem evangelisation'** – those who have not heard the gospel in this life will be given an opportunity to respond to it after death. Proponents of this view generally appeal to the mention in 1 Peter 3:18-4:6 of Jesus preaching through the Spirit to spirits in prison. Opponents point out that this passage is one of the most difficult to interpret in the whole New Testament and that it is unwise to base a theory so firmly on an unclear passage. Historic proponents of this view include Clement of Alexandria. More recent proponents include George Macdonald, Donald Bloesch and Gabriel Fackre.
 - **'Universal opportunity before death'** – God will give all people who would respond in faith to the gospel (or perhaps all people without exception) an opportunity to do so during this life whether by sending a human missionary to them or through more supernatural means (e.g. dreams, visions, angelic messengers). Proponents point to biblical examples such as Nebuchadnezzar's dreams (Daniel 2), the Ninevites in the time of Jonah, and the Ethiopian official in Acts 8. Historic proponents include Thomas Aquinas and Jacobus Arminius. More recent proponents include Norman Geisler and Robert Lightner. One variation of this view, known as the 'final option theory' that has been proposed by Roman Catholic theologians including John Henry Newman claims that Christ encounters all people at the moment of death providing them with an opportunity to repent and believe.
- **'Inclusivism'** – the belief that those who have not heard the gospel faithfully proclaimed may be saved if they respond in faith to whatever 'light' they have been given by God (whatever knowledge about Himself God has revealed to them). These people will realise after death that the light they had responded to came from God and that Christ was the ultimate object of their hopes and their faith. Inclusivists generally argue from the fact that Old Testament believers were saved despite obviously not having heard the name of Jesus or understood the details of his death and resurrection. They claim that Romans 2 raises the possibility of people being saved through general revelation without receiving special revelation from God.²² They also argue that the texts about the condemnation of those who do not believe in Jesus that Exclusivists claim in support of their position actually refer only to people who have heard the gospel and rejected it and cannot apply to those who have never heard. Historic proponents of Inclusivism have included Justin Martyr and John Wesley. More recent proponents include C.S. Lewis, Clark Pinnock, Wolfhart Pannenberg and John Sanders.

²¹ It should be noted that some authors, confusingly, use the term 'Exclusivism' to mean what we have called 'Restrictivism'.

²² 'General revelation' refers to what can be known about God by all people through nature, conscience and natural law. 'Special revelation' refers to verbal revelation especially the Scriptures and the person of Jesus Christ.

- **'Universalism'** – the belief that all people will eventually be saved through Christ (strictly this is 'Christian Universalism' since it retains belief in Jesus as the only Saviour). It is important to realise that Universalists may be either Exclusivist (if they hold to the 'Postmortem Evangelism' or 'Universal opportunity before death' views) or Inclusivist in their views about how God will save people but they cannot be Restrictivists. There is a range of opinion among Universalists about how God will achieve this universal salvation and what degree of knowledge and faith is required for a person to be saved. Universalists who believe that God will not save anyone against their will must argue either that there is a universal opportunity to respond to the gospel before or after death and that all respond in faith or that Hell is purgatorial in the sense that God allows people a lengthy time (as long as it takes) to respond to His grace. Historic Universalists include Origen and Friedrich Schleiermacher. More recent proponents include William Barclay and Jacques Ellul.

It should be noted that all three of these views maintain a belief, based on texts such as John 14:6 and Acts 4:12, that Christ is the unique revelation of God and the only Saviour, thus distinguishing them from 'Pluralism', which claims that all religions are equally true and that there are many ways to reach God. It is also worth noting that these various positions cut across other theological divides within Christianity including the distinction between Calvinism and Arminianism. A Calvinist, for example, will accept that only the elect will be saved and will hold to the distinctive view that God's saving grace is irresistible but they may hold to different views about how many people are elect and how and when God shows His grace to the elect. With the exception of Universalism, all of these views allow for the possibility of Hell as a final place of separation from God for those who are not saved, but they allow for either the traditional view or Annihilationism. It should also be noted that many Christians have held an agnostic view (concluding that we cannot be certain) on the fate of those who die without hearing the gospel on the basis that they find insufficient evidence in the Bible to reach a conclusive decision. These people generally hold to the belief that God wishes all people to be saved and that He will ensure that as many people as possible are saved. They maintain that the scriptural evidence focuses only on those who have received special revelation from God and that it is not concerned to answer our questions about those who have not. By definition if we are reading the Scriptures we have received God's special revelation and will be judged on the basis of our response to it. God will judge those who have not heard fairly and justly and although we can hope that many might be saved we cannot say definitively how many will be saved or on what basis. Finally, it should also be noted that none of these views precludes the idea or the necessity of Christian mission. Restrictivists alone will be motivated by a belief that if people do not hear the gospel they cannot be saved, but all of the other views can point to other motivations for mission including obedience to Christ's command and the greater benefits and blessings in this life for those who know Christ and have access to Scripture. A discussion of the relative merits of exclusivism and inclusivism in light of Scripture is beyond the scope of this review, but both have excellent pedigrees within evangelical thought.²³ In contrast, evangelicals have traditionally rejected the idea of Universalism on the basis of the many New Testament references to people who will be judged and condemned to Hell, although some have argued that it is a good thing to hope that all might be saved.

Is Bell a Universalist?

On page 9, where he asks what happens if the missionary gets a flat tyre and cannot come to tell someone about Jesus, Bell is clearly concerned to attack 'Restrictivism' but he does not mention the possibility of Inclusivism. Later in the book, Bell considers John 14:6, where Jesus says that "*I am the way the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me*". Bell's discussion of this verse shows conclusively that he is not a 'Pluralist', since he insists that it shows "*Jesus alone as the way to God*" (p.154) and explicitly rejects the claim that "*good people will get in, that there is only one mountain, but it has many paths*" (pp.154-5).

²³ Those who are interested in reading further are encouraged to read John Sanders (editor), *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?* (1995, IVP) which contains a useful overview of the various views and detailed presentations of Restrictivism, Inclusivism and Postmortem Evangelisation with responses to each presentation by the other writers.

Interestingly, Bell calls this false view “*inclusivity*”, while he uses the word “*exclusivity*” to describe the view that:

Jesus is the only way. Everybody who doesn't believe in him and follow him in the precise way defined by the group doing the defining isn't saved, redeemed, going to heaven, and so on. (p.154)

This view, which Bell also rejects, is what we have described as Restrictivism. Bell's decision to describe Pluralism as the alternative to it using the label ‘inclusivity’ without mentioning the possibility of Christian Inclusivism as described above would appear to be further evidence of his tendency to force the reader to choose between polar opposite views. This is another example of the practice we saw in his consideration of views about Hell of attacking the view that is most different from his own and not taking seriously a view that is less distant from it. In the context of Hell he did not seriously consider Annihilationism, which overcomes some of his objections to the ‘traditional’ view of Hell, and in the context of the scope of salvation he does not seriously consider Inclusivism, which solves some of his problems with the Exclusivist position. I do not intend to imply that the Annihilationist or Inclusivist positions are necessarily correct, but I am simply pointing out that Bell appears determined to drive people towards the views he favours by painting the views at the opposite extreme in the worst possible light using caricatures and emotive language and neglecting to mention that there are alternative views that sit between the two extremes. This is not an honest way to consider any topic and it is regrettable that Bell takes this approach. Having dismissed these two extremes, Bell presents his own position, which he calls “*exclusivity on the other side of inclusivity*” (p.155), as the moderate position. His description of this option is, however, somewhat confused. At one point he appears to conceive of it in terms similar to what we have called ‘Inclusivism’:

This kind insists that Jesus is the way, but holds tightly to the assumption that the all-embracing, saving love of this particular Jesus the Christ will of course include all sorts of unexpected people from across the cultural spectrum. (pp.154-5)

This would almost suffice as a description of the Inclusivist position, but Bell proceeds to describe the “*exclusivity on the other side of inclusivity*” view in terms that sound like Universalism:

What Jesus does is declare that he, and he alone, is saving everybody. And then he leaves the door way, way open. Creating all sorts of possibilities. He is as narrow as himself and as wide as the universe. He is as exclusive as himself and as inclusive as containing every single particle of creation. (p.155)

This statement reaches far beyond what Jesus actually says in John 14. He does not say that he is “*saving everybody*”, nor does he say anything about breadth or narrowness. Just as we saw in our consideration of his views on Hell, Bell stops short of endorsing one perspective unequivocally but he pushes the reader inevitably towards one conclusion, in this case ‘Universalism’.

Bell's main discussion of Universalism is in Chapter 4, *Does God Get What God Wants?* This title is derived from Bell's discussion of 1 Timothy 2:4 (already mentioned in our consideration of his view of God's character), which is located in the earlier part of the same chapter. Bell uses a series of questions to open up the possibility in the reader's mind that God may eventually save all people before promising to discuss “*some specific responses*” (p.103). As we consider the responses he mentions we must remember that Bell is firmly committed to the idea that people must choose to respond to God's love. This raises the obvious difficulty that many people die without ever doing so. How can this be reconciled with the hope that all people might be saved, which is, after all, God's stated desire? The responses to this conundrum that Bell considers, which he assures us have all been proposed by “*serious, orthodox followers of Jesus*” (p.109), are:

- The view that we can only choose to respond to God in this life (Restrictivism), with the variation among some that people who reject God become progressively dehumanised.
- The view that there is a single second chance after death (the ‘Postmortem evangelisation’ view as described above). On page 106 he appeals to Martin Luther as a supporter of this view (see our discussion of the nature of the book for the problems with this quotation).
- The view, which he considers to be a logical extension of one post-mortem opportunity to reconsider, that there are multiple repeated ‘second chances’ and that God gives us, “*As long as it takes*” (p.107).

Bell is at pains to emphasise that this view is found throughout church history from the early church in a “*long tradition of Christians*” (p.107). He names Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Eusebius as people within this tradition and says that Jerome, Basil and Augustine acknowledged it was the predominant view (pp.107-8). It should be noted that although all of these historic figures believed in some type of postmortem opportunity to repent, not all of them were Universalists, although Bell does not make this distinction clear.

This third view would appear to be most compatible with ‘Universalism’ and it is the only one that can allow for the purgatorial view of Hell that Bell favours, but does it find support in the Bible? Although we may agree with Martin Luther that God is capable of offering people an opportunity to repent after death, the only biblical passage that is regularly presented in support of this theory is 1 Peter 3:18-4:6, which is, as we have already said, one of the most notoriously difficult in the whole New Testament to interpret (reference to any commentary will confirm this). It is a basic principle of biblical interpretation that no doctrine should be founded on one unclear passage. Furthermore, there are very strong suggestions elsewhere in the New Testament that the final judgement will be based on the actions of individuals during this life alone. Hebrews 9:27 says that “*man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgement*”. In the description of the final judgement in Revelation 20:11-15 there is no suggestion that anyone will have a final chance to repent before being cast into the lake of fire. What is depicted is that those people who have died are gathered from the sea, from death and from Hades (the place of the dead) to face God’s judgement on the basis of the deeds they had committed during their life with the final decision to cast them into the lake of fire being made on the basis that they are not named in the book of life. In John 5:28-29 Jesus says “*a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.*” The idea of postmortem evangelisation is, therefore, purely speculative and we may say the same about the idea that God presents people with a universal opportunity before death. Although I would not be dogmatic in denying that either of these is possible I cannot defend either view from Scripture and, in my judgement, the balance of biblical evidence would appear to weigh against both views.

Bell suggests three reasons for considering Universalism. Firstly, he mentions several Bible passages that supposedly point towards it. On page 107 he mentions parts of three verses (Matthew 19:28, Acts 3:21 and Colossians 1:20) that appear to point in that direction, but he does not engage in any discussion of any of these verses or their context. In a later chapter Bell he returns to his speculation on Universalism and offers four scriptures in support (p.134). In each case, however, he fails to understand the verse correctly in context:

- Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 15:22 that “*as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive*”. Bell misses the fact that Paul is not saying all people will be made alive but all those who are ‘in Christ’, a characteristically Pauline term for those who have believed in Him (see Romans 8:1).
- Titus 2:11, which says that, “*the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men*”. Bell does not mention the two common understandings of this verse which are either that “*all men*” means all kinds of men or that God’s grace appear to all men but people are free to reject, since Paul does not say that all are saved.
- Romans 5:18, which speaks of “*life for all men*” through Christ’s righteous act. This phrase is interpreted either as meaning all kinds of people or on the basis that the wider context makes it clear that it is only those who are ‘in Christ’ who receive this life since the contrast is with those who are in Adam and thus receive condemnation. In fact, the immediately preceding verse shows that it is only “*those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace*” who will reign in life. In the wider context of Romans this can hardly mean all people.
- Jesus’ claim in John 12:32 that he will “*draw all men*” to himself. Bell writes that, “*He is sure, confident, and set on this. All people, to himself*” (p.151). Again this verse is often understood to mean all kinds of people or that all are drawn but some can resist that drawing.

All four of these verses, then, are compatible with Exclusivism or Inclusivism and none demands a Universalists interpretation. Bell also appeals to the Old Testament prophets for support of Universalism. He takes the prophecies about the inclusion of the Gentiles to mean that, “*God will be united and reconciled with all people*” (p.100), yet the prophets wrote simply that all nations would be included. There is an important distinction between saying that people from all nations will be saved and claiming that all people without exception will be saved, yet Bell blurs this. In the same discussion he also misuses Malachi 2:10 to support the idea of God as the father of all people (p.99), when the context clearly shows that this verse is about the nation of Israel and whether they have been faithful to their Father God. There is no suggestion that God is the father of all people, and Scripture is careful never to make that claim – the term ‘father’ is one that only God’s own people can use to speak of Him. In the same argument Bell uses Paul’s quotation of a Greek poet in Acts 17:28 to claim that “*Paul says*” we are all God’s offspring (failing to distinguish between Paul’s own words and the words he quotes as a starting point for a lengthier discussion) and Ephesians 3:15 to suggest the same when that verse is actually about God as the origin of fatherhood rather than God as the father of all people.

Secondly, he argues that God receives greater glory through universal salvation than the traditional concept of Hell:

the belief that untold masses of people suffering forever doesn’t bring God glory. Restoration brings God glory; eternal torment doesn’t. Reconciliation brings God glory; endless anguish doesn’t. Renewal and return cause God’s greatness to shine through the universe; never-ending punishment doesn’t. (p.108)

Bell offers no biblical basis for this belief which appears to reflect his own judgement of what he thinks should glorify God most. We may wonder why the Bible authors (or the Spirit who inspired them) did not seem to think that God’s glory was lessened by their depictions of people being judged and lost. Revelation, the book that speaks of people being cast into the ‘lake of fire’ (20:15) speaks of God as the one who deserves all glory because he is Creator (4:11), Redeemer (5:13) and Judge (19:1-2) without any sense of contradiction. It appears that God is equally glorified through all three actions.

Thirdly, in another echo of the book’s title, Bell expresses his confidence that God’s love is so great that it must ultimately be triumphant over human resistance:

an untold number of serious disciples of Jesus across hundreds of years have assumed, affirmed, and trusted that no one can resist God’s pursuit forever, because God’s love will eventually melt even the hardest of hearts [...] Which is stronger and more powerful, the hardness of the human heart or God’s unrelenting, infinite, expansive love? (p.108-9)

This way of speaking about God’s love comes very close to denying what Bell later goes on to say, that love must allow its object freedom to reject it (p.113). Some Christians do believe that God’s grace cannot be resisted,²⁴ but Bell does not. The above quotation reflects a perennial problem for Christian Universalists, which is how to reconcile the belief that love must include the freedom to reject it with the hope that all will one day be saved. A discussion of predestination and election is beyond the remit of this study but it is worth noting that the biblical idea of an elect people is difficult to reconcile with the idea that all will be saved, however we believe the membership of the elect is decided.²⁵ We might suggest, however, that ‘Universalism’ is not truly logically consistent with a belief in the kind of freedom that Bell believes in.²⁶ The only way to be a convinced Universalist is to believe that God is committed to saving everyone and that He will have His way with every person whether they choose to accept Him or not.

²⁴ ‘Irresistible grace’ or ‘efficacious grace’ is a key part of the theological system known as Calvinism.

²⁵ One possible way to reconcile this difficulty is the idea that election, whether of Israel or the Church, was never about salvation but about becoming God’s agent in the world – election to service rather than salvation. Bell does not discuss this idea and neither will I, but I mention it for the sake of completeness.

²⁶ Bell believes in ‘libertarian’ or ‘counterfactual’ freedom (that freedom must include the real possibility of an alternative choice) but ‘Universalism’ requires belief in either determinism or the concept of ‘compatibilist’ or ‘non-counterfactual’ freedom (that we have freedom to choose but that this does not require that we could have chosen otherwise).

This inability to reconcile the freedom to reject God's love with the hope that all will be saved would appear to be the only reason why Bell falls short of endorsing 'Universalism' unambiguously. He clearly finds it appealing as a story that is "*bigger, more loving, more expansive, more extraordinary, beautiful, and inspiring than any other story about the ultimate course history takes*" (p.111) and writes that:

Whatever objections a person might have to this story, and there are many, one has to admit that it is fitting, proper, and Christian to long for it... To shun, censor, or ostracize someone for holding this belief is to fail to extend grace to each other in a discussion that has had plenty of room for varied perspectives for hundreds of years now. (p.111)

Frustratingly, Bell doesn't identify what these many objections are. What he does say is that the questions of whether everyone will be saved or some will "*perish apart from God forever because of their choices*" 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*" (p.115). Although this open position may seem very non-dogmatic, Bell is happy to be dogmatic in his rejection of some views of Hell and the whole chapter within which he makes the statement reads as a fairly passionate proposal of the Universalist position. We can only say that Bell is at best inconsistent and at worst hypocritical on this point. He is not honestly asking for openness but building a case for a certain position. He is also ignoring his own advice about the dangers of speculation:

Hard and fast, definitive declarations then, about how God will or will not organize the new world must leave plenty of room for all kinds of those possibilities. This doesn't diminish God's justice or take less seriously the very real consequences of sin and rebellion, it simply acknowledges with humility the limits of our powers of speculation. (p.116)

This is a remarkable statement to make towards the end of a chapter in which he has engaged in extended speculation as well as criticism of alternative views in a spirit that does not demonstrate great humility. So, then, Bell is attracted to 'Universalism', but in the final analysis it is just one of a number of speculative suggestions about which we cannot be dogmatic. This conclusion would be acceptable if Bell engaged in a serious exegetical study of the verses he mentions and of the many other verses that could be listed as 'proof texts' against 'Universalism' including all those that speak of ungodly people ultimately being judged, condemned or punished.

Are we resigned to speculation?

Bell's reference to speculation raises the question as to whether we have really been left by God without any evidence that might point us towards a more certain conclusion. After all, speculation about a person's views is only necessary when they have not revealed them, but God has spoken to us. We have already considered some verses that Bell proposes in support of Universalism, but there are several other lines of biblical evidence that must be considered. One obvious problem for Bell's idea of multiple opportunities to be reconciled with God after death is the urgency and seriousness that the Scriptures appear to attach to the response we make to God here and now. Nowhere is this more evident than in the parables of Jesus. Bell restricts the application of these parables to our use of time in the present life, as the following quotation demonstrates:

These are strong, shocking images of judgment and separation in which people miss out on rewards and celebrations and opportunities. Jesus tells these stories to wake us up to the timeless truth that history moves forward, not backward or sideways. Time does not repeat itself. Neither does life. While we continually find grace waiting to pick us up off the ground after we have fallen, there are realities to our choices. While we may get other opportunities, we won't get the one right in front of us again. That specific moment will pass and we will not see it again. It comes, it's here, it goes, and then it's gone. Jesus reminds us in a number of ways that it is vitally important we take our choices here and now as seriously as we possibly can because they matter more than we can begin to imagine. (p.197)

So, according to Bell, these parables are intended to make us think about better choices. They are not intended to warn us that we must respond to God's offer of salvation before it is too late and there is no possibility of a further choice. Yet in each of the parables of Matthew 25 there is a sense of finality and these

parables are set in the context of Jesus' concern to warn his hearers that the day of His return (the coming of the Son of man) is unknown and therefore they must be ready (Matthew 24:36-44). There can be no doubt that Jesus is setting these parables in the context of the Old Testament idea of the day of the Lord which, as we have already seen earlier, He associates with a coming of the Son of Man "*on the clouds of the sky, with great power and great glory*" and the gathering together of God's elect (Matthew 24:30-31). In other words, Bell is simply wrong to suggest that the parables apply primarily to the everyday choices we make. They are all about the day when God separates his own people from the other people of the world, the urgency of ensuring that we are in that group and the horror of ending up outside it. In each parable some people end up inside and others outside – there is a clear separation of people that is incompatible with the idea of Universalism.

There are many other passages that Bell does not consider which create serious problems for the 'Universalist' position. Jesus said much about entering the Kingdom (e.g. Matthew 18:3) and receiving eternal life (John's "*I am*" sayings). Why urge people to enter the Kingdom now if there is no concern that they might one day end up outside it? Or consider his warnings in Matthew 7 at the end of the 'Sermon on the Mount'. What can the image of the narrow and wide gate in verses 13-14, or the warning that even some who did miracles in His name would be told to depart from him in verse 23, or the image of the wise and foolish builders in verses 24-27, mean if they are not intended to warn that the decisions made in this life have eternal consequences. Or what sense is there in the urgency with which Paul worked to see some saved (e.g. 1 Corinthians 9:19) if all would eventually be saved anyway? True he envisaged a day when all would acknowledge Jesus as Lord (Philippians 2:11) and when all things would be reconciled to God through Christ (Colossians 1:19-20), but these verses do not require that those people will acknowledge this truth gladly or be reconciled into a loving relationship. Paul's confidence was that God would be ultimately victorious and that nothing would be left in rebellion against him, yet this is exactly the possibility that Bell imagines when he writes of people being allowed to continue as their own gods forever if they continue to reject God's love (pp.115-6, quoted earlier). How are the warnings of Hebrews about the consequences of ignoring the salvation God has provided in Christ (Hebrews 2:3) to be taken seriously if there is, in fact, no "*judgement and [...] raging fire that will consume the enemies of God*" (Hebrews 10:27)? Or what of Peter's belief that the coming day that would bring salvation for those who have faith in Christ would also be a "*day of judgement and destruction of ungodly men*" (2 Peter 3:7)? Adding all of this to the testimony of Revelation we must conclude that the consistent expectation of the New Testament is that history is moving relentlessly towards a climactic day when God will act decisively in judgement, creating a new world where only righteousness will be permitted and condemning those who have rejected him to eternal destruction. None of the writers of the New Testament seem to have shared Bell's reluctance to reach a conclusion on how God would arrange the details of the new world. Rather they were concerned, as God inspired them, to warn people about the eternal consequences of the response we make to God in this life.

Bell on Christ and the cross

Is Jesus a universal force present equally in every culture?

We have already seen that Bell claims that Jesus is the only way to God (p.154, quoted above), but what does he believe about Jesus and especially about the cross? Bell says relatively little about the identity of Jesus, although we do note his implied belief that Jesus was not omniscient in the way he speaks of Jesus' knowledge about a man he encountered: "*Rich people were rare at that time, so there is good reason to believe that Jesus knew something about him and his reputation*" (pp.40-41). More startling than this is Bell's claim that the early Christians thought of the world in terms of a life force or mystical spirit (Greek *zōē*), that pervades all things and is the "*energy, spark, and electricity that pulses through all of creation sustains it, fuels it, and keeps it going. Growing, evolving, reproducing, making more*" (p.145). Bell likens this to 'the Force' in Star Wars (p.144), although he later backtracks somewhat from this by claiming that the biblical notion is not quite the same as that (or the equivalents in other traditions) as it is not impersonal and indifferent to us (p.145). He claims that the poem in Genesis 1 (poem) understands the "*Word of God*" as this life force and that the early Christians saw Jesus as this force incarnate (p.146). This is a highly distorted reading of the biblical evidence. Far from depicting a ubiquitous 'force' in creation, Genesis 1 describes a personal God who existed before the universe and who creates the universe but remains distinct from it. He creates persons in his image and his words are his authoritative creative declarations. God is never described in the Old Testament as a universal force. Although he is said to see all things and to be inescapably present everywhere (see Psalm 139) he is never said to be present in all things. Although John writes of Jesus as the 'Word' who became incarnate (John 1:14), he leaves his readers in no doubt that this person was with God and was God (John 1:1). This verse is an echo of Genesis 1:1 and John is clearly describing the one Creator God of the Old Testament. John's understanding of Jesus was shaped primarily by the Old Testament rather than ideas from Greek thought. Even if the first-century Greeks conceived of a mystical spirit and called it *zōē* (Bell, as usual, provides no clues as to his basis for this claim so we must accept this on his authority), there is no suggestion in the New Testament that those who became followers Christ thought of Jesus in these terms. John uses the word *zōē* when he speaks of the (eternal) 'life' that Christ gives, and this is an example of a common New Testament practice of redefining existing terms so that they had distinctively Christian meanings. Bell is in serious danger here of suggesting a kind of 'panentheistic' worldview in which God, although greater than the universe, pervades it so that it is part of his being. This is in radical contradiction to the biblical revelation of a personal God who is transcendent over the universe He created, separate from and independent of it, yet makes himself immanent by being involved in it and ultimately becoming incarnate within it in the person of Jesus.

Bell's view of Jesus as the universal mystical spirit underlies his claim that:

Jesus is supracultural. He is present within all cultures, and yet outside of all cultures. 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. (pp.151-2)

This language is typical of pluralistic thought that refuses to see any culture as superior in any way to another, although we must remember that Bell is not claiming that all religions are ways to God since he maintains the belief that Jesus is the only Saviour. He is not claiming that there are many ways to God but that the one way is equally present in every culture and system of belief. Through all of these cultures and religions the one God is reaching all people. Notice carefully the last clause of this quotation. Bell is not simply saying that Jesus is present in some sense in all cultures but that he is present equally in all of them. This precludes us from claiming that Jesus may stand in judgement over any culture or from weighing up the degree to which a theological system is consistent with Jesus' teaching and the gospel of Jesus Christ. This applies not only to different shades of Christian belief, but also to other cultures and, presumably, religions since "*Jesus is bigger than any one religion*" (p.150). The name 'Jesus' doesn't matter as people can refer to this "*mystery present in all of creation*" by any name (p.159). Notice also how Bell uses the Pauline phrase the "*mystery of God*" to

refer to the claim that Jesus is already present, hidden in every culture and belief system (p.150). This is not, however, how Paul uses this word at all. The mystery of which he speaks is that God (the personal God of the Old Testament who revealed himself in a unique way to Israel) had a plan to include the Gentiles within his own special people. This plan is called a 'mystery' because it was once concealed but has now been revealed openly (Colossians 1:27). The mystery is that in Christ God would create a new humanity in which Jew and Gentile would be united so that through the church God would display his wisdom (Ephesians 3:1-13). For Bell, however, the church is no longer in a special relationship with Christ. Churches are only groups of people who put words to the mystery that belongs equally to everyone:

A church is a community of people who enact specific rituals and create specific experiences to keep this word alive in their own hearts, a gathering of believers who help provide language and symbols and experiences for this mystery. (p.156)

The symbols of which Bell speaks are baptism and communion, but instead of being Christ's appointed signs of the special covenant relationship between the believing community and its Lord, they are re-cast by Bell as signs of universal salvation:

These rituals are true for us, because they're true for everybody. They unite us, because they unite everybody. These are signs, 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. He holds the entire universe in his embrace. He is within and without time. He is the flesh-and-blood exposure of an eternal reality. He is the sacred power present in every dimension of creation. (pp.157-8)

There is no room here for Paul's belief that the church is the body of Christ and that he is its head in a special way (Colossians 1:18).

On the nature of religions, Bell says that they "should not surprise us. We crave meaning and order and explanation. We're desperate for connection with something or somebody greater than ourselves. This is not new" (p.153). We should not be surprised when people stumble upon this 'mystery' that is Jesus, sometimes using his name and sometimes not (pp.158-9). So religions are not, as Paul claims in Romans 1, idolatrous human substitutes for the true God, but human attempts to connect with God. Although Paul could also speak of the innate human desire to seek God (Acts 17:27-28), he would hardly have seen religions generally as harmless and inoffensive! Because Christ is found everywhere, "it is our responsibility to be extremely careful about negative, decisive, lasting judgments about people's eternal destinies" (p.160). Although Christian Inclusivists and many Exclusivists would undoubtedly agree with this statement, the whole discussion within which it is set places Bell well beyond the pale of a traditional Inclusivist position. Inclusivists will claim that people can be saved by Christ on the basis of their faith response to whatever truth has been revealed to them by God, but they expect that this will set the person in opposition to those aspects of their culture that are hostile to what has been revealed about God. Bell makes no such distinction within cultures and leaves the possibility open that someone could be saved by the 'Jesus' (the sacred power) within their culture even by following a belief system that rejects everything that can be known by that person about God. Not only does Bell appear to leave no room for a concept of 'special revelation' from God in Scripture or in Christ, since these are no more revelations than the spiritual presence of Jesus in other cultures, he has reduced the concept of 'general revelation' to be a presence equally within all cultures and in condemnation of none rather than universally accessible truths about God that can form the basis of judgement since they leave people "without excuse" (Romans 1:20).

The gospel, then, becomes an all embracing message rather than a declaration of the Lordship and saving action of Christ that calls for a response. Bell claims that:

A gospel that leaves out its cosmic scope will always feel small. A gospel that has as its chief message avoiding hell or not sinning will never be the full story. A gospel that repeatedly, narrowly affirms and bolsters the 'in-ness' of one group at the expense of the 'out-ness' of another group will not be true to the story that includes 'all things and people in heaven and on earth'. (p.135)

Although we may agree that the gospel is often made into something smaller than it really is and that the gospel is not the assertion of the 'in-ness' of those who proclaim it but the invitation to others to believe it, Bell is surely wrong to infer that the gospel does not make a distinction between those who are in and out. We can agree with Bell that we are not qualified to decide definitively who is 'in' and 'out' but surely the gospel when proclaimed becomes a call to respond to God's call to repent and believe in Him, acknowledging that Jesus Christ is Lord. Such a call must distinguish between those who accept it and reject it. As mentioned above, Paul, who most commonly uses the word 'gospel' to describe his message about Jesus, constantly speaks about those who are 'in Christ' and Jesus often spoke about the Kingdom of God in terms of being inside or outside. Although we may not know decisively who belongs to God, God most certainly does know (2 Timothy 2:19). It is one thing to confess with humility that we cannot make bold pronouncements about the eternal destiny of others but it is another thing entirely to suggest, as Bell does, that there is in reality no distinction between 'in' and 'out'. Furthermore, the New Testament consistently holds out the possibility that we can know and be assured that we are in Christ and that we belong to God. John wrote his gospel so that people would believe and have life (John 20:31) and his first epistle is concerned with helping believers know that they genuinely know God.

Bell's 'scriptural basis' for his belief in the universal presence of Christ in all cultures comes from 1 Corinthians 10, where Paul speaks about the things that happened to Israel as "examples" and "warnings" for us of the reality of God's judgement (verse 11). Bell lifts one concept from this chapter, the fact that Paul says of the rock that Moses struck to provide water for Israel in the desert, "that rock was Christ" (verse 4). This phrase is the inspiration for Bell's chapter title *There are Rocks Everywhere* (Chapter 6). From this phrase Bell constructs his theory that there are clues within other cultures and religions on a par with this image within the history of Israel (p.143). Bell writes, "Paul finds Jesus there, in that rock, because Paul finds Jesus everywhere" (p.144). The problem with this use of 1 Corinthians 10 is that Bell apparently sees no difference between the history of Israel as God's chosen people through whom his plan of salvation, centred on Christ, would work out, and every other nation and culture on earth. He fails to recognise that Israel received a special revelation from God, consisting of words that explained the events of their history (see Romans 9:4-5), as opposed to simply the kind of general and non-specific revelation that all peoples have. Paul's intention in 1 Corinthians 10 is to emphasise an aspect of the continuity of Christians with Israel as God's people and to warn us from the ways in which they went wrong as well as showing us that Christ was the fulfilment of their hopes, the one who provided for them and the ultimate basis for their redemption, just as he is for us. Bell misses the point entirely by seeing Paul's words about the rock as a pointer to God's redemptive presence in all cultures and religions.

What about the cross?

Given Bell's Christology (his beliefs about Jesus) it is not surprising that his view of the significance of the cross is unclear, although we should add that his brief comments on the resurrection are generally good (pp.129ff.). He mentions different images of the atonement found in the New Testament, including the idea of the end of the sacrificial system found in Hebrews (although it is, as we shall see, significant that he sees it as the end rather than fulfilment of this system), reconciliation, the guilty being set free (which is how he defines 'justification'), victory, and redemption, and asserts that all are true (p.127). We can agree with Bell that all of these images, properly understood, are aspects of what Christ achieved on the cross, however, we must take issue with Bell's view that they are simply human attempts to explain what the cross accomplished:

For these first Christians, something massive and universe-changing had happened through the cross, and they set out to communicate the significance and power of it to their audience in language their audiences would understand. And so they looked at the world around them, identifying examples, pictures, experiences, and metaphors that their listeners and readers would have already been familiar with, and then they essentially said: What happened on the cross is like ... (pp.127-8)

This way of speaking raises important questions about his view of Scripture which will be considered below. Were the words used by the New Testament writers only human attempts to express an inexpressible truth or were they God given words to describe what he had done? We might also question whether these word pictures are only metaphors for what happened at the cross as opposed to various facets of what God actually did. Perhaps we should understand them, instead, as God's solution to the various real spiritual problems that together constitute sin and its consequences. We should also notice that Bell's list does not include the 'penal substitution' theory of the atonement. This is the belief, based especially on Romans 3:21-26, that Christ bore God's wrath against our sin when he died in our place as a substitute.²⁷ Although Bell does not explicitly reject this explanation of the cross, it is obviously incompatible with his view of God's character since his God has no wrath to be appeased! Another image of the cross that Bell appears to dislikes is that of sacrifice. Speaking of animal sacrifices he writes, "*Just the thought of such practices and rituals is repulsive. So primitive and barbaric. Not to mention unnecessary. It doesn't even cross our minds to sacrifice animals*" (p.123). Aside from the fact that this statement reflects Bell's own cultural bias (many people in other cultures would not find the idea at all barbaric), the implication is clearly that animal sacrifice cannot have been instituted by God. In fact, Bell sees it as a human idea based on a theory of capricious gods who needed to be appeased (pp.123-5). The problems this poses for large swathes of the Old Testament are obvious. The language of Hebrews, which speaks of Jesus' death as the fulfilment of the Old Testament patterns of sacrifices, is reinterpreted by Bell to mean that Jesus put an end to the barbaric practice of animal sacrifice. Although Bell does not spell out exactly what he means, the implication appears to be that Jesus revealed the Old Testament system to have been wrong as opposed to seeing Jesus' death as the necessary fulfilment of a God-given system that sets the pattern for understanding the significance of Jesus' death.²⁸

²⁷ That the "*sacrifice of atonement*" in Romans 3:25 has to do with the aversion of God's wrath is clear both from the Old Testament background to the term and from the context in Romans, since God's wrath has already been established as the problem which the cross must deal with (Romans 1:18).

²⁸ The way Bell writes in this chapter is highly reminiscent of the theory of 'expressive experientialism' that originated with Friedrich Schleiermacher and is commonplace in liberal Protestant theology. This theory says that doctrinal beliefs are the words that believers put to the experiences they have. Bell seems to think that biblical words (including the name 'Jesus' and descriptions of the atonement) and practices (baptism and communion) are little more than human labels for an experience of the universal spirit. The same appears to be true of the Old Testament passages that base the practice of animal sacrifice on commands from God. All religions are, then, equally valid ways of expressing this reality.

Bell on the necessity of repentance and faith

Why does it matter?

We might ask at this point what the practical relevance of this whole discussion is. Why does it matter how God works out the details of the world to come? Can we not leave these questions to God and remain unconvinced of any position? It matters for a very important reason. The message that Bell proclaims has no urgency because it has no finality. It is as if he is saying, "Respond to God's love (how could you not) but if you don't God will just wait and wait until you do, so take your own time about it". The result of this is that it puts us in control of the situation and makes God our servant. Instead of understanding that we are moral creatures responsible to our Creator, we become the master and God's plan of a universe where all is put right is put on indefinite hold while we continue to enjoy our sin and self-worship. This version of the 'gospel' includes no call to repentance. When the 'good news' or 'gospel' (which can be understood narrowly as the assertion that Jesus is Lord or broadly as the whole grand story of God's redemptive plan) is proclaimed in the New Testament it always includes the call to, in the words of Jesus, "*repent and believe the good news*" (Mark 1:15). This is also true of John the Baptist's preaching (Matthew 3:2), the proclamation of Peter and the other apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 2:38; 3:19), and of Paul's message to both Jews (Acts 13:39) and Gentiles (Acts 17:30). Although some of these passages emphasise faith (belief) and others emphasise repentance, we should not see the difference as contradictory in any sense. In fact the linking of repentance and faith is an important aspect of a proper understanding of the biblical meaning of faith. Faith is not simply the belief that certain things are true, but the transference of confidence (trust) away from our own ability to shape and rule our lives and onto Christ. Instead of worshipping false gods and serving ourselves, we turn away from these things (repentance) to worship and serve the living God (faith). Our trust is placed in Christ's death as the basis through which God makes us right with Himself and in his resurrection power as the basis through which we can live a life that pleases God.

What is saving faith?

Does Bell's 'gospel' include this call to repentance and faith? He does say some things about 'faith', although he fails to understand it in the terms we have just outlined. He falls into a basic error when he mentions, towards the climax of a long list of supposedly contradictory biblical accounts of salvation, the demons believing and doesn't seem to realise that this belief is not the same as saving faith since he infers from it that faith may not be essential for salvation (p.18). This is ironic given the fact that the biblical context in which the demons' belief is mentioned is an argument by James that 'faith' that does not result in changed actions is not faith at all (James 2:19 in context). James *never* suggests that faith is not necessary for salvation! Bell seems like a drowning man who thinks a life-jacket is a kind of anchor and so refuses to ask for one to be thrown to him! Another passage that Bell uses to suggest that faith may not be necessary for salvation is John 14:6 (we have already referred to some of his discussion of this verse at an earlier point) where he claims that Jesus "*doesn't say [...] how, or when, or in what manner the mechanism functions that gets people to God through him*" (p.154). The context, however, does provide the 'mechanism', since Jesus has already called the disciples to trust in Him as well as God (verse 1) and he returns to the importance of faith later in the chapter (verses 11-12). Later in the same discourse he speaks about the importance of abiding in Him, which includes obedience to his commands (John 15:1-17). The mechanism that "*gets people to God*" through Jesus is a relationship with him that begins and continues with faith! Bell also infers that the dying thief to whom Jesus promised Paradise didn't necessarily 'believe', since he simply asked to be remembered in the "*age to come*" (pp.54-5), but this not only twists the relevant passage, which actually records him speaking of kingdom as being Jesus' kingdom rather than a general concept of a coming age (Luke 23:42), it also misunderstands the meaning of faith again. How could the thief ask this of Jesus if he didn't believe certain things about him and how could his cry be interpreted as anything other than an expression of confidence that Jesus had the power to include him in the kingdom? Bell turns an example of repentance and faith into an argument against the necessity of either! Elsewhere, Bell writes that, "*Our trusting, our change of hearts, our believing God's version of our story doesn't bring it into existence, make it happen, or create it. It simply is*" (p.188). In other words,

he is prepared to allow that faith is a good thing, but he refuses to acknowledge that it is necessary. God has already written the story; our faith is merely an acknowledgement of its truth. Faith does not actually effect salvation – it is simply an acknowledgement that we are already saved! This is not how the apostle Paul described it when he said that we have been saved “*through faith*” (Ephesians 2:8) or how the writer of Hebrews saw it when he wrote “*without faith it is impossible to please God*” (Hebrews 11:6).

Bell’s view of faith is necessary to his hope that Universalism is correct, but it arises out of distortions of the biblical evidence. Another such distortion is seen in his treatment of Jesus’ words on the cross when he prayed for his father to forgive those who crucified him (Luke 23:34). Bell writes that, “*Jesus forgives them all, without their asking for it*” (p.188). This is not, however, what the text says, since it records the prayer of Jesus and does not tell us that the people were in fact forgiven (not to mention the addition of the word “*all*” which is clearly a nod in the direction of ‘Universalism’). Furthermore, in implying that this is evidence for the possibility of forgiveness without faith, Bell neglects the words “*for they know not what they are doing*”. The forgiveness for which Jesus prays is for the sin of crucifying an innocent man who was none other than the Son of God. Of the true identity of Jesus the Roman soldiers were ignorant. Jesus was not speaking of forgiveness for all of their sins or for all people but of forgiveness for a specific sin of ignorance on the part of this group of men. Furthermore, Luke’s record of these words is intended to tell us something about the character of Jesus rather than to be an exhaustive theology of forgiveness. Bell, however, constructs on the basis of this verse a claim that, “*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*” (p.189). Bell reserves a place for faith in some sense, but it is simply about accepting God’s love and does not apparently need to contain any belief in actual facts about God or Jesus:

I believe that the indestructible love of God is an unfolding, dynamic reality and that every single one of us is endlessly being invited to trust, accept, believe, embrace, and experience it. Whatever words you find helpful for describing this act of trust, Jesus invites us to say yes to this love of God, again and again and again.
(p.194)

The belief that saving faith does not necessarily require any beliefs about Jesus is also clear in another passage where Bell writes:

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 his point. He’s often not talking about ‘beliefs’ as we think of them – he’s talking about anger and lust and indifference. He’s talking about the state of his listeners’ hearts, about how they conduct themselves, how they interact with their neighbours, about the kind of effect they have on the world. (p.82)

This is a wonderful example of the kind of ‘half-truths’ that abound in *Love Wins*. Bell is correct to claim that God is concerned with the state of our hearts, but there is no dichotomy between this and what we believe to be true. Humbling ourselves and dealing with the issue of the heart must happen as a result of realising what is true about ourselves and about God. Saving faith does not have to know much about God, but it must rest on some truths, at least the facts that God “*exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him*” (Hebrews 11:6). By this definition faith must rest on knowledge of facts, but Bell seems intent to reduce it to simply saying yes to God’s love. No wonder this faith is so unimportant since it is so lacking in substance. Furthermore, Jesus does talk frequently about people’s relationship to Him and to the kingdom! He calls people to recognise what is true and leave behind the falsehood that they prefer to believe. He calls them out of the darkness into the light (John 3:19-21).

Is repentance necessary?

So much for what Bell says about faith, but what about the other half of the picture, repentance, without which it cannot be true biblical faith? On this he is completely silent! Even when discussing the parable of the Lost Son he fails to mention the concept of repentance. He understands the issue to be whether or not the sons accept the father’s version of their story or their own (p.166), whereas the issue is actually one of repentance. The ‘prodigal’ son repented of his foolishness and returned to the father, but the older son did

not repent because he did not recognise that he needed to. That the stories of Luke 15 are about repentance is clear from verses 7 and 10, where Jesus speaks of the joy in heaven that results from the repentance of a sinner. This formula is found at the end of the first two parables but it missing from the end of the third story precisely because it is intended to provoke us to ask who needs to repent. By saying it twice Jesus has created the expectation in the hearers' minds that it will come at the end of the third story and by failing to say it again the third time he actually leaves it ringing more loudly in their minds. Bell does not appear to recognise any need for a person to turn away from the idols they have created and to recognise that they were wrong in order to accept God's love. Forgiveness is not, after all, contingent upon a response, it is already ours. This is, of course, completely consistent with Bell's distorted view of God's character and of sin. Our real problem is not that we have been actively rebelling against God and choosing to worship other gods in defiance of him but that we have been ignoring God's love for us. Biblical repentance and faith involves giving up thinking that I deserve to be saved and accepting God's undeserved grace that saves. It means humbling myself to be able to receive His mercy! Scripture consistently teaches that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble, both through direct statements to that effect (Proverbs 3:34; James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5) and through the numerous examples it contains. Bell, by contrast, almost seems to encourage an attitude of pride in his readers by allowing them to assume that they deserve God's love, that he will save them whatever they have done and that he will do it in their time and on their terms. I do not mean to say that Bell actually believes this, but I maintain that it would be a fair inference for a biblically uninformed reader to make from the book.

Bell's use of Scripture

Isn't the question behind the questions the authority of Scripture?

Although most of the reaction to *Love Wins* has focused on questions about Bell's view of Hell and who, if anyone, ends up there, I am convinced that there is a deeper problem with the book surrounding Bell's use of Scripture. We might ask whether Bell's lack of clarity about these doctrinal issues arises from a lack of clarity in the Bible, from a belief on Bell's part that clarity itself is undesirable, or from a lack of conviction about the authority of the Bible. If it is the latter then the real problem surrounding doctrinal positions on Hell and salvation is that there is no common ground of authority on which to attempt to settle the questions. Bell does not directly comment on his views about Scripture in *Love Wins* and so we must approach our discussion with caution and avoid making conclusive judgements about what he believes. We have already noted problems with Bell's approach to numerous specific passages above as well as the question over his view of the Old Testament that arises from the way he speaks about the sacrificial system and the general question of how he conceives of inspiration given the way he speaks about the images of the atonement in the New Testament. In this section we will ask what view of the authority of Scripture Bell holds before commenting on what is missing from Bell's consideration of Scripture. Finally we will say something further about his tendency to use multiple questions and avoid answers.

What authority does Scripture have?

The repeated quotations from Scripture throughout *Love Wins* and the way in which Bell uses them suggest that he expects his readers to have a high regard for the authority of Scripture and that he regards it as true. That he thinks his arguments will stand and fall on the basis of Scripture is also implied in his lengthy attempts to justify his understanding of certain Greek words. Of course this approach may arise from a conviction on Bell's own part that Scripture is true and authoritative but it could equally arise from a recognition that he will not win over evangelicals without providing some kind of scriptural support for his position. We are not in a position to make a definitive judgement about this since Bell does not spell out his view of Scripture, but there is a rather strange statement in the preface of the book that raises a significant question over how he really understands Scripture's authority (p.x):

The ancient sages said that the words of the sacred text were black letters on a white page – there's all that white space, waiting to be filled with our responses and discussions and debates and opinions and longings and desires and wisdom and insights. We read the words, and then enter into the discussion that has been going on for thousands of years across cultures and continents.

The "sacred text" can only mean the Bible since Bell refers to no other text and the term 'scripture' means something akin to sacred writing. There are a number of problems with this statement. Firstly, who are these "ancient sages"? What did they believe about God? Why should we take their ideas seriously? What exactly did they say? In keeping with Bell's avoidance of referencing throughout the book we are left without answers to these questions. I suspect, given Bell's regard for Jewish rabbinical traditions,²⁹ that he is speaking about Jewish Rabbis, but in the absence of any sources I cannot be certain. One thing we can be certain about, however, is that they are not the writers of the biblical books. Nowhere in the Bible is there any statement that even approximates what Bell says here or that suggests that his approach is correct, and this leads us to the second major problem with the statement, which is what it says about the authority of the text. Here we must tread carefully, since Rob Bell himself does not develop or explain the statement further. We must, however, say that this quotation suggests that our reflections upon Scripture are in some way as important as what the text actually says. Are our thoughts and wisdom on a par with the text? Do we add to God's truth? Is it authoritative over our interpretations? Is it a final revelation that judges our opinions, or have there been new revelations since it? Given what Bell says about the presence of Christ equally in all cultures can the Bible

²⁹ This regard is more evident in his earlier book *Velvet Elvis* (Zondervan, 2005)

even be thought of as a special kind of revelation from God? Is it the inspired word of God or the words of men or a mixture of the two so that we must sift out the wheat from the chaff?

Although I accept Bell's point that people have always developed their interpretations of Scripture and that we continue to do so, it is vital to emphasise that our interpretation is never binding in the way the text is, that the meaning of the text, correctly understood, must judge, correct and shape our beliefs and that the canon of Scripture as we have it was God's complete and final verbal revelation, although the person of Jesus Christ to whom it bears witness is the ultimate and perfect revelation of God. Bell's misuses of Scripture in *Love Wins* are, as we have seen, numerous. In fact it would be much easier to mention the parts of Scripture that he uses appropriately. In general he interacts well with the account of the rich young man in Matthew 19 (pp.26ff.) and despite his misunderstanding, as we have seen, of the 'parable of the lost son' in Luke 15 as a story about heaven and hell, much of his extended consideration of it is helpful (pp.164ff.).³⁰ It is worth noting that both of these passages come from the Gospels, and indeed from two of the three 'synoptic Gospels'. These seem to be Bell's favourite part of Scripture. As we have seen, he frequently ignores passages that do not suit his theological position. We cannot say whether Bell is ignorant of the existence of these verses, although this seems unlikely given his training as a pastor, or whether he simply chooses to ignore them because they do not suit his theology, or whether he sees the epistles as of a secondary level of authority by comparison with the words of Jesus. We are not at liberty to be selective in our reading of Scripture, to discount any part of it as merely human opinion rather than the inspired word of God or to take parts of it out of context to bolster an argument that suits our preconceived ideas. Whilst we all read Scripture through the lenses of our prior interpretations and theological systems, the key question is whether we come to it with confidence in its authority and in submission to it, desiring that our preconceptions should be challenged and, where necessary, corrected. I hope that Bell reads Scripture in this way, but, as we have already seen and shall see again below, the way in which he handles the text raises serious doubts in my mind.

Returning to Bell's comments on the New Testament authors' descriptions of the significance of the cross (see the discussion above) we note that he writes, "*What the first Christians did was look around them and put the Jesus story in language their listeners would understand*" (p.129). Although we must surely accept that the New Testament contains a number of different ways of explaining the cross and that the words used are indeed derived from the world they inhabited (from the court room, the slave market, the temple), we must not deduce from this fact that they are nothing more than 'pictures' or 'metaphors'. In fact, the New Testament writers never use the words "*is like*" about the cross – they write in terms that suggest that what they are describing actually corresponds to reality – the cross really did do these things. Although I do not expect that we will ever fully plumb the depths of the cross, at least in this life, and I do not claim that the New Testament descriptions exhaust its significance, I am uncomfortable with reducing them to being only "*examples*" in the absence of a basis in the text for this. The risk is that we feel free to replace them with examples from our own culture, which may in fact bear little connection to the reality, or that we find flaws in the example chosen based on our own judgement, since every metaphor has its limits. More importantly, the way that Bell describes the process by which the New Testament authors, and notice that he simply calls them "*first Christians*" rather than 'apostles' (even this language diminishes the authority of their writings), decided upon what they would write raises questions about exactly what it means to say that their words were God-given or God-breathed. Were these men guided by God in the process of choosing these words? Are their words to be received as the words of God? Could they have been mistaken in some of the words they used? Again we cannot determine what Rob Bell would say to such questions from what he writes in *Love Wins*, but we must express our concern that if he does believe in the inspiration of the New Testament epistles he has left serious room for confusion among his readers. Another example is found in how he speaks about Revelation, which he calls, "*a complex, enigmatic letter from a pastor named John*" (p.111). He says that, "*at*

³⁰ He acknowledges indirectly his indebtedness to Tim Keller for some of his insights by listing *The Prodigal God* in the list of *Further Reading* on p.201.

the heart of the letter he paints a picture for them" (p.112), yet the pictures in the book are not presented as the composition of John but a faithful record of what was revealed to him by Jesus (Revelation 1:1-3). We must ask whether Revelation is what it claims to be, a record of visions given by Christ, or in fact a carefully constructed letter written by John to describe his own understanding of spiritual realities.

The Bible's grand story?

We have already seen that Rob Bell acknowledges that there is a grand story of God that explains all of creation and in which we must see our individual stories (p.134). We must assume that Bell believes that the Bible in some way bears witness to this story. This seems to be a fair deduction from his frequent use of the Bible and from his reference to the *"story of the Bible"* on page 43. As we have seen, however, his use of Scripture is highly selective. He frequently distorts the meaning of passages and words to suit his own ideas and he entirely ignores many of the passages that are most problematic for his perspective. Furthermore, in response to the imagined suggestion that reading *"the story"*, which is evidently a euphemism for the Bible since he proceeds to quoted extensively from it, will help to rescue us from *"abstract theological discussions that can tie us up in knots for years"* (p.12), Bell proceeds not to outline the grand story of the Bible but to quote selectively and without reference to the context from numerous smaller stories within the Bible in a way that implies that they are contradictory and confused (pp.12-18). In addition to numerous references from the Gospels and Acts he throws in three quotations about salvation from Paul's epistles and one quotation from James that speaks about demons believing. One of the Pauline passages that he quotes is Romans 11:26, which reads, *"And in this way all Israel will be saved"*. Bell mentions this verse as if it implies that salvation depends on *"the tribe, or family, or ethnic group you're born into"* (p.17). I know of no biblical commentator who suggests that Paul means anything of the sort in that verse. The two dominant schools of interpretation of the verse, which is part of a lengthy discussion of God's purposes for Israel in light of his inclusion of the Gentiles in His people and the rejection of the gospel by many Jews, are either that *"all Israel"* refers to all those who will be saved (i.e. the Gentiles are now part of Israel too) or that the verse refers to a future ingathering of national Israel. In no sense does the verse imply that only national Israel will be saved, and in fact Paul vehemently argues against this way of thinking in both Romans and Galatians!

Whether or not Bell intended to do so, the impression that he leaves is that the New Testament is hopelessly tangled and cannot be understood to give a clear understanding of what is required salvation. The examples that he chooses from narrative portions of the New Testament are misleading because he repeatedly ignores the fact that it is possible for the writer to describe the response a person makes to Jesus or how they come to encounter Him without using the words 'faith' or 'believe' but without implying that the person had no faith. This kind of argument from silence is not convincing and the approach ignores the importance of allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture so that clear passages cast light on unclear ones and direct statements of God's intention or will are taken as normative where narrative accounts are read as descriptive.³¹ Hence if the writer to Hebrews writes under divine inspiration that it is impossible to please God without faith (Hebrews 11:6) then we must accept that faith was present on the part of those who were accepted by Him even if the word is not used. These accounts may help us to understand what biblical faith is, including the fact that it is never only about intellectual assent to the truth of propositions but always includes trusting in God and obedience to what He commands, and what it is necessary to believe about God in order to be accepted by Him. They cannot, however, be forced to bear the weight of explaining definitively what a person must do to be saved. So, we are left with the questions of what exactly Bell understands God's story to be and of where he derives his version of God's story from. If it is from Scripture, how does he derive it from Scripture if he thinks it is so confused, and if not then what is his source? Does he believe that some parts of Scripture bear faithful witness to God and His story while others don't, and, if that is the case, on what basis does he decide

³¹ The so called 'analogy of faith'

which parts to accept and which to reject? It is impossible to say how Bell would answer these questions, but I maintain that they are raised directly by the way he used Scripture in *Love Wins*.

We may add to this concern about where Bell's version of God's story comes from that there are some major themes in Scripture that do not appear at all in *Love Wins*. For example, the idea of God's covenant promises that form a covenant people who are his in a special way (Israel in the Old Testament and the Church in the New), are missing from Bell's analysis altogether. Likewise, he does not mention the Kingdom of God, or the sovereign rule of God, at all. Nor does he write of God as one who speaks and communicates His word clearly to people. Yet these three ideas – covenant, Kingdom and Word – must surely be at the top of a list of key concepts in Scripture that hold together God's story as revealed in it. The God of the Bible speaks. He speaks creation into being, He commands obedience, He pronounces judgement, He makes promises, He gives laws, and He calls for faithfulness. The Word of God became incarnate in Jesus and called people to repentance and faith in Himself. The gospel word proclaims this Jesus as Lord and calls all who hear to recognise His Lordship and to end their rebellion against Him. The Lordship of Christ is an essential consequence of the fact that the God of the Bible is sovereign over all creation and is working out His purpose to bring all things back into a proper relationship to His sovereign rule as exercised through Jesus. This God who is sovereign and who speaks works out His purposes for mankind through covenants by which He commits Himself to His people and assures them of his future plans for them. These covenants provoke us to a response of faith, since faith can only be exercised in response to truth that God has revealed. These are all essential parts of the grand story of God and yet they are entirely absent from *Love Wins*. Bell has focused on one aspect of God, a vital one indeed, namely His love and has constructed a uni-dimensional version of 'God's story' that excludes other essential aspects of God's character. Whatever Bell's view of Scripture, his telling of God's story is in no sense a faithful retelling of the story of God that the Bible tells.

Questions, not answers

Before leaving the issue of Bell's use of Scripture it is worth making a further comment on his tendency to raise questions rather than to provide answers and to generate uncertainty rather than encouraging confidence. Although this is a general feature of the book I mention it here because this style raises a fundamental question that is pertinent to what we believe about Scripture, namely whether it is possible to have certainty in what we believe. This preponderance of questions is, of course, a familiar trend in writings from within the so-called 'emergent church' movement. I am in some sympathy with part of this trend since there has, in my estimation, been an unhelpful tendency in some Christian traditions to demand certainty about every aspect of belief and life to a degree that questioning is discouraged or even, in practice if not by design, forbidden. This approach to Christian faith does not do justice to the biblical testimony to people who questioned God. We might consider Job, Habakkuk and many of the Psalms in the Old Testament or Thomas in the New. There is a rich understanding in Scripture that faith does not preclude questions and that the opposite of faith is not doubt but disbelief. Questions are accepted by God, even encouraged by Him, but the key question is whether the heart is oriented towards God or away from Him and whether or not the questioner is genuinely interested in discovering truth. Bell refers to the importance of discussion with reference to biblical examples like those I have listed (p. ix), but he seems to think that these examples show that the discussion is the goal rather than the means to an end. He seems to delight in the idea of an "*ancient, ongoing discussion surrounding the resurrected Jesus in all its vibrant, diverse, messy, multivoiced complexity*" (p.xi) but he fails to point out anything but the bare minimum of truth that is beyond discussion, clear rather than complex and united rather than diverse. Bell sees his endeavour as following in the legacy of Jesus, who answered questions frequently with a question (p.x). In drawing this parallel he makes two mistakes. Firstly, he misses the fact that Jesus' questions were based on His knowledge of the hearts and unspoken thoughts of individuals and were chosen carefully to steer them towards greater truth. He often followed them with a parable which challenged the person's thought and with a direct challenge at the end that was not framed as a question (consider the

encounter with the expert in the law in Luke 10:25-37 for example). Secondly, he misses the fact that although the Lord frequently used questions and spoke enigmatically and poetically (often using parables) to outsiders, he spoke plainly to his disciples in private (Mark 4:34) and he made some very bold direct statements in public too. The New Testament epistles also make many bold truth claims. Bell clearly intends to be provocative (for example in his throw away reference to *“the woman who wrote the Letter to the Hebrews”*, p.10), but where Jesus and the apostles were provocative in order to challenge people out of ignorance and complacency and towards a greater grasp of truth, Bell simply shakes us and leaves us shaken without pointing to any firm foundation on which we may settle. Doubts and questions are good so long as we seek God for the answers and submit ourselves to His truth as revealed by Him. When they lead us away from Him or when we become the judges of God’s revealed truth rather than allowing it to judge us then doubt is a harmful thing.

Scripture bears testimony to truth that can be trusted. It claims that it is possible to know God and to know those truths about God and the world that He has revealed to us as well as to have assurance in what we believe (this is the central purpose of 1 John – to help the reader know that they have eternal life). Bell’s style of writing appears to imply that there is relatively little that we can know with certainty. I accept that there are many things that we cannot know since God has not revealed them us and I maintain that there are secondary issues of Christian belief on which Christians are divided, which must mean that Scripture is not unambiguous on these matters.³² There is, however, a core of truth that is crystal clear in Scripture and in which we are called to trust and to guard (2 Thessalonians 2:15; 2 Timothy 1:14; Jude 3). These are the things of *“first importance”* that have been handed on from the Lord to the apostles and from them to us (1 Corinthians 15:3ff.). It is this health-promoting truth that Christian teachers must teach (Titus 2:1). I am convinced that this core includes a number of matters over which Bell appears to be less than clear, notably the character of God, the person of Christ, the significance of the cross, the reality of God’s wrath and the certainty of a final day of judgement. On all of these matters Scripture says much and we must submit ourselves to its authority to shape our understanding by what it says.

³² By this I do not mean that it is wrong to have a view on them or even that it is impossible to discern a ‘biblical’ position on them but merely that they are not as clear from Scripture as the core of the gospel.

Conclusions

Our survey of *Love Wins* has identified a number of key problems. The book is poorly presented both in terms of its lack of clarity and its failure to acknowledge its sources. It models a use of Scripture that can only be described as lamentable, with numerous misquotations, selective references and distortions. As a result it proposes positions on Hell, the person of Christ, the cross, the scope of salvation and the requirement for repentance and faith that cannot be sustained by the whole testimony of the New Testament. All of this appears to arise from a questionable view of the authority of the Bible and a skewed understanding of God's character that emphasises his love at the expense of his holiness, sovereignty and truth. I struggle to escape the conclusion that Bell does not accept Scripture as a truthful and authoritative revelation from God although I cannot reach a definitive judgement on this given the fact that he does not discuss his views more fully. I also struggle to recognise the one dimensional picture he paints of God as the one true God revealed in Scripture. In bringing our discussion of Bell's theology in *Love Wins* to a conclusion, let's consider the picture he paints of God, Jesus and the Bible.

The 'God' of *Love Wins* is all love, would not condemn anyone and is angry at social injustice but has no wrath against the idolatry and love of self that are the root of sin. God's love is so relentless that God could not ever close the gates of Heaven and, since love demands freedom to reject it, God is prepared to allow people to continue theoretically forever as their own gods, ruling their own independent kingdoms in isolation from God. That is what Hell is for Bell – the consequence of rejecting God, an entirely self-inflicted experience of loss and distress but one that can have purgatorial consequences. There is no fixed line between Heaven and Hell either, for there are purgatorial flames in Heaven too. After all, transformation of the character takes time, and what has not been completed at the point of death will take time to be completed after this life. Heaven, as envisaged in the New Testament, is not necessarily final, either, it is one new beginning in a series of new beginnings. This 'God' accepts us entirely on our own terms and in our own time. He sets no limits, demands nothing and will tolerate rivals indefinitely. Bell goes way beyond a hope that Hell will be empty, or at least as sparsely populated as possible, to embrace a view that excludes any concept of God's final judgement. There is no hint of a climactic future Day when Christ will return in glory to judge the living and the dead. This is the area where it is most difficult to see how Bell can insist that he belongs within Christian orthodoxy since the Nicene Creed, which is often accepted as a measure of broad orthodoxy, affirms that Christ "*will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end*".

The 'Jesus' of *Love Wins* is a universal spirit who is present in and accessible to every culture, religion and belief system. He is the only Saviour, but he is saving everyone and he can be known by a multitude of names – he is great enough to bear them all. Signs of him are present in every culture in the same way that they were present in the Hebrew writings of the Old Testament. He is not related to Christians or the Church in any special way – they are just a group of people who happen to name him as 'Jesus' and who provide their own culturally-conditioned language for the mystery. His death was the ultimate transformative event in human history, but it is a mystery that words cannot express fully and the New Testament images of it were only the attempts of human beings to find images to capture something of its significance. One theory of the atonement that is notably absent is any suggestion of Jesus taking our place and bearing the wrath and judgement of God against our sin (penal substitution). How could this theory have any meaning if God's wrath is not set against sinners and He does not judge?

The 'Bible' of *Love Wins* is a collection of human words about God, pictures painted by people who struggled to express what they knew about Him. It is a sacred text, but our interpretations and questions, ideas and theories can be, even must be, added to the text. It tells a grand story of God's love and His purpose of making a new creation but it also contains ideas, which the writers attribute to God, that are frankly barbaric and abhorrent (animal sacrifices, yuck!) It also contains human impressions and explanations for what they saw, like prophets who wrongly thought that the all-loving God was expressing wrath! This Bible does not appear

to be the revelation of God given in words. It does bear witness in some sense to the grand story of God, but it spoils that story through details, presumably arising from human misconceptions, that are quite unpalatable and fall short of the true greatness of God.

In all of this, Bell is typical of a number of Christian writers at the present time, generally identified as the 'emergent' part of the 'emerging church' conversation, who are engaged in a process of deconstructing aspects of Christian, and especially evangelical, theology but who have little to offer by way of constructing a positive alternative. As inferred in the introduction to this review, I believe that deconstruction can be helpful and that re-construction may not be desirable or even possible in some areas of theology where certainty had been demanded in the past, but the impression that *Love Wins* leaves is that virtually nothing can be constructed other than a very basic belief that God loves us and will do whatever is necessary for as long as possible to get as many of us as possible together with him. At many points in reading *Love Wins* I found myself in agreement with Bell as he engaged in the process of deconstruction but I was frustrated at his lack of attempt to then bring the reader back to a more faithful understanding of the gospel. I had no sense at all that he sees his task as being a faithful teacher of sound doctrine (Titus 2:1), a custodian of the pattern of sound teaching passed on from the apostles (2 Timothy 1:13-14), a builder on the foundation of the revelation received by the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 2:20, 3:2-6), a workman who is committed to handling the word of truth correctly (2 Timothy 2:15), or a contender for the faith once for all entrusted to the saints (Jude 3). I am not even sure that this kind of language would fit with Bell's general approach to theology, yet every one of these images is found in the New Testament, notably in the later books that were written in the years when the apostles who had known Jesus during his life on earth and had received the gospel directly from Him were disappearing from the scene.

I applaud Bell's desire to provoke thought, to deconstruct limited and potentially distorted understandings of the gospel, and to make the heart of God's plan for mankind clear to a generation who struggle with much of the language that has been commonplace amongst Christians. I also welcome his desire to open up discussion about important questions such as the scope of salvation and the nature of Hell on which consensus has not been reached by the Christian tradition but about which people sometimes speak in a way that implies that their view is the only Christian view. I fear, however, that in his desire to do all of these things he has lost sight of the reality that there is a body of faith that was revealed by God to the apostles, recorded in their writings and entrusted to subsequent generations. More worryingly, he appears to have come to a distorted understanding of God's character and purposes which leads to a gospel that does not cohere with the New Testament witness. This is the kindest way I can find of saying that I believe that Bell is, ultimately, teaching a different gospel from the apostolic gospel. I say this not because he hopes that the majority of people, perhaps all, will be saved nor because he wants to discuss alternative ways of understanding Hell and Heaven, but because he does not appear to see Scripture as the authoritative, God-breathed account of the gospel. Fundamentally, the views Bell presents in *Love Wins* appear to begin with a one-sided view of God and then to extrapolate from that on the basis of logical deduction, highlighting parts of Scripture that appear to fit his theory, twisting others to force them to fit and ignoring those that cannot fit. The task of Christian teachers is to understand and to proclaim the gospel revealed by God in ways that connect to our culture. Bell reverses the process by beginning with a culturally-acceptable view of 'God' and constructing a 'gospel' that fits this image. He is not the only person to have done this, and we must all accept that our understanding of God is often limited by our culture and in constant need of clarification and correction, but if Scripture is not seen as the authoritative and trustworthy guide that can correct us and teach us (2 Timothy 3:16) then there is no hope of ever knowing whether our perception is becoming more authentic or less so.

Taking a charitable perspective we may see Bell as a man who cares deeply about Jesus and believes firmly that he alone is the Saviour, who is so impressed by the expansiveness of God's love that he cannot conceive of anyone rejecting it, who is frustrated that a Restrictivist view of salvation and a view of Hell as eternal torment is presented by some as the only acceptable Christian view, and who is frustrated by the insensitivity

and arrogance of some proponents of Restrictivism. I, for one, admire Bell's hope that all might one day be saved and am challenged by this book to ask whether I long for that as much as I ought to or if I am driven sufficiently to a commitment to proclaim the gospel of Christ. Unlike Bell, however, but like the apostle Paul (as he explains the gospel in Romans) I am convinced that the gospel is only good news if it includes an honest explanation of the nature of the heart of sin, which is human pride and idolatry, and a warning of the reality of God's righteous wrath and coming judgement which results in the eternal condemnation of those who do not repent. Unless people understand this they cannot repent and believe the gospel and the cross of Christ makes no sense. This does not mean that the gospel I proclaim will be primarily about Hell and judgement or even that I will state these truths up front every time I share it, but that I will not deny, hide or attempt to ameliorate or apologise for them. Rather I will proclaim the hope that is in Christ Jesus alone because without Him there is no hope and I will call those who hear to repent and believe because the time is short and the day of judgement is coming. As I do this I hope that my ongoing understanding of the gospel and knowledge of Christ will be increasingly shaped by the revelation of God to mankind that is contained within the Scriptures he gave us.

Fundamentally I am concerned that Rob Bell seems to think that his job as a Christian teacher has been fulfilled when he deconstructs views he disagrees with and unsettles the faith of his reader to the degree that they are left with more questions than answers even about central issues on which the Bible has much to say. A Christian teacher is, I maintain, called to bring their hearers (or readers) to a greater faith in Christ and a sounder understanding of the faith. They must *"teach what is in accord with sound doctrine"* (Titus 2:1) and this is what distinguishes them from false teachers. I hope and pray that those who read *Love Wins* will not be led astray by the wrong ideas contained within it but that they might, like the people in Berea when they heard Paul, search the Scriptures to see if what it says is true (Acts 17:11). I also hope that Bell will overcome his reaction against the potentially unhelpful expressions of Christian faith he encountered in his childhood and return to a more biblically grounded understanding of the gospel. He is a man of significant influence and I pray that His influence will be used to lead people towards a greater confidence in Christ and the gospel rather than continuing to provoke them to uncertainty and doubt. Likewise, I hope that those who respect his influence will not be driven by the premature negative reactions of some to the book towards an unquestioning acceptance of what Bell says. Rather, I hope that we all might grow together towards *"unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ"* (Ephesians 4:13).

Recommended further reading

I have decided in this response to keep references to other books to a minimum since my intention has been to interact with *Love Wins* in the light of Scripture. Some books have been mentioned in the footnotes, but in this section I will list only three books. They have been selected on the basis that they model a good approach to discussion between Christians of different perspectives. Each of them contains chapters by several contributors and responses by the other contributors.

On the nature of Hell:

William Crockett (editor), *Four Views on Hell*, Counterpoints: Bible and Theology (1996, Zondervan)

On the scope of salvation:

John Sanders (editor), *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?: Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (1995, IVP Academic)

On the uniqueness of Christ:

Dennis Okholm and Timothy Phillips (editors), *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, Counterpoints: Bible and Theology (1996, Zondervan)